

Remarks by Brian Dooley, Human Rights First

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing on Bahrain

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Thank you to the Lantos Commission for today's briefing, and to Congressman McGovern for his continued commitment to the struggle for human rights in Bahrain. Your leadership enables our work in Washington and I know—because they tell me—human rights activists in Bahrain enormously appreciate your dedication to this issue.

It's great to be here, back in the Hart Senate Office Building. Thirty one years ago I had a desk in an office one floor below here—in the Joint Economic Committee, when I was an intern for Senator Ted Kennedy. I had a desk and a typewriter, a small part of a much bigger effort to help realign the relationship between the U.S. government and its repressive ally, South Africa.

Like Bahrain's regime, South Africa's discriminated against its majority population, shut down political dissent and imprisoned its opposition.

Some things were different back then—there were no mobile phones, the internet hadn't been invented. Other things were much the same. This is the same suit jacket I wore in 1985.

And the administration then—like now - didn't want to upset its military ally with criticism of its human rights record. The things the state Department said then to justify their lack of pressure on their embarrassing ally are much the same as we hear now—that quiet diplomacy works best, that the best chance for democracy to emerge is through the

moderates in the regime, and that “constructive engagement” is the way to bring about change.

All of that sounds okay but it didn't work then and it's not working now.

What happened in the 80s was that it was left to Congress to safeguard America's best interests. It drafted and passed a bill that included comprehensive economic sanctions against South Africa but also much more. Yes there was the ban on equipping the South African security forces with weapons, but also that the U.S. President should bring together government and opposition groups in South Africa for negotiations.

It said that South Africa should recognize political parties and the expression of political opinion, should release its political prisoners, and it named some—including Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki and Walter Sisulu.

It also said that the U.S. Ambassador to South Africa should meet Mandela—who was in jail.

Why can't the administration do these things now? Why can't it ask for these things? Why shouldn't the U.S. Ambassador to Bahrain seek to visit the political leaders in jail?

So the State Department didn't like the bill much and President Reagan vetoed it—the first time a presidential veto was used on a foreign policy issue in the 20th Century. But a bipartisan coalition in

Congress overrode the veto and passed the bill and, like now, it was left to Congress to impose consequences on an ally for its appalling human rights record.

This culture of handwringing has been passed down from State Department officials of the 80s to the staff there now. In 2011 in response to the outbreak of peaceful protests in Bahrain the Obama administration responded with a series of mixed messages.

Since then the positive parts of those messages have largely faded, and by June 2015 the State Department was reduced to citing “meaningful progress on human rights”—virtually invisible to everyone else—to justify lifting the ban on selling weapons to Bahrain.

We’ve produced a timeline of where the U.S. has got it wrong over the last five years on Bahrain, in the report we’re releasing today—[*How to Reverse Five Years of Failure on Bahrain*](#).

The report recommends a series of practical steps that Washington can take to reverse its failure, including supporting the bipartisan legislation to introduce a ban on the sale of weapons that can be used against protestors in Bahrain—legislation introduced by Members of Congress McGovern and

Pitts in the House and by Senators Rubio and Wyden in the Senate.

Senior administration officials should repeat President Obama’s May 2011 call for the release of political opposition leaders, the U.S. Ambassador to Bahrain publicly state if the trials his staff witness in Bahrain are fair and meet international legal standards, and the U.S. govt should offer technical support to the Bahrain security forces to diversify so they’re not made up almost exclusively from the ruling Sunni sect.

The U.S. knows how to do this—in the late 60s from Detroit to New York to Philadelphia and Boston and in cities across this country, in response to the 1968 Kerner Commission into inner city violence, American police forces diversified to better reflect the communities they serve. And the U.S. helped with the process in the late 1990s to diversify the Northern Ireland Police service so that it was no longer overwhelmingly drawn from one sect.

Thirty years after the Anti-Apartheid Act was passed the State Department needs to get a new vocabulary and a new approach on how it deals with repressive allies and needs, once again, to follow the lead of Congress in imposing consequences for human rights abuses.■