Human Rights Watch World Report 2001
This report reviews human rights practices in seventy countries and describes events from November 1999 through October 2000.
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Middle East and North Africa Overview

Human Rights Developments
Positive developments in some countries in the region were overshadowed by a continuing pattern of human rights abuses, political violence, and a faltering Arab-Israeli peace process. At this writing clashes unprecedented in their lethality had erupted between Palestinian demonstrators and Israeli security forces in Gaza, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and inside Israel itself. Serious abuses including arbitrary arrest, torture, and unfair trials were pervasive, as emergency rule or laws suspending constitutional protections were applied in many countries and the death penalty remained in force in all except Oman, Qatar, and Tunisia. Against this sobering backdrop, local activists and human rights organizations challenged these policies, though they often paid a high price for their courage. The rulers of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain made statements and authorized initiatives that suggested they might be ready to take human rights issues more seriously than in the past. The year also saw a potentially significant transition as Bashar al-Asad took power in Syria, joining the new generation of rulers in Morocco, Jordan, and Bahrain.

The status and rights of women were a key issue in many countries. In Morocco the issue of remedying the discriminatory provisions of the personal status law and a “national action plan” to give women more rights gave rise to large demonstrations for and against in March. Jordanian women and men joined together in a campaign to eliminate laws condoning “honor killings” of women, and women in Kuwait campaigned vigorously for the right to vote and stand for public office. Saudi Arabia in September ratified the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). But in all these countries as in others in the region, women continued to suffer from severe forms of institutional and societal discrimination in nearly every aspect of their lives, particularly in the form of unequal personal status laws and the lack of legal redress in cases of domestic violence. Despite some positive initiatives, tens of millions of women throughout the region continued to be denied full equality, a fact that was reflected in high rates of illiteracy and maternal mortality and low rates of political participation and was justified in terms of religion, culture, and tradition.

The issue of refugees, internally displaced and stateless persons was prominent throughout the year. Palestinian activists in the region and beyond initiated a right-of-return campaign that was well-grounded in international human rights law, but the problem of statelessness for Palestinian refugees in host countries in the region, Syrian-born Kurds, and Bidun in Kuwait and Bahrain was largely unaddressed or addressed in unsatisfactory ways. The region as a whole accounted for millions of refugees—and otherwise—and internally displaced persons who, along with similarly high numbers of migrant workers, endured violations of basic rights at the hands of indifferent or worse government officials and abusive private employers. Serious anti-Moroccan immigrant violence erupted in Spain in February. The government of Iraq continued to force Kurds and other minorities out of the Kirkuk region into the autonomous three northern governorates. At least 200,000 Iraqis were illegal residents in Jordan, vulnerable to pressure from Iraqi and Jordanian intelligence services and to involuntary return to Iraq. Thousands of Iraqis desperately seeking refugee protection have turned up in Europe, Australia, and the U.S. Many Iranians and Iraqis fleeing to Turkey were denied protection there and forcibly returned to the countries they were fleeing. Iran hosted an estimated half a million Iraqi refugees and 1.4 million Afghan refugees, making it, according to the United
Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the leading refugee host country in the world. Egypt continued to be host to an estimated two million or more Sudanese, although most did not have formal refugee status.

Morocco began to come to terms with the legacy of human rights abuses under King Hassan II, who died in July 1999. His powerful and feared interior minister, Driss al-Basri, was sacked in November 1999 by the king’s son and successor, Mohamed VI. In October, Moroccan activists protested at the infamous Tazmamert prison, carrying candles and red roses to commemorate those who died under horrific conditions at the secret facility in the 1970s and 1980s. The demonstrators were not permitted access to the prison itself, which reportedly was ringed by dozens of paramilitary forces. They called for the trial of those responsible for “disappearances,” deaths in custody, and arbitrary detention, and the return to the families of the bodies of those who perished.

This year saw another potentially important generational transition of power when the reign of Syrian President Hafez al-Asad came to an end with his death in June, but the carefully orchestrated succession of his son Bashar left no doubt that the apparatus of the ruling Ba’th party was still firmly in place. Nevertheless, supporters of political reform broke the ice with bold public statements that would have been unimaginable under the rule of the new president’s father. In Iran, expectations that the election of a new parliament with the majority composed of reformers would lead to substantive progress in human rights were thwarted when hardline conservatives fought back by closing down some thirty independent newspapers and magazines, effectively destroying what had been a vital element of the reformists’ power base, and dealing a severe setback to freedom of expression. Prominent reformists also faced intimidation, detention, and prosecution throughout the year.

The year also saw important reminders, positive and negative, of the potentially constructive role of an independent judiciary in creating an environment of legal protection of basic rights. In Israel the high court issued important rulings outlawing common interrogation techniques that amounted to torture and the practice of hostage taking. In Egypt, the Constitutional Court struck down the restrictive associations law of May 1999 and the Court of Cassation ruled that parliamentary elections had to be supervised by the judiciary rather than representatives of the executive branch. The absence of an independent judiciary was unfortunately more apparent throughout the region. In Tunisia, the judiciary continued at the service of the state to harass and convict human rights activists and other peaceful dissidents. Egypt and Bahrain continued to try political critics and protestors before state security courts. In Iran President Khatami and his allies spoke eloquently about the importance of rule of law, but his conservative adversaries used revolutionary courts and special clergy courts to deliver unfair verdicts, persecute citizens peacefully advocating political reforms, and close down the country’s freewheeling print media.

Military operations claimed civilian lives in Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Israel, the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, and the Palestinian Authority territories. Several hundred persons were killed each month in Algeria as civilians were killed in indiscriminate attacks, and clashes continued between armed groups and security forces. U.S. and British air forces continued to enforce the “no-fly zone” over northern Iraq from Incirlik base in Turkey and southern Iraq from bases in Saudi Arabia, although according to press reports the number of overflights and use of missiles and bombs was considerably lower than in the previous year.

The Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and south Lebanon generated civilian casualties and damage, as well as regional tension, as U.S.-brokered peace negotiations faltered repeatedly. Israel bombed Lebanon’s electricity infrastructure twice during the year, targeting on February 8 the Jamhour plant supplying Beirut as well as facilities in Baalbek and Deir Nbour near Tripoli, and the Bsalim station in Beirut.
and the Deir Ammar station in Tripoli on May 5. It appeared that the Israeli Air Force used U.S.-
manufactured helicopters and U.S.-supplied AGM-114 Hellfire laser-guided missiles in the Bsalim attack,
which completely destroyed three of the facility’s six large transformers. In a previous Israeli attack on

Israel’s unilateral military withdrawal from south Lebanon in May, followed by the rapid collapse of the
Israeli-backed militia—the South Lebanon Army (SLA)—marked the abrupt end of over two decades of
occupation for the civilian population. Families who had fled violence, intimidation and impoverishment in
the occupied zone began to return as well as those whom the SLA had summarily expelled from their homes.
On May 23, local residents stormed the notorious Khiam prison, which since its opening in 1985 had been
a joint enterprise of Israel and the SLA. They routed the SLA jailers without violent incident and freed about
130 detainees, some of whom had been held without charge for fifteen years. Within days, the facility was
transformed into an informal museum, drawing thousands of Lebanese who toured the cramped cells and
solitary confinement rooms, and read the names of torturers which were prominently posted on a large
handwritten list near the entry gate.

At this writing, the death toll from Palestinian clashes with Israeli police, border police, and IDF that
began on September 29 had risen to some 120, almost all of them Palestinians. More than 4,800 were injured.
Human Rights Watch’s investigations in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza Strip in early October revealed a
pattern of excessive, and often indiscriminate, use of lethal force by Israeli security forces in situations where
demonstrators were unarmed and posed no threat of death or serious injury to the security forces or to others.
By mid-October the IDF had expanded its use of tanks and helicopter gunships armed with both missiles and
medium-caliber machine guns in Palestinian residential areas in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. On October
7, Hizballah guerrillas captured three Israeli soldiers on the south Lebanon-Israel border, announcing that
they were being held hostage in exchange for nineteen Lebanese in Israeli jails and possibly other Arab
prisoners. A fourth Israeli was in Hizballah custody as of this writing; the Lebanese group alleged that he was
a spy but the Israeli government said he was a businessman and army reservist. Successive Israeli
governments have long maintained that two of the Lebanese prisoners, Shaykh ‘Abd al-Karim ‘Obeid and
Mustafa al-Dirani, captured in Lebanon in Israeli commando operations in 1989 and 1994 respectively and
held without charge ever since, were bargaining chips in exchange for Ron Arad, the Israeli navigator who
went missing after his plane was shot down over Lebanon in 1986.

Comprehensive international economic sanctions remained in place on Iraq. High oil prices and a Security
Council resolution in December 1999 that removed limits on the amount of oil Iraq could sell meant that the
oil-for-food humanitarian relief program no longer faced cash constraints. As a short-term emergency
assistance program limited to commodities, however, the oil-for-food program could not provide the
extensive investment and development efforts needed to address the overall humanitarian situation, which
remained grave. The Security Council resolution provided for the “suspension” of non-military sanctions in
the event that Iraq cooperated satisfactorily with a new arms inspection regime, but Iraq insisted that it had
fully complied with earlier resolutions and that sanctions should therefore be lifted without qualification or
delay.

In the region and around the world, advocacy and demonstrations increased on behalf of Palestinian
refugees and their right of return under international law. On October 7, Israeli troops opened fire at a crowd
of 500 demonstrators in Ramieh on the Lebanese side of the Israel-Lebanon border. The protesters, carrying
Palestinian flags and demanding the right to return, reportedly threw stones at a nearby Israeli outpost. Two
Palestinians, residents of Lebanon’s Shatila and Bourj al-Barajneh refugee camps, were killed and twenty-
three wounded, two critically, according to press reports. Some 25,000 people participated in funeral processions for the victims the next day in Beirut. On October 24, security forces dispersed forcibly thousands of Jordanians who marched from Amman to the Allenby Bridge connecting Jordan and the West Bank to press for the right of return. The BBC reported that the demonstrators “were beaten into retreat by Jordanian police with baton, water cannon and tear gas, as helicopters hovered overhead.” Among the protestors were Jordanian parliamentarians and members of professional associations.

The rights to freedom of expression and association were trampled across the region. There were no independent and critical local media in Saudi Arabia, Libya, Iraq, and Syria. In Tunisia and Egypt, the state-run broadcast and major print media were not open to independent or critical perspectives. Journalists were harassed, arrested, or imprisoned in Egypt, Iran, Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen, and areas under the control of the Palestinian Authority (P.A.), and the independent weekly La Nation remained suspended in Algeria. P.A. authorities ordered the closure of five radio and television stations between May 5 and June 2, and arrested Samir Qumsiah, chair of the Council of Private Radio and Television Stations, after he called for a thirty-minute broadcasting halt to protest the closures.

In Morocco, despite positive developments in other areas, foreign and local journalists faced harassment and threats during the year, and newspapers were banned or seized because of critical commentary about the current and former king, and interviews with Islamist and Polisario (Popular Front for the Liberation of saquia el Hamra and rio de Oro) leaders. Three journalists from France 3 were placed under house arrest for three days in October, the Paris-based press freedom organization Reporters without Borders said, after they had filmed the October 7 protest march to Tazmamert prison, and authorities confiscated their material before they left Morocco. The Moroccan government’s relations with Qatar soured in July in part because of the content of programming by the emirate’s regionally popular al-Jazeera satellite television station. Moroccan Prime Minister Abdel Rahman al-Youssoufi charged that the station “led a campaign against Morocco, against its democratic evolution, its institutions and image.” Qatar’s foreign minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabr al-Thani, said that “today’s world does not fear the press” and press freedom “should not be a reason for tension in relations between states.”

The trials of Capt. Mustafa Adib, including a prison hunger strike, attracted considerable attention in Morocco. Adib, 32 years old, had written in 1998 to then-Crown Prince Mohamed, in his capacity as head of the armed forces, to inform him of corruption and racketeering among the high command at the airbase where he served in the southeastern province of Errachidia. An initial inquiry led to the dismissal of those involved and cleared Adib of any wrongdoing, but he subsequently faced arbitrary transfers and retaliatory disciplinary measures. After failing to get relief inside the army, he filed a complaint in a civil court about his treatment, also to no avail. He was arrested on December 17, 1999, the day after he was quoted about the situation in the French daily Le Monde. A trial in February led to his conviction and a five-year prison term on charges of “violating military discipline” and “insulting the royal armed forces,” despite objections by his lawyers that they were not allowed to call witnesses and that one of the judges had been among his commanders at the air base at the time of his original complaint. After Adib went on hunger strike in May the Supreme Court finally acted on his appeal, overturning the February sentence and returning the case to the Rabat military court. In what Adib’s defense lawyer called “a parody of justice,” the court on October 6 sentenced him to two-and-one-half years of imprisonment after again finding him guilty of the same charges. In late September, Transparency International, the global anti-corruption organization, named Captain Adib as one of four winners of the group’s Integrity Awards at its annual general meeting.
Intellectuals, including prominent novelists, poets, and songwriters in Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon and Yemen were prosecuted for the content of their work, sometimes based on complaints from self-appointed private guardians of the Muslim faith. In December 1999, Lebanese musician Marcel Khalifa was tried in a Beirut court for singing a song viewed as blasphemous of religious values because its text included a short verse from the Koran. The song was adapted from a poem written by Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish. In his testimony, Khalifa, who faced a maximum sentence of three years in prison, said “Could you imagine that Lebanon would bring its artists to court? When a country brings its artists to court, it brings itself before the court.” The court acquitted Khalifa of the charges on December 15, 1999.

In Yemen, conservative clerics and political groups targeted Samir al-Yusufi, editor of the weekly 
Thaqafiya
, for serializing Sana’a is an Open City, a novel by Mohammed Abdulwali. He was charged in a criminal court in July with “insulting Islam,” and the case was pending as of mid-October. Egyptian author Salahuddin Muhsin was arrested in March because prosecutors found two of his books, A Night Talk with Heaven and Trembling of Enlightenment, offensive to Islam. He was tried in a state security court and received a six-month suspended sentence in July. Earlier in April, violent clashes erupted between protesters and security forces in Cairo after an Islamist newspaper charged that A Banquet of Seaweed by Syrian author Haidar Haidar was blasphemous. A panel of literary experts appointed by the Ministry of Culture held that the novel was not blasphemous but authorities said that it would be withdrawn from circulation.

A Kuwaiti appeals court in March banned a novel and a collection of poetry by prize-winning novelist and short-story writer Laila al-‘Othman and Kuwait University philosophy professor Dr. ‘Aliya Shu’ayb and fined them both. While the court did not specify which references in the works constituted illegal expressions, during pre-trial questioning prosecutors focused on a description of an apple in feminine terms in Dr. Shu’ayb’s collection of poetry and a description of the “lustful” coming together of sea waves in al-‘Othman’s novel.

Palestinians who publicly criticized P.A. policies were arbitrarily arrested and detained. Security forces arrested eight prominent personalities who signed a November 27, 1999, petition criticizing P.A. “tyranny and corruption.” Six were released on JD50,000 (U.S. $70,000) bail on December 19, but Ahmad Dudin and ‘Abd al-Sattar Qassem were held until January 6, 2000. Qassem was re-arrested on February 18 and detained until July 28, despite a July 11 high court order for his release.

The tightening of restrictions on freedom of opinion and expression extended to scholars and universities. The Tunisian government in January summarily dismissed and later expelled Jean-Francois Poirier, a French philosophy teacher at the Institute for Social Sciences, in retaliation for his association with Tunisian human rights activists, and in late July dismissed Moncef Marzouki from his post as professor of community medicine at the University of Sousse after he spoke out publicly in Paris and Washington about the government’s human rights record. In late June, Egyptian authorities arrested Saadeddin Ibrahim, professor of sociology at the American University in Cairo, in connection with his efforts to mobilize students and others to monitor the country’s parliamentary elections in October and November. The government held him without charge for forty-five days and subsequently filed charges against him before the Supreme State Security Court for allegedly receiving foreign funding without permission and disseminating information harmful to Egypt’s reputation.

Palestinian academic Jawad al-Dalou of the Islamic University in Gaza was suspended in November 1999, along with two students, for writing in a student newspaper that many beggars in Gaza came from a particular district. Yemeni authorities closed a women’s studies center at Sana’a University in December 1999 in the wake of conservative objection to a conference the center had sponsored. The pervasive presence
of Yemeni security personnel on campus led some faculty to request parliamentary legislation barring them from such a role, and Iran’s parliament was reportedly considering similar legislation. On August 5, Iranian authorities arrested Hojatoleslam Hassan Youssefi Eshkevari, a leading independent religious scholar, after his return from Berlin where he had presented a paper on “Dictatorship and its History.” He was held in solitary confinement for two months and put on trial in October before a Special Court for the Clergy on charges of apostasy and “being corrupt on earth,” which carry the death penalty. As of this writing no verdict or sentence had been announced.

Peaceful freedom of assembly, virtually non-existent in several countries including Iraq, Syria and Saudi Arabia was still a sought-after right throughout much of the region. Tunisian authorities closed down a publishing house after it had hosted a meeting on freedom of the press in that country. Palestinian Police Chief Ghazi al-Jabali in February issued new regulations prohibiting processions, demonstrations, or public meetings without prior approval from the district police commander. Offenders faced up to two months of imprisonment or a maximum JD50 (U.S. $70) fine. The high court suspended their implementation on April 29, but as of September had not acted to revoke these or other regulations limiting freedom of assembly.

The Lebanese government in April suppressed peaceful, student-led protests against the Syrian role in Lebanon and prosecuted demonstrators in the military court. At an April 17 demonstration, dozens assembled at the Ministry of Justice in Beirut to protest the arrest of two students on April 13 for distributing leaflets calling for Syria’s withdrawal of military forces. On April 18, demonstrators gathered near the National Museum and some put tape over their mouths to underscore the government’s attempts to silence them. When this crowd refused to disperse on the order of a Lebanese army officer, security forces forcibly dispersed the demonstrators, and in an ensuing clash, several were reportedly injured. Eight demonstrators received sentences ranging from ten days to six weeks in prison. In the wake of these two incidents, some one thousand students peacefully rallied on three university campuses on April 19 to cries of “The Israeli army out, the Syrian army out,” and “Lebanon first.” Although the campuses were surrounded by security forces and army troops, there were no arrests and the rallies did not spill out onto the streets.

Following serious clashes on October 6 between police and demonstrators protesting Israeli policies in the occupied Palestinian territories, the Jordanian government announced a complete ban on public demonstrations and detained hundreds of people. Clashes developed after Friday prayers, with the worst incidents taking place in Palestinian refugee camps. Police responded to crowds calling for an end to Jordan’s peace treaty with Israel with baton charges, tear gas, and live ammunition. At least one demonstrator at the Baq’a refugee camp near Amman was killed and scores were injured. Demonstrators and their supporters claimed that the police had used excessive force in quelling the protests.

Shaikh Hamad Bin Issa Al Khalifa, Bahrain’s ruler, announced on October 2 that he envisaged “a new organizational and constitutional concept of our state,” but it was not clear if he intended to institute such changes through mechanisms specified in the constitution of 1973, whose provisions for a partially elected parliament were suspended by decree in 1975. The government continued to hold without trial five opposition activists arrested in January 1996 in connection with their campaign to reinstate the 1973 constitution. One of the five, Abd al-Wahab Hussain, was released on March 17 following an order by the High Court of Appeal but was rearrested after spending about an hour at home. Others who had been released in 1999, including Shaikh Abd al-Amir al-Jamri and Shaikh Ali Ashoor, had been compelled as a condition of their release to refrain from speaking out or engaging in political activities. On April 3, Peter Hain, the British foreign minister responsible for the Middle East, responding to a query from a member of parliament, said
that Abd al-Wahab Hussain was being held in “a flat on Ministry of Interior property” and that “the decision to renew the detention order was again made on public security grounds.”

In Bahrain, individuals as well as associations and organizations with views critical of government policy continued to face severe restrictions. According to the London-based Bahrain Freedom Movement (BFM), for example, in late December 1999 the authorities intervened to prevent a planned meeting at the prestigious Uruba Club on the subject of human rights. On August 8 security officials intervened to force the cancellation of a long-scheduled public speech that evening at the Al-Ahli Club by Hassan Radhi, a leading defense lawyer, on the subject of constitutional rights. The BFM also reported that on July 4 speakers at the Al-Ahli club publicly criticized the ruling family’s refusal to revive the partially elected National Assembly.

Bahrain’s government maintained its policy of providing no information concerning the numbers or identities of persons arrested, tried, convicted, acquitted, or released under the State Security Law or brought before the State Security Court, where procedures do not meet basic fair trial standards and verdicts were not subject to appeal. The government announced the release of several hundred prisoners during the year, but the opposition BFM charged that there were numerous new arrests and state security court trials.

Women in the Middle East and North Africa continued to suffer from severe forms of discrimination in nearly every aspect of their lives and women’s rights continued to be one of the most contested areas for reform. Institutionalized discrimination in personal status laws and the lack of legal redress for violence against women characterized the majority of women’s human rights abuses. The year 2000 was declared by the Arab Parliamentarian Union as the year of the Arab woman. Instead of governments adopting reform policies that would address discrimination and violence against women, women’s rights became a chip in political negotiations between conservative and liberal forces in society, and inaction on the part of the governments unfortunately prevailed. Countries that have signed or ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)—Iraq, Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia—maintained national laws that contradicted the spirit and letter of CEDAW.

Workers rights were limited or nonexistent, particularly in Gulf states that employed large numbers of foreign workers. According to the annual report of the International Labour Organization released in May, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates were among the few countries anywhere that prohibited outright any type of labor organization, while Bahrain and Qatar allowed only committees or councils “whose freedom of action is tightly constrained and which therefore do not have attributes of independent workers’ organizations.”

Governments in the Gulf continued to use legislation to promote employment of their own nationals and to discourage the use of foreign workers. In Kuwait, over one million foreign workers enjoyed little legal protection against abusive practices of employers, and women domestic workers were excluded from the labor law, increasing their vulnerability to physical and sexual abuse. In March, the Indian government stopped issuing immigration clearances for domestic workers in Kuwait due to reported abuses.

In Saudi Arabia, 69 percent of the workforce of 7.2 million was composed of foreigners, many of them Asian. Nongovernmental organizations in Indonesia pressed the government of President Abdurrahman Wahid for a three-month hiatus in sending women workers to Saudi Arabia. In August, twenty-two groups demonstrated at the Manpower Ministry in Jakarta, demanding that the government educate women about their rights prior to leaving the country, and reach an agreement with Saudi authorities that would ensure the workers’ protection against abuse and the availability of legal remedies. On June 19, an Indonesian domestic worker, Warni Samiran Audi, was beheaded in al-Ahsa in eastern Saudi Arabia. The Saudi interior ministry
said she had been convicted of killing the wife of her employer. Indonesia’s Manpower Ministry director general for labour, Din Syamsuddin, said the next day that the Indonesian embassy had not been officially informed of the execution, although the government had been seeking the woman’s release or a reduced sentence for three years.

In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), foreigners comprised about 70 percent of the population of 2.76 million and 90 percent of the labor force. Workers did not have the right to organize trade unions, to strike, or to bargain collectively, and faced deportation if they carried out such activities. Domestic and agricultural workers were excluded from protection under the labor law, and reports continued of the physical abuse of women domestics and withholding of their wages. Migrant workers also faced corporal and capital punishment following unfair trials. An Indonesian domestic worker, Kartini binti Karim, was handed over to the police in 1999 when her employer discovered that she was pregnant and her husband was not in the country. The Fujairah Sharia court in February convicted her of adultery and sentenced her to death by stoning, while it acquitted in their absence the Indian national who was the woman’s accused partner. Commenting on the trial, Sulaiman Abdulmanan of the Indonesian Foreign Ministry said that Kartini “did not understand Arabic, and it seems she was just trembling and saying yes to everything.” Though she did not refute the adultery charges during the trial, she later testified that her pregnancy was the result of a rape. Kartini was never informed of her right to communicate with the Indonesian embassy or her right to a translator, and the embassy was not notified in advance of her trial. The harsh and inhumane sentence attracted international attention, and on April 25 the appeals court reduced the sentence to one year in prison and deportation. In September, the Sharia court in the emirate of Ras al-Khaimah found a Bangladeshi man and woman guilty of adultery and sentenced them to three months in jail and 150 lashes each. UAE Labor and Social Affairs Minister Humaid al-Tayer said the same month that employment visas would be issued “only to those who possess at least secondary education.” The new measure was expected to affect adversely mainly South Asians, who comprised the largest number of unskilled workers in the emirates.

In Bahrain this year labor activists made an effort to win the right to establish an independent trade union body. The International Center for Trade Union Rights, an independent London-based nongovernmental organization, reported in August that the executive committee of the General Committee of Bahraini Workers (GCBW), set up by the government in 1981 as an alternative to independent trade unions, requested government permission to reconstitute itself as an independent union in accordance with ILO and Arab Labor Organization principles. Shaikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, prime minister and uncle of the amir, reportedly summoned the executive committee to a meeting where he rejected the request and said that there would be grave consequences if they persisted with such demands. The minister of labor and social affairs subsequently instructed the committee to postpone GCBW general assembly elections scheduled for November 2000 to choose a new executive committee.

Foreign workers were violently attacked in Libya, where hundreds of thousands of Africans reportedly migrated over the past several years in search of work. On September 21-22, there were clashes between African immigrants and Libyans in az-Zawiyah, a town near Tripoli, in which approximately fifty Chadian and Sudanese migrants were killed, according to the daily *al-Hayat* (London). Dozens of others reportedly were injured, according to the Libyan media and Sudan’s foreign ministry. The Reuters news agency reported from Lagos on October 5 that some three thousand Nigerians returned home from Libya on Nigerian-government-organized flights and that state television featured the migrants “describing killings and beatings as ordinary Libyans had set upon alleged illegal immigrants.”
Governments in the region continued gradually to embrace some of the language of human rights discourse and to establish what they said would be rights-monitoring bodies. There were welcome developments in the Algerian government’s decision to permit four international human rights organizations to visit the country; the invitation that Saudi authorities extended to the U.N. special rapporteur on judicial independence; and the launching in Rabat of a human rights center co-funded by Morocco’s ministry of human rights and the U.N. to provide training for judges, police officers, prison administrators, and teachers.

Information about human rights developments in Bahrain remained difficult to access but there were several indications from high government officials that they were taking human rights issues more seriously. In October 1999 the amir announced the formation of a human rights committee comprising six members of the Shura Council, an appointed advisory body with no legislative or other authority. According to Bahrain Brief, a London-based pro-government newsletter, the committee’s duties were to “scrutinize legislation,” investigate reports of abuses, and “raise awareness within society that the government considers the protection of human rights a priority.” Bahrain Brief also reported that in February the committee was asked to examine the treatment of foreign workers. As of October, no further information was available regarding the committee’s activities or the results of any investigations it may have carried out. On August 2 the amir told Cable News Network (CNN) that he was ready to allow international human rights groups free access to the country. “I am ready to carry them on my private aircraft and they can meet any group,” he said. A two-person delegation from the office of United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson visited Bahrain in late October to discuss technical assistance and human rights teaching. The delegation reportedly met with the ministers of education, justice, and the interior as well as the chairman of the Shura Council’s human rights committee and the president of the University of Bahrain.

On a less positive note, however, the government deferred once again a visit by the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention that was initially planned for 1999 and most recently scheduled for October 2000; the visit was rescheduled for February 2001. On October 28, according to the Bahraini daily Al-Akhbar al-Khalij, the minister of labour and social affairs denied the August 8 written request of eighteen Bahraini citizens for permission to set up an independent human rights committee.

There were conflicting signals from the government of Saudi Arabia in response to the launching of Amnesty International’s worldwide campaign—“End Secrecy, End Suffering”—that focused on the kingdom’s human rights practices. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated in March that the government had a “keen interest and commitment to the cause of human rights.” Interior minister Prince Nayef in April dismissed as “merely nonsense” the allegations of human rights abuses in the kingdom, and added: “We welcome anyone to see for himself the facts in the kingdom as it has nothing to conceal.” But Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal appeared to rule out access to the kingdom for Amnesty representatives. He told the leading Spanish daily El País in April: “If Amnesty International was seeking the truth and if it informed itself honesty of the truth, we would consider” a visit. He continued: “But so long as it continues to use erroneous information as its basis without taking into account our responses,” the visit would have “no sense.”

In October, Jordan signed a memorandum of understanding with the International Labor Organization that was designed to address the problem of child labor in the kingdom through actions of state ministries and NGOs. The ministry of labor said that the memorandum represented the initial step for Jordan’s participation in the ILO’s International Program on the Elimination of Child Labor. Jordan was the first West Asian country to ratify ILO Convention 182 Concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labor, which calls for immediate measures to eliminate child
slavery, debt bondage, child prostitution, trafficking, and other forms of hazardous and exploitative child labor.

There were also positive developments with respect to international justice. On September 8, Morocco and Kuwait signed the Rome Treaty for the establishment of an International Criminal Court, joining Jordan, which signed in October 1998.

**Defending Human Rights**

The region’s vibrant and growing community of human rights activists persevered, despite widely differing local environments. At this writing, three Syrians remained in prison, serving long sentences that the state security court imposed in 1992 following an unfair trial. In Bahrain, government-controlled Iraq, Libya, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates severe internal restrictions meant that it was impossible for human rights activists to speak and meet openly. Elsewhere, defenders variously faced surveillance, official harassment, arrest and detention, threats of criminal prosecution, and the inability to register human rights groups under the law. In an increasingly worrying trend, the issue of foreign funding was used in Egypt and Jordan, and by the Palestinian Authority, to disparage the intentions of committed individuals and independent, locally based organizations. For example, in September the Jordanian Press Association suspended Nidal Mansour, chief editor of *al-Hadath* weekly, for receiving foreign funding for a local branch of a press freedom organization, the Center for Defending Freedom of Journalists.

In Tunisia, government efforts to monopolize human rights discourse and smother independent activists were challenged repeatedly by human rights defenders on the ground, who faced job dismissals, judicial proceedings, intensive surveillance, and sometimes physical assault at the hands of police. The Kuwaiti cabinet’s 1993 order dissolving all unlicensed human rights and humanitarian organizations remained in force and local advocates were forced to meet informally or under the auspices of organizations that enjoyed legal status. In Yemen, local groups were allowed to function although some were threatened with closure.

Activists were particularly at risk when they undertook efforts to expose corruption and gross human rights abuses. In Iran, the independent press that had been playing an increasing role in exposing human rights violations and promoting human rights principles was dealt a crippling blow with the enforced closure by hardline religious and political conservatives of thirty newspapers and the imprisonment and prosecution of leading journalists and writers. Palestinian Authority security forces in December 1999 detained eight signatories of a November 27, 1999, petition criticizing P.A. “tyranny and corruption” for periods between three weeks and seven months.

In Algeria, security forces in May detained Mohamed Smain, head of the Relizane office of the Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights (LADDH), after he attempted to document evidence at a grave site connected with the case of two former mayors implicated in mass killings in the area. Egypt’s large and sophisticated human rights community was under attack throughout the year. The controversial 1999 Law on Civil Associations and Institutions overturned on procedural grounds by the Supreme Constitutional Court had been strongly criticized by local human rights activists since it allowed the government undue interference in the internal affairs of NGOs and criminalized any activity that authorities deemed political. The Egyptian Organization for Human Rights (EOHR) was informed in late July that its application for official registration under the previous law had been granted. However, several days later the EOHR was notified that a final decision had been deferred upon the request of security officials. Due to criticism by the government and in some of the media of NGO reliance on foreign funding, several rights groups were facing
the possibility of cutting back on their activities since they were largely dependent on this form of financial support.

Women’s rights defenders in the region continued to address legal discrimination and violence against women. In Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, and Kuwait, they were castigated by parliamentarians, conservative parties, and the media, who alleged that their actions were destroying the family, the unity of the nation, imposing “immoral” values on society, and that they were agents of the West. The Permanent Arab Court to Resist Violence Against Women, established in December 1999 in thirteen Arab countries, launched the Feminine Rights Campaign, which called for equality between men and women especially with respect to divorce. The one-year campaign’s main objective was to achieve equality in the right of divorce and its consequences; unify laws and juridical procedures; ensure equal rights as to the custody of children, marital property and all other marital rights; and establish government funding to guarantee the payment of alimony.

Human rights defenders also continued initiatives to promote joint work in the region. In October 2000 a follow-up conference to the April 1999 First International Conference of the Arab Human Rights Movement was organized by the Arab Working Group for Human Rights in coordination with five human rights organizations. The meeting, held in Rabat, Morocco, and attended by over 60 participants and observers from 43 local and international human rights organizations focused its discussions on some of the recommendations from the earlier conference. The conference called for improved coordination among Arab human rights groups and activists and more effective use of international human rights protection mechanisms. It recommended the setting up of a coordinating and representational office in Geneva, Switzerland to assist in this purpose. It called for an end to restrictions on funding sources for human rights work and recommended establishing a fund for human rights defenders. Discussions also covered ways of improving the tools available for regional human rights protection and the role of the movement in facilitating democratic and constitutional reforms.

Also in October the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies organized the Second International Conference of the Arab Human Rights Movement around the theme of human rights education and dissemination. Over one hundred Arab and international experts and activists from human rights groups and governments—including artists, writers, media experts—examined the political and cultural obstacles to the dissemination of human rights in the region and sought to identify ways and to develop strategies for overcoming them. The conference adopted the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights Education and Dissemination setting out principles and standards for human rights education in the region and establishing an agenda for the 21st century. It called on Arab governments to draw up national plans for human rights education and to urgently revise existing educational curricula to ensure their consistency with human rights values.

The Work of Human Rights Watch

Staff and other representatives of Human Rights Watch’s Middle East and North Africa division travelled during the year to Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, and Yemen. The missions were multifocused, involving research, coordination and cooperative work with local human rights activists and lawyers, and dialogue with government officials wherever possible. Thematically, the major concerns of Human Rights Watch included violations of freedom of expression and association, women’s rights, the absence of due process in legal proceedings in civilian and military courts, and minority rights and statelessness. In Algeria and Lebanon, the focus included accountability for past human rights abuses, including “disappearances” and extrajudicial executions at the
hands of state agents and armed militia groups. Human Rights Watch covered from the field the Israeli military withdrawal from occupied south Lebanon and closely monitored and publicized subsequent developments, including the kidnapping of Lebanese civilians by Hizballah operatives. In Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza Strip Human Rights Watch investigated excessive and indiscriminate use of force by Israeli security services in clashes with Palestinian civilians, failures to protect civilians by Palestinian security forces, and attacks on civilians by civilians.

Human Rights Watch’s requests for access to Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Syria, some of them longstanding, were all pending with their respective governments at this writing.

Human Rights Watch representatives presented concerns to governments in the region, and met with senior government officials in Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Israel and Kuwait, as well as with officials in the Palestinian Authority. In Egypt and Israel, Human Rights Watch brought its concerns about detention, torture, and prison conditions to the ministries of justice. In Iran, a Human Rights Watch researcher met with the judge presiding over the trial of thirteen Iranian Jews in Shiraz to discuss due process and fair trial issues: It was the first time since 1979 that a revolutionary court judge had accepted to meet with a representative of an international human rights organization. In Kuwait, Human Rights Watch met with Ministry of Interior officials to discuss that ministry’s discriminatory treatment of the Bidun, Kuwait’s stateless long-term residents, and met with parliamentarians to express concerns about proposed legislation which discriminated against women and Bidun, and restricted freedom of expression. Human Rights Watch observed the military court trials in Lebanon of former South Lebanon Army soldiers and officers as well as civilians who were charged with criminal offenses under Lebanese law for contact with Israel, and collected information from Lebanese families whose relatives were known or believed to be “disappeared” in Israel or Syria.

In January 2000 Human Rights Watch wrote to the U.N. Security Council urging that the sanctions in force against Iraq be radically restructured to remove restrictions on non-military trade and investment while tightening controls on Iraq’s ability to import weapons-related goods. The letter was accompanied by a memorandum addressing the impact of the sanctions on the humanitarian situation in Iraq. Human Rights Watch also called on the Security Council to set up an international tribunal to try top Iraqi leaders for war crimes and crimes against humanity. The letter acknowledged the high degree of responsibility of the Iraqi government for the unfolding humanitarian emergency, but insisted that the United States and other powers also face up to their share of the responsibility and take action to improve conditions.

Together with five other international organizations and religious groups, Human Rights Watch in March and August again urged the Security Council to address the grave humanitarian consequences of the sanctions, and in September Human Rights Watch wrote to both the Security Council and the government of Iraq setting out urgent steps necessary to alleviate the humanitarian crisis.

Human Rights Watch did not forget that other war crimes or crimes against humanity had been committed in the region and that to date no one has been held accountable in courts of law with local or international jurisdiction. It was eighteen years ago, in September 1982, that at least 700 to 800 Palestinians, and possibly as many as several thousand, were slaughtered in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Beirut by the Israeli-armed and -allied Lebanese Phalange ( Kata‘eb) militia while nearby Israel Defense Forces (IDF) personnel looked on and did nothing to stop the sixty-two-hour indiscriminate carnage. In December 1999, we wrote to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak to condemn the appointment of Maj. Gen. (Reserves) Amos Yaron as director-general of Israel’s Ministry of Defense and urge his immediate dismissal from public service. While serving as an IDF division commander during Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in 1982, his actions and omissions facilitated the massacre in the camps. By all accounts, the perpetrators of this indiscriminate
slaughter were members of the Phalange (or Kata’eb, in Arabic) militia, a Lebanese force that was armed by and closely allied to Israel since the outbreak of Lebanon’s civil war in 1975, but the killings were carried out in an area under IDF control. An IDF forward command post, commanded by Amos Yaron, was situated on the roof of a multi-story building located some 200 meters southwest of the Shatila camp.

Human Rights Watch noted in the letter that the Sabra and Shatila massacre was a grave violation of international humanitarian law and a crime against humanity, and urged that General Yaron—as well as the other Israelis and Lebanese with direct or indirect responsibility for the killings—should face criminal investigation and prosecution. Human Rights Watch also sent a letter to Lebanese president Emile Lahoud that raised the same point and inquired about legal or administrative measures that the government of Lebanon initiated or was contemplating with respect to investigation and prosecution of Lebanese citizens who are known or suspected to have had direct responsibility for the killings in Sabra and Shatilla. Human Rights Watch did not receive replies from either government.

In the lead up to the February parliamentary elections in Iran, Human Rights Watch issued a short briefing on current human rights conditions. Noting that the atmosphere surrounding the election campaign was notably freer than at the time of the last elections in March 1996, Human Rights Watch pointed to a number of human rights issues as still impeding a free and fair election in the Islamic Republic, and said little had changed in the legal framework relating to the enjoyment of rights in Iran.

In March, Human Rights Watch published the findings of international observers who attended the trial of Tunisia’s outspoken human rights lawyer, Radhia Nasraoui, and twenty co-defendants, most of them students, on charges related to membership in or activities on behalf of an unauthorized left-wing political association, the Tunisian Communist Workers Party (Parti Communiste des Ouvriers Tunisiens, PCOT). The trial dramatized many aspects of Tunisia’s human rights situation. In addition to government measures to harass and impede the work of human rights defenders like Nasraoui, the case illustrated the use of repressive laws to imprison Tunisians who engage in peaceful political activity deemed critical of the country’s present government. It also demonstrated the commonplace nature of torture during interrogations in Tunisia and the judicial system’s disregard of this abuse and its failure to provide defendants with basic guarantees of a fair trial.

In advance of the Israeli withdrawal from occupied south Lebanon, Human Rights Watch disseminated a briefing paper that identified the human rights issues that were largely being neglected by the international media, and briefed Israeli and international journalists in Jerusalem.

In its 38-page report, “Promises Betrayed: Denial of Rights of Bidun, Women, and Freedom of Expression,” released in October, Human Rights Watch detailed Kuwaiti laws and practices that systematically discriminate against women and stateless Bidun, and that criminalize free expression by journalists, academics, and writers. Human Rights Watch called on Kuwait to amend its Penal Code and Printing and Publications Law to protect freedom of expression and to revoke laws that discriminate against women and long-term non-citizens of Kuwait.

Also in October Human Rights Watch published the results of a week-long fact-finding investigation into the unlawful use of force against civilians by security and police forces in Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. The organization condemned a pattern of repeated Israeli use of excessive lethal force during clashes between its security forces and Palestinian demonstrators in situations where demonstrators were unarmed and posed no threat of death or serious injury to the security forces or to others. In cases that Human Rights Watch investigated where gunfire by Palestinian security forces or armed protesters was a factor, use of lethal force by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) was indiscriminate and not directed at the source of the threat.
Human Rights Watch also documented a pattern of IDF disregard for and targeting of Palestinian medical personnel and ambulances evacuating or treating injured civilians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In the report, Human Rights Watch also criticized the failure of the Palestinian police to act consistently to prevent armed Palestinians from shooting at Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) from positions where civilians were present and thus endangered by the Israeli response.

In a six-page briefing published in October as the first round of People’s Assembly elections were getting underway in Egypt, Human Rights Watch noted several factors not conducive to a free and fair election. These included restrictions on freedom of association and assembly, including the ability to form political parties and to hold public rallies as part of an electoral campaign; arrests and prosecution before military and state security courts of political opponents, in particular members of the Muslim Brotherhood; restrictions on freedom of expression, including banning of books and newspapers and the use of criminal charges against journalists; and harassment of human rights activists and others preparing to monitor the elections.

Throughout the year, Human Rights Watch sought to defend those who were persecuted for their human rights work and to protect and enlarge the political space in which independent institutions of civil society could express diverse—and dissenting—views. In the case of Tunisia, Human Rights Watch spoke out repeatedly in opposition to the government’s systematic efforts to intimidate that country’s human rights activists and to silence its most outspoken writers. In Egypt, Human Rights Watch intervened to criticize a restrictive NGO law and to condemn threatened prosecution of activists under military orders. Following the Palestinian Bar Association’s decision to remove the names of Palestinian lawyers associated with human rights groups from its list of practicing lawyers, Human Rights Watch intervened to urge the Palestinian Authority to ensure that human rights lawyers did not face threats, intimidation or professional sanctions because of their human rights activities. In Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Yemen, Human Rights Watch wrote to the governments to protest arrests or harassment of journalists, writers, artists and academics, and to urge that the fundamental right to freedom of expression be respected.

The division also devoted time and resources to advocacy efforts within the United Nations. For example, in July, Human Rights Watch attended the U.N. Human Rights Committee’s review of Kuwait’s implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, where we briefed committee members on the results of our investigation into violations of women’s rights, rights of Bidun residents, and freedom of expression. In October, we called for the creation of an independent panel of experts to investigate human rights violations committed during clashes between Israelis and Palestinians that began on September 29, and urged the creation of a standing body of independent international criminal justice investigators to be available for deployment by the U.N. at short notice whenever the need arises for independent, impartial investigations of a criminal justice nature.

In our continuing efforts to maximize communication with activists and others throughout the region, we translated public statements and press releases into Arabic and made these widely available. The Arabic section of Human Rights Watch’s web-site continued to grow and provided access to key documents produced by the organization in its global coverage of human rights violations. Traffic to this section tripled during the year, up from about 650 page-views per day during 1999 to about 2,000 pages per day in September 2000. During September, close to 250 users each day visited this section of the web-site.

The Role of the International Community

European Union
Human rights abuses in the Middle East did not occasion much in the way of public diplomacy by the European Union or member states, despite visits to European capitals by Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, Iranian President Mohamed Khatami, King Mohamed VI of Morocco, and Shaikh Hamad bin Issa Al Khalifa of Bahrain, and visits to the region by Chris Patten, the European Union’s commissioner for external affairs, Javier Solana, the E.U.’s high representative, and the foreign ministers of France, the United Kingdom, and other European countries. The E.U. at the U.N. General Assembly in October sponsored resolutions on the human rights situation in Iraq and Iran. The E.U. speech on October 26 on “the human rights situation in the world” mentioned Syria as a country “where the expression of opposition or dissidence is systematically repressed” and expressed concern about the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia, “in particular by restrictions on fundamental freedoms.” The speech welcomed Algeria’s invitation to several international human rights organizations but said that the E.U. “remain[ed] concerned by the persistence of violence and by the fate of missing persons.”

The year also saw little movement in the “Barcelona process” of establishing a Euro-Mediterranean free trade and cooperative security zone. The European-Mediterranean Association Agreement between the E.U. and Israel, signed in 1995, went into force in June 2000 after completion of ratification by all E.U. member states. Israel thus joined Tunisia and Morocco as countries with operational association agreements. A draft agreement with Egypt was completed in July 1999, but as of this writing Egypt had not yet taken steps to sign it. There was no public discussion of how the human rights practices of these countries, especially Tunisia and Israel, could be reconciled with the stipulation in article 2 of each agreement that the agreement was premised on “respect for human rights and democratic values.” There were no indications that the year had seen progress regarding negotiations over association agreements with Algeria, Lebanon, and Syria. Signed agreements with Jordan and the Palestinian Authority remained to be ratified by some E.U. member states before coming into force.

External relations commissioner Patten, speaking in Cairo in early April on the E.U.’s Mediterranean policy pointed to human rights along with drugs, terrorism, immigration, and conflict prevention as areas where “we need some practical results.” “Our handling of these crucial topics needs to be sufficiently flexible to allow the partners who wish to advance ahead of others to do so without prejudicing the right of all Barcelona partners to participate in the discussions,” he said.

In his Cairo speech Patten observed that Europe “now” accounted for 47 percent of total “Mediterranean imports,” amounting to 30 billion euros (U.S. $25.1 billion). E.U. countries took 52 percent of all “Mediterranean exports,” he said, worth 63 billion euros (U.S. $52.7 billion). Europe, he said, “is by far the largest donor of non-military aid in the region,” amounting to 9 billion euros (U.S. $7.5 billion) in grants and loans.

According to a U.S. Congressional Research Service study of transfers of conventional arms released in August and covering the 1996-1999 period, 85 percent of United Kingdom arms deliveries to developing countries were to the Middle East, while the comparable figures for France, Germany, and Italy were 43 percent, 40 percent, and 12.5 percent respectively. European countries accounted for just over 48 percent of all arms deliveries to the region in this period. According to the study, the bulk of the sales comprised tanks and self-propelled guns, other armor, supersonic aircraft, and naval vessels.

United States

The Middle East—especially Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and conflicts and Iraq—occupied much of the Clinton administration’s diplomatic energies over the year. In a June speech to the American-Arab Anti-
Discrimination Committee devoted to Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and Iraq. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Thomas Pickering identified the components of U.S. policy in the region as achieving a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace, ensuring regional stability, stemming the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, creating free market conditions, encouraging sustainable development, and “expanding political reform and adherence to international norms for human rights.”

In his presentation to Congress in March of the Near East segment of the Administration’s foreign operations budget for fiscal year 2001, Assistant Secretary of State Edward S. Walker, Jr. said, “Advancing vital U.S. political and economic interests in the Middle East is complicated by a legacy of ethnic conflicts, border disputes, economic dislocations, ecological disruptions, and human rights abuses—all of which have contributed to terrorism and violence.” Walker also stated that the Administration was “pursuing a strong program for developing civil society in a region that often lacks the most rudimentary institutions for peaceful transition of leadership, freedom of expression, or respect for women’s rights.”

In its budget presentation the Administration requested military and economic assistance grants of U.S. $2.8 billion for Israel, nearly U.S. $2 billion for Egypt, and U.S. $228 million for Jordan. The request for democracy programs in the region, “particularly in Algeria, Morocco, Yemen, and Oman,” was $4 million. In requesting allocations for individual countries, Walker’s presentation mentioned human rights or support for democratic institutions as issues of concern in Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, and Yemen, though there was no such mention in the presentations for Bahrain or Jordan. Surprisingly, Tunisia was characterized without qualification as “a stable democratic country,” raising serious question about the ability of the U.S. government to recognize, let alone encourage or support, democracy in the region. The U.S. was a key convener of a conference of foreign affairs ministers in Warsaw in June entitled Towards a Community of Democracies, to which Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar, and Yemen were invited. In a press briefing on June 19, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Harold Koh said that the list of countries invited “was an inclusive one which included not just countries that were established democracies, but those that were striving for democracies and those that had made a commitment on the democratic path.” He added that “those countries that have experienced backsliding, we hope that the conference will itself be an occasion to engage them and press them aggressively on the extent to which we found their recent progress to be lacking.”

Koh visited Tunisia in June—the first visit to any country in the region by him or his predecessor since 1993 (see Tunisia chapter below). In October 1999, Koh’s deputy, Bennett Freeman, visited Israel and also met with Palestinian officials and human rights activists.

The State Department’s Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1999, released in February 2000, continued to provide comprehensive coverage of the human rights situation in each country in the region. Koh’s introduction to the report, however, which set the tone for much of the media coverage, avoided citing abuses by Middle Eastern allies of the U.S., with the exception of Saudi Arabia regarding religious freedom, and Egypt, Oman, and Yemen with regard to the practice of female genital mutilation. Inexplicably, the introduction referred approvingly to Tunisia’s presidential election, where President Ben Ali won with an official 99.4 percent of the vote, as “a modest step forward,” and pointedly failed to include Tunisia in a discussion of Middle Eastern countries where dissidents and human rights defenders face arbitrary arrest, unfair trials, and intensive surveillance.

In September, the State Department released its second annual congressionally-mandated report on international religious freedom, which also included chapters on each country in the region. The report cited Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia for intolerance towards religious minorities, and Egypt, Israel, and Jordan for
discriminatory policies. The report also noted limited improvements in Egypt, Iran, Israel, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. According to the report, Assistant Secretary of State for International Organizations David Welch met with Saudi Arabia’s foreign minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, to discuss religious freedom and human rights issues. In the Saudi Arabia chapter, the report’s authors wrote that “the overwhelming majority of citizens support an Islamic state and oppose public non-Muslim worship,” without any indication of how this conclusion was reached concerning a country where freedom of expression is severely restricted.

The Congressional Research Service report on arms transfers released in August noted that “the high value of U.S. arms transfer agreements with developing nations is attributable to major purchase by key U.S. clients in the Near East, and to a lesser extent in Asia, together with a continuation of well-established defense support arrangements with such purchasers.” For the most recent period covered, 1996 to 1999, Middle East countries accounted for more than 65 percent of total deliveries of U.S. arms to developing countries, and the U.S. accounted for nearly 50 percent of all arms purchase agreements by Middle East states. The principal Middle East purchasers of U.S. arms in this period were Egypt ($5.8 billion), Saudi Arabia ($5.5 billion), and Israel ($4.2 billion). The report listed tanks and self-propelled guns, armored vehicles, naval vessels, supersonic aircraft, helicopters, surface-to-air missiles and anti-ship missiles as the main categories of weapons systems purchased.

The U.S. signed a wide-ranging free trade agreement with Jordan on October 24 similar to agreements already concluded with Canada, Mexico, and Israel. U.S. and Jordanian officials expressed hope that the agreement would attract international investment to Jordan. The Clinton Administration promoted the agreement with Jordan as a model for future trade pacts on the grounds that its provisions mandated compliance of both parties with international labor and environmental standards.