

INTRODUCTION TO THE WORK OF MIDDLE EAST WATCH

In 1989, Human Rights Watch launched the fifth of its regional organizations, Middle East Watch, to monitor and promote human rights in the Middle East and Northern Africa. Over the course of the year, a Middle East Watch Committee was assembled, a staff was selected, priorities were set and several major projects were launched.

Because the region covered by Middle East Watch, which runs from Morocco to Iran, has a large share of the world's most serious human rights violators, the setting of priorities was an important part of the work of Middle East Watch in 1989. Staffing constraints prevented Middle East Watch from monitoring all countries of the region simultaneously, particularly in light of our commitment to sustain monitoring of any country that we begin to examine.

Several factors went into the choice of countries on which Middle East Watch focused initially. We want to deal with the most serious violators. Yet we must also ask where we can have the greatest impact. In addition, as a new group, Middle East Watch must demonstrate its fairness and impartiality by focusing on a range of countries cutting across geopolitical, ethnic and religious lines in the region. A broad focus also helps demonstrate that Middle East Watch applies universal standards that the world community has agreed bind all peoples and nations. The necessity of being selective was underscored by the substantial number of governments in the area covered by Middle East Watch that are so repressive as to make it impossible for domestic human rights monitoring organizations to exist. Middle East Watch is determined not to permit such countries to evade international scrutiny by restricting access and the flow of information, but our work is complicated by the lack of contacts within these countries to help collect detailed and reliable information on human rights violations.

With these factors in mind, Middle East Watch devoted most of its energy in 1989 to four countries: Algeria, Iraq, Israel and Syria. Algeria merited attention in light of more than 500 killed by government forces during the October 1988 riots, and the government's promises of reforms to address the grievances that led to the riots. Middle East Watch monitored the reforms, pointing out the ways they fall short of international standards, and pressing the government to keep its vows to investigate and prosecute cases of torture. A report we published on the first anniversary of the October riots summarized these concerns.

In the Israeli-occupied territories, the intifada completed its second year with about 300 Palestinians killed by Israeli troops, roughly the same number as in 1988. Israel has said all killings by the IDF are investigated, and "in every instance where evidence exists of violations, legal steps are taken." Middle East Watch sent a delegation to Israel and the Occupied Territories in June 1989 to examine the vigor of this system of investigation. The study continued through 1989 and a report is due in the spring of 1990.

Iraq and Syria were the focus of major efforts by Middle East Watch because of their ruthless and despotic governments. Each

refused to allow investigative visits by Middle East Watch. In the case of Syria, a Middle East Watch investigator went anyway, and conducted a three-week investigation without government permission. In the case of Iraq, such a visit was deemed too dangerous, particularly for Iraqis who might provide information about abuses. In both cases, despite the lack of government cooperation, Middle East Watch investigators were able to piece together a detailed picture of human rights conditions by conducting scores of interviews in the Middle East, Europe and the United States with emigres and recent visitors to the countries. A 235-page report on Iraq was completed for release in February 1990, and a report on Syria is also scheduled for publication in early 1990.

In addition to continuing work on these countries, Middle East Watch in 1990 will direct its attention to Iran, Morocco and possibly Egypt.

The staff of Middle East Watch was assembled during 1989. Research Director Eric Goldstein and Senior Associate Salem Mezhoud were hired. Both are former journalists with extensive experience in the Middle East and Northern Africa. Executive Director Andrew Whitley, a long-time journalist with the Financial Times and the BBC who had been based in Teheran and Jerusalem, was selected to head the organization beginning March 1, 1990. All three are based in New York.

The Middle East Watch Committee, which has responsibility for setting policy for the organization within the context of Human Rights Watch, was also assembled in 1989. Its 27 members reflect the diversity of the region and include many of the top U.S.-based scholars on the Middle East and Northern Africa, as well as a range of other distinguished individuals, all with a commitment to apply human rights standards even-handedly to all countries of the region.

Kenneth Roth
Deputy Director
Human Rights Watch

ALGERIA

Since the riots of October 1988 that left more than 500 dead, Algeria has once again disappeared from the news media in the United States. Mindful of a need to take stock of changes since the riots, Middle East Watch published a short report assessing the reforms and human rights one year after the riots.

While the government of President Chadli Benjedid has introduced meaningful reforms, Middle East Watch expressed concern that its promises to investigate and prosecute cases of torture have not been kept, and draft laws introduced to ensure freedom of expression and political association did not go far enough. Although new parties have been given permission to form, it remains to be seen whether the ruling National Liberation Front will permit them to challenge its dominant position.

Middle East Watch will continue to monitor reforms in Algeria in 1990.

EGYPT

After collaborating informally with the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights for some time, Middle East Watch responded quickly to

the detention and beating in August of two of its members, lawyer Amir Salem and journalist Mohamed al-Sayyid Said. Middle East Watch protested to President Hosny Mubarak, organized a letter from members of Congress, and cooperated with other groups that voiced their disquiet to the Egyptian government. Salem and Said were released after approximately two weeks in detention.

IRAQ

The ruthlessness of the regime of Saddam Hussein has been long known but insufficiently documented, due to its brutal suppression of dissent, tight controls on journalists, and refusal to allow independent human rights organizations to investigate in the country.

During 1989, consultant David Korn compiled the first comprehensive human rights report on human rights in Iraq. Middle East Watch's requests to visit Iraq and meet with officials were met with transparent excuses and then silence. Nevertheless, Korn was able to gather telling evidence from interviews with scores of diplomats, journalists, and Iraqi exiles in the United States and Europe. His article, "Iraq's Criminal Credit Line," appeared in The New York Times, October 26.

Human Rights in Iraq, 235 pages, covers the suppression of dissent, torture, arbitrary arrests, disappearances, summary and political executions, mass expulsions, the use of chemical warfare against Iraq's Kurdish civilians, the forced resettlement of many thousands living in predominantly Kurdish areas, and violent attacks against Iraqi dissidents abroad. It was completed for release February 11, 1990, and will be issued as the first publication of a joint venture between Human Rights Watch and Yale University Press.

Middle East Watch also pressed the U.S. government to condition its relations with Iraq on improvements in human rights, urging a cutoff in the generous loan guarantees currently extended to Iraq. In the fall, Middle East Watch supported passage of an amendment by Senator Daniel Inouye to bar Export-Import Bank loan guarantees to Iraq and seven other countries. The legislation passed in November.

Representatives of Middle East Watch also met with State Department officials and recommended that they condemn Iraq's human rights record during the session of the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva in February 1990. Past U.S. support of efforts to censure Iraq for abuses has been only lukewarm.

ISRAELI-OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

Middle East Watch has in its first year endeavored to monitor the range of human rights conditions in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, while focusing its reporting efforts on a narrower topic: accountability for killings by the Israeli army.

During the second year of the Palestinian uprising, the number of Palestinians killed by security forces -- nearly 300 -- was approximately the same as during the first year. In consultation with Palestinian and Israeli human rights groups, Middle East Watch decided to issue a report on the army's mechanisms for investigating and punishing excessive force. This report will also consider how much freedom authorities give others to conduct independent investigations of abuses, and whether the system as a

whole effectively holds troops accountable when misconduct has taken place.

In June, Paul Chevigny, Bell Chevigny and Eric Goldstein conducted an investigative mission to Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to look into these issues. During the rest of 1989, we followed Israeli investigations into selected cases. Our report will be issued in the spring of 1990.

At the same time, Middle East Watch responded to measures taken by Israeli authorities against Palestinians active in monitoring human rights. We protested the continued closure of the Palestine Press Service, the arrest of lawyer Adnan Abu Leila, the detention and torture of Al-Haq field worker Sha'wan Jabarin, and the travel restrictions on lawyer Raji Sourani. In Washington, Middle East Watch organized letters to Israeli authorities signed by members of Congress concerning the detention of poet Sami Al-Kilani and of human rights worker Sha'wan Jabarin.

SYRIA

In 1989, Syria moved to mend its relations with other Arab nations, notably Egypt. At the same time, the Soviet Union signaled to the regime of President Hafez al-Asad that it could not count on unconditional support in the future. These shifts in Syria's external relations suggested that new possibilities may arise to press the Asad regime on its dismal human rights record. Given the need for a comprehensive and up-to-date report on human rights in Syria, Middle East Watch sent consultant Jim Paul to Damascus and other towns of Syria in the summer of 1989 to interview scores of intellectuals, members of minorities, former political prisoners, and relatives of victims of abuses. Further interviews were conducted in Cairo, Paris, London and the United States. In early 1990, Middle East Watch will publish its report on Syria.

Among our gravest concerns in Syria are the pervasive practice of torture, deplorable prison conditions, a population of political prisoners conservatively estimated at 7,500, and the brutality of Syrian occupation forces in Lebanon. The report will also describe the denial of political pluralism and freedom of expression.