

Human rights cannot be the prerogative of one geographic group, political system or religion.

That's why they are called universal.

An innocuous news item from Riyadh caught my attention last week. It reported a meeting between the president of the Saudi Human Rights Commission, Dr. Awwad Al-Awwad with the secretary-general of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Dr. Nayef Al-Hajraf, during which they discussed ways to increase coordination between the GCC member states in the field of human rights.

The reason why it caught my attention is that the global discussion on human rights has, for some time now, looked more like a monologue – with interlocuters from the west appearing to be preaching, cajoling, and sometimes threatening their counterparts from different parts of the world. The collective “west” has assumed the mantle of guardian of human rights world-wide and has put this front and centre of its engagement with the rest of the world. Recently the Biden administration re-affirmed this approach.

Why did this happen? What are the consequences? And why is a meeting between al-Awwad and al Hajraf important?

In 1948 the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which has since become the landmark document and reference point on all discussions related to human rights all over the world. The first line of the declaration recognises **“the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family”**.

Such a declaration in 1948, in a document issued by the world states, was unprecedented. Europeans had just in the previous decade killed six million Jews who were living amongst them, as well as many others including gypsies and gays. European countries still held huge parts of the world in colonial bondage; slavery had still not been fully eradicated, and pogroms and mass atrocities littered the recent history pages of many countries. It was the shock and the enormity of these crimes that pushed the human rights agenda to the forefront. In many countries decent human beings swore “never again”. Europe, which had seen the worst abuses of the rights and dignity of humankind atoned and re-invented itself.

The human rights debate after 1948 however was swiftly absorbed in the cold war rhetoric of the time, until in 1975, another milestone document was agreed: the Helsinki Final Act signed by the US, the USSR and all the countries of Europe and North America large and small. This now became the totem pole for the human rights defenders, not only because it recognised human rights, but importantly, because all countries agreed that human rights were not just the prerogative of the government of the country concerned, but were a matter of interest to all. The Soviet leadership had agreed to the inclusion of the so called “human dimension” of the Helsinki Final Act, as a quid pro quo to other things, such as the recognition of frontiers, but had not fully understood that this would take a life of its own and would allow the west to challenge the very basis of the Soviet system. The west, on the other hand, saw the Helsinki Final Act as an opportunity to take the moral high ground. The rest is history.

There is no doubt that most of the west’s concerns about human rights in other countries is justified; the intentions behind the criticisms, benign; and there is also no doubt that a lot of good happened and many bad things prevented, as a result of the west’s interest and concerns. Western action is often not driven by governments at all, but by civil society groups that campaign assiduously for human rights to be incorporated in the foreign policy of countries, with the governments catching up

later. Western NGOs are not shy to criticise their own governments too. In 1994 I was present at a meeting of the governments signatories to the Helsinki Final Act in Budapest which was reviewing progress in the implementation of the Act. There was a proposal that Amnesty International and other NGOs be allowed to address the meeting. For three days the Turkish delegate, afraid of being criticised for human rights abuses in Turkey, filibustered to try to stop the process, whilst US and European diplomats argued in favour. When finally the Turk gave up, and Amnesty International took the floor, the object of their criticism was not Turkey, but the United States, and its policy of retaining and practising the death penalty.

Today, human rights are part of international relations. This reality will not go away, particularly since global media and instant communications means that events in one part of the world are graphically transmitted to millions globally and instantly. There is no excuse for anyone to say “I did not know”. People have discovered the power of joining together virtually in global movements to influence this or that policy, and support this or that movement.

One thing however is clear. No one group of countries, or political system, or religion, can or should have a monopoly over the human rights agenda. Europe and the broader west has much to contribute to the safeguarding of human rights world-wide, not least because of its own experiences, both positive and negative. But the approach needs to be more nuanced and humble. Others need to be heard, and their opinions valued. Dialogue on human rights needs to be exactly that – a dialogue.

The rights and dignity of humankind are inalienable. They need to be defended when under attack, and those who violate them need to be punished. But the process to achieve this must be bottom-up, and not only western driven but global. Some point to the experience of the UN Human Rights Council, where some states constantly use delaying tactics to hinder scrutiny of human rights violations, as an example of why this approach is flawed. It is true that a more universal approach may take longer to bring about change, during which time many will suffer. But on the other hand change imposed from outside is likely to be either superficial or short-lived, and may even be counter-productive.

Gulf countries should have their own dialogue on human rights in which they should involve different opinions from within their societies. Those who argue that human rights are about importing outside values are wrong. It is about recognising universal values – “the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family.”

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