

# **In Conversation: Defending International Human Rights**

**Ryan Kaminski**, conducted by Sarah Moon

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**What human rights violations across the world do you think are the most pressing issues of our time?**

Right now, we have a really serious humanitarian situation around the world. Recently a UN official compared Yemen to “hell” given the famine that is happening in the country. Yemen, Syria, recent developments in Venezuela—these situations create not only various serious issues in those countries but also have a record of metastasizing across the region, leading to a force multiplier for human rights violations and simply violations of human dignity. I think these problems really are the ones that we really need to get together and solve, and hopefully, we have the multilateral institutions, norms, and practices to do it.

**What do you think are some implementations that the international organizations, including the UN, have undertaken to mitigate these abuses and humanitarian issues?**

First, there have definitely been programs established to mitigate harm. The leadership of the World Food Program, UNICEF, and other agencies have supported the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) to serve and provide a direct response to alleviate some of the worst impacts and provide direct assistance on the ground.

But, one of the positive areas I've come across is what the United Nations and the

international community are doing in response -- installing accountability mechanisms. You have a Commission of Inquiry on Syria that has amassed all kinds of information. It's developed a secret list of entities that are potentially responsible for war crimes. It's shared evidence and findings that have been effectively used in prosecutions and for accountability. I think that's a real prime example of the international community going forward on accountability and making sure that there's a paper trail and that there is at least some semblance of making sure that perpetrators are held accountable. I think a lot of these Commissions of Inquiry, in their fact-finding missions, have developed groups of experts that have been really useful in that regard—trying to achieve some level of accountability and rectify these situations in terms of the worst of the worst human rights violations.

**In extension, what type of role do you believe that the United States administration should assume in mitigating these abuses?**

Unfortunately, during the past administration, in many ways, the United States was “out to lunch” on these problems. The United States gave up a seat on the Human Rights Council, which creates the mandates for these investigatory mechanisms. Additionally, the United States did not even participate at the Human Rights Council in the previous administration as an observer.

The good news is that we've seen some very positive moves by the new administration—the Biden administration re-engaging in the council, as an observer, and really wanting to come back to the table on personal accountability for these rights violations. Secretary of State Blinken addressed the Human Rights Council discussing some crucial priorities the country wishes to resume looking at, including many very serious humanitarian situations, but also countries like North Korea, which have very problematic human rights records.

I think the record clearly shows that there is a unique role the United States can play when it has a seat at the table. This is not to say that the United States can do it alone. But it can work with international partners and create the diplomatic and political space to advance accountability and keep the spotlight on these atrocities. Just recently, the Security Council had a meeting on food security and humanitarian crises. Some people might not place this in the bucket of human rights, per se. But in my view, it's obviously a human rights issue. What we're witnessing is that prime example of what the United States can help enable when it has a seat at the table—it's exercising leadership.

**How do you believe that we should be able to localize these issues with the American people?**

I think there is too often an information gap. When I was at UNA-USA (UN Association of the USA), one of the things we really tried to raise understanding of was the Commission of Inquiry Report on North Korea that was released by the Human Rights Council. This was the Human Rights Council doing satellite images, bringing survivors to the United Nations, creating space for a Security Council discussion specifically on human rights, and bringing the heads of that Commission to Capitol Hill to make sure that the members of Congress knew what the United Nations was doing in terms of leadership on this front.

I think it's an awareness problem, but I also think it's recognizing that these are bipartisan priorities. Seeking accountability for atrocities abroad isn't a Democratic or Republican issue. It really is a bipartisan issue and part of our values in the United States. If we don't address these issues, they will end up becoming global crises that will always create impacts for Americans and create situations that impact our national security. The situation in Venezuela has unleashed scores of refugees across the region, right in our own backyard, which creates serious implications for the United States. Of course, we should try and resolve the Venezuela crisis on its own end, but we also need to think about how it also is impacting our own interests. It absolutely, certainly does.

**What type of advice do you have for youth leaders and human rights activists across the world? What next steps do you think we need to take as a part of this generation to be advancing human rights?**

I think it's doing exactly what you're doing and recognizing yourself as human rights defenders and partnership builders now, and engaging these issues.

I think when we look at some of the times that the United Nations and international human rights institutions have most been in the news, it's when youth have been at the table—making comments and recommendations. We need to recognize that this is the here and now, and we need this activism now.

We're in such a crisis point; we're all bringing the solutions to the table, and human rights

are just as relevant in our own backyards, our own schools, and our own communities. I remember we were hearing from representatives of the Trevor Project once at the United Nations. A lot of them didn't speak the same language, but they were literally talking to each other using Google Translate. I think one of the advantages of these digital technologies is that they've enabled network building and bridge building like never before, so I would advise to really take advantage of that.