

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Briefing on “Human Rights and Freedom of Expression in Morocco”

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Statement of Sherif Mansour
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Let me begin by commending the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for holding this important hearing on human rights in Morocco, and thanking its members for inviting me to speak to you today on behalf of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).

My name is Sherif Mansour and I lead CPJ’s work in the Middle East and North Africa region.

The Committee to Protect Journalists is an independent, nonprofit organization that promotes press freedom worldwide and defends the right of journalists to report the news safely and without fear of reprisal. CPJ protects the free flow of news and commentary by taking action wherever journalists are under threat.

I will focus my remarks on Morocco's record of retaliation against journalists using dubious legal charges, smear campaigns, and surveillance tactics.

The first point I’d like to emphasize is that this is a record that goes back decades.

Immediately after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, the Moroccan government was the [first](#) to use the charge of “terrorism” to silence and intimidate freedom of expression and legitimate journalism. One of their first targets was the editor of *Al-Sharq* weekly magazine, Mohamed Al-herd in 2003. He was charged and convicted of praising terrorist acts, merely for reprinting an article critical of Moroccan security forces, as CPJ [reported](#) at the time. Ten years later, the very same terrorism charges were falsely [used](#) against Ali Anouzla, the editor of *Lakome*, an independent news site, once again for simply reprinting a report from Spain’s leading daily newspaper *El Pais*.

The second point I’d like to emphasize is that Moroccan authorities have, since 2015, escalated their practice of jailing journalists, making them the worst jailer of journalists in the Maghreb/North Africa. The region includes civil war ravaged [Libya](#), [Algeria](#);

which saw multiple years of anti-government protests, and [Tunisia](#); which witnessed a recent power grab. Unfortunately, they have been better than their neighbors at getting away with it.

As of [December](#), Morocco has been holding 4 journalists behind bars according to CPJ's latest census, a historically high number it has consistently maintained every year since 2017. Two of the main charges the Moroccan authorities used to jail independent journalists have been to accuse them falsely of either [sexual crimes/misconduct](#) or participating and/or organizing protests. The year 2015 marked the first time they applied the first set of charges against investigative reporter [Hicham Mansouri](#), who is now living in exile. The Moroccan government began charging journalists for participating in protests starting specifically after the anti-corruption Hirak Rif protests in 2016.

Last month's widely publicized sentence of [six years in prison](#) for Omar Radi, under charges of sexual assault, is widely seen as a retaliatory and silencing tactic against a well-known critic of the Moroccan government. He is in jail today joining his fellow Moroccan journalists [Taoufik Bouachrine](#) and [Soulaiman Raissouni](#), who are serving sentences of 15 years and 5 years, respectively over similar charges. This co-option of women's legitimate fight against sexual violence as a tactic to silence journalists, is particularly distressing.

Radi, Bouachrine, and Raissouni have all criticized government corruption, penning op-eds or launching investigations into alleged government abuse, and have each covered anti-corruption protests in the [Rif](#) region. The protest coverage was the main reason journalists were arrested in Morocco as reflected in CPJ's census in [2017](#) and [2018](#).

The third point I'd like to raise here today is the orchestrated nature of other forms of intimidation that the Moroccan government uses to threaten and silence reporters, working on issues marked as sensitive to the government, including corruption, protests, and the media blackout in the disputed [Western Sahara](#) territory, south of the country.

Radi, for instance, was subjected to at least 10 separate interrogation sessions, a well-coordinated smear campaign in the pro-state media, and held for a year pending trial. It is widely suspected that such actions were taken to [prevent his](#) investigation into abusive land seizures by government officials.

Even before the investigations, Amnesty International performed a forensic analysis of his phone and connected it to the infamous [Pegasus](#) spyware. We now also know that Bouachrine and Raissouni were similarly selected as potential targets for the spyware,

according to recent reporting by the [Pegasus Project](#), an investigation by a global consortium of 17 media outlets in 10 countries.

Similarly, the government surveilled Maati Monjib, one of the prominent journalists and co-founder of the Moroccan Association for Investigative Journalism, and [convicted](#) him in January of fraud and endangering state security. He was sentenced to one year in prison. His trial began in 2015, and continued for years. He told [CPJ in 2019](#) that he faced government surveillance and smear campaigns in pro-state media.

Ultimately through this three-pronged strategy of prolonged legal harassment, surveillance, and smear campaigns, the Moroccan government has been able to ensure widespread censorship in the country, while paying scant price for it, especially under the Trump administration. When the U.S. does not condemn or apply pressure on governments for their human rights abuses, whether publicly or privately, governments see that weak response as a greenlight for further repression. And that is precisely what has happened in Morocco.

The U.S. has a unique role in the world, as one of the most powerful countries and a perceived leader on human rights and press freedom, and has a close relationship with Morocco. Given threats to journalists in Morocco, we make the following recommendations:

- The State Department should publicly condemn the legal harassment of journalists and demand the release of all journalists behind bars, as it did in [July](#) when Radi and Raissouni were sentenced.
- Congress should apply pressure on Moroccan authorities for their violations, including in the context of appropriations. Consider the example of Senator Chris Coons, who [tweeted](#) last month about the imprisonment of Omar Radi. This sends a message to Moroccan authorities that Congress is paying attention.
- U.S. government authorities should emphasize press freedom in conversations with Moroccan counterparts, as Secretary Anthony Blinken [did](#) in his phone call with the Moroccan Foreign Minister, Nasser Bourita, in May.
- The U.S. should [investigate](#) Moroccan authorities who have used surveillance and spyware technologies purchased from U.S. allies to surveil journalists and ensure that surveillance technologies are not sold to governments that will use them against journalists.
- The U.S. should ensure that any discussion of the Western Sahara includes considerations about press freedom in the region, including allowing local and international journalists access to the region without intimidation or retribution.

As we consider security, counterterrorism and other forms of international cooperation, let us remember that an uninformed or censored public is a vulnerable public, open to

manipulation, misinformation and exploitation. We must consider press freedom an integral part of U.S. foreign policy and I hope my statement here today has given you a compelling argument for Morocco. Thank you.