



Peace and Security Funders Group

INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS FUNDERS GROUP

IHRFG-PSFG FEDERAL POLICY BRIEFING WASHINGTON DC

HUMAN RIGHTS AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY ON THE NATIONAL POLITICAL AGENDA

Wednesday, March 30, 2011

10:00 – 11:00am

Speakers:

Heather Hurlburt, Executive Director, National Security Network;
Stephen Rickard, Executive Director, Open Society Policy Center

Moderator:

Ellen Dorsey, Executive Director, Wallace Global Fund



Heather Hurlburt opened this session by highlighting three dynamics within the current political climate:

- Polling reveals that within likely Republican voters there is a subset drawn to more extreme ideas. For this subset, their worldview is framed in terms of 'evil.' There is a rise of Islamophobia and fear of a threat from Russia and nuclear weapons.
- A second dynamic is a divisive political arena, particularly within the Republican party. The tea party is really 101 individual tea parties and the most effective method for securing votes on Capitol Hill is going door to door for support.
- There is not sufficient grassroots traction to make anyone move on Capitol Hill or within the White House.

She then explored several clusters of issues we currently face:

- The Middle East, Islamophobia and negotiating with the Taliban. I.e. Glenn Beck's caliphate. Most agree that this argument is ridiculous, but the fear of having that narrative used against you is making it difficult for politicians to take a stand.
- Afghanistan. Few individuals want to advocate for faster withdrawal because they don't want to be seen as negotiating with Al Qaeda.
- Pakistan. How can we focus on civilian assistance to Pakistan without being accused of supporting Al Qaeda?
- Iran is benefiting from what is happening in the Middle East because old authoritarian U.S. allies have been deposed.
- Increased political pressure related to Palestine. It is difficult currently for the U.S. administration to take big steps toward a Israel/Palestine solution.
- Egypt. Will the U.S. allow the Muslim Brotherhood to be part of the new government?

- It is important to put forth our own narrative to counter the issue clusters outlined above. Libya represents an expansion of the U.S.' use of international cooperation for humanitarian ends, which opens up a tremendous set of possibilities.

Stephen Rickard shared that there have been a number of disappointments with the Obama Administration. The overarching criticism is that while there are good individuals on staff, human rights have not been anyone's obsession. The budget conversations currently overshadow everything and many of the human rights-related legislation died at the end of the last session, with no way to resurface now.

There has also been a loss of Republican momentum since the midterm elections and the House is currently very divided. Partisanship is a big problem, prompting advocates to strategize how to engage with those who disagree on issues.

After setting the stage, Mr. Rickard highlighted several opportunities for change:

- Move focus away from the Hill to the Administration;
 - Continue to fight current efforts to write a new authorization for military force;
 - Work with Dick Durban, who is joining the Senate Foreign Relations Committee;
 - Use budget concerns that make the case that war and long prison sentences are really expensive;
 - Partner with transparency-related coalitions;
 - Be more effective in building a politically relevant constituency on human rights.
- Approaching Congress with constituents is the difference between negotiating and begging.

Question & Answer:

Q: While we still have military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, how can progress be made on accountability and detention practices?

A: Accountability work has been very challenging. Obama said that he didn't want to be looking backward even before he was elected but has said exactly the opposite about countries abroad. There is a non-partisan private commission working on writing the record of what happened during the Bush administration. There may need to be some new revelation to remind the media that this story has not yet been told. Little attention to these stories says that society has internalized "this is who we are, we do these things". How do we rejuvenate the human rights argument and revisit it with the general public and media leaders? A case also needs to be made that current counter-terrorism policies are ineffective.

Q: Do we have a sufficient constituency to move these issues? What is needed to build this? Is it true that conservatives have been more vocal on these issues?

A: Obama is President, he doesn't need Amnesty to tell him what it is right, so some of the blame should be placed on the Administration. But neither us nor them should be let off the hook. We need to stick to our priorities, train our allies to be more effective, build alliances and not work in silos. The peace and human rights communities should work more closely together. We need to make it politically feasible for individuals on the Hill who want to be our allies to be our allies.

Q: What are potential issues that could garner bipartisan support?

A: The first is Afghanistan, there is an anti-war right. The second is the defense budget, third are civil liberties issues and the fourth is the nuclear security budget.

Q: Do peace and security advocates do a good job of advocating versus whining? How can funders help them be more effective?

A: Hill staff are overwhelmed. Working through trusted networks is better, as they receive too much electronic material. Frame issues for Hill staff as how that issue affects their district.

Q: How do we balance telling Hill staff what they should do and asking them what we can do for them?

A: This requires long term investments and not shifting from issue to issue. Funders can encourage advocates to make this a priority, resist pushing NGOs to take on new issues and encourage collaboration between groups. The center left must be convinced that it can have a conversation about the defense budget without serious political consequences.

Q: How do we address fear? We can't win the debate until we figure out how to change the conversation.

A: The biggest contributing factor to changing the fear factor would be improvements in the economy. People currently feel under immense pressure.