

# MEDIA

HIGHLIGHTS 2022 Q3



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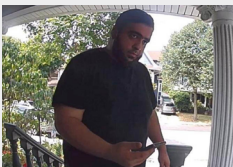


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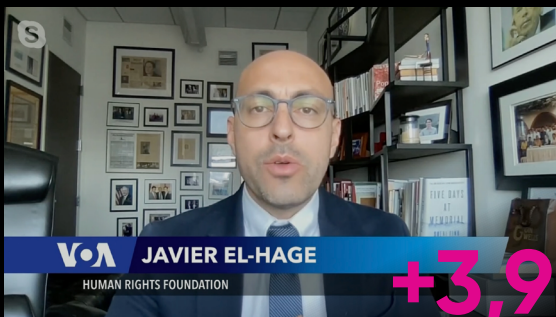


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# BY THE NUMBERS

**+16,200,000,000**  
GLOBAL IMPRESSIONS



**+3,900**  
MEDIA MENTIONS

## COVERAGE OF HRF PRINTED IN **34 LANGUAGES**

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# TV & BROADCAST

HRF's work is consistently featured in top media outlets around the world. Besides print and online formats, HRF regularly makes appearances on television, the radio and podcasts. Here's a snapshot:

## Unchained

Oslo Freedom Forum: How NFTs Helped Chinese Dissident Artist Badiucao Evade Censorship  
July 1, 2022

## Commonwealth Club of California



The Human Rights Foundation and Justice in Syria  
July 27, 2022

## CBS 60 Minutes



Chinese Artist Badiucao:  
Drawing Truth to Power  
July 31, 2022

## Voice of America

Foro: Nicaragua, derechos humanos y poder político  
September 9, 2022



The Seattle Times

# Biden's visit to Saudi Arabia disappoints human rights activists

June 26, 2022

By [Bethany AlHaidari](#), HRF Senior Fellow on Human Trafficking



^ Abdullah Al-Aoudh, left, son of detained Saudi scholar Salman al-Odeh; author Bethany AlHaidari; Areej Al-Sadhan, sister of detained humanitarian aid worker Abdulrahman Al-Sadhan; and attorney Jim Walden on a recent visit to the White House. (Courtesy of Bethany AlHaidari)

For nearly two years, I was [trapped with my daughter](#) in Saudi Arabia under repressive laws that give

preference to men over women, and discriminate on the basis of identity and belief.

As a human rights researcher in Saudi Arabia, I watched my Saudi colleagues and heroes be detained, disappeared, tortured and even killed for expressing their views and supporting human rights.

I will never forget the [sense of relief](#) I felt on Dec. 15, 2019, after years of living in fear, when I was seated on a flight back home to Washington state. When the clouds cleared as we were landing to reveal the Space Needle, I finally felt safe, free and equal under the law.

Recently, this sense of safety was shaken, when [President Joe Biden confirmed his intention to visit Saudi Arabia](#) from July 13-16. He is expected to meet with the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the man culpable for the murder of Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

As so many impacted by Saudi Arabian repression languish, including U.S. citizens and residents of Washington state, I cannot help but feel disappointed and frightened by how this trip may further embolden an already dangerous dictatorship. It sends a tragic message to individuals impacted by Saudi repression here at home.

Since I returned I've had the honor to work with families of brave human rights activists and dissidents who are detained or trapped for supporting human rights work, and others who are entrapped in Saudi with their children as I once was. I didn't realize how prevalent this problem was on our own soil until I returned to the U.S.

I've worked on cases of more than [100 American families who have been torn apart by repression in Saudi Arabia](#). We work with family members who have not heard from their loved ones in years as they have been disappeared, family members who had to learn that their brother, son, father, mother or sisters were tortured and now live with permanent physical deformations or post-traumatic stress disorder due to torture.

We work with families whose loved ones' prison sentences and travel bans are so long that they live with the possibility of never seeing them again unless something changes. We have [American women and children who remain entrapped or kidnapped](#) in the country in situations of abuse, unable to exit due to hyper-patriarchal and archaic male guardianship and kafala laws,

which prohibit them from exiting the country without a husband or father's permission.

We have women who have had their children taken from them to Saudi Arabia, and even one here in Washington state who is under an active travel ban in Saudi Arabia, so she is unable to see her son. [Mothers of children in Oregon](#) never got justice for their child's murder due to Saudi Arabia helping citizens flee ahead of trial.

The repressive tactics of the Saudi government have not been limited to within its own borders, and the impact of Saudi transnational repression within U.S. borders should not be ignored. This was most apparent with the brutal murder of journalist Khashoggi, an American resident. Such egregious crimes by this regime appear to go without punishment.

I hope that a U.S. president's meeting with Saudi Arabia will result in freedom for the family members of U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents who are wrongfully detained — [like the well-known cases of Abdulrahman Al-Sadhan, Salman al-Odeh, Mohammed al-Qahtani, Mohammed al-Rabiah,](#)

Sarah and Omar AlJabri, and others who cannot be publicly named.

I also hope that it would result in the [lifting of travel bans barring individuals from exiting Saudi Arabia's](#) borders and returning home to their families — such as Aziza al-Yousef, Salah al-Haidar, Loujain al-Hathloul, Bader al-Ibrahim and Walid Fitaihi. I also hope that American children who are entrapped there will be able to reunite with their mothers — like [Teresa Malof, Madonna Saad](#) and so many others.

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**I urge the Biden administration to prioritize human rights ahead of this meeting, and to secure the safety and well-being of his own citizens and residents.**

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I urge the Biden administration to prioritize human rights ahead of this meeting, and to secure the safety and well-being of his own citizens and residents. A good start would be securing freedom for the

wrongfully detained and bringing these American families back home.

*Bethany AlHaidari holds a PHD in International Human Rights Law focused on Saudi Arabia, she works as the Saudi Case Manager for the Freedom Initiative and as a Senior Fellow on Saudi Arabia for the Human Rights Foundation. She is a proud alumna of the University of Washington School of Law.*

# What it's really like to live in Rwanda

After spending five years in Kigali, Anjan Sundaram says the president's facade hides a country where discussing politics could kill you

June 23, 2022

By [Anjan Sundaram](#)



▲ *Living in Kigali, it can be easy to believe the government's claims that it is a beacon for Africa | CREDIT: Jennifer Sophie*

On Tuesday, Prince Charles [flew into Kigali](#), ahead of this week's Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. Boris Johnson, who is

heading proceedings, is expected to [join him in the Rwandan capital today](#) as will Justin Trudeau, Canada's prime minister.

I lived and worked in Kigali for five years as a journalist, but was refused accreditation to report on the event. My crime? Being critical of the Rwandan government. Paul Kagame, Rwanda's president, is using this elite gathering – where Kigali will doubtless be presented at its best, polished to perfection – to burnish his international image and conceal his dictatorship. Make no mistake: Rwanda's human rights crimes are being whitewashed by events like these.

To arrive in Kigali is to confront a facade of modernity and progress. There are no beggars on the streets, though the country is among the poorest on Earth. The electricity in Kigali rarely cuts out. The government touts its gender-equal parliament – making it one of the few countries in the world to have achieved such parity (although parliament has almost no power, and largely rubber-stamps Kagame's directives). Living in Kigali, it can be easy to believe the government's claims that it is a beacon for Africa.

This is no doubt part of the reason that the UK has struck an astonishing deal to [deport asylum seekers in the UK, many of whom are fleeing](#)

[dictatorships, to Rwanda](#), a dictatorship. After a century of narratives portraying Africa as backward, a successful African country invites hope. Rwanda, we are being told, has moved on since the horrific days of the 1994 genocide when over a million citizens, many of them ethnic Tutsi, were brutally slaughtered. The current gathering of international movers and shakers in Kigali only embellishes this story.

Kagame is a crafty player in this game. A skilled rhetorician, his high-minded speeches call upon a deeply-ingrained sense of humiliation and historical injustice in his population, while claiming to craft a new nation proud of their history – and serve to conceal his near-totalitarian state.



^ High-profile critics of Paul Kagame are subjected to Rwanda's sham courts, which are virtually powerless and part of the façade CREDIT: GIAN EHRENZELLER/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock



While living in Rwanda, I taught a class of Rwandan newspaper journalists in a media program financed by the European Union. When I first arrived, I too was seduced by Rwanda's facade: Kigali's restaurants, its efficient public services and clean, safe and well-lit streets. The weather was cool almost all year round, and the hills around Kigali, long like baguettes, made a beautiful skyline. Rwanda is incredibly safe – unless you anger the government, in which case it quickly becomes extremely unsafe. Over the years, I witnessed my students and colleagues shot dead, imprisoned and forced to flee the country after they criticised Kagame. Sometimes their criticisms were benign, or made in obscure newspapers; but Kagame is intolerant.

I wrote a book entitled [Bad News: Last Journalists in a Dictatorship](#), telling these brave Rwandans' stories, as well as mine, as I tried to keep them safe. More than 70 Rwandan journalists who were killed, disappeared or fled are listed in the appendix. I did not list all the academics, activists, soldiers, politicians, priests and teachers who met the same fate.

The names of the brave reporters I taught are taboo, and cannot be spoken of without risks to their safety. Kagame has declared many of them enemies of the state. In Rwanda, such simple acts as taking notes or gathering in groups to discuss politics are transformed into possible acts of treason. Punishments vary from assassinations to imprisonment, or more insidious events, such as bank loans suddenly needing repayment in full.



^ To arrive in Kigali is to confront a facade of modernity and progress | CREDIT: Jennifer Sophie

Prior to the 2010 presidential election, which Kagame won with 93 per cent of the vote (he won the subsequent 2017 election with nearly 99 per cent of the vote), I was reporting at one of his election rallies. A police officer stepped up to me and told me he had observed me look at Kagame and write. "Looking and writing," he said. "That's not allowed." I shut my notebook and for the rest of the rally, wrote on the palm of my left hand, which I closed into a fist as I left the rally grounds.

The president is, through his security agents, all-seeing. He decides which stories can be told. All of Rwanda, every inch of the country, is divided into "villages", comprising about 100 families each, which report to and receive orders from the president's office with great efficiency. In 1994, this decades-old system, which pre-dated colonial rule by the Belgians, was used to perpetrate the genocide, which began almost simultaneously across the country and killed with a speed even greater than the Nazis achieved in the Second World War. Kagame has kept this dangerous system intact.

High-profile critics of Kagame are subjected to Rwanda's sham

courts, which are virtually powerless and part of the façade. International justice organisations, such as the Clooney Foundation, recently reported on the trial of the ex-Hotel Rwanda manager Paul Rusesabagina, who had been living in exile in the United States. Rusesabagina, on whose life the Hollywood blockbuster Hotel Rwanda was based, was kidnapped in Dubai two years ago, brought to Kigali against his will, and [now languishes in a prison with little hope of release](#), his popularity a threat to Kagame.



^ "Hotel Rwanda" hero Paul Rusesabagina in his pink inmate's uniform | CREDIT: SIMON WOHLFAHRT/AFP via Getty Images

Rusesabagina's daughter, Carina Kanimba, speaks to him every weekend for five minutes. At the Oslo Freedom Forum last month, she told me, "My father's lip hangs limp. His arm is in pain, and hanging at an unnatural angle, indicating a loss of control." Kanimba, whom

Rusesabagina rescued from a refugee camp during the genocide and adopted, says Rwanda has denied her father access to an independent doctor, and that a Rwandan doctor has diagnosed her father's ailments as "psychological".

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**At the Oslo Freedom Forum last month, [Kanimba]...whom Rusesabagina rescued from a refugee camp during the genocide and adopted, says Rwanda has denied her father access to an independent doctor, and that a Rwandan doctor has diagnosed her father's ailments as "psychological".**

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The Rwandan government regularly issues blanket denials to human rights reports documenting its abuses. The government says it is a democracy, and that its society is free.

But Rwanda's human rights crimes are being whitewashed by international sports and political events. This year Kigali hosted the Basketball Africa League, and this week Kagame will receive the leaders of Commonwealth nations, including [Prince Charles](#) and Boris Johnson. Kagame will use the Commonwealth gathering to further burnish his image. Foreign leaders will be presented with Kigali's facade, with little reason to look at the dictatorship behind it.



^ The Prince and the Duchess of Cornwall arrived in Kigali on Tuesday evening ahead of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, his first since being chosen in 2018 as its next head. | CREDIT: Chris Jackson/Getty Images

While living in Kigali, I once happened to be on the terrace of a building, and noticed a hole in the walls. I went up to look. To my surprise, I saw the president's office. From the street, one could only see high walls and gates.

It was within that presidential compound that decisions were made about who would go to prison and who would be free, who would die and who would live. So I was surprised to see this office from above so clearly.

I could see the buildings neatly laid out and manicured lawns. A voice came from behind: "What are you looking at?" It was a security guard. He told me, in a gentle voice, I wasn't allowed to look through that hole. The guard asked why I was looking at the president's office. His calmness unnerved me. I told him that I looked for no particular reason; and immediately I felt guilty. I wondered if I should keep looking or turn away. The act of looking had been turned into something insidious. I wondered about the things I had seen and written about – many of which the government would not have wished to be known. I wondered if I had been observed all along. Often, I felt safe only in the confines of my office.

When my journalism students were attacked, I was forced to look behind Kagame's facade, to understand why it was so dangerous to speak up against his powerful government, financed and trained in

security matters by Western countries including the US, Israel and the UK. I discovered a sophisticated, controlling dictatorship, and power so concentrated in Kagame that to challenge him – even peacefully – is to risk exile, imprisonment and even death. The world might be marvelling at Rwanda right now. The UK might tout the country as a humane solution to its refugee crisis. But don't be deceived – for all its beauty Rwanda is, in reality, a prison like any other.

# Human Rights Foundation pide 'una postura firme contra el régimen cubano' a un año del 11J

La organización internacional considera que los países democráticos no deben negociar con el régimen, sino sancionarlo.

July 12, 2022

By DDC



▲ Turbas parapoliciales armadas con palos para reprimir a manifestantes en La Habana el 11 de julio. YAMIL LAGE (AFP)

La organización defensora de los derechos humanos Human Rights Foundation pidió “al mundo democrático” una “postura firme” contra el régimen cubano ante la ola represiva desatada contra los manifestantes del 11 de julio en el último año, a través de [un comunicado](#) publicado este lunes.

“Díaz-Canel y su régimen han mostrado poco remordimiento por estos atroces abusos y el mundo democrático debe adoptar una postura firme contra ellos. Hay que sancionar a los militares, a las fuerzas de [Seguridad del Estado](#) cubano y a todos los responsables de los abusos contra los derechos humanos que han tenido lugar desde el 11 de julio del año pasado, incluidos los miembros de la todavía influyente familia Castro”, afirmó el comunicado.

“Cualquier intento de reanudar los lazos diplomáticos o económicos con el régimen debe estar condicionado a la liberación de los [presos políticos](#) e incluso a la eventual restauración de la democracia”, agregó, en aparente referencia a la felixibilización de sanciones anunciada por Joe Biden.

La organización internacional dijo que durante décadas “los países democráticos de Europa y América Latina, y más recientemente – aunque por poco tiempo– [Estados Unidos](#), han negociado y entablado relaciones con los Castro y su sucesor elegido a dedo, a veces con la esperanza de que este compromiso acabara llevando al régimen a abandonar su control total sobre la sociedad cubana”.

Sin embargo, señaló que “el [Partido Comunista](#) ha dejado claro que no tiene planes de hacerlo”, por lo que recomendó “apoyar directamente a los cubanos que claman por una transición democrática y dejárselo claro a Díaz-Canel y sus compinches”.

Human Rights Foundation calificó a las protestas del pasado 11J como “un valiente y raro acto de desafío a la dictadura que ha gobernado la Isla con puño de hierro durante más de seis décadas”.

Recordó que entonces los “manifestantes fueron recibidos con una brutal [represión](#) y criminalización, y el dictador Miguel Díaz-Canel llegó a llamar a la violencia contra los manifestantes, instando a los partidarios del régimen a luchar



en las calles para 'defender la revolución'".

"En una clara demostración de lo férreamente organizada que está la represión militar y policial en la Cuba totalitaria, casi todos los artistas, periodistas o disidentes de alto nivel fueron detenidos, acosados o se les impidió salir de sus casas ese día", agregó el comunicado.

El texto señaló que "más de 1.000 personas fueron detenidas en relación con las manifestaciones, algunas simplemente por informar sobre ellas en las redes sociales, muchas de ellas de tan sólo 17 años".

"A principios de este año, tras ser detenidos arbitrariamente durante meses, 381 de los manifestantes fueron juzgados por tribunales y condenados a penas de hasta 25 años de prisión", continuó.

El comunicado de Human Rights Foundation recordó que producto de la ola represiva del régimen u la crisis económica "un número récord de cubanos lo está arriesgando todo para abandonar la Isla".

# Iran Tried to Kill Me on American Soil

For exercising my freedom as a U.S. citizen and criticizing the regime, my life and family are at risk.

August 7 , 2022

By [Masih Alinejad](#), HRF international council member



^ Masih Alinejad said this security-camera photo shows defendant Khalid Mehdiyev outside her Brooklyn home. PHOTO: MASIH ALINEJAD

Brooklyn, N.Y. "This time their objective was to kill you," a special agent from the Federal Bureau of Investigation told me. "We

detained him with a loaded AK-47." When I saw the photos of the weapon, I was filled with shock, fear and disbelief.

In 2014 I launched a campaign challenging compulsory hijab in my native Iran. For defending a woman's right to dress how she wants and my endless criticism of the regime, I have been targeted multiple times by the Iranian government on American soil.

Video security footage at my home showed a man on my porch last week trying to break in. While he was outside my door, I was on a video call with Human Rights Foundation chairman Garry Kasparov and Venezuelan activist Leopoldo López. We were discussing how last month both [Vladimir Putin](#) and Nicolás Maduro were in Iran, and that just as the dictators are united, so should be the efforts against their regimes.

According to an affidavit from the FBI, the Iranian agent who attempted to enter my home is Khalid Mehdiyev, an Azerbaijan-born immigrant to the U.S. New York police arrested him on Thursday and, after searching his car, they found the loaded AK-47, 66 rounds of ammunition, more than \$1,000 in cash, and multiple fraudulent license plates from various U.S. states. President Biden's national security adviser, Jake

Sullivan, has confirmed that the Iranian regime sent Mr. Mehdiyev to assassinate me.

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**The Iranian regime's attempts to silence me will never work. I am not fearful of dying, because I know what I am living for. I have dedicated my life to fighting for those in my country who bravely risk everything to challenge the dictatorship.**

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Tehran is deathly afraid of my message and its strength inside Iran. For months last year, I had to move between multiple safe houses after the FBI foiled a plot by Iranian agents to kidnap me from my home in New York and forcibly return me to Iran by way of Venezuela. I am routinely harassed online and accounts try to impersonate me to discredit my message. Earlier this month my social-media accounts were fraudulently suspended. The

regime has gone after my family in Iran, trying to use my mother to lure me back to the country.

Though my family and I are again being uprooted from our home to go into hiding, the Iranian regime's attempts to silence me will never work. I am not fearful of dying, because I know what I am living for. I have dedicated my life to fighting for those in my country who bravely risk everything to challenge the dictatorship.

Iran continues to deny all of this, but it's the truth. The regime is my only enemy, the only entity interested in kidnapping or killing me. It has already harassed my family in Iran, put my sister on national TV to denounce me, and jailed my brother for two years. It is no surprise that a ruthless tyranny would want to repress innocent activists, but it is shocking it would twice attempt to commit crimes against someone in America. For daring to enjoy my freedom and give a voice to the countless Iranians who can't speak freely, I am unable to live in peace or security even in the U.S.

Tehran is unlikely to stop. Regime officials are humiliated that this latest foiled plot makes the regime

look like a bumbling failure. Perhaps they will be emboldened to finish what they started. I am grateful for the protection of law-enforcement agencies, and I hope the U.S. government takes this seriously and makes clear to the mullahs that an American citizen like me should feel safe exercising her constitutional freedoms inside U.S. borders.

*Ms. Alinejad is a member of the Human Rights Foundation's international council and author of "The Wind in My Hair: My Fight for Freedom in Modern Iran."*

# Life in a safe house: Why I sympathize with Salman Rushdie

August 8, 2022

By [Masih Alinejad](#), HRF international council member



▲ *Salman Rushdie at an interview in London in April 2008. (Dylan Martinez/Reuters)*

*Masih Alinejad is an Iranian journalist, author and women's rights campaigner. A member of the Human Rights Foundation's International Council, she hosts "Tablet," a talk show on Voice of America's Persian service.*

My heart goes out to Salman Rushdie. I'm deeply appalled [by the attempt on his life](#) and extremely relieved that he survived.

The attack on Rushdie was an act of terrorism. That's what President

Biden and other Western leaders should call it. The media in Iran have been celebrating it, regretting only that the assailant didn't manage to kill Rushdie. The brutal regime in Tehran has a history of encouraging acts of violence to undermine our freedoms. Why aren't we taking a stronger stand?

The attack on Rushdie struck especially close to home for me. I, too, have been repeatedly targeted by the vicious regime in Tehran for my criticisms of [its hateful policies against women](#). Two weeks ago, I got a lucky break: Police [arrested a man](#) with a loaded AK-47-style rifle in his car after he made a failed attempt to enter my house in Brooklyn. The incident recalls another plot foiled by the FBI in 2021, when federal prosecutors [charged four alleged Iranian agents](#) with conspiring to kidnap me and take me back to Iran. At the time, I had to go into hiding for a while; now the FBI has put me under its protection again.

Now I find myself living in a safe house with featureless white walls adorned with replica modern paintings; this is where I was when I learned about the attack on Rushdie. It might be safe, but it's

not my home. Until two weeks ago, I lived in a beautiful house in Brooklyn surrounded by loving neighbors who, since my unwilling departure, have been watering my flower beds in solidarity with my plight. Since the attack on Rushdie, the official Telegram channel of the Revolutionary Guard Corps and others in Iran on social media [have been praising](#) the would-be killer. They've also been saying that I should be next.

Rushdie himself knows only too well what this situation is like. After Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini [issued a fatwa](#) in 1989 calling for the author to be killed over his book "The Satanic Verses" (which Khomeini deemed offensive to Muslims), Rushdie ended up living in a safe house for most of the next 10 years. That lifestyle took its toll. By around 2001, he was sick of the living in the shadows and began making public appearances again. He even wrote a [memoir](#) about his experience. Everything seemed fine.

After years on the run, Rushdie might have concluded that he had regained his freedom. Now that assumption is over. In fact, Khomeini's threat against him was never lifted; Iran's current supreme



leader [affirmed](#) the original fatwa on Twitter as recently as 2019, and the bounty for killing Rushdie now stands [at more than \\$3 million](#). Apologists claiming there is no link with Iran should consider the headline with which the main state newspaper in Tehran celebrated Mr. Rushdie's wound: "[Satan's eye has been blinded](#)."

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**What has driven so much of the intensity of my activism is a sense of obligation and camaraderie with the many women, journalists and human rights activists who have stood up for liberal values inside Iran and paid a steep price.**

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I have often thought of Rushdie and his plight over the past two years when my own journey in and out of safe houses first began. I often wondered how Rushdie coped with the physical and mental hardships

of enforced imprisonment. To be in a safe house is like being back in quarantine — except that there seems to be no vaccine against the fanaticism of the Iranian regime.

The fact that a religious fundamentalist regime issues fatwas against those who criticize them is not surprising. What is shocking is the lack of action from democratic governments around the world, which should be categorically denouncing these actions. In the sleepy town of Chautauqua, N.Y., Rushdie was about to lead a discussion about the role of the United States as a haven for exiled writers and other artists under threat of persecution. The irony is not lost on me.

I have no intention of disappearing from public view. The activist in me wonders how many more times someone on U.S. soil will be a target of the Iranian regime and its supporters before concrete action is taken. The other part of me wonders whether I will be able to do banal, normal things such as walking to the local bakery or sitting outside on a winter day and drinking hot chocolate.

What has driven so much of the intensity of my activism is a sense of obligation and camaraderie with the many women, journalists and human rights activists who have stood up for liberal values inside Iran and paid a steep price. I owe it to them to use the freedoms I have enjoyed in Western democracies to give them a voice. I do not want to die and will have to take precautions, but I intend to live a life free from fear, with a garden and loving neighbors, no matter what it takes. I hope Rushdie recovers quickly. One day I'd like to thank him – and maybe even show him our flower beds.

# The Ailing Human Rights Industry

At this year's Oslo Freedom Forum, even the most sanguine activists struggled to overcome a sense of drift and impotence

August 8, 2022

By [Armin Rosen](#)



▲ OSLO FREEDOM FORUM / JAN KHUR

The message emanates from the untroubled green hills, the unremarkable fjord, the pristine and car-free downtown, the silent trams, the colorless streets where

there is no trash, no crime, no visible suffering of any kind: All is well here, for you are in a boring place. Dullness is Oslo's great asset—only somewhere with total confidence

in its solutions to all of modern society's problems could fail to see the obvious absurdity of the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony, which takes place at City Hall every year. Maybe the Oslo Freedom Forum, the Human Rights Foundation's (HRF) annual convention of political dissidents, could only happen in a place characterized by a sense of post-historical languor.

In two prior trips to the forum I have met an activist from the famously rebellious Syrian city of Kafr Nabl who was murdered by an al-Qaida affiliate a little over a year later, overheard the embittered mutterings of the exiled former president of the Maldives while we killed time in a hotel lobby, and looked into the eyes of a secularist Bangladeshi blogger who was then near the top of a jihadi death list, glimpsing a mad imbalance of resignation and mortal fear. These and a hundred other interactions too inspiring and unsettling to convey in any single piece of writing all happened without my having to leave the Norwegian capital, where the convenience stores all close before 12, as if to punish you for even having an appetite.

The forum, which I attended this year for the first time since 2017, is based on a simple premise that no one would have disputed five years ago—namely that knowledge, publicity, technical know-how, and networking could free the oppressed from their shackles. The main programming is a series of TED-style 10-to-15-minute presentations from people who have fought autocratic regimes or nonstate groups, alongside similar talks from journalists, scholars, or technologists aiding the activists in their fight against tyranny. In between these sessions are hours' worth of subtly curated workshops, dinners, and other quasi-structured schmoozing opportunities. These are all of astoundingly high quality because of the range of backgrounds and outlooks on hand. The forum is an experiment in discovering what anti-drug war activists, cypherpunks, Islamists, North Korean defectors, *National Review* staffers, Syrian torture survivors, and the CEO of Tumblr can learn from one another. In Oslo, relationships would be built and awareness would be raised, seeding some kind of future positive change for the billions who toil under dictatorship.

HRF was founded in 2006 by Thor Halvorssen, the libertarian-minded scion of a prominent family in his native Venezuela who had previously headed the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (since renamed the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression), the leading group advocating for free speech on U.S. college campuses. HRF has a very different approach than Human Rights Watch (HRW) or Amnesty International. The latter groups seek to leverage their activist and donor networks, along with the waning illusion of moral authority, in order to accrue power within governments and multilateral organizations like the United Nations or the International Criminal Court, globe-spanning entities that the ideologists of the Western human rights industry believe to be legitimate, effective, and extremely important. In contrast, HRF avoids the incumbent human rights community's lust for high politics, instead foregrounding the activists themselves, getting the advocates in front of people from a range of professional and ideological backgrounds who are capable of promoting their stories and advancing their work. Just as crucially, HRF exclusively focuses

its attention on the denial of civil and political rights. The legacy human rights community gets much of its profile and fundraising from attacks on democracies like the United States, whose openness ensures that there is never any shortage of good- and bad-faith internal criticism. HRF cares only about dictatorships, predatory governments, and authoritarian militant groups, none of which handle dissent all that well.

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**HRF avoids the incumbent human rights community's lust for high politics, instead foregrounding the activists themselves, getting the advocates in front of people from a range of professional and ideological backgrounds who are capable of promoting their stories and advancing their work.**

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Has either approach—the elite self-seriousness and sanctimony of Big Human Rights, contrasted with the freewheeling and heterodox HRF—really accomplished much? The world of 2022 is a nightmare compared to that of five years ago, the last time I was in Oslo for the forum. The list of things that have gotten worse is long and sobering. Any remaining hope that the Twitter and Facebook-driven revolutions of the Arab Spring would usher in an era of freedom and democracy in the Middle East has evaporated. Bashar Assad and his Iranian allies slaughtered their way to control over nearly all of Syria, Yemen became the site of an ever more violent and intractable proxy war, and even Tunisia devolved into a soft autocracy. The Taliban are back in power in Afghanistan; Nicholas Maduro held on in Venezuela, sending over 5 million of his subjects fleeing for their lives. Russia invaded Ukraine and became a full-on police state. Social media and the internet became an easy conduit for nearly any government in the world, democratic as well as autocratic, to track and manipulate just about anyone under their rule. China sent its Uyghur minority to concentration camps and dismantled democratic

self-rule in Hong Kong, in defiance of international legal obligations, which of course counted for nothing in the end. The Chinese Communist Party might have created and accidentally leaked a pathogen that's killed some 20 million people, a disease that proved to be a once-in-a-century boon for unfreedom the world over, in Sydney as well as Shanghai. The autocrats have grown more confident and more dangerous as democracies' sense of weakness and drift settles into an indefinite and comfortable malaise.

"Speaking personally," said the exiled pro-democracy Hong Kong activist Glacier Kwong during her presentation on the final day of this year's forum, "the last year has been an incredibly dark period for me, beset by shadows and the torments of my own thoughts." She had seen an authoritarian regime destroy her society and jail her friends without suffering any consequences. "I'm sorry to say the international community has not honored our sacrifices," said Kwong. She closed with a statement that, by virtue of its vagueness, might be the most realistic call to action possible in the face of the Chinese communist



leviathan: "Honor the sacrifice Hong Kong has made for you."

None of the world's recent tragedies can be laid at the feet of HRF, and even HRW and Amnesty are relatively blameless. But in Oslo it was clear that the post-World War II human rights paradigm was crumbling under realities that are both current and also somehow premodern. Powerful bad people are defeating powerless good people, just as they have for millennia. Laws, values, and idealism are less immediately tangible than bullets and poison gas. Citizens of the major democracies have demanded their governments turn inward, such that from an American vantage point the atrocities of Aleppo or Xinjiang look like they're happening farther and farther away from us. The modern world's various channels of idealism—multilateral organizations, NGOs, democratic governments, technological innovators—are some combination of impotent, cravenly self-interested, or complicit in the broader decline.

When the rebels of the human rights world survey the wreckage, the most honest of them now see a landscape where victory isn't

inevitable, old dreams have been replaced, former certainties no longer hold, and idealism's very survival requires a retreat into cold reality.

The forum opened on May 23rd at the Oslo Konserthus, a hulking concrete shed of Nordic modularity, with at least twice the capacity of the Oslo Nye Teater, where the event had been held in 2017. "The world has changed so much since we were last here three years ago," opened HRF President Celine Assaf Boustani, alluding to the COVID cancellations of the past two forums. The pandemic, war, and democratic decline all plagued humankind. "Each of these," she alleged to the roughly 1,000 people on hand, "is the result of authoritarians."

Halvorsen then spoke briefly. He wore red sneakers and an olive jacket without a tie. Halvorsen's youthful round face competes with the unblinking focus suggested in his sharp hairline. The 46-year-old has the intense self-possession of someone waging a lonely, longshot war against nothing less than evil itself. When I spoke with him later that day, he rattled off his family's history with the regime in

Venezuela, the country of his birth: His father had been a political prisoner, his family's property was expropriated, his mother was shot by regime agents; his cousin Leopoldo Lopez, a leading opposition politician, spent seven years either in prison or under house arrest or holed up in the Spanish Embassy in Caracas. Halvorssen is the producer of *The Dissident*, a 2020 documentary about the murder of Jamal Khashoggi.

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**"If we don't end dictatorships," cautioned Halvorssen, "dictatorships will end us."**

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"More than half of humanity lives under the boot of authoritarianism," Halvorssen announced onstage. "We have to keep repeating that number." Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine and various regimes' desperate attempts to influence election outcomes and change minds proved that the mere existence of unfreedom was a danger to democratic societies. "If we don't end dictatorships,"

cautioned Halvorssen, "dictatorships will end us."

HRF, and Halvorssen in particular, want their production to look good, marking another difference with more traditional human rights groups. The aesthetics in Oslo are not an afterthought; HRF aims for particular moments, images, and people to reach virality. The first striking image of the conference was of Evgenia Kara-Murza, wife of the imprisoned Russian democracy activist and former forum speaker Vladimir Kara-Murza, sitting on a spotlit high stool in a dour black jacket, facing the crowd in profile, reading a letter her husband had written to her from Moscow's Fifth Pre-Trial Detention Facility. "The price of freedom is high," Kara-Murza wrote, quoting his mentor, Boris Nemtsov, an anti-Putin figure murdered just outside the Kremlin walls in 2015. A fate more permanent than prison might be coming, Kara-Murza seemed to warn, lightly hinting at his own survival of two previous attempts to poison him. But, the jailed man continued, "I have no doubts and no regrets."

Kara-Murza, we learned, had once said that the worst thing for a

political prisoner is to be forgotten. At its best the forum was a three-day revolt against forgetting, even if it often had the unintended effect of reinforcing just how impotent memory can be. During his talk, Omar Alshogre, director of detainee affairs for the Syrian Emergency Task Force, dramatically acted out his cousin's death in his arms in an Assadist dungeon in Syria. In the midst of trying and failing to imagine what Alshogre's ordeal must have actually been like, it dawned on me that most Syrians like him—genuine liberals with English fluency and a bravery that democratic citizens can scarcely comprehend, a courage that to us looks almost like suicide—had been killed or exiled over the past 11 years of war.

The exhortations continued throughout the week. "I ask you to keep Belarus on the agenda," pleaded one of the exiled leaders of that country's pro-democracy movement, whose husband languished in prison for the crime of heading an opposition political party. "Help us internally in Eritrea so that we don't have to choose between dictatorship and human trafficking," urged Filmon Debru, who endured unspeakable torture,

and the mutilation of his hands, when Bedouins kidnapped him in the Sinai during his escape from the hyperstrict Eritrean dictatorship. "My father is not doing well," warned Carine Kanimba, adopted daughter of Paul Rusesabagina, the *Hotel Rwanda* hero now serving a 25-year prison sentence after being kidnapped to the country of his birth.

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"Kazakhstan's disappeared from the headlines already," fretted one questioner during a panel discussion. Was it ever in the

headlines? I thought. For someone who lives in Kazakhstan there might be few things more important than the state of political rights in that vast yet remote-seeming Central Asian country—remote to me, that is. Alas, the front pages, and the attention of the average democratic citizen, can only hold so much faraway suffering at once. One's reserves of attention and emotion are preciously limited. Time grows shorter with every passing second.

In the shadow of these hard and ever hardening realities, the forum could feel like a series of attempts to either salvage or bury leftover and potentially discredited visions of human progress. The U.N.-led international system, said Ukrainian activist Oleksandra Matviichuk, was "in ruins like Mariupol," a cutting reference to the Black Sea city that the Russian invaders had recently destroyed. On the more optimistic end of the spectrum, Tawakkol Karman, the "mother of the revolution" in Yemen and a winner of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize, insisted that the chaos in her nearly destroyed country was not the fault of the protest movement that unseated the country's long-ruling dictator. There had been,

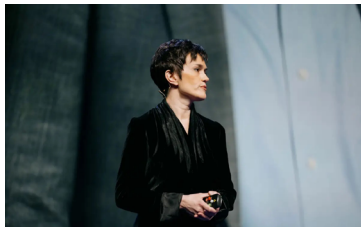
Tawakkol insisted, "a successful national dialogue that brought all of Yemenis together ... We wrote a great constitution." Awesome as that document undoubtedly was, it proved no match for "the forces of the counterrevolution," namely the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, which had all sabotaged Yemen's future. She took no responsibility for the post-Arab Spring chaos, and said nothing about what her movement could have done differently or what democratic activists could learn from her revolution's failure. Karman's speech, and Yemen's plunge into chaos since the 2011 uprising, suggested a paradox that was uncomfortable to reflect upon at any gathering of political dissidents: A botched democratic revolution can ultimately turn out worse for human freedom than the regime it replaced.

Karman was, as she noted, a member of the Facebook and Instagram oversight boards, a merging of Big Tech and human rights activism that also reflected the naivete of an earlier time. The tech giants had a conspicuous presence in Oslo: Twitter, Meta, and Jigsaw, which describes itself as "a unit within Google that explores threats to open societies,"

each had displays and workshop rooms on the Konserthus' ground floor. That these companies could themselves be threats to freedom, and that they are in an open and very often indecisive self-reckoning with the implications of their own vast power, are facts that are now too obvious to hide. "We can predict what the next conspiracy theory is going to be," said Beth Goldberg, a research program manager at Jigsaw, during a panel discussion. "How do we boost people's immunity?"

Google controls more information about more people than nearly any nonstate entity in history (I am typing this very article on a Chromebook, in Google Docs). The line between well-intentioned defense of the information space and a quasi-Orwellian campaign to manipulate hundreds of millions of minds in the service of a preferred corporate or political vision might be thinner than most people at Google or its peers seem to realize, even at this late stage. Goldberg spoke of "pre-bunking at the level of meta-narrative or a rhetorical technique" in response to future conspiracy theories, a form of subtle content manipulation that, she assures us, is "not even

political. It's way more cerebral." To prevail against disinformation, she said, it was necessary to "tap into people's deep-seated identities and beliefs."



▲ Evgenia Kara-Murza | OSLO FREEDOM FORUM/JAN KHUR

Scott Carpenter, Jigsaw's director of policy, assured me that there's nothing to worry about here, and inasmuch as there is something to worry about, Google worries about it too. "The first principle has to be, 'do no harm,'" he said of the ideal anti-disinformation content regime. "There's a lot of harm out there already, so you're balancing harms." A counterproductive way to balance harms, he said, would be for Google to act as chief censor and force users to adapt to its heavy hand. "We want to get beyond the idea that the only response you have is to take things down," he said. When lies proliferate on Google's platforms,

there can perhaps be “speed bumps so there’s a little bit of friction. People can push through them if they want.”

A speed bump isn’t a wall or a force field. That’s pretty reassuring. But could any web giant advance freedom in any meaningful sense if it held so much unaccountable power? I noted to Carpenter that his employer probably had the ability to read my email, and to read over my article drafts at the moment I was writing them—although I caught myself and admitted this is a power I continue to willingly give to Google. His reply pointed toward a fundamental dilemma of existence in the modern world, where people understand very little of the systems and technologies that allow them to live connected and relatively frictionless lives. “In the world in which we live,” Carpenter said, “ultimately you have to trust someone. Over the years in working for Google, I find that, in my experience, the commitment to security and protection for our users is really, really high.”

“Big Tech was never set up to be civil liberty-oriented,” Thor Halvorssen explained to me at the

end of an emotionally draining first day of programming. “They’re set up to make money.” We met in the M.C. Escher-like entanglement of interlocking passageways that formed the Konserthus’ lower lobby as attendees filed out of the complex, catching a couple hours of decompression before dinner. Halvorssen is eminently capable of being funny but almost never laughs in public. He evinced no outward sense of accomplishment after a successful day of his organization’s premier event. The scope of the work ahead of him was just too daunting, work that extended even to the tech firms that sponsored the forum. “Big Tech needs to have a thorough education in authoritarian government and what it means. So many Big Tech companies have unwittingly become the tools of dictatorships,” he said. “Social media is not a place to share photos and opinions. It has become [like] weapons—their weapons.”

Twitter, Google, and Meta were all here, I observed. In fact the companies’ displays and seminar rooms were just down the hall. “Yes,” he said, “they’re not just here, they’re actually supporters of the Human Rights Foundation, and they

are sponsors of the Oslo Freedom Forum. And obviously I'm speaking honestly. We're grateful for their support. That does not mean that we are going to be oblivious and turn a blind eye to what these companies should do and are not doing."

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**There was a plausible case for change that seemed to be organizing everything, one anchored in a certain realism about the sources of unfreedom and the difficulty of overcoming them.**

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The 30-minute interview was a barrage of righteous accusation. "The billionaire who runs Apple" should declare himself an agent of China under the U.S. Foreign Agents Registration Act, Halvorsen charged. Fusion GPS, compilers of the debunked Steele dossier, "has been a criminal enterprise" because of its work smearing human rights defenders on behalf of the Russian

and Venezuelan regimes. "Now," he said, "we are a small conference that essentially stands in contrast to the world's largest gathering of dictators." Davos? I asked. No, Halvorsen corrected me: "The United Nations."

I came to Oslo wondering if HRF had succumbed to the usual corruption-by-inertia, and if the NGO industrial complex, Big Tech, and politically minded corporate donors had nudged it toward the institutional progressivism that is now the monoculture of the educated West, conquering by attrition until everything looks and sounds like an episode of Pod Save America, except duller. Halvorsen is a big part of the reason this hadn't happened. The founder and CEO of HRF was out to please nobody; he made no pretense toward any self-interest and made no obvious concessions to institutionalism, even in the case of the organization he'd built over 16 years. Maybe this was just the appearance of edginess, a kind of madman theory of human rights activism in the service of fairly conventional aims. Still, there was a plausible case for change that seemed to be organizing everything, one anchored in a

certain realism about the sources of unfreedom and the difficulty of overcoming them.

"The world has been sliding in the wrong direction now for more than a decade," he explained. "That has everything to do with the West being compromised or the West being cowardly." Tech companies chased giant paydays in China; Tony Blair lived in a mansion paid for in part by a lobbying deal with the government of Kazakhstan. Held beside the flagrant corruption infecting the upper reaches of Western societies, human rights advocacy could be something countercultural, a way of exposing a dishonest elite and a redoubt of honesty in a world of lies. But those claiming liberal democracy could bring paradise on Earth no longer sounded credible, and those who did often sound credible, like Halvorssen, knew better than to make any sweeping utopian claims.

What next, after utopia? Many of the liberating hopes of the 20th and 21st centuries have taken a pretty awful beating lately. The dream of de facto global governance under a multilateral liberal regime has proven delusional or worse. Only an ideologue still argues that freer

markets automatically result in freer societies. These days, no one talks about the emancipatory potential of social media unless they work for a social media company. The internet might spread ideas and connect activists to one another, but it's also a means to surveil and manipulate people on an unprecedented scale, as well as a medium through which young children get hooked on Chinese government-owned spy apps and slightly older children get hooked on porn. By now we know that liberal democracy is a superior way to organize society while also being as potentially dangerous as most other messianic ideas.

The former modes of progress were premised on grand centralities, vast organizations standing for immutable universal truths and governed by virtuous administrators. Forget all that, the very large Bitcoin contingent at the forum seemed to say, and forget every other big idea to fix all the world's problems—the administrators are mostly getting in the way of things. In Oslo, the Bitcoiners sought to progress beyond existing frameworks without anyone's help or permission.



The Bitcoiners were easy to spot: The guy in the Pikachu hat and the cartoon Bitcoin gold chain was a Bitcoiner, as was the guy in the Long Bitcoin sweater. The guy in the Bitcoin is Dead sweater offered a more complicated case. Both presenters who went on the main stage in face-shadowing baseball caps were Bitcoiners. The crypto folks were cliquish and tended to be oblivious to the business casual and formal dress codes, like they'd achieved some new level of being in which our rules no longer applied to them. I get it, I thought to myself: The old level of being, the one I'm stuck in, is terrible a lot of the time. In this terribleness lies the optimistic long-term case for Bitcoin, namely that it could serve as a platform for solving problems that have never been solved before, and thus has both the velocity and the permanence of any other unkillable idea.

"In Nigeria everyone is governing themselves," explained Bernard Parah, a 23-year-old from the Middle Belt city of Jos and the founder and CEO of a Bitcoin platform called Bitnob. "Even the government doesn't trust itself," a friend and fellow countryman chimed in from across our lunch

table. In Nigeria, Parah explained, food prices were skyrocketing, and the national government's dysfunction had made the currency practically useless. Parah knew a woman who was able to start a laundry business and pay her kids' school fees just from a bump in Bitcoin prices after 2020.

"If you can rationally explain something about Nigeria," Parah said, "you do not understand it." In many parts of the world, in places where the cruelest and most capricious actor is the state itself, Bitcoin can actually be a hedge against the irrational. "In the next few years, Bitcoin will be more common in Nigeria than anywhere else in the world," Parah promised.

Bitcoin, explained HRF Chief Strategy Officer Alex Gladstein during a main-stage presentation, is "an open and neutral new kind of currency," one that could sneak behind barriers to financial autonomy, evading the reach of autocrats who "relentlessly persecute their critics with the weapon of money."

"What makes Bitcoin so incredibly powerful is that no one controls it," said Elizabeth Stark, CEO of

Lightning Labs during a panel discussion. "In Africa, banks are like a luxury brand," noted Fode Diop, the Senegalese founder of the Bitcoin Developers Academy, who during his time on the main stage recalled his family's savings being cut in half when the West African franc was devalued in the 2000s. "The future of banking is an Android device connected to the Bitcoin network itself," he predicted. Jack Mallers, the CEO of Strike, explained in a tone of blissed-out evenness that Bitcoin could "escrow value anywhere on the planet ... at the speed of light, across oceans ... across regimes." It didn't matter that the digital currency was plunging in value at the time, as it periodically does. "This illustration works if Bitcoin's at \$10,000 or \$1,000."

"I'm a philosopher," said Reed College professor Troy Cross during a panel, remembering when he'd first learned about Bitcoin in the early 2010s. "I thought, this is one of the most beautiful ideas I've ever encountered."

The next day, Cross and I found ourselves seated in the same bank of couches. Since he is a philosopher enchanted with the

idea of Bitcoin, he seemed like exactly the person to ask about the technology's potential dark side. Perhaps, I suggested, the people convinced that Bitcoin is the key to securing financial rights beyond the reach of autocrats and kleptocrats were repeating the mistake of early internet or social media enthusiasts high on the hypothetically democratizing power of a new technology. Cross, it turned out, wasn't a starry-eyed crypto dreamer, but an intellectually curious man—a lover of long walks in the Oregon woods, I imagined—who wanted to explore the implications of something that seemed genuinely revolutionary. "I bought two dozen pairs of socks for five Bitcoin each from an Alpaca farmer in New Hampshire in 2011," he recalled. "I thought it was probably gonna fail. Most of us did."

Over the following decade, Cross watched as the value of Bitcoin rose, as crypto turned from the realm of oddball hobbyists into a series of exotic financial products, the true nature of which was poorly understood even among its biggest boosters. "It's not gonna improve humanity," Cross explained, referring to both the idea and the reality of an ungovernable

global network for holding and transferring value. "It's not gonna make us better. It's a tool, like the internet. Even more than the internet, it's gonna be like electricity itself. Imagine saying electricity is aligned with a philosophical mission—it's a force of nature."

By this interpretation, Bitcoin is a system beyond all systems, outside of anyone's real control, of a kind that would be built as soon as the technology existed. It would find its purpose, however beneficial or malign, once the old consolidating projects were exposed as inefficient or oppressive.

I realized that Bitcoin is useful to Nigerian peasants or Ukrainian defense militias or drug traffickers because it is in tension with the old and familiar human rights idea, which depended on state power, moral authority, and coercion. States, the source of fiat currency, appear less stable and less trustworthy; the forces of good are getting harder to identify, and outside pressure has very real limits when applied to oppressive governments. Bitcoin's "use cases," to borrow the 'coiner jargon, spring from a myriad of failures.

"It's not debt, it's not a unit of account, it's not a means of exchange, it's not a good store of value in the short term," Cross said of Bitcoin, meaning it fits none of the usual criteria to even be considered "money." Bitcoin was, Cross explained, "part of nondeal political philosophy ... In a perfect world it's not viable. Its value is in the imperfection of our world."

Bitcoin is almost a banality, or maybe a futile last gasp at agency against the world's wrongdoers, when held beside someone like Carine Kanimba, adopted daughter of Paul Rusesabagina, who Don Cheadle played in *Hotel Rwanda*. Rusesabagina's continuing imprisonment in Rwanda seems an insult aimed at a specifically American view of human progress and of reality itself. If a beloved actor gets an Oscar nomination for playing you in a movie, a movie that millions of people saw and that became a sociopolitical event unto itself, then nothing bad can possibly happen to you, according to the American faith in the metaphysical grandeur of entertainment and fame. You are untouchable, and the power of popular culture has taken you beyond the realm of the merely human.



▲ Carine Kanimba | OSLO FREEDOM FORUM/  
JULIE HRNCIROVA

In the case of the *Hotel Rwanda* rescuer, who saved the lives of 1,268 Tutsis and their sympathizers at the Mille Collines hotel in Kigali in the spring of 1994, it was force that mattered in the end. In September of 2020, Rusesabagina, a U.S. green card holder, was lured from his home in San Antonio, Texas, onto a private jet in Dubai, which he believed was taking him to a speaking engagement in Burundi. He was drugged onboard, and the plane landed in Kigali, Rwanda's capital. The forum, with its presentations from family members of the dead and imprisoned, could be an unintended reminder of

the pathetic limits of awareness-raising and the puny dimensions of thought. The Uyghurs remain in concentration camps and Assad still rules Syria, neither of which are particularly obscure facts these days. Rusesabagina was tortured and sentenced to 25 years in prison by the regime of Paul Kagame, a former darling of the international development human rights industrial complex—the harsh sentence being an especially flagrant attack on the idea that publicity can advance the work of human rights activists and protect them against harm.

As Kanimba explained when I interviewed her in Oslo, Rusesabagina is her uncle by marriage. Her parents were slaughtered in the opening days of the genocide; amid the chaos Rusesabagina made sure that Kanimba and her sister, both little older than toddlers at the time, were rescued from a displaced persons camp and taken to safety at the Mille Collines. She is now in her late 20s, a poised and elegant spokeswoman for her father's cause and someone whose years living in Belgium and the United States mean she can plead his case on different continents and

in multiple languages. She does not remember the genocide, or her biological parents. "I think they waited until we were 6 or 7 to tell us that we were adopted because as kids they didn't want to scare us," she said of Rusesabagina and his wife, Tatiana. "And so watching the movie, it was also a way for me to learn about my life, what our family went through. And it was a way for them to be able to explain it to us in a way that we could understand."

In a place like Kigali in the mid-'90s, a luxury hotel manager such as Rusesabagina was a person whose social and political clout went beyond his job title. He met Paul Kagame when he allowed the Mille Collines to be used for meetings of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, the Tutsi militia group that ended the genocide before transforming itself into one of the most durable and sophisticated dictatorships in Africa. As an ethnic Hutu, Rusesabagina was too admired by Tutsis as a hero to be safe under a leader as jealous of admiration as Kagame. "Also," Kanimba alleged, "they wanted to eliminate the influential Hutus," which described Rusesabagina.

Rusesabagina moved his family to Belgium after the civil war. Kagame's regime often sent representatives to ask him to return, dangling the prospect of high-level government employment. Rusesabagina realized this was a ploy to either imprison him or win his public loyalty. Then came *Hotel Rwanda*, released in 2004, in time for the 10th anniversary of the genocide. Rusesabagina felt he was in too much danger to attend a special screening at the national stadium in Kigali. Tatiana went instead, and watched from the same box as Kagame. "He stood up afterward and noticed how people were crying and people were admiring my father in the stadium," Kanimba said of Kagame. Her adoptive mother had enough awareness of her country to know it was time to get out, more or less right that second. "She immediately left for the airport," Kanimba recalled.

The serious threats didn't begin until Rusesabagina's two visits to the White House of George W. Bush after the release of *Hotel Rwanda*, once to meet the president, and then again to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Over the years, Kagame's

henchmen fabricated receipts connecting Rusesabagina to a rebel movement in the Congo and attempted to plant child pornography on his computer. The family moved to San Antonio, where Kanimba is certain Rwandan regime agents continued to surveil her father. Now in prison, Rusesabagina joins the annals of wartime heroes whose lives became haunted by their own heroism: Soviet agents murdered both Gareth Jones and Raoul Wallenberg, Oscar Schindler died poor, Varian Fry descended into alcoholism and obscurity and bitterness. One key difference in Rusesabagina's case is that the worst of his suffering happened after he became a global symbol of human decency.

What does one even do in response to something like Rusesabagina's imprisonment, grim evidence of what dictators can achieve when they gamble—often correctly—that their public image, and reality itself, can be discarded and reconstructed at will? The question of how to shame, pressure, or remove dictators, which animates the forum and its work, can sometimes only be answered one murder or prison sentence at a time. Hopefully it will be answered

through the work of people like Kanimba, too. When her father was kidnapped, Kanimba quit her job at a New York-based impact investing firm. The campaign for Rusesabagina's freedom has notched one significant policy win: In May, the U.S. government declared he was being "wrongly detained," notable given that Kagame-era Rwanda and the United States have had generally friendly relations. With the help of her sister, Kanimba began filing lawsuits wherever she could to prove their father's imprisonment was a state-sponsored hostage-taking. "I can send you the transcript of his torture and this kidnapping," she said, the bitter fruits of one such legal expedition. She knows that her father was kidnapped using a private jet leased from a Greek company for \$120,000. "We have the receipt," she explained, "and it's paid to the Office of the President."

When Rusesabagina arrived in Kigali, Kanimba told me, "they held him in solitary confinement." We were meeting in a modest dressing room behind the Konserthus stage. "I cannot imagine the pain that he felt because the room was smaller than this. The only lights that he

had were between the door and the bottom."

For Kanimba, the question of moral action in the face of an immovable dictator isn't abstract—it's not some metaphorical needle to be threaded between the figurative gaps in something called "human nature," but an oppressive fact of existence filling every second of every day, aimed at destroying whomever it touches. The fight to change the mind of Paul Kagame hasn't destroyed Kanimba, though. It is her privilege, she believes, to be able to carry such an immense burden on her father's behalf, and perhaps on everyone else's behalf too. "Here's the thing," she said. "Both my biological parents were slaughtered with machetes. My life was spared for a reason. And I was adopted by Paul Rusesabagina for a reason, and I'm grateful to be alive and I'm grateful to be able to stand up for him today. And so I think this is why I was saved."

*Armin Rosen is a staff writer for Tablet magazine.*

# The sanctions against Russia still have holes. Here's how to plug them.

September 8, 2022

By [Michael McFaul](#)

and [Garry Kasparov](#), Chairman of the Human Rights Foundation



^ A worker inspects pipes at a gas drilling rig on the Gazprom PJSC Chayandinskoye oil and gas field, a resource base for the Power of Siberia gas pipeline, in the Lensk district of the Sakha Republic, Russia, in October 2021. (Andrey Rudakov/Bloomberg News)

*Garry Kasparov is chairman of the Renew Democracy Initiative and the Human Rights Foundation. Michael McFaul is director of the Freeman*

*Spogli Institute for International Studies, a Hoover fellow at Stanford University and a contributing columnist to The Post.*



The United States and other democracies around the world rightly responded to Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine by imposing new sanctions on Russia's financial system, oil and gas exports, and certain individuals. These sanctions are more comprehensive than any other effort undertaken by the free world against a dictatorship the size of Russia.

They have certainly weakened the Russian economy. But only the most optimistic believed that sanctions would persuade Putin to change his mind and withdraw his army from Ukraine. Instead, the purpose of these sanctions should be to limit Russia's capacity to wage this war against Ukraine – to compel, not persuade, Putin to end his invasion. To date, there have been some successes, but the experience of the past six months also shows that there is much more to be done. We have several suggestions for measures that we think are worth taking.

Targeted export controls on sensitive technology have proved especially effective by limiting Russia's ability to replenish precision weaponry. Over time, this disruption of sophisticated

technology components, including first and foremost chips that Russia cannot make, will weaken Moscow's military capabilities.

Now the democratic world must impose additional import restrictions on technologies such as aircraft parts, sonar systems, antennas, spectrophotometers, test equipment, GPS systems, vacuum pumps and oil-field equipment. Russia should be completely unable to obtain any high-tech imports, as ultimately most technology is dual-use. Any technology that helps the Russian economy also helps Putin kill more Ukrainians.

Over the long run, the exodus of tens of thousands of Russian high-tech workers triggered by Putin's war also will further diminish Russia's military industrial base. Moving forward, the West should do more to facilitate a massive Russian brain drain. Democratic countries should make it easier to accept Russian immigrants with technological expertise through a variety of residency and economic incentives. Europe and the United States must also make it easier for political and media opponents to Putin's regime to immigrate, to

help further divide Putin from the Russian people.

Sanctions also have interrupted foreign direct investment, causing food, drug and material [shortages](#). Impressively, roughly a [thousand foreign companies](#) have exited Russia; most will never come back. This doesn't just affect the range of available goods and services; it will also diminish technology transfer and innovation in a wide range of industries throughout Russia, especially in the energy sector.

But more should be done. Democratic governments must put more pressure on their companies that have not left Russia yet. Foreign enterprises helping Putin's war machine, even through the simple act of paying taxes, should face sanctions, too. The international community also should compel countries such as Turkey, Georgia and Kazakhstan – which are currently helping to bypass [existing sanctions](#) – to halt ongoing smuggling operations.

Sanctions on Russian individuals have produced real and lasting results. The lengths to which Russian oligarchs have gone to circumvent

or get off the sanctions list suggest that sanctions are working.

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**Any individual supporting Russia's war in Ukraine, even if indirectly or passively, should pay a cost.**

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Yet sanctions have still not been imposed on [thousands](#) of Russian officials, party leaders, regional government heads, board members of Russian state-controlled enterprises, propagandists and celebrities supporting the war. It's time to add them to the list. Individuals in third countries helping Putin – such as [former oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili](#), the de facto ruler of Georgia – should know they, too, will face sanctions unless they stop supporting Putin's barbaric invasion. Any individual supporting Russia's war in Ukraine, even if indirectly or passively, should pay a cost.

To date, sanctions have been ineffective in targeting Russia's fossil fuel exports, the [primary source of income](#) for Russia's war

effort against Ukraine. Tragically but predictably, Putin's war dramatically pushed up global energy prices, producing short-term windfall profits for the Kremlin. Western leaders also consciously left in place loopholes in the sanctions regime so that that governments and companies could keep purchasing Russian energy. (Left untouched, for example, was [Gazprombank](#), a key financial institution for Russia's state-controlled natural gas corporation.)

The good news here is that more is already planned. By the [end of the year](#), the European Union plans to make drastic cuts in fossil fuel imports from Russia, and the Group of Seven aims to implement an innovative idea of [capping the price of Russian oil exports](#) worldwide. The prospect of this price cap is already compelling Russia to sell oil at [discounted prices](#). Democratic government leaders around the world must credibly signal their readiness to pressure their banks, insurers and shipping companies to enforce the price cap. Consumers living in the free world have to stop financing Putin's war by buying Russian oil and gas.

Finally, democracies must signal their intention to maintain sanctions for as long as it takes to achieve three outcomes: Ukraine must regain all of its territory, including Crimea; Russia must pay war reparations to Ukraine in full; and Russian war criminals must be brought to justice. Leaders of the free world must avoid the temptation to offer partial sanctions relief for incremental changes in Russia's war efforts, and they should never do anything regarding sanctions relief without endorsement from Ukraine's government.

Expanding and sustaining sanctions will be costly to the United States, Canada and Europe. But this is the price we must pay for decades of failure to act against Putin's authoritarian and imperial ways. Fortunately, nations of the free world pay this cost solely with money; Ukrainians are paying with blood.



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+1 (212) 246-8486



info@hrf.org



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