

Protecting Intrinsic Human Rights

An Interview with Michael Breen, President and Chief Executive Officer, Human Rights First

EDITORS' NOTE Michael Breen is President and Chief Executive Officer of Human Rights First. Before joining Human Rights First, Breen served as President and CEO of the Truman National Security Project and the Center for National Policy, co-founded the International Refugee Assistance Project, served in the Obama administration's Office of White House Counsel, and led American paratroopers in combat as an Army officer. He has worked and served in conflict zones around the world, led dozens of successful and award-winning campaigns for policy change at the federal and state level on a range of climate, national security, and human rights issues, and advised hundreds of electoral campaigns for offices from state representative to president. His writing and commentary have been featured by The New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, Meet the Press, and many others. Breen holds a JD from Yale Law School and a BA from Dartmouth College, having studied in Russia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and England.



Michael Breen

we curb the abuse of technology by empowering our network of rights defenders and equipping them with the tools needed to enact change. We are driven by a fundamental belief in universal rights and that all people have the right to life, liberty, and security.

Will you provide an overview of Human Rights First's areas of focus?

As we aim to create a more just and equitable world for all people, our work focuses on four critical areas:

1. Authoritarianism: We use our expertise and influence to uncover abuses of power and hold institutions accountable to make sure people across continents and circumstances can live without fear of oppression.
2. Extremism: With a network of human civil rights defenders, veterans, and advocates, we are challenging the antidemocratic extremist movement in the United States. We confront this extremism through research, advocacy, legal action, and technology to uphold human rights and protect democracy.

3. Systemic Injustice: Systemic injustice has plagued America since its founding. We advocate for equitable policies, provide legal representation, and conduct research to address historical injustices affecting marginalized communities.

4. The Use and Abuse of Technology: We develop technological solutions to uncover and address human rights abuses, rebalance power dynamics, and hold violators accountable.

What are the keys to creating lasting change in Human Rights First's efforts?

To make real and lasting progress, we need to build a network of people and organizations that respect and defend human rights. We need a human rights movement that is a meaningful part of our communities, not one that stands apart from them. We've got to be relevant to our neighbors.

Internationalism is rightly at the core of our belief in universal rights, and it would be unfair to say that the traditional human rights movement has completely ignored domestic concerns, but I believe that we have to be more committed to showing up for our neighbors when it counts.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF Established in 1978, Human Rights First's (humanrightsfirst.org) mission is to ensure that the United States is a global leader on human rights. The organization works in the United States and abroad to promote respect for human rights and the rule of law.

Will you discuss the history of Human Rights First and how you define its mission?

Established in 1978, Human Rights First is a nonpartisan international human rights organization based in New York City, Los Angeles, and Washington, DC. Our advocacy has been instrumental in the success of various initiatives to ban torture, hold bad actors accountable via sanctions, and bring the refugee and asylum policies of the United States into compliance with international law.

We protect intrinsic human rights. We support victims of injustice and promote the rule of law. For almost 50 years, Human Rights First has worked tirelessly at home and abroad to uncover human rights abuses, bring perpetrators to justice, and ensure that all people live without fear of oppression or persecution. We challenge authoritarianism, we confront extremism, we combat systemic injustice, and



Michael Breen testifies to the U.S. Congress

That's why we have established a footprint that spans the United States, allowing us to build networks of human rights defenders in the communities we serve, to better understand local challenges and work collaboratively towards solutions.

Will you highlight the strength and expertise of Human Rights First's team?

Our teams are passionate advocates for the fundamental belief that all people are born free and equal in dignity and rights, and are entitled to equal rights and freedoms without distinction of any kind. We are subject matter experts who deeply believe that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.

Our Refugee Representation Program, for example, provides crucial legal services to migrants in the Washington DC, New York City, and Los Angeles areas who lack representation, cannot afford legal assistance, and are seeking asylum or other forms of protection-based immigration status. They recognize the dire situations faced by our clients, many of whom have fled political, religious, ethnic, and gender-based persecution in countries plagued by severe human rights violations. For these clients, legal representation is not just a matter of procedural necessity, but often a matter of survival for themselves and their families.

Through our collective expertise and dedication, we provide comprehensive support to these vulnerable individuals, guiding them through complex legal processes and empowering them to assert their rights in pursuit of safety and justice. Our team's tireless efforts underscore our unwavering commitment to defending human rights and ensuring access to justice for all.

How valuable has it been for Human Rights First to have such an engaged and committed board?

The board at Human Rights First has been instrumental in driving our mission forward and creating a more equitable world. The directors' expertise and diverse perspectives have proven invaluable in navigating the challenges of the current climate both domestically and abroad. We were particularly fortunate to have two extremely capable and visionary co-chairs during a pivotal period for our organization and human rights in general. Mona Sutphen and Mike Rozen brought tremendous new talent to the board, and their leadership was instrumental in allowing us to play the crucial role we have in responding to crises from Afghanistan to Ukraine and establishing some groundbreaking new programs.

Where did your passion for addressing human rights work develop?

I had the privilege of serving as an Army officer earlier in my career, including combat leadership assignments in Iraq and Afghanistan. My experience in the military was the beginning of a lifelong commitment to defending human rights and democracy.

I opposed the idea of going to war in Iraq, and while I served there I found myself fulfilling my duty to the very best of my ability while witnessing the realities of that conflict and its impact on civilians.



Michael Breen in Ukraine

The values instilled in me since childhood by my father, a retired law enforcement officer, had been a major influence on my decision to serve in uniform. His teachings on the importance of due process and human rights echoed in my mind as I faced the ethical dilemmas of war.

One experience among many stands out. As the insurgency in Iraq ramped up, my fellow soldiers and I found ourselves focusing more and more on hunting down the bombmakers behind some horrific attacks on civilian targets: restaurants, hospitals, buses, schools. During those raids, I encountered the families of those we were pursuing, their fear palpable as armed soldiers entered their homes. I found myself reassuring those families of our values as Americans, emphasizing our commitment to human rights and justice.

Months later, while still fighting in Iraq, I discovered that many of those I had detained had later been subjected to torture in Abu Ghraib. I was deeply shaken. This realization prompted me to question how such abuses could occur under the banner of my uniform and flag. It ignited a determination within me to ensure that such egregious violations never happened again.

After my service, I pursued a career in law, co-founding the International Refugee Assistance Project and working with refugee families in Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan, serving in the Office of White House Counsel, and having the opportunity to lead a few important and impactful institutions in Washington, DC.

Eventually, I found my way to Human Rights First. The organization's tireless advocacy for asylum seekers' rights and campaigns against torture resonated deeply with me, and I knew I had found a place where I could contribute to lasting, meaningful change and uphold the values I hold dear.

What are the keys to the ability for the United States to maintain its role as a beacon of human rights advocacy?

When U.S. policies and actions no longer match its values, when hate and extremism are normalized, and when our democratic processes are threatened, our global legitimacy is undermined along with our ability to protect the most vulnerable worldwide.

As such, it's imperative to acknowledge and address human rights issues here at home while holding accountable those who aim to dismantle our democracy. The ideology fueling the antidemocratic extremist movement in the United States has become increasingly visible within our institutions, policies, and public discourse. It poses an existential threat to our democracy that is no longer confined to the fringes. To safeguard democracy in the United States, it is imperative to confront violent attacks themselves and attempts to propagate and mainstream violent extremism. This requires a comprehensive approach to mitigate the profound threat posed to the foundations of our democratic principles.

Through a collaborative network of human and civil rights defenders, veterans, and advocates, our Extremism and Human Rights Program is actively challenging the antidemocratic extremist movement. Leveraging our expertise in research, policy, law, technology, and national security, we aim to uncover the movement, expose its tactics, and uphold fundamental human rights.

Our effort to confront extremism builds upon our established work on refugee and immigration issues, our veterans coalition, and tools from our Innovation Lab. This integrated approach allows us to effectively address the surge in antidemocratic extremism, emphasizing the protection of local democratic institutions and the mitigation of extremism within the military and law enforcement.

What are your priorities for Human Rights First as you look to the future?

As we look to the future, we remain steadfast in our focus on our four pillars of work. In the immediate, we are dedicated to helping protect free and fair democratic elections, especially in the United States. This involves work to help protect our democratic institutions and confront antidemocratic extremism.

Additionally, we remain dedicated to holding accountable bad actors for human rights violations, including attacks against human rights advocates and political opponents in places like Russia, while simultaneously supporting human rights defenders in Ukraine.

The recent killing of Alexi Navalny in a Siberian prison cell is a stark reminder that dictatorship is resurgent in many parts of the world, and we are committed to standing alongside those on the front lines of those struggles. We will continue working to amplify the voices of those who have the courage to advocate for justice and freedom, providing them the support and solidarity needed to continue their vital work in what are challenging and often dangerous environments. ●