

## Freedom Online Coalition Conference Offers Global Perspective on Surveillance and Human Rights

by [Emily Barabas](#) [1]  
June 20, 2013

This week, the Freedom Online Coalition convened government, civil society, and business stakeholders in Tunis for its third annual conference on the open Internet and human rights. CDT's Matthew Shears and Emily Barabas participated in the event, continuing CDT's engagement with the Coalition and international civil society partners. Matthew presented in the Internet Governance High Level Training workshop for Middle East and North African policy-makers. He was also a panelist in the session on Development and Innovation: making the case for Net Neutrality.

The Freedom Online Coalition conference was designed to cover a [range of themes](#) [2] related to Internet freedom, but concerns about United States surveillance overshadowed the discussions. For many participants, the conference was their first opportunity to interact with US government officials and technology companies since the Prism leak, and participants did not shy away from asking tough questions of representatives from the State Department, Facebook, and Google. The focus was timely and understandable but dominated the debate in the plenary sessions, shortchanging other important issues such as access and censorship.

The Freedom Online Coalition comprises 21 member states who have [committed](#) [3] to protecting the exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms on the Internet. Government officials from FOC member states spoke about how they achieve these objectives while also meeting other policy goals. Many expressed the importance of viewing freedom and security as complementary values. Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs Frans Timmermans provided a [particularly insightful perspective](#) [4] on the issue. On the one hand, he said, without security there can be no freedom. On the other hand, with too much security, freedom is also unable to exist.

Tunisian government officials are working hard to find this middle ground, despite the challenges of maintaining stability after the Arab Spring. Both officials and members of Tunisian civil society reflected on the progress they have made in the two years since the revolution: Internet filtering and blocking have declined significantly; the communications minister has put in place a working group to set strategy for achieving security while respecting human rights; and, the Tunisian government has reached out beyond its borders, ratifying international treaties and developing legal mechanisms to support cooperative security frameworks.

But, as some speakers pointed out, there is still work to be done. Concerns were raised that many laws from before the revolution remain in place. And just days before the conference began, Tunisian rapper Ala Yaacoub was sentenced to two years in prison for [posting a song called "The Police are Dogs"](#) [5] on the Internet. Protesters filled the streets in opposition to his sentence.

In one of the opening speeches, Rebecca MacKinnon [reminded coalition members](#) [6] that the policies of individual nations matter on a global scale, particularly when national security policy and state surveillance practices fail to respect human rights. She highlighted the importance of cooperation in the open Internet and the risks of distrust among stakeholders:

The Internet's balkanization is inevitable unless and until we make a shared commitment to mechanisms, norms and standards that will hold government surveillance – and corporate business practices including compliance with surveillance demands – appropriately accountable to universal human rights standards.

MacKinnon also discussed the recent landmark [report on surveillance](#) [7] by UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression Frank La Rue, which raises alarm about the impact of widespread government surveillance on privacy and free expression worldwide. MacKinnon urged FOC members to heed La Rue's recommendations for

bringing national practices in line with human rights standards:

Given the globally interconnected nature of the Internet it will not be enough if one or two enlightened democracies stand up and implement these recommendations while everyone else carries on as they presently do. It is equally vital that the companies on whose platforms and services we depend – for practically everything in our lives these days – commit to technical and design standards, as well as business practices, that are consistent with universal human rights principles and standards.

MacKinnon is right. Ultimately it won't be enough for one or two enlightened democracies to implement the Special Rapporteur's recommendations. But the Freedom Online Coalition could take the lead. The coalition should seize the opportunity and take concrete steps, spearheading efforts to restore the trust of domestic and global citizens. Its time to use Prism to launch a constructive dialogue about how to improve domestic and international surveillance standards moving forward. Next year's meeting in Tallinn, Estonia, would be an excellent opportunity to evaluate how much progress has been made in achieving policy environments in which security and freedom truly co-exist.

Copyright © 2013 by Center for Democracy & Technology. CDT can be freely copied and used as long as you make no substantive changes and clearly give us credit. [Details](#).

**Source URL:**

<https://www.cdt.org/blogs/emily-barabas/2006freedom-online-coalition-conference-offers-global-perspective-surveillance-a>

**Links:**

[1] <https://www.cdt.org/personnel/emily-barabas>

[2] [http://www.freedomonline.tn/Fr/themes\\_11\\_59](http://www.freedomonline.tn/Fr/themes_11_59)

[3] [http://www.minbuza.nl/binaries/content/assets/minbuza/en/the\\_ministry/declaration-freedom-online-feb-2013.pdf](http://www.minbuza.nl/binaries/content/assets/minbuza/en/the_ministry/declaration-freedom-online-feb-2013.pdf)

[4] <http://www.government.nl/news/2013/06/17/minister-opens-internet-conference-in-tunisia.html>

[5] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-22896036>

[6] <http://consentofthenetworked.com/2013/06/17/freedom-online-keynote/>

[7] [http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session23/A.HRC.23.40\\_E\\_N.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session23/A.HRC.23.40_E_N.pdf)