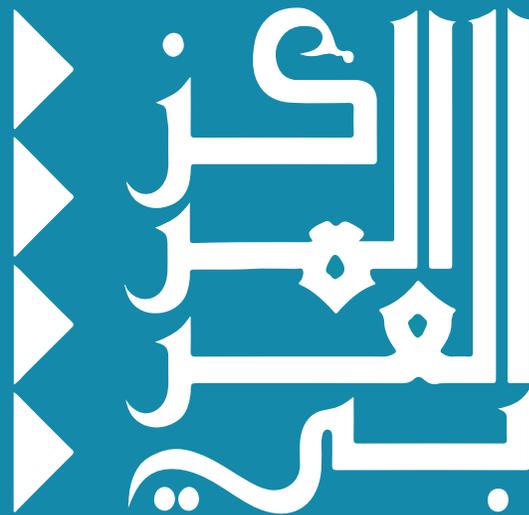


A Case for Human Rights and Democracy in US Middle East Policy

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The United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted in December 1948 by majority vote of the UN General Assembly. It was rooted in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms"—freedom of speech and expression, freedom of religion, freedom from want, and freedom from fear—which his widow, Eleanor Roosevelt, drew upon as chair of the UN Commission on Human Rights that drafted the declaration. The document recognized that respect for and advancement of human rights were essential to creating a stable and peaceful world. The Universal Declaration, the gold standard for international human rights, has been built into the constitutions of numerous countries and has inspired several additional agreements, which now have the force of international law.

Advancement of the human rights agenda—despite frequent backsliding, lack of concern, and insincere lip service—has been a cornerstone of US foreign policy ever since, as matters of principle as well as national interest. As President George W. Bush noted in his address at the 20th anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in 2003, advancing freedom is “the calling of our country.”

In short, American leadership has been instrumental in forging a broad global consensus on the importance of the respect for human rights in the global political system.

The Recession of Human Rights in US Foreign Policy

The Trump Administration, however, has indicated it intends to veer sharply from this bipartisan course and de-emphasize human rights. It is reshaping US foreign policy to conform to an emerging Trump Doctrine in which, *inter alia*, principles and values apparently may be set aside if they appear to conflict with narrow conceptions of US national interests. The approach is the very definition of the president's vow to put “America First.”

Both President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson have made this explicitly clear. During the presidential campaign, Trump disparaged the idea of promoting democracy among authoritarian allies, announcing that the United States would, in the case of the Middle East, “promote regional stability, not radical change.” In his inaugural address, he proclaimed that the United States would not seek “to impose our way of life on anyone,” an assurance he repeated to Muslim leaders in his Riyadh speech last May. Instead, as he noted in Riyadh, the United States would pursue a “principled realism” based not on advocating for human rights or democratization, but “security through stability” and, at best, “gradual reforms.”

Tillerson, for his part, has also drawn a distinction between advancing human rights and protecting the United States' core security interests. In a speech to State Department employees on May 3 he stated this plainly.

Tillerson said America has both “policy and values” and asserted that if policy is routinely conditioned on values, it “creates obstacles to our ability to advance our national security interests, our economic interests.” He boiled down US policy in the region to a “counterterrorism effort.”

In practice, this approach has afforded free passes to several human rights abusers in the region. Trump has praised Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi, despite his severely authoritarian rule and the mounting human rights abuses on his watch. The president has evidently given up on helping to bring political stability and representative government to Libya, in which, he said, the United States has “no role.” During the visit to Riyadh, Trump told the king of Bahrain, Sheikh Hamad bin Issa Al-Khalifa, that “there has been a little strain, but there won't be strain with this administration,” emphatically abandoning concerns about human rights stemming from the repression of Bahraini Shiites and domestic political opposition. (In March, the US State Department dropped all human rights conditions on the sale of F-16s and other arms to Bahrain.) While assuring Arab leaders that his broader intentions do not include an assertive human rights component, both President Trump and Secretary Tillerson have made clear that US policy in the region is, first and foremost, focused on counterterrorism and the fight against a loosely defined “Radical Ideology.”

Trump may have made something of an exception with his personal intervention on behalf of Aya Hijazi, the American NGO worker jailed in Egypt whose release he reportedly demanded in his bilateral meeting with Sisi in April. Whether this marks a new activism on behalf of unjustly accused civil society workers in Egypt and elsewhere in the region, or—as seems more likely—a one-off intervention to demonstrate the president’s commitment to “America First,” remains an open question.

The “Virtuous Circle” of Stability: Human Rights, Democracy, and Prosperity

Such outliers aside, the administration’s policy has posited a false distinction between security and human rights. In fact, as the long history of international agreements and US foreign policy has explicitly recognized, there is a strong correlation among human rights, democracy, stability, and economic success. A 2015 MIT study concluded “that democratizations increase GDP per capita by about 20% in the long run. We find similar results when we estimate the effect of democratizations on annual GDP...” The US Agency for International Development has noted that “long-term, sustainable development is closely linked to sound democratic governance and the protection of human rights.” Likewise, the Heritage Foundation writes that “economic freedom has underpinned and reinforced political liberty and market-based democracy.” Add to this the powerful influence of rules-based capitalism, in which market economies reinforce democratic governance, and vice versa. Thus, human rights, democracy, and

economic progress work together in a mutually reinforcing “virtuous circle.”

The economic growth and human freedoms that this circle fosters tend to promote greater political stability. As UN Secretary General António Guterres noted in a briefing to the Security Council in April, human rights are “intrinsicly linked to peace and security,” a statement seconded during the discussion by US Permanent Representative Nikki Haley. Salil Shetty of Amnesty International has likewise found that essential human rights are a “crucial foundation of freedom, justice and peace” – in other words, a backbone of political stability and regional security.

In his NED speech in 2003, George Bush noted the implications for US policy in announcing his “Freedom Agenda” in the Middle East. “Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe,” he said, “because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty.”

The False Stability of Repression

As many analysts have observed, maintenance of stability in the region will fail if it is based largely on the persistence of repression. Pent-up demand for economic and political change, and a widely shared conviction that government is rigged for the benefit of ruling elites, brought about the Arab Spring. The demands that fueled the uprisings, by and large, have not been met.

Clever regimes have long managed to game the system, utilizing standard techniques of election rigging and imprisoning political opposition. Since 2011, however, they have added modern twists such as criminalizing online speech and broadening the definition of “terrorism” to encompass almost any words or actions that run afoul of the authorities. In several countries, whether monarchies or republics, this includes laws against *lèse-majesté*, reinforced by vigorous self-censorship on well-understood topics considered off limits, such as discussion of official corruption.

These tactics have, by and large, succeeded in the short run but are more than likely destined for failure in the longer term. To the extent that the United States chooses to ignore ongoing repression rather than act to shape a more favorable regional environment for basic liberties, it risks bungling its response to the next wave of political unrest and unwittingly increasing risks to vital US interests. This deepens already substantial levels of international disapproval toward the United States, especially among critical constituencies such as Arab youth, opposition parties, and civil society, which are crucial to the region’s political future.

Recommendations

Fortunately, a number of policy options are available to the president which should find resonance with an administration that wants to shake up business-as-usual while putting the screws to US opponents, enhancing business

opportunities for US corporations, and putting America first. The Trump Administration could consider the following options:

- *Stand up more vocally to the world's violators of human rights.* These comprise North Korea, China, Russia, and numerous countries in the Middle East, including Egypt. Quite a few of the violators are allies and it is true that the United States has important interests to protect. But these interests need not come at the expense of the people who live there, nor erode America's reputation for basic fair-mindedness and commitment to freedom. Despite its flaws, the United States has an effective global voice.

- *Pressure key regional allies on high-profile human rights cases more often,* as Trump evidently did in the case of Aya Hijazi. Some of these involve Americans, such as the 17 US citizens convicted in Egypt for pro-democracy work, largely funded by the US government, in 2013. Many other specific cases merit attention as well, including the hundreds of political dissidents imprisoned throughout the Arab Gulf.

- *Pressure – and make use of – the United Nations.* This involves making reform and empowerment of the UN's human rights instruments a centerpiece of US plans to change its relationship with the organization. It would demonstrate the administration's commitment to reordering the way it does business internationally and afford Washington new opportunities to beat back against serial rights abusers

- *Resist the temptation to pull out of the Human Rights Council* and instead, work to make it more representative of the world's democracies.

- *Make greater use of the UN's Universal Periodic Review process,* which provides member states the ability to review and express opinions on human rights conditions among world countries, and for the states under scrutiny to declare what they have done to fulfill their international legal obligations. All countries are evaluated every several years, so no one is left unexamined. The United States has typically been quiet in these proceedings, but it can speak up not only to pressure foes, but to put ostensible allies on notice that the United States is not indifferent to the suffering of their citizens – not to mention their future political stability.

- *Support international civil society organizations,* which include many prominent groups based in the United States, politically, rhetorically, and financially. These groups and their and local partners have been victimized in recent years as part of the effort by authoritarian regimes to shut down any form of political opposition, including nonviolent criticism of objectionable policies. Many local NGOs are essentially friendly toward the United States and its support for human rights, and many have received funding from the US government for a broad range of projects focused on expanding civil liberties, political participation, and economic development.

- *Enlist business in the struggle for human rights.* International corporations have, to say the least, a mixed record in many of the countries where they operate and in quite a few cases are complicit in serious human rights violations. Legal interpretations of the UN Universal Declaration have held that its provisions apply to corporations as well as governments, and many international covenants and initiatives, such as the UN Global Compact, have sought to bring corporate policies into alignment with universal principles of human rights. Active cooperation between the Trump Administration and the corporate community to advance liberty in the Middle East and globally can help support a credible US human rights agenda and enhance the global reputations (and even the bottom line) of US firms.
- *Enhance bilateral cooperation with like-minded countries* to press—regionally and in international fora—for greater accountability on human rights issues. Many potential

partners are in Europe, and they may welcome a change in US direction at a particularly difficult time in trans-Atlantic relations. But there may be some surprising allies in places such as sub-Saharan Africa and Tunisia which, according to Freedom House, is the sole Arab Spring country to transition from an autocracy to an electoral democracy.

Human Rights: America's Past and Future Calling

The United States has been a global moral leader on human rights since Eleanor Roosevelt championed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Time and again, and despite occasional failings and neglect, the United States, though sometimes alone, has been an advocate for broader freedom. Such advocacy, while it does involve tough choices, has helped defend US security in the long term, stabilize US allies and the international system, and build the moral capital Washington needs to credibly advance its broader interests.

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