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The Trump Administration's Human-Rights Dilemma

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President Donald Trump has demonstrated little interest in promoting human rights abroad. He was a dealmaker, focused on achieving concrete economic and security ends. Worrying about whether other peoples can, say, protest against their government doesn't seem to concern him.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson reinforced this point by skipping the release of Foggy Bottom's annual human-rights report. Past secretaries typically have appeared to at least claim to support the universal values that Americans say they hold dear. Not this time. Presumably, Secretary Tillerson was "busy."

Ultimately, a foreign policy is sustainable only if it advances the interests of the people expected to pay and die for it. Protecting America—its population, territory, economic prosperity and constitutional liberties—is the government's most important duty.

Nevertheless, that doesn't bar Washington from attempting to advance human liberty in ways consistent with its larger responsibilities. Simply talking about the importance of governments respecting human life and dignity can help.

Moreover, ignoring human rights in the short term often creates long-term trouble. For instance, Washington's support for brutal, dictatorial regimes undermines American security policy in the Middle East. It is extremely hard to force recalcitrant governments to weaken their control over their people. But underwriting governments that maintain such powers frequently generates popular ill will.

There is much to criticize about the Iranian government, but Washington cannot escape responsibility for having contributed to the creation of the current Islamist regime. In 1953, the Eisenhower administration promoted the overthrow of the elected leftist government. The largely ceremonial Shah turned into a real monarch, oppressing anyone who opposed him and forcibly modernizing the traditional Islamic society. He was eventually overthrown by a disparate coalition, but the better organized and more ruthless clerical forces won control.

Today, Tehran is a U.S. adversary, so foreign-policy hawks routinely decry its human-rights abuses. But Washington is far quieter when confronting the behavior of its regional allies. For

instance, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Libya, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey all play important roles in U.S. regional strategy today. (The other Gulf States also are active to varying degrees, but Riyadh is the dominant partner among them.) All have human-rights issues that undermine their effectiveness today and could create new problems tomorrow.

In Bahrain, home of the U.S. Fifth Fleet, a Sunni monarchy holds a Shia-majority population in political bondage. The State Department noted that the most serious human-rights abuses involved “limitation on citizens’ ability to choose their government peacefully,” not to mention “restrictions on free expression, assembly, and association,” as well as “lack of due process in the legal system.” Unfortunately, added State, “Beginning in June government action against the political opposition and civil society worsened these problems.”

The authoritarian sectarian-minority government is a prescription for long-term instability. Manama blames Iran for interfering, but Saudi Arabia deployed troops to enforce Bahrain’s undemocratic will. Tehran can claim to be on the side of the angels so long as the Sunni monarchy crushes dissent.

President Trump appears to have a budding bromance with President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt. However, Cairo has been moving backwards on human rights. As State observed in its report,

The most significant human rights problems were excessive use of force by security forces, deficiencies in due process, and the suppression of civil liberties. Excessive use of force included unlawful killings and torture. Due process problems included the excessive use of preventative custody and pretrial detention, the use of military courts to try civilians, trials involving hundreds of defendants in which authorities did not present evidence on an individual basis, and arrests conducted without warrants or judicial orders.

The Sisi government also has conducted a campaign against journalists and NGOs, especially those backed by foreign money, seeking to cover the regime’s activities. One of the targets is the Al Nadeem Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence, which combats torture. I visited the center a couple years ago and was told the human-rights situation was much worse than under Hosni Mubarak, who was ousted in the peaceful 2011 revolution. Yet the government is threatening the center with closure. Add to political repression economic problems and the Sisi regime looks vulnerable to internal, if not popular, challenge.

Iraq has been ravaged by the Islamic State, which has committed atrocities galore. However, Baghdad has its own serious human-rights problems. The State Department noted that “civilian authorities were not always able to maintain effective control of all security forces.” Moreover, “Sectarian hostility, widespread corruption, and lack of transparency at all levels of government and society weakened the government’s authority and worsened effective human rights protections.” The security forces “committed some human rights violations, and there continued to be reports of [government-allied Shia militias] killing, torturing, kidnapping, and extorting civilians.”

Daesh's depredations, of course, are worse. But official Iraqi abuses, particularly against Sunnis, aided the rise of ISIS. And if the Shia-dominated national government doesn't reform, its misbehavior is likely to generate more Sunni insurgents and terrorists in the future—leaving Iraq permanently hobbled by violence and instability.

Washington's closest ally, Israel, is not exempt. While it protects traditional democratic freedoms for its own citizens, albeit tolerating serious discrimination against Arab citizens, it does not recognize similar liberties for the millions of Palestinians under its occupation for a half century. Treating the subject population like the helots of antiquity has spurred violent resistance by Palestinians and significant antagonism throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds to Israel and its chief backer, America.

Occupation policies exacerbate these tensions. The State Department went into detail:

Significant human rights abuses also included excessive use of force or deadly force by Israeli Security Forces (ISF) in a number of their interactions with Palestinian civilians; arbitrary arrest and associated alleged torture and abuse, often with impunity by multiple actors in the region; restrictions on civil liberties, particularly by Hamas in Gaza; and Israeli demolition of Palestinian homes and related displacement.

Of course, both Hamas and the Palestinian Authority engage in their own repressive practices, and the former has targeted Israeli civilians. Unfortunately, Israel's occupation makes cultivating a serious, accountable Palestinian government far more difficult.

Jordan, another longtime U.S. aid recipient, has been involved in the fight against ISIS. But State's human-rights report paints a suboptimal picture:

The most significant human rights problems were citizens' inability to choose their ultimate governing authority; restrictions on the freedom of expression, including detention of journalists, which limited the ability of citizens and media to criticize government policies and officials; and mistreatment and allegations of torture by security and government officials.

To these criticisms, State added "restrictions on freedom of association and assembly, poor prison conditions, arbitrary arrest and denial of due process through administrative detention, prolonged detention, and allegations of nepotism and the influence of special interests on the judiciary."

The fact that there are worse alternatives to Hashemite rule doesn't immunize the monarchy from popular criticism and even opposition. As the reservoir of goodwill recedes, under extraordinary pressure from mass refugee flows, the Jordanian government will find it harder to withstand a crisis. Any political shift in Amman would unsettle Washington and Israel.

Libya is in the throes of civil conflict, if not another formal civil war. The United States recognizes the Government of National Accord, which does not control the entire country. The lack of effective governance has led to criminality, violence and human-rights abuses by a multitude of parties. State points to a number of problems, including unlawful killing, torture,

“degrading treatment or punishment,” life-threatening imprisonment, arbitrary arrest, restrictions on freedom of speech and press as well as religion.

In the name of alliance solidarity, Washington has made itself subservient to Saudi Arabia, backing Riyadh’s aggressive and brutal war in Yemen. The House of Saud is effectively a totalitarian state. State notes,

The most important human rights problems reported included citizens’ lack of the ability and legal means to choose their government; restrictions on universal rights, such as freedom of expression, including on the internet, and the freedoms of assembly, association, movement, and religion; and pervasive gender discrimination.

Add to the mix arbitrary arrest, lack of due process, overcrowded prisons and nonexistent judicial independence.

Any regime that relies on widespread repression to maintain control risks upheaval. The Saudi monarchy is even more vulnerable since a particular bloodline can’t legitimize such kleptocratic and hypocritical rule. Washington loses credibility supporting this repressive regime, as well as the war in Yemen, in which Riyadh has been responsible for thousands of civilian deaths.

Turkey is another nominal ally that complicates U.S. foreign policy. Kurdish militias constitute America’s strongest anti-ISIS surrogates in Syria. Ankara has targeted them on the ground and from the air, out of fear of Kurdish separatism. Indeed, Turkey also ended the cease-fire with Kurdish activists at home, rekindling a brutal military campaign and killing hundreds of civilians. Ankara also reaped the violent whirlwind after initially accommodating the growth of ISIS in Syria.

Equally significant, in recent years Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been constructing an authoritarian state, destroying an independent media, arresting parliamentary opponents, and prosecuting critics, even school children. He began pressing to change the constitution to create a Putin-style authoritarian presidency.

Last year’s coup attempt was Turkey’s Reichstag fire, giving Erdogan an excuse to punish all of his opponents, even those who resisted the attempted military takeover. The state of emergency, noted State, “allowed suspension of some due process protections for those accused of ties to terrorist groups”—which turned out to be almost anyone who had criticized Erdogan and his abusive behavior. Moreover, “The government restricted freedom of expression, media, and the internet, intensifying pressure on the media following the failed coup attempt.”

That was merely the start:

Courts imprisoned tens of thousands of persons accused of supporting the coup or terrorist groups, in many cases with little clarity on the charges and evidence against them. Government decrees issued under the state of emergency restricted suspects’ access to legal assistance, allowed suspects to be held without charge for up to a month, and in some cases froze the assets of suspended or fired civil servants or their family members.

Moreover, “The government suspended and dismissed tens of thousands of civil servants, who generally had little access to legal recourse or appeal, and closed thousands of businesses, schools, and associations.”

As legal repression, political instability and military conflict have expanded, the economy has slowed. Turkey has become an even less reliable partner for the United States.

Washington, obviously, can do little to fix any of these nations. However, the persistent and sometimes pervasive abuse of human rights detailed by the State Department’s annual report has security consequences. Rather than ignore the issue, the Trump administration should take the side of liberty and democracy. While America cannot remake the world, it could at least affirm the principle that governments should protect their people’s lives and dignity. If Washington succeeded in pushing the needle even a little on human rights, the world ultimately would be safer for Americans.

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