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The U.S. human rights conundrum

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U.S. President Donald Trump has demonstrated little interest in promoting human rights abroad. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson reinforced that message by skipping the release of Foggy Bottom's annual human rights report.

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 U.S. government's first priority. Nevertheless, that doesn't bar Washington from attempting to advance human liberty along the way.

Moreover, ignoring human rights often creates long-term trouble. For instance, Washington's support for brutal, dictatorial regimes undermines American security policy in the Mideast. Among those nations playing important roles in U.S. regional strategy today are Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Libya, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. All have human rights issues which undermine their effectiveness as U.S. partners.

In Bahrain, home of the U.S. 5th Fleet, a Sunni monarchy holds a Shiite majority population in political bondage. The U.S. State Department noted "limitation on citizens' ability to choose their government peacefully," "restrictions on free expression, assembly, and association," as well as "lack of due process in the legal system."

The authoritarian sectarian-minority government is a prescription for long-term instability. Iran can interfere while claiming to be on the side of the persecuted majority.

Trump appears to have a budding bromance with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. However, Cairo has been moving backward on human rights. The U.S. State Department cited "excessive use of force by security forces, deficiencies in due process, and the suppression of civil liberties." Add to political repression economic problems and the el-Sisi regime looks vulnerable to internal if not popular challenge.

Iraq has been ravaged by the Islamic State group. However, Baghdad has its own human rights problems. The U.S. State's Department's report noted that "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 Shiite militias) killing, torturing, kidnapping and extorting civilians."

Government abuses, concentrated on Sunnis, aided the rise of IS. And if Baghdad doesn't reform, its misbehavior is likely to generate more insurgents and terrorists in the future.

Washington's closest ally, Israel, is not exempt. Millions of Palestinians have suffered under its occupation. Detailed the department: "Significant human rights abuses also included excessive

use of force or deadly force by Israeli Security Forces (ISF) ... and Israeli demolition of Palestinian homes and related displacement.” This has spurred violent resistance by Palestinians and significant antagonism throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds.

In Jordan, the U.S. State Department cited “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.” The lack of good alternatives to Hashemite rule doesn’t immunize the monarchy from opposition.

Libya is in the throes of civil conflict if not civil war. The lack of effective governance has led to criminality, violence and human rights abuses by a multitude of parties. The nominal government’s failings make chaos more likely than stability to remain Libya’s reality.

In the name of alliance solidarity, Washington has backed Saudi Arabia’s brutal war in Yemen. Yet the U.S. State Department detailed “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.” Added to these are arbitrary arrest, lack of due process, overcrowded prisons, and nonexistent judicial independence.

Another nominal ally, Turkey, is more foe than friend. Ankara is targeting America’s strongest anti-IS surrogate in Syria, the Kurdish militia. Moreover, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been constructing an authoritarian state, destroying independent media, arresting parliamentary opponents, and prosecuting critics, even schoolchildren.

Last year’s coup attempt was Turkey’s Reichstag fire, giving Erdogan an excuse to punish all of his opponents, as detailed by the U.S. State Department. As legal repression, political instability, and military conflict have expanded, the economy has slowed. Turkey is an ever less reliable partner for the U.S.

Washington obviously can do little to “fix” any of these nations. But it could at least affirm the principle that governments should protect their people’s lives and dignity. A freer world should be a safer world for all.

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