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The Hypocritical Strain in U.S. Foreign Policy

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[Ted Galen Carpenter](#)^[2]

Ralph Waldo Emerson observed that “a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.” While that is true, it’s important to note that Emerson spoke only about a *foolish* consistency. He was not offering a brief in favor of cynical, pervasive inconsistency. U.S. foreign policy officials over the decades seem incapable of grasping that crucial distinction.

The latest example is [the](#)^[3] [contrast](#)^[4] between Washington’s strident condemnation of government crackdowns on pro-democracy demonstrators in such places as Syria, Iran, and Libya, and the tepid, perfunctory criticism of such crackdowns by pro-U.S. regimes in Yemen, Iraq, and Bahrain. Populations throughout the Muslim world are noticing that [double standard](#)^[5] and are drawing their own, rather unfavorable conclusions.

But the recent manifestation of U.S. foreign policy hypocrisy is nothing new. Throughout the Cold War, Washington purported to stand for freedom, democracy, human rights, and noninterference in the internal affairs of other societies. And U.S. officials justifiably excoriated communist regimes for violating all of those standards. At the same time, though, the United States helped stage coups and took other measures to destabilize governments (even democratic governments) that were deemed insufficiently supportive of Washington’s regional or global objectives.

A series of U.S. administrations also forged close ties with some of the most corrupt and brutal rulers on the planet—from the Shah of Iran, to Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos, to Zaire’s Mobutu Sese Seko. Even worse, U.S. leaders publicly [lavished](#)^[6] [praise](#)^[7] on those bloody tyrants as though they were legitimate “free world” figures.

Specific features of U.S. policy have repeatedly reflected that same hypocrisy. The Clinton administration expressed horror at the violence in Bosnia and Kosovo following the breakup of Yugoslavia, exaggerating the civilian toll and making over-the-top comparisons to the Holocaust. Eventually, the United States led military interventions to suppress the fighting and impose order. Yet while the bloodshed in the Balkans was taking place, far, far greater numbers of civilians were dying in internecine struggles in places such as Sierra Leone and Liberia, with scarcely a shrug from the administration.

Washington's reaction to incidents of "ethnic cleansing" depended heavily on who was doing the deed. U.S. officials could scarcely contain their outrage when Serb forces used those tactics. Yet the U.S. government did little more than "tut-tut" two decades earlier when its NATO ally, Turkey, invaded Cyprus, occupied nearly forty percent of the country, expelled the Greek Cypriot inhabitants, set up a puppet government, and proceeded to bring in tens of thousands of settlers from the Turkish mainland. Indeed, Washington still countenances [8] Turkey's ongoing occupation and ethnic cleansing.

Even Washington's reaction to the fighting and ethnic cleansing within the former Yugoslavia exhibited the same double standard. A glaring example was the response to Operation Storm, the military offensive that the Croatian government launched in August 1995 against rebel Serb forces in the Krajina region of Croatia. That operation ultimately led to the flight or expulsion of some 200,000 Serb inhabitants—in some cases involving families that had lived in the region for centuries.

One would think that this action constituted ethnic cleansing at least as much as anything Serb forces had done in Bosnia, but the United States viewed matters differently. Washington supported Zagreb's offensive, with President Clinton admitting in his memoirs [9] that he "rooted" for the Croatian action. No where in that book does he mention the unfortunate fate of Serb civilians in the region. And it appears that the U.S. government did more than root. There are indications that it assisted the offensive by providing intelligence information to the Croatian military.

Critical statements about Operation Storm were noticeable by their absence. Referring to Operation Storm and a similar subsequent offensive by Muslim and Croat forces in Bosnia, an anonymous State Department official contended that those actions were beneficial because "they cleaned up the map." According to the U.S. double standard, only Serbs engaged in distasteful ethnic cleansing. Whenever other ethnic groups in the former Yugoslavia did so, it was merely map cleaning.

No nation can be entirely consistent in its foreign policy. There will always be cases in which double standards cannot be avoided—or at least avoided without major damage to vital national interests. But policymakers should not casually engage in hypocrisy. That kind of behavior undermines credibility and creates needless enemies among foreign populations.

Washington has been far too promiscuous in its use of foreign policy double standards over the decades, and it has paid a high price for such cynicism. Unfortunately, it appears that the Obama administration may be going down the same path once again in its hypocritical, very selective, reaction to examples of the Arab Awakening.

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