

# The American Conservative

## Too Many Foreign Policy Double Standards Hurt U.S. Credibility

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April 26, 2018

American leaders like to portray the United States as an exemplar of ethical conduct in the international system. The reality is far different, and it has been for decades. Throughout the Cold War, the United States embraced extremely repressive rulers, including the Shah of Iran, Nicaragua's Somoza family, Taiwan's Chiang Kai-shek, and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, all the while portraying them as noble members of the "Free World." Such blatant hypocrisy and double standards continue today regarding both Washington's own dubious behavior and the U.S. attitude toward the behavior of favored allies and friends.

The gap between professed values and actual policy is especially evident in the Middle East. U.S. officials routinely excoriate Syria and Iran, not only for their external behavior, but for manifestations of domestic abuse and repression. Some of those criticisms are valid. Both Bashar al-Assad's regime and Iran's clerical government are guilty of serious international misconduct and human-rights violations. But the credibility of Washington's expressions of outrage is vitiated when those same officials remain silent, or even excuse, equally serious—and in some cases, more egregious—abuses that the United States and its allies commit.

Following the Syrian regime's alleged use of chemical weapons in early April, President Trump painted Assad as an exceptionally vile enemy. He immediately issued a tweet describing the Syrian leader as "an animal" who gassed his own people. In his subsequent address to the American people announcing punitive air and missile strikes, Trump charged that the incident confirmed "a pattern of chemical weapons use by that very terrible regime. The evil and despicable attack left mothers and fathers, infants and children thrashing in pain and gasping for air. These are not the actions of a man. They are crimes of a monster instead." The president also blasted Russia and Iran for their longstanding sponsorship of Assad. "To Iran and to Russia, I ask: What kind of a nation wants to be associated with the mass murder of innocent men, women and children?"

*TAC*'s Daniel Larison provided an apt response to that question. "Trump should know the answer, since he just hosted one of the chief architects of the war on Yemen that the U.S. has backed to the hilt for the last three years. Britain welcomed the Saudi crown prince earlier on,

and France just hosted him in the last few days. All three have been arming and supporting the Saudis and their allies in Yemen no matter how many atrocities they commit.”

Indeed, the United States has been an outright accomplice in those atrocities, which among other tragic effects, has led to a cholera epidemic in Yemen. The U.S. military refuels Saudi coalition warplanes and provides intelligence to assist them in their attacks on Yemen—attacks that have exhibited total indifference about civilian casualties. A recent revelation implicates Washington in even more atrocious conduct. Evidence has emerged that Saudi forces have employed white phosphorous munitions, and that the United States supplied those foul weapons that inflict horrible burns on their victims. For U.S. leaders to criticize Syria for using chemical weapons in light of such behavior may reach a new level of hypocrisy.

Washington’s double standard also is evident regarding the international conduct of another U.S. ally: Turkey. U.S. officials reacted with a vitriolic denunciation of Russia’s annexation of Crimea, but the reaction was—and remains—very different regarding Ankara’s invasion of Cyprus in 1974 and the occupation of that country’s northern territory. Washington’s criticism was tepid even at the beginning, and it has become more so with the passage of time. Indeed, there is greater U.S. pressure on the government of Cyprus to accept a peace settlement that would recognize the legitimacy of the puppet Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus that Ankara established (and has populated with settlers from the Turkish mainland) and countenance the continued presence of Turkish troops. Although the United States initially imposed mild sanctions on Turkey for invading and occupying its neighbor, they were soon lifted. Sanctions imposed against Russia are stronger, and there is little prospect that they will be lifted, or even eased, in the foreseeable future.

Washington’s criticism of Turkey’s repeated military incursions into northern Iraq and northern Syria likewise have been barely audible. That has been the case even though the targets in Syria are Kurdish forces that aided the United States and its allies in their war against ISIS.

The flagrant U.S. double standard also is apparent in the disparate assessments of the domestic conduct of Iran and such U.S. allies as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. UN Ambassador Nikki Haley verbally eviscerates Tehran at every opportunity for repressing its population. When anti-government demonstrations erupted in several Iranian cities earlier this year, Haley was quick to embrace their cause. “The Iranian regime’s contempt for the rights of its people has been widely documented for many years,” she stated during a Security Council session. Haley added that the United States stood “unapologetically with those in Iran who seek freedom for themselves, prosperity for their families, and dignity for their nation.”

Iran certainly does not resemble a Western-style democracy, but its political system is vastly more open than either Egypt’s or Saudi Arabia’s. Although the clerical Guardian Council excludes any candidate for office that it deems unacceptable, competing elections take place between individuals with often sharply contrasting views. President Hassan Rouhani won a new electoral mandate over a decidedly more hardline opponent in the May 2017 presidential election. Compared to some U.S. allies in the Middle East, Iran resembles a Jeffersonian democracy.

The Saudi royal family does not tolerate even a hint of domestic opposition. People have been imprisoned or beheaded merely for daring to criticize the regime. Saudi Arabia's overall human-rights record is easily one of the worst in the world, as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have documented. It is a measure of just how stifling the system is that the government finally allowing women to drive is considered a radical reform. A similar suffocating miasma of repression exists in Egypt, where President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has imprisoned thousands of political opponents, executed hundreds, and wins rigged elections by absurd margins reminiscent of those in Soviet satellite countries during the Cold War.

Yet, President Trump and other U.S. officials express little criticism of those brutal, autocratic allies. Trump's demeanor during his state visit to Riyadh last year bordered on fawning. Washington approves multi-billion-dollar arms deals for both Saudi Arabia and Egypt, despite their legendary human-rights abuses. As noted, the United States even continues to assist Saudi Arabia in its atrocity-ridden military intervention in Yemen.

There may be plausible geo-strategic reasons for persisting in such double standards. Iran, for example, has been openly hostile to the United States and its policy objectives since the fall of the Shah. It is not illogical for Washington to be intent on countering the influence of Tehran and its Syrian ally, even if that requires making common cause with other repressive regimes in the region. But U.S. leaders need to be candid with the American people and acknowledge that their decisions are based on cold calculations of national interest, not ethical considerations. They should at least spare us their pontificating and the pretense that they care about the rights or welfare of Middle Eastern populations. Washington's policies indicate otherwise.

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