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Posted on Thu, Feb. 17, 2011

On good relationships with bad governments

Meddling in other countries' affairs is gravely risky.

By Stanley Kober

The revolutionary movement sweeping the Middle East has raised the question of whether the United States has favored stability over democracy. It's an easy accusation in light of past U.S. support of presidents who stay in power for decades and kings who rule in perpetuity. But it's a little too easy.

The United States recognizes other countries not as an act of approbation, but simply to maintain contact with their governments.

To be sure, some governments are so odious that the United States doesn't maintain diplomatic relations with them - Iran and North Korea, for example.

But that policy has its drawbacks. The absence of a U.S. embassy in those countries means we give up the insights that could be provided by diplomats who report on political, economic, and other events. Many of America's allies maintain diplomatic relations with Iran and North Korea for that reason.

These allies are looking at diplomatic recognition not as a reward for those regimes, but simply an acknowledgment that they are in power. If a certain group of people controls a territory, then they are the people you have to deal with, even if you find them reprehensible.

But recognition also means one should observe a certain code of conduct. The boundaries of that code were identified in the Declaration of Independence, which affirmed that Americans held the British "as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends."

If that is the standard, Americans have a problem. Simply put, one doesn't subvert a friend. And even if we do not consider a government a friend - even if we hold our noses as we conduct business with it - subversion raises problems of international conduct, because the rule of law is based on equal application of the law. So if we can subvert them, they are allowed to subvert us.

It's for this reason that the principle of nonintervention in the internal affairs of other countries is so widely upheld. If countries routinely interfered in other countries' affairs with the intention of subverting their governments, the rule of international law would have no meaning; it wouldn't even be an aspiration. That would heighten tension and the risk of conflict.

Does diplomatic recognition then mean that we must simply live with tyrannical governments? Are our hands completely tied once we recognize regimes?

Winston Churchill provided an answer in his famous "iron curtain" speech, in 1946: "It is not our duty at this time, when difficulties are so numerous, to interfere forcibly in the internal affairs of countries

which we have not conquered in war. But we must never cease to proclaim in fearless tones the great principles of freedom and the rights of man. . . ."

To do that effectively, however, a nation's own conduct must reflect those values. Unfortunately, America's recent conduct has undercut its credibility on that score.

The war in Iraq has been especially damaging. "Even as the United States was waging a war partly in the name of democracy, the vast majority of the Arab public passionately opposed it, and even many governments counseled against it - largely for fear of public opposition," writes Shibley Telhami, who conducts polls of public opinion in Arab countries.

Arab analysts are also exhibiting growing concern about the antidemocratic behavior of the current Iraqi government. The outcome of the Iraq war, symbolized by the flight in terror of the country's Christian inhabitants, raises an uncomfortable question about American power.

That question is reinforced by developments in Lebanon. In 2006, when Israel and Hezbollah fought, then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said the conflict represented "the birth pangs of a new Middle East." Now that Hezbollah has emerged triumphant from a power struggle with U.S.-backed former Prime Minister Saad Hariri, Rice's words take on a meaning she doubtless never intended.

If there is one reason for caution about the revolutionary movements now engulfing the Middle East, it is that Iran also looks favorably on them (except for the movement within Iran itself, of course). In a sermon last month, Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami hailed the demonstrations in other countries, claiming they were following the example of the 1979 Iranian revolution. Iran's Fars News Agency has reported the creation of a Hezbollah organization in Tunisia that's modeled on the one in Lebanon.

The dilemmas of diplomacy are unavoidable, but they are made worse if the United States doesn't live up to its principles, squandering both its moral authority and its power. Unfortunately, the United States is not in the commanding position it possessed when democracy swept the communist bloc 20 years ago.

For all the agonizing and advising now consuming Washington, the harsh truth may be that, at least for the time being, America's ability to influence events is more limited than we imagine. Perhaps we can only watch and hope, and pray that people seeking freedom will fulfill their dreams.

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