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After facing up to world of change, Clinton leaves a legacy of caution

By: Guy Taylor - December 27, 2012

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton spoke at a women's college in Saudi Arabia in 2010 on the condition that her hosts temporarily bend their strict Islamic customs by allowing men and women to sit in the audience together without a curtain between them.

Women and men would be allowed to ask questions, and the entire session would have to be broadcast live on television. The event ultimately went off without a hitch, something of a coup for Mrs. Clinton.

"You had women in full abayas [body cloaks] in the most conservative environment for women in the world, and they literally shrieked when she came in the room," said P.J. Crowley, who was assistant secretary of state for public affairs at the time.

Mrs. Clinton is stepping down as secretary of state, and Sen. John F. Kerry, Massachusetts Democrat, has been nominated as her replacement.

Mrs. Clinton's admirers say the Saudi event shines as an example of her breaking ground by connecting directly and personally with foreign nationals.

Indeed, Mrs. Clinton has visited more nations — 112, according to the official count — and spoken to more foreign populations than any U.S. secretary of state in history.

Impressive as that may be, her critics say Mrs. Clinton has fallen far short of making much of an impact on several foreign policy challenges facing the United States, not to mention the fate of democracy around the world.

"I don't think she's been a very successful secretary of state by any measure," said John R. Bolton, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. "I don't know how her speeches have advanced American strategic interests in any way beyond maybe advancing her political career."

The price of indecision

Like many other Republicans, Mr. Bolton says U.S. strategic interests have undergone a significant regression during Mrs. Clinton's tenure.

This is perhaps nowhere more evident, her detractors say, than in the Middle East.

With Mrs. Clinton at Foggy Bottom, the Obama administration waffled on whether to support pro-democracy activists seeking to overthrow Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak in early 2011. Many conservatives say the cost of that delay is one reason for Washington's chilly relationship with Egypt's new rulers, the Muslim Brotherhood.

If nothing else, the U.S. appears to have missed an opportunity to exert influence when it was still possible during the months surrounding Mubarak's ouster.

The Obama administration — Mrs. Clinton included — took a similar posture toward pro-democracy activists in Iran during the so-called Green Revolution in 2009, and later in Syria, which has since deteriorated into a bloody civil war.

The State Department has sent more than \$200 million in communications equipment to Syrian rebels and humanitarian aid to Syrian civilians. But that has not stopped Syrian civilians from complaining for months that the United States has been waffling on the war's periphery and resisting a leadership role.

Early on, Mrs. Clinton reasoned against intervening on grounds that Syrian President Bashar Assad had potential as a "reformer" — a message that outraged those fighting for his ouster.

Many now agree that America's ambivalence will end with an unfortunate result: Whoever ultimately takes power in Damascus will remember Washington's hands-off posture.

A truly balanced look at Mrs. Clinton's legacy, her critics say, also would have to take into account the killings of a U.S. ambassador and three other Americans in a terrorist attack in Libya this year. After a perfect storm of intelligence and diplomatic security failures, J. Christopher Stevens was the first ambassador killed on the job in more than 30 years.

A limited role

Close observers caution against blaming Mrs. Clinton for creating the underpinnings of the Obama administration's foreign policy of "leading from behind."

Even Mr. Bolton, in an interview with The Washington Times, argued that Mrs. Clinton has been "dwarfed ultimately in foreign policy by the president," whose administration is perceived to be "comfortable with American decline."

"One of her problems," Mr. Bolton said, "is that she never had the opportunity to carve out a role for herself."

Kurt Volker, a former CIA analyst and career State Department officer, said: "I think she found herself in a difficult position with the White House that was really trying to minimize its engagement abroad.

“If that’s the White House you’re working for, it’s very difficult to be proactive as a secretary of state,” said Mr. Volker, noting that Mrs. Clinton “also had to be very sensitive to the fact that she had opposed Obama in the 2008 Democratic primaries.”

“There was always the appearance of political division between the two of them,” he said. “So she had the primary responsibility of being extra careful to avoid any such appearances.”

Some contend that Mrs. Clinton, who will be 69 in 2016, has spent the past four years playing it safe in the interest of preserving her chances for another run for the presidency.

“You feel to a certain degree as if she’s covering her tracks,” said Joshua Landis, director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma.

Mr. Landis said Mrs. Clinton has “taken no risks” when it comes to U.S. relations with Saudi Arabia or other Persian Gulf monarchies that “propagate Wahabi Islam,” a fundamentalist movement that adheres strictly to the Koran and considers nonbelievers to be infidels. Nor, he said, has she been willing to stand up to Israel, which he described as pursuing “colonialist policies” in the West Bank that “infuriate Muslims.”

“If she is preparing to run four years from now, it makes a lot of sense,” Mr. Landis said.

Eliot Cohen, a top foreign policy adviser to Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney, said Mrs. Clinton’s mark on foreign policy is less distinct than it might have been.

“She is not to Barack Obama as Condi Rice was to George W. Bush or Madeleine Albright was to Bill Clinton, or George Shultz was to Ronald Reagan,” said Mr. Cohen, who worked as a special adviser to Ms. Rice for two years.

“That is not to say Mrs. Clinton has been a bad secretary of state,” he said, “but rather that she has not gotten a whole lot of free reign from the White House.”

“You cannot really see her imprint on foreign policy,” said Mr. Cohen, who compares her to Mrs. Albright, who engineered the Clinton administration’s policy toward the Balkans; Mr. Shultz, who reshaped how the Reagan administration thought about the use of force in the world; and Ms. Rice, who fashioned a new era of U.S. relations with Europe.

The ‘reset’

Others point to the former Soviet Union and Asia as two regions where Mrs. Clinton has attempted to push boundaries set by the White House, particularly with regard to the administration’s self-described “reset” of relations with Russia.

Although many say the “reset” has been a fiasco — boosting authoritarian President Vladimir Putin’s image while leaving Russia’s neighbors defenseless to Moscow’s sphere of influence — Mr. Volker, who also served as deputy assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, said Mrs. Clinton has worked hard at alleviating such perceptions.

The former Soviet republic of Georgia felt particularly “left out by the ‘reset’ policy on grounds that it put an emphasis on U.S. relations with Russia rather than with the most democratic former Soviet states,” Mr. Volker said.

Recognizing this, Mrs. Clinton visited the Georgian capital of Tbilisi in 2010 and “used the right words, saying Russia was ‘occupying’ part of Georgian territory and that Russia had ‘invaded’ Georgia,” he said.

“Her effort strayed from the silence that was coming from the White House,” Mr. Volker said. “She stepped out and said the right things.

“She wasn’t playing lead on this, or a proactive U.S. policy role, but on the margins she was maneuvering for good.”

He noted another example in which Mrs. Clinton gently resisted a White House-driven “groundswell” of support within NATO for reducing U.S.-controlled nuclear weapons stationed in Europe.

“Within the confines of a U.S. policy that has been really about retreating from confrontation in the world, she was able to find a few ways to show a little spine,” said Mr. Volker, who served as the permanent U.S. representative to NATO from the final year of the George W. Bush administration into the first year of the Obama administration.

Others say Mrs. Clinton missed opportunities to ask tough questions on Russia.

“She toned down her human rights rhetoric substantially,” said Ariel Cohen, a senior research fellow for Russian and Eurasian Studies at the Heritage Foundation.

The “reset” has been followed by significant backsliding toward authoritarianism — as highlighted the return to the presidency by Mr. Putin, whose government has ordered the U.S. Agency for International Development to cease operations in Russia and forced Radio Free Europe to stop broadcasting in the nation.

“Rhetoric from Hillary Clinton and from the State Department and most importantly from President Obama could have been more stringent,” said Mr. Cohen, who also criticized Mrs. Clinton for “not doing enough to promote ties between the countries of Central Asia, the South Caucasus and Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus, and to encourage them to integrate more with the West.”

“The result is that we’re losing the post-Soviet states,” he said. “They’re falling back into Moscow’s orbit.”

‘Pivot to Asia’

The extent to which blame should be laid on Mrs. Clinton remains a topic of debate. Regardless of political leanings, many say waning U.S. influence in the former Soviet bloc is partly a consequence of the Obama administration’s other major foreign policy initiative: the self-described “pivot to Asia.”

China's smaller neighbors have grown alarmed as the Middle Kingdom increasingly flexes its military muscles in territorial disputes along the oil- and gas-rich Pacific Rim.

The administration's "pivot" has sought to counter China by growing new and deeper diplomatic ties in Southeast Asia, while quietly strengthening military-to-military relations with U.S. allies in the region.

The lifting of U.S. economic sanctions in exchange for pro-democracy political reforms in Myanmar is an oft-cited highlight of the "pivot," and Mrs. Clinton's role in the effort has won praise from liberal and conservative analysts alike.

"Where she has had some freedom to maneuver, it's been in Asia and that's where the administration has done best," said Eliot Cohen, foreign policy adviser to vanquished Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney.

Douglas Bandow, who served as a special assistant to President Reagan, said Mrs. Clinton has "been very active in going over and meeting with leaders in the region."

"It's fair to put this as part of her legacy," he said, cautioning against judging Mrs. Clinton's overall performance without considering the historical context surrounding her reign as secretary of state.

"What we're entering into is a world where America doesn't run everything. The U.S. cannot dictate," said Mr. Bandow, who is now a senior fellow specializing in foreign policy at the Cato Institute.

Directly to the people

Mrs. Clinton's admirers say she has sought tirelessly to redefine U.S. foreign policy away from government-to-government "talks" and toward direct interaction with foreign citizenry.

This often has involved harnessing such issues as women's rights. She has made an effort to speak before women's groups in dozens of nations — and at last year's Women in the World Summit in New York, she asserted that she had "made women a cornerstone of American foreign policy."

Former State Department officials who worked closely with Mrs. Clinton say her finest moments were built on the cornerstone. The women who cheered for her in Saudi Arabia "recognized what she means as a role model for women in the world," said Mr. Crowley, adding that Mrs. Clinton's efforts have not been limited to women's issues.

Mr. Crowley recalled a 2009 trip to Pakistan during which Mrs. Clinton took part in a roundtable discussion with news anchors from Pakistani television. "In the aftermath, the reaction had one person being quoted in the major daily papers in Pakistan as saying 'our leaders don't talk to us the way that she just talked to us,'" he said.

"She was setting a standard in terms of how leaders should engage citizens of the world," Mr. Crowley said, adding that Mrs. Clinton was alternatively tough in meetings

with the Pakistani media before the May 2011 Navy SEAL raid that killed Osama bin Laden in Pakistan.

During one exchange, a group of Pakistani newspaper editors was hounding her about restrictions on U.S. aid to Pakistan, Mr. Crowley said. “She responded by saying, ‘Hey, you’ve got questions for us, well, we’ve got questions for you. It’s hard for us to believe that no one in Pakistan knows where Osama bin Laden is.’”

Others say Mrs. Clinton’s legacy will be one of a secretary of state who honestly cared little about what her legacy would be.

Michael O’Hanlon, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, said she is a leader who “works her tail off” and puts the pursuit of positive results well above that of praise, approval or fame.

“She has been solid, pragmatic and diligent as opposed to flashy, risk-taking or otherwise preoccupied by her image of herself and her place in history,” Mr. O’Hanlon said. “I don’t think she spent a lot of time on that. I think she spent a lot of time trying to understand how to solve problems.”

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