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Restoring the U.S. Moral Standing in the Middle East through a Focus on Reform and Civil Society

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Brief Analysis

The United States needs to restore emphasis on its values in order to combat critical media narratives and a growing appreciation for China.

Even before the Trump presidency, the United States faced a credibility problem. It was repeatedly challenged when it argued that its national interests are best realized when framed by universal values and human rights. Since the Trump presidency, residual credibility has suffered additional setbacks. For some, these setbacks were inconsequential: Washington could pursue an approach in which its stature as a “force for good” is sidelined, and its interactions with its Middle East interlocutors are driven solely by a raw calculus of immediate interest.

Such a course, however, is not likely to be sustainable if the United States hopes to maintain its influence in the Middle East. It could increase regional tension and create unstable situations vulnerable to shifting variables. More importantly, it is incompatible with the expectations of the U.S. public and is at odds with deeply entrenched American values. While the United States may contemplate an exit strategy from a less than productive role as the world police force, its own self-image and its long tradition of global engagement demand that it remains a moral reference for a world in which democracy and good governance are in the minority.

Aside from the plethora of immediate domestic issues the Biden administration faces, the United States is mitigating the maneuvers of its former superpower foe, Russia, in the latter’s pursuit of a re-emergence while also negotiating the soft ascent of China as its main rival in economic might and global influence. It is in the context of these two larger global challenges that Washington must restore the trust it had damaged with its liberal democratic allies. While addressing these multiple priorities, Washington will continue to allocate resources to long-standing Middle East issues—Israel/Palestine, Iran, Iraq, terrorism—and may devote new attention to more recently developing ones

—including Syria, Yemen, and Libya. The intensity and focus of its engagement, however, must be balanced with its priorities.

Actors in the Middle East, however, do not recognize or advocate for this form of regional engagement based on U.S. priorities. The United States occupies a disproportionate place in the region's political action and thought. The resulting expectation in the region, as subjective as it may be, is that it should receive proportional importance in Washington.

The perennial U.S.-centric character of political discourse in much of the Arab Middle East is repeatedly underlined by the dominance of conflicting assessments of U.S. policy in the region: Washington is chastised for its heavy interventionist hand and alleged plan of imperialist hegemony while concurrently lamented for its perceived disengagement and lack of strategy. Arab politicians and public intellectuals, espousing either of the two stances, repeatedly and sharply rebuke U.S. actions and positions while deeming them bound to failure, detrimental to the region, and ultimately contrary to Washington's own interests. Furthermore, the constant refrain for decades has been that the age of U.S. dominance and influence has ended, or is on the verge of ending, and that new global actors are ascending in the coalescing multi-polar international order.

Undoubtedly, the post-Cold War unipolarity that placed the United States in the position of unprecedented global leadership has receded, as Russia's and China's positions attest. Still, the inflated assessments that circulate in Arab political discourse seem to be more reflective of the desires of their proponents than of a sober reading of the facts. The challenge that Washington faces is both to counter its foes' negative portrayal of the United States and also to manage the expectations of less hostile interlocutors. Tackling the narratives that dominate the Arab political space is key for taking back ownership of the United States' image in the Middle East and refocusing it away from unrealistic fears and desires towards a more sustainable moral focus.

The Arab world's media marketplace is dominated by three narratives, reflecting the consolidation of the print and broadcast information sector in the age of online social media prominence. New media platforms are more likely to amplify rather than supply alternatives to this narrative dominance.

The first narrative, a product of the nationalist and leftist discourse of decades past, is promoted by Iran. While operating across Tehran's many proxies, a considerable fraction of its output originates from Dahiyeh, Lebanese Hezbollah's informal capital. It proposes that the region's plight is due to nefarious U.S. attempts to usurp its wealth and control its governments, attempts that local forces—Iran being first among them—resist.

The second narrative, promoted by Qatar and Turkey, draws on some leftist and nationalist themes. At its core, it is mainly the not-so-subtle promotion of accommodationist Islamism as a practical compromise that may provide a degree of representative governance and regional peace—even though the moment of popular enthusiasm for this proposition as long passed. In this narrative, the United States is often naive and misguided, falling prey to narrow interests and insidious actors.

The third narrative, sponsored by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, attempts to present itself as moderate and forward thinking, rejecting extremism and terror, and espousing a vision of peace for the region while focusing on Iran as the primary danger to the region. The United States is generally presented positively, though historically criticized for its alliance with Israel. With the Trump presidency, this narrative transitioned to a full endorsement of U.S. policies and its position towards Israel shifted into to a full embrace. The role of the regional villains was re-allocated to Qatar and Turkey, in addition to Iran.

Today, the Biden administration faces the unprecedented situation of being maligned by all three regional narratives. The Tehran-Dahiyeh narrative labels it as insincere and accuses it of pursuing policies that are only cosmetically different from Trump policies. The Doha-Ankara narrative sees the United States as weak, lacking

resolve and vision. The Abu Dhabi-Riyadh narrative characterizes it as foolish, vindictive, and counter-productive.

These narratives get an additional boost from Russian information operations presenting a multi-faced portrayal of the United States as a failing and malevolent behemoth. Hints at a Chinese information operation can also readily be identified in many regional countries, with the latter reinforcing its image as a responsible and capable international leader. Still, to the extent that a substantial endeavor to promote China can be identified in the region, it is less of a push from China itself, and more of an implicitly collaborative pull from regional actors, fueled by three political trends represented in all three regional dominant narratives.

The first of these three trends is advocacy for state paternalism—the model of the nation as a family, with the state as the parent that bestows privileges and metes punishment on its children citizens. The second is the critique of Western “neo-liberalism”, or of capitalism without qualification, as the impediment for the realization of economic potential. The third trend is the denunciation of radical Western “degeneracy” in its embrace of homosexuality, promiscuity, and social chaos.

All three narratives, given their promotion by patriarchal regimes, are supportive of state paternalism. Critique of capitalism is a mainstay of the Iran-led media, while Doha-Ankara outlets will rely on this critique to explain embarrassing failures. The denunciation of degeneracy is leveraged by all three narratives on a more utilitarian bases, often by creating parallels between Western practices and those of targeted regional rivals. Some examples include equating Iranian mut’ah or, adversely, Saudi misyar marriages with prostitution in the “degenerate” West, or challenging Turkey’s religious credentials for its de-criminalization of homosexuality.

Despite lingering Soviet-era positivity towards its might, Russia’s misdeeds and misfortunes are too numerous to allow it to effectively pursue the status of a role model. China, on the other hand, seems to proffer all the desired “credentials” of the major regional media narratives—that is, state paternalism, directed economy, and social control, as well as the unstated fundamental quality of being the anti-United States.

Indeed, the embrace of China is more likely a stand-in for the pervasive anti-Americanism that inhabits much of Arab political culture than an actual endorsement of Chinese policies and norms—all of which remain deeply opaque to most regional decision makers and pundits. Nonetheless, ubiquitous surveillance, limitations on the internet, and the potential for a social credit system to control behavior — already in extensive effect in China—are highly appreciated by actual and/or would-be political, religious, and social authorities in the region. More importantly for these authorities, the presumed success and stability of their Chinese implementation serve to resist the Western-supported local rejection of such policies.

However, the Arab critique of the Biden administration may appear to be the result of disagreement on policies. In actual fact, it may be more reflective of difference in values. In a region populated by autocracies and failed states, it cannot be presumed that the dominant narratives and the governments that sponsor them speak for the totality of the population. There may be a plurality acquiescing to unaccountable rulers on the basis of a social contract that promises a range of public services in exchange of submission to the leadership. With the increasing failure of governments to fulfill their part, the sustainability of their model of political control is in doubt. Out of necessity, principle, and exposure to alternatives worldwide, a vocal minority in virtually every country in the region is actively seeking a citizen-centric vision of governance.

In the 1990s, demands for reform shifted from political parties to civil society organizations—due in part to the former’s embrace of ideological dogma and sclerotic structures. At its inception, the civil society movement was informed by local social activism, which is driven by benevolent pursuits. The modern civil society movement is instead defined by its rights-based perspective.

Western governments and international non-governmental organizations contributed substantially to developing

capacity and access to funding for the emerging regional organizations. Yet the calls for reform—for citizen participation and fair representation in political decision making, transparency in the distribution of public resources, accountability of individuals and institutions in charge of public service, the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, local administration of municipal and provincial affairs, environmental measures, equal rights and cultural security for ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities, among others—were not a foreign import, as is alleged by autocrats and theocrats.

The roots of such demands in the region can be traced back to the nineteenth century in many cases; Western input has only provided a resource to fine-tune and validate these local concepts and pursuits. The avenues that civil society support has opened towards the local communities have provided the means for the citizen-centered proposition to realize part of its potential from the bottom up—which authoritarian voices in particular have naturally found threatening.

While the United States once played a part as an amplifier of civil society reform voices, the validity of this approach was questioned during the Obama administration, presumably as part of the desire to disengage from the broader interventionism of the George W. Bush years. But while it may be necessary to address the legitimate concern of civil society organizations potentially becoming vehicles for outside government influence, dismissing the calls for liberal, democratic, progressive, secular reform effectively amounts to absurdly punishing activists for their affinity for universal values and Western ideals. It is such a posture that left many of the core generators of the “Arab Spring,” civic and civil activists with positive agendas, lacking support, while the sponsors of today’s three dominant regional narratives embraced various autocratic and theocratic forces and diffused the constructive potential of that once-in-a-generation moment.

The United States may have military might deployed across the region, and may yield considerable economic influence, but its real power is in the intangible credit that it carries as the world’s moral reference. Despite its many detractors, this proposition has lived and prospered for many decades. In recent years, the perceived hypocrisy of the Obama administration (Obama is said to have described the Syrian crisis as “high investment, low return”), then the chaos and moral detachment of the Trump administration seem to have lowered this credit to dangerous levels. Judging from the stated positions of Joe Biden and from the early actions of his administration, there is indeed a desire for redress.

The Biden administration may not have the bandwidth to tackle the multitude of issues facing the Middle East. Still, it does not lack tools, and they need not be costly. In one particularly salient case, the Biden administration has deployed a return to this focus by favoring humanitarian considerations in its approach towards the war in Yemen. While this decision was cynically dismissed by all concerned parties to the conflict—deemed a “cover for defeat” by the pro-Iranian Houthis and a politically motivated “punishment” by Saudi-funded media—such cynicism may dissipate if Washington maintains a consistent stance, stressing the importance of successful reforms and accountable institutions across the region and providing moral recognition and support for ongoing efforts to enhance the resilience of democratic practices, elections, and participation.

Such efforts may require direct engagement with friendly and receptive governments—notably Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan, Kuwait, and Iraq. It will also involve the constructive response to local efforts engaged in the remedial preparation for citizen-led polities—in Lebanon, Libya, Algeria, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. It will also necessitate the principled and open demand for accountability and the restoration or realization of a public participatory space from some close partners—namely Egypt, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman.

Theocrats and autocrats may relentlessly compete for power, but while seeking the partnership or engagement of the United States, they readily agree on the need to exclude it from any support role for democrats in the region. The Obama and Trump administrations’ willingness to oblige these demands, regardless of justification, has weakened

the public and popular standing of the United States and reducing the soft power tools at its disposal in the process. The U.S. public has little appetite for interventions in the Middle East, but U.S. military or material actions are not needed to engage the region. Instead, what is needed is the moral leadership of the United States as the potent partner or ally that will not remain silent on infringements of universal values and human rights. Reframing U.S. partnership as such may provide the spirit lift for activists, refocus the attention of the acquiescing majority towards seeking its interests instead, and derail the converging efforts of Arab media narratives to present China as an alternative model. This may indeed prove to be a “low investment, high return” proposition. ❖



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