

Another Course Correction Needed: Towards a Better Reception of U.S. Positions in the Middle East

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Brief Analysis

Characterizations of U.S. engagement in the Middle East as merely chaotic ignore—often deliberately—that a course correction in U.S. policy is indeed taking place. Underneath the U.S. administration’s multiple, even conflicting messages communicated to friends and foes in the Middle East, the outlines of a coherent policy are potentially discernible. Washington is moving towards a more exclusive focus on interdicting Iranian hegemonic plans while maintaining pressure on radical Sunni Islamist groups.

Yet the framing and delivery of this new policy are far from ideal, and its audience cannot assume a guarantee of its continuation. Thus, another course correction is also needed: U.S. rhetoric directed at international audiences must change if its intent is to communicate the message of a steady U.S. hand in the Middle East.

Friendly regional commentators have applauded certain elements of U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s speech delivered at the American University of Cairo. In particular, they have praised his proclamation of the United States as a “force for good.” Likewise, views that the speech ‘set the record straight’ were abundant.

These courtesy reactions are indeed indicative of genuinely positive feelings in many circles in the Middle East about the Trump administration’s relinquishing of former U.S. President Barack Obama’s policies, in particular his approach to Iran. Yet worries in these same circles about the immediate effects of recent policy actions announced by the Trump administration are also real. In this light, Pompeo’s speech neither effectively developed the good will nor dissipated concerns of those in the region inclined to be see benefit in new U.S. policies. In fact, a fair or even sympathetic assessment of its reception ought to recognize the negative impact of this speech.

Domestic Disputes Don’t Translate

Outside of America itself, U.S. policy is often seen not as a succession of distinct presidencies with diverging approaches that are each entitled to reset policy parameters, but rather as the incoherent and unreliable actions of one continuous governmental entity.

Like former President Barrack Obama’s declaration of “a new beginning” while intending to assure a wide audience of continuing U.S. engagement a decade prior, Secretary Pompeo seemed not to notice the oxymoron of proclaiming a steady U.S. policy while simultaneously debunking its prior iteration. In stripping and deconstructing the policies of a previous U.S. president, Pompeo fell into the same mistake of presenting to his audiences a model of previous

U.S. policy-making as ill-informed, badly conceived, and wrongfully executed. The expectation that a further iteration should inspire confidence is not credible.

Moreover, Pompeo—who generally adheres to a measured, civil discourse—indulged in an undiplomatic attack on former President Barack Obama in his attempt to distance the current administration’s policies from previous ones. The tone of the speech was distinctly polemical. This unexpected style may have been in line with President Trump’s own rhetorical approach, but its efficacy for a non-domestic audience is highly questionable.

Put simply, the unequivocal dressing down of the politics of a rival party does not translate well outside the U.S. national borders. In U.S. domestic politics, the assumption that political rivals, even with diametrically opposing points of view, think and act in what they believe to be in the national interest is usually an unstated but generally accepted norm. The robust nature of the American political system allows for a high level of acrimony in discourse while maintaining a deeply rooted trust that no verbal confrontation, however vicious, will degenerate into a real threat to the centuries-old political order. Even the current, unprecedented “stress-test” under Trump is far from challenging the continuity of U.S. democracy.

But on much of the international stage, such levels of contentious discourse—especially when coupled with sharp breaks in previous policies—are associated with revolutions, not elections. And since no revolution has rocked Washington lately, the Arab perspective of the recent pointed rhetoric and abandonment of policies is that the United States is a fundamentally fickle entity. Parties in the region who see the current U.S. policy as swinging in their direction will provide praise, but the claim that a fundamental course correction has taken place is in all likelihood implicitly dismissed.

Moreover, Pompeo’s admonishment of Obama for empowering nefarious Islamists, especially when combined with Trump’s claim that both Obama and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton “created” the “Islamic State” in Iraq and Syria (IS) empowers the United States’ detractors. Any and all subsequent qualifications and clarifications will be left off of the direct quotes that eager promoters of anti-U.S. rhetoric—Russia, Iran, and a resurgent “anti-imperialist” Arab left—could now exploit. These detractors will further relish the many soundbites provided by no less an authority than the Secretary of State detailing the multiple failures of the United States in understanding the region and in engaging malevolent forces.

Thus, in addressing international audiences—certainly when addressing Arab audiences, adjustments are in order. As the prerogative of the policy-maker, the intent and content should be left unchanged; the form, however, should be more carefully calibrated to the expectations of the intended audience.

Critique Bad Actors, Not U.S. Policy

It is fair to sharply critique the Obama administration on the domestic stage for policy oversights in the Middle East, decrying it as excessively optimistic and failing to generate a positive outcome. The Obama administration engaged with various Muslim Brotherhood organizations on the basis of its positive assessment of the margin of democratic content in their discourse and positions. It also opted to seek an agreement with Iran due to its expectation that such an action will empower moderate forces within the Islamic Republic and will prompt Iran to normalize its behavior across the region. On both counts, the Obama administration may be accused of unwarranted trust and exuberant optimism, which led to an expected failure. When addressing Arab and Middle Eastern audiences, however, it is more correct and more appropriate to direct the onus on the failure of these policies towards the parties that actually failed to live up to the former administration’s expectations, however excessive.

Had Secretary Pompeo focused on chastising Iran for its insistence on transgressing international community norms and for its spectacular failure to seize the opportunity provided by the Obama administration to behave as a conventional state—as he did in his previous ‘12 points’ speech of May 2018 — Pompeo would have avoided sharing a

domestic dispute irrelevant to his audience.

Similarly, Pompeo can underline how the Muslim Brotherhood failed to live up to the promise of democratic behavior after of the Arab Spring and highlight its current ideological stance that allows for further radicalization to move the spotlight to a more pertinent line of critique and away from the self-infliction of damage on the image of the United States.

A duality of public embrace and silent skepticism from Middle Eastern governments will wear on the sustainability of their ties with the United States, especially as they welcome renewed engagement with China and Russia. And while the United States may or may not benefit from a withdrawal from the Middle East, it need not amplify the prospects for such a departure through rhetorical missteps.

The current US administration has the right to distinguish itself from the policies of its predecessors. But it is better served when its rhetoric suggests to both political classes and general audiences in the Middle East that changes in U.S. policy reflect orderly re-assessments within a single coherent system rather than an unreliable and unpredictable series of policy reversals. ❖

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