Policy Topics

The Hypocrisy Trap: U.S. Foreign Aid in the Middle East[1]

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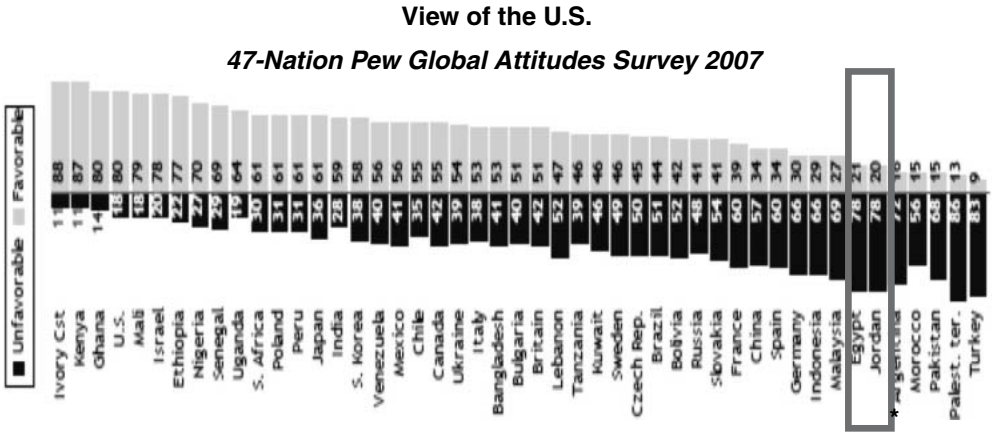
Washington, D.C.—The endemically authoritarian Middle East is embracing political change, yet the United States is bracing for the worst. U.S. policymakers are finding they can claim very little credit for the wave of democratically inspired events, and they foresee few benefits arising from the surge of demonstrations and strikes. The quandary they face is how to explain to the American people one of the great foreign policy failures in U.S. history.

Playing on U.S. national security fears allows autocratic partners to dictate their interests to the United States. Funneling aid to gain policy concessions from dictatorial regimes, nurtures animosity that prevents the U.S. from exercising meaningful leverage when change finally becomes possible. A legacy of bitterness makes it likely that reformist leaders will be compelled to prove themselves through anti-American postures. In the worst case democracy itself falls out of favor being interpreted as too American. These are the larger lessons for U.S. policy makers from the fall of Hosni Mubarak.

No one perfected the art of double dealing better than Mubarak; he maintained official and business ties with the U.S., and keeps the border with Gaza closed while his political allies fan populist anger against the U.S. and Israel. He blocked all U.S. efforts to strengthen social networks, cooperatives, unions and all other civil society vehicles to a more responsive government, yet no leader received a more consistent flow of rewards from Washington.

The Middle East has received more U.S. aid per capita than any other part of the globe. Instead of greater trust, however, the U.S. dividend has been a decline in popularity.

Figure 1: U.S. is the least popular in countries where its aid is the most abundant



[1] 本稿は、2009年11月24日(火)に行われた総合政策学部講演会の内容をまとめたものである。講演時のタイトルは「The Hypocrisy Trap and U.S. Soft Power」であった。

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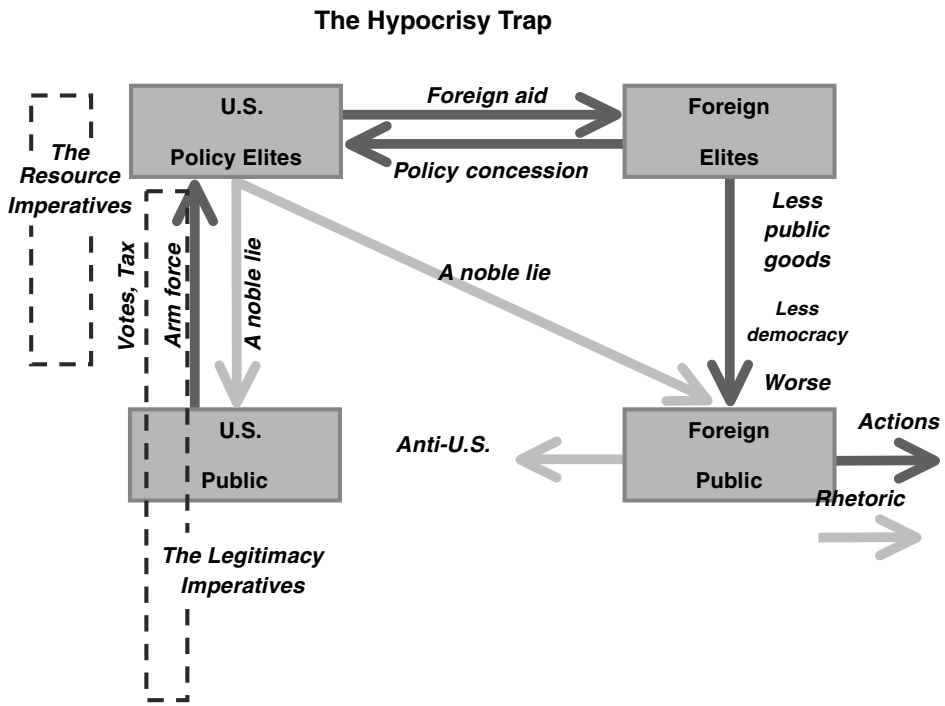
U.S. popularity is lowest among the Arab populations in the Middle East that receive the most aid. This is no surprise to policy experts, since much of the aid is distributed "strategically," in the form of private benefits to small, ruling coalitions in order to obtain policy concessions that are rarely popular among the population as a whole. This strategic distribution is hidden from the American public.

Explaining the divergence between rhetoric and reality to the U.S. public is tricky. U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East typically empowers four types of actors. First, are the "initiators" of the policy: the foreign policy bureaucrats and political operators in the U.S. Departments of State and Defense, and in the National Security Council who, while subject to budget constraints, must aim for the most strategic impact of U.S. resources. The second group includes their transaction partners overseas, usually elites who understand they are receiving resources for which they owe nothing to their own people. Both they and the U.S. initiators share the goal of remaining in power at home. To succeed, both must co-opt the third and fourth sets of actors: the non-elite populations at home and abroad. This is where the gap between the rhetoric and reality of foreign policy arises.

Figure 2: The *hypocrisy trap*: two stories and four audiences



That co-option consists of a noble lie that links aid with democracy promotion. It is constructed to conceal the strategic logic of aid transfers while building support at home. The noble lie often cites what Joseph Nye pioneered as "soft power": linking aid disbursements to a broad geopolitical agenda that prioritizes base rights, U.N. votes, support for global free trade, and access to low-cost natural resources. The lie often includes an overstatement designed to evoke sympathy or fear, or to mislead the public into believing that a grand and urgent cause—e.g., the campaign against global communism or terror—is being served. Overstatements aim to make foreign aid designated for undemocratic, repressive governments more palatable when it otherwise might jar the democratic sensibilities of the voting public at home that foots the bill.

Overstatements also cloud general awareness of the pernicious lie shared and understood by the foreign policy elites at home and abroad. For them, soft power means that the United States will try to attain its goals by courting foreign officials and providing them with the resources they need to stay in power. The soft power of foreign aid thus becomes a weapon of bribery.

The institutionalized hypocrisy that results can more easily be concealed from domestic audiences than from the public overseas who are victims of the overt contradiction between the advertised priorities and the reality. The hypocrisy is made more blatant by the daily espousal by U.S. leaders of the virtues of democracy.

Democracy is often cited for its capacity to draw upon the expertise and knowledge of all its citizens, and thus its great capacity for self-correction. If leaders tell lies, we expect that the democratic process will provide remedies. But such self-correcting mechanisms are often absent in foreign policy planning because the negative policy effects are often borne solely by populations overseas. Because the aid enables autocrats to postpone necessary reforms (instead, they consolidate support from a close circle of insiders), their nations suffer the deterioration of institutional quality and a contraction of provisions for the public good such as education and access to justice. Hence the angry crowds in the streets of Cairo.

Using foreign aid for soft power creates false expectations, and the lies create dissension at home and anti-U.S. sentiment overseas. The Obama administration started this last round of expectation-building in the Middle East with the president's 2009 speech in Cairo which led the people in the Middle East to believe that they had a defender in Washington. But by trying to claim more sympathy than his predecessors, he inflamed the population overseas with heightened expectations, creating risks of an even greater backlash downstream should the expectations not be met.

The political crisis in the Middle East is far from over, but the ability of the U.S. to play a necessary role in its resolution has been significantly impaired. To be successful there, policy planners must either enhance their ability to disguise the hypocrisy or to reduce the need for it. To try to do both, they will fail at both. The first option is made less likely by today's open information environment. The second option means taking a long, hard look at how U.S. overseas assistance falls into a hypocrisy trap, and to challenge the foreign policy complex composed of ideologies, interests and domestic institutions that have identified the American government with the embodiment of Arab authoritarianism.

U.S. policymakers use foreign aid as a way of ensuring America's security and economic interests by contributing to the stability of the Middle East. But in the end, by ignoring the link between social and political development, it may have compromised both U.S. security and the long-term regional stability.

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