

# Outside View: Selective U.S. support for democracy

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WASHINGTON, June 13 (UPI) --

WASHINGTON, June 13 (UPI) -- Americans, and the rest of the world, would remain uncertain as to the strategic thrust of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.

With the events of the recent past, a cloud has formed in defining the true nature of just what the United States seeks to accomplish with its so-called and real allies and other governments embarking on a democratic path or plunging into the abyss of tyranny that is so familiar to the region.

Although U.S. President Barack Obama has described his new policy in glowing terms to the Middle East as no longer supporting Arab authoritarian states, this hasn't been applied to the "preferred" governments in the region and governments in turmoil.

At the same time U.S. and British support for Syrian rebels, including their growing calls to halt an arms embargo, are fighting to overthrow the repressive Assad regime in Syria, reflects a case of double standards and sign of confused U.S. policy toward the region.

As with the terrorist attack on the U.S. diplomatic mission in Benghazi, Libya, the Obama administration is unwilling to admit a lack of detente, while also not protecting U.S. citizens in the Middle East.

In Libya the attackers were referred to in all manner of ways -- other than "terrorists" -- while in other parts of the Middle East, regimes aren't singled out as being repressive.

How, after all, is it morally different when Iran sends weapons to Assad and Hezbollah to put down pro-democracy rebels compared to other Middle East "friendly" rulers who provide "boots on the ground" to crush pro-democracy demonstrations in thawing Middle Eastern countries such as Bahrain?

Looked at from this perspective, the Obama administration's much touted "new" approach to the Middle East is very much like old wine in new bottles. Former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's policy of supporting "friendly" authoritarian regimes remains alive and well in the Middle East under Obama.

Human Rights Watch explains why this remains the case.

Key allies such as the United States and the United Kingdom have refrained from publicly criticizing "friendly" regimes' crackdown on freedom of expression and repression of civil society.

Arms exports to the United Arab Emirates (among others) continue to trump human rights and the interests of Americans caught up in the maelstrom of diplomacy and justice.

HRW points out, "In 2012, the U.S. signed a \$3.48 billion dollar deal with the UAE to provide a missile defense system. In June, "industry sources" in Abu Dhabi cited criticism of the UAE in the U.K. media as one factor in a decision not to invite British oil company BP to tender for 2014 oil concessions."

The UAE's abysmal record on human rights is coupled with equally poor treatment of foreign investors and businessmen such as Zack Shahin whose imprisonment on trumped up criminal charges demonstrates that attempting to do business in that country can seriously damage one's health.

Shahin, once touted as an American success in the UAE real estate market, was forced to undergo a 2-month hunger strike last year to convince the U.S. government to publicly request he be released on bail. After such pressure and bail, Shahin was forced to flee the UAE when paramilitary thugs using mace and stun guns attacked him in his hotel room.

Shahin fled to Yemen where his attempt to again seek protection from the U.S. government once again was trumped by support for a "friendly" regime, sacrificing an innocent American to an internationally criticized judicial system. While Shahin was incarcerated with terrorist suspects, his legal team had to educate U.S. Embassy officials about the relative simple procedure of providing an American with an emergency passport.

Although the Yemeni government was prepared to put Shahin on a plane bound for the United States, this was obstructed by the lack of clear support by the U.S. government.

Pursuant to international law, Shahin should have been deported to the United States; however, when he arrived at Sanaa airport he was met and abducted by Dubai security officers and returned to Dubai where he awaits a multitude of repetitive cases accusing him of a multitude of offenses.

Does Shahin have the support of his government?

Consider former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko. The U.S. State Department never subjects the UAE leadership to the same degree of criticism for its lack of reforms and political repression as they do on Ukraine.

In the current State Department human rights report on Ukraine, Tymoshenko, who was also imprisoned on trumped up corruption charges, is given pride of place and her name is raised by the U.S. ambassador to Ukraine at every opportunity.

In stark contrast, if you ask the consular officials in Dubai when the last time Shahin's case was discussed you will be met by blank stares and an embarrassing silence.

The United States has been even more critical than the European Union of selective use of justice in Ukraine but has ignored the same "selective use of justice" in countries such as the UAE that are friendly to U.S. business interests. By the State Department's own admission, arbitrary arrests, lengthy detentions, police and prison brutality and a lack of independent judiciary are facts of life in the UAE.

"The Ministry of Interior detains foreign residents arbitrarily at times," the State Department admits in its latest annual report.

Freedom House and Human Rights Watch describe cases of police torture, lack of accountability of the police for human rights violations and denial of access to counsel for prisoners during lengthy trials.

In such an environment, it is impossible for Zack Shahin to receive a fair trial in the UAE and it should be U.S. policy to therefore demand his immediate release into U.S. officials' custody.

Other Americans thinking of visiting or doing business in UAE should be made aware that their government won't seek to protect them from "pro-Western" regimes if they are considered friendly to U.S. business and regional security interests.

In pursuing the old Kissinger foreign policy the Obama administration has signaled that it doesn't support the promotion of human rights in the UAE and other "friendly" regimes in the Middle East.

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