

Trump's value-free foreign policy



Rashmee Roshan Lall

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Just about three years ago, an American president stood before the cadets graduating from the US Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., and offered a new foreign policy direction. It was important, he said, for the United States to distinguish between its “core interests” and “crises that stir our conscience.”

The first might require, indeed necessitate, military action. The second would not, or at least not in the first instance. Instead, the United States would broaden its tools “to include diplomacy and development, sanctions and isolation, appeals to international law, and, if just, necessary and effective, multilateral military action.”

That president was Barack Obama and his words drew severe criticism from across the American foreign policy establishment. Obama's stance repudiated decades of bipartisan foreign policy, screeched the critics, because it appeared to take a value-free approach to the world.

Pundits and policymakers raged against the immorality of the United States turning its back on the principles that guided its interaction with the world for much of the 20th century. The United States must always

have the will to threaten force to protect the values that define it, they said.

That was then.

In the age of President Donald Trump, Obama's words seem idealistic rather than immoral. They took a principled but pragmatic understanding of the United States' role in the world, a decade after the catastrophic and unprovoked invasion of Iraq. They did not delink America's commitment to human rights from foreign policy, as Trump's Secretary of State Rex Tillerson recently signalled in a speech. As value-free foreign policies go, the Trump administration's is probably the most unwavering and despicable of them all.

Even before Trump set off for the Middle East on his first foreign tour as president, the consequences of his administration's laissez-faire approach to core American values such as democracy, human rights and free trade were becoming obvious.

No autocrat or authoritarian-minded regional leader – Egypt's Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan – was denied the chance to meet and greet the US president. Each received fulsome praise and no criticism whatsoever of the treatment of

journalists and civil society activists.

Trump met the Saudi deputy crown prince, architect of the bloody Yemen war now in its third year, but is not known to have expressed concern about its seeming futility and inexorableness.

When Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas came calling, Trump unfairly and inaccurately laid a lot of the blame for the unresolved conflict on the Palestinians' alleged pay-for-slay policy.

Then, as Trump embarked on his overseas trip, White House officials started to indicate his plans for the forthcoming interactions with Arab and Israeli leaders. Unlike Obama, Trump would neither lecture nor chastise on human rights, press freedom, religious tolerance and democracy. Instead, he would prefer to do deals in areas of common interest.

When Trump's national security adviser, H.R. McMaster, spelt out the three core purposes of the overseas tour, which started in Riyadh and continues through Tel Aviv and the Vatican, it was a brusque list that swapped uplifting brotherhood-of-man ideals for reciprocal recognition among Sunni Islam, Judaism and Catholicism.

As Natan Sachs, director of the Centre for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution put it, the Trump approach seemed to underline to the Arabs and Israelis that “we are not the UN. We are not Sweden. We are the US and we are your ally.”

Some might say this is realpolitik rather than anything else. “The US isn't an NGO,” Condoleezza Rice, who was George W. Bush's secretary of state, recently said, in a reference to non-governmental organisations' high-minded ideals. Sometimes, she said, it needs to deal with people who might “assault” its values.

But Rice, who also defended the Iraq invasion as an improvement on Saddam Hussein's rule, admitted that the United States had to remember its values when dealing with the Middle East. It does not need to engage in “democracy promotion” but should “stand up for those who just want to have the same basic values that we have.”

Unfortunately, Trump's America doesn't seem interested in either.

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Who governs Libya?



Fethi Benessa

When we applauded the new constitution, we were, in fact, sanctifying the law of the victor.

Who governs Libya? The question baffles most, if not all, Libya observers and continues to baffle Libyans themselves. Even the governed do not know who governs them.

Ask that question inside or outside Libya and you will get as many answers as there are political orientations at play. They all seem to agree on one thing: Libya is not one entity; it is a smorgasbord of many cantons and ministates, each with its own ruler and regime.

No ruler can claim authority beyond limits that have been established by force. Even inside the same city in Libya, you might find that each neighbourhood has its own ruler and its own militia.

Those claiming to have a detached view of the Libyan situation will tell you that the real ruler of Libya is not Libyan. The destiny of Libya is not in the hands of its citizens. Practically all the names of neighbouring countries have been advanced as the culprit with-

in the framework of this theory.

African-American civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr is credited as having said: “A man can't ride you unless your back is bent.” We Libyans are the ones who allowed others to ride our backs. We are the ones who have created a multitude of leaders and pseudo-leaders. We are the ones who have cheered illegitimacy, welcomed false pride and condoned lawlessness in exchange for false hopes.

When we applauded the new constitution, we were, in fact, sanctifying the law of the victor because only the victors were allowed to design the new constitution. We did not stand up for the equal right of all Libyans to live in dignity. Our fight was not against each other as much as it should have been for the goal of founding a state for all Libyans.

Instead, we stood by and cheered the logic of victorious cities versus defeated cities. We cheered exclusion and the sweeping aside of entire cities. We justified unnecessary and illegal collective punishment and excelled

in the art of dividing ourselves into old regime cronies versus new rats, Islamists versus secularists, victors versus losers, original Libyans versus new Libyans and a minority versus a majority.

It is very easy to see and touch ignorance in the Libyan context. I am using ignorance here not as the opposite of education but rather as a descriptor for those who have chosen the option of hurting themselves and their people instead of using their God-given talents to transcend adversity. They have let pride, resentment and envy guide their steps and are headed for perdition, bringing down with their fall thousands upon thousands.

Yes, this is our sorry state. We know very well that we cannot fix it unless we let go of our petty differences, which, with time, turned out to be unfounded and motivated only by greed. We should have looked at Libya as our home country but instead we saw it as a beckoning cake. To satisfy our selfish gluttony, we were prepared to bargain with the devil himself.

What really governs Libya is our greed and voracity. It is our immoral willingness and readiness to destroy our own home and bring it down on our own people. We bemoan our time and our lot but fail to see that the only defect of our time is us.

I believe that the only conspiracies against us are of our own making.

How many times did we conspire to bring down an employee or official just because he is rigorous in his job and upholds the law?

How many times did we falsify documents just to get money that was not ours?

How many times did we mock an honest employee or a policeman or soldier, calling him a “loser” for not spoiling himself or his relatives and simply treated him as a social outcast?

And, finally, just how many times did we lick the boots of a powerful thief just to lay our hands on some scraps of his booty?

Fethi Benessa is a Libyan writer.

Can Middle East intelligence services trust the White House?



Tom Regan

Trump appears to have just made up his own mind to share the information.

In this scandal-every-day world of Washington, it is hard to stay focused on any one revelation for longer than a 24-hour news cycle.

Some stories, however, have reverberations that last long past their appearance on the front page of US newspapers and as the main topic of discussion on cable news networks.

The revelation that US President Donald Trump shared classified information about the Islamic State (ISIS) with two top Russian diplomats at a recent White House meeting is one such example.

On the surface, it may seem more of a tempest in a teapot than a full-blown scandal. As president, Trump can declassify any intelligence he wants at any time he wants to do so. And, while the United States and Russia are not friends, they are partners in the fight against ISIS. Others at the meeting, such as H.R. McMaster, the US national security adviser, downplayed the incident, saying Trump was only trying to encourage the Russians to make greater efforts against ISIS.

Upon closer inspection, several serious problems emerge.

First, while the president is free to declassify any top secret he wants, he is not as free to disclose it when it has come to the United States from an ally. Normally, the United States contacts the ally in advance to find out if it is OK to divulge the sensitive information to another country. Then the president works with his national security team to ensure that only the pertinent facts are exposed. In this case, none of these protocols were followed and Trump appears to have just made up his own mind to share the information.

The allies in question in this case appear to be Israel and probably Jordan. Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, who has excused other anti-Jewish statements and actions by Trump, seems intent to ignore this one as well. A spokesman for his government directed all inquiries to the Israeli Embassy in Washington.

As for Jordan, Trump made what some said was an uncheduled call to King Abdullah II the day following the story in the

Washington Post. Some media outlets speculated it was to deal with fallout from disclosing the information to the Russians.

The question then becomes how much does this affect the United States' relationship with intelligence services in Middle East. One bit of very sensitive information the president reportedly shared was the city inside ISIS territory where the plot to use computer laptops to blow up aeroplanes was located. While the Russians are partners with the United States against ISIS, they have other interests in the region and other partners who are anti-US, such as Iran, that might find it interesting to know that such an intelligence asset exists in Syria.

Now that ISIS is likely aware that an Israeli or Jordanian spy is in their midst, it will do its best to root out such an individual. As we have learned, ISIS doesn't particularly care if it kills numerous innocent people while it hunts for the mole.

In January, Obama administration officials warned Israel to be careful about what sensitive infor-

mation it shared with the Trump administration because they were concerned it could be leaked to the Russians. Well, this sensitive information wasn't leaked. It was given away in a very out-in-the-open manner.

After this incident, US intelligence experts are publicly saying that Middle East countries will be very reluctant to share important, sensitive information about ISIS with the United States, for fear Trump will repeat what he did with the Russians and endanger their intelligence assets in Syria.

Their fears are likely well-founded. If the United States and the world have learned anything from the first few months of Trump's term in office, it is that he will do and say anything without any apparent logic, rhyme or reason.

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