

Middle East: Western ‘Soft Power’ Re-Visited

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The old adage that a single death is a tragedy, multiple deaths merely a statistic has never rung more true than in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region today. Faced with mounting human rights abuses of all kinds, keeping track of the death toll in the conflicts in Libya, Syria, Iraq and Yemen has become a fleeting preoccupation of Western media and public policy debates where only four years ago the twists and turns of the ‘Arab Spring’ were charted in detail. The Arab world’s past and ongoing abuses were then highlighted in detail in Western, above all European, policy formulations seeking to engender a new politics of inclusion and participation for the region. Now, the focus of Western policy establishments has fragmented between a number of competing crises. At the time of writing, these included UN-sponsored negotiating processes among competing political actors with limited impact on the ground (Libya), maintaining a broad international coalition to combat ISIS (Iraq and Syria) and political support for a regional military mission led by Saudi Arabia and the GCC in Yemen.

In none of these situations is countering the overall death toll in the region or strengthening human security directly addressed or even close to the centre of the policy debate. Syria, still under the rule of Bashar al-Assad, is in the ‘*too difficult to fix*’ box because of the regionalised conflict that many foresaw the transnational violence in Syria would become: ISIS effectively now controls the whole of the Iraqi-Syrian border linking its territorial conquests, thus merging its putative state across northern Syria and Iraq; the Iraqi government, heavily reliant on Iranian

rather than Western military assistance, is now less susceptible to US and EU pressures over safeguarding all of its citizens in the fight-back against ISIS; and Yemen, whose incipient steps towards political inclusion were cut short in 2014 by the takeover of key strategic areas by the northern Houthis, is likewise beyond any direct Western political influence. By relying on airpower alone, the GCC-Arab military mission to displace the Houthis now risks falling into exactly the same trap as Western powers lined up against ISIS.

The consequences of continuing to allow this situation to escape their collective control should be at the heart of policy reviews in Western capitals, above all in the European Union. The recent downplaying of the West’s ability to influence outcomes in the Middle East has attracted others, not just ISIS, to fill a policy void that stretches straight back into Europe. Europe itself spent the first half of 2015 agonising over the fate of Greece, within or beyond the eurozone.

Another old adage is that military campaigns never conclusively win anything without political processes to end them. For this, Europe and the US still have an armoury of ‘soft power’ tools which it could, and should, be deploying more strategically and tactically. Instead of responding with blanket financial donations and propping up regional reform programmes that meet with internal elite resistance, the West needs to target its assistance in ways which explicitly address its own economic and political interests, as an internal, as well as external, policy response to the threat of mounting chaos in the Middle East.

In place of the currently defeatist attempts to mitigate and manage overspill effects, the key to European efforts lies in building up the capacities of local populations to resolve, manage and combat the conflicts in their midst, including on the front lines of

the overspill effects of migration into Southern Europe. This means resetting the 'prevent and deplore' button of regional policy back towards the 'enable and cure' policy approaches side-lined since the rise of ISIS in 2014.

Most European governments, along with the US, will argue that they are already responding to regional demands for institution-building and the creation of economic resilience, including in states such as Tunisia which, until the major terrorist incidents of 2015, had successfully navigated the choppy waters of the 'Arab Spring' aftermath. But as an open letter addressed to President Obama by 60 close observers of Tunisia in May 2015 pointed out, the sums of money committed are paltry in comparison with the US's hard security expenditure, and the balance between the two needs urgent re-evaluation. The US\$134 million pledged by President Obama during the visit of Tunisian President Caid Essebsi to Washington is just 14% of what the US provides in assistance to Jordan, and a sixth of the annual US\$800 million, the letter-writers argued, that the Tunisian reconstruction process actually needs¹.

More directly than for the US, which will shortly be in the full throes of its next lengthy presidential campaign, the Middle East's conflicts have already had profound consequences *within* European societies as well as beyond the EU's southern borders. The overspill of violent extremism, migrant flows and asylum-seekers is already headline news, overwhelmingly addressed in terms of prevention rather than prompting a radical rethink of Europe's collective approach to migration flows. Exploring the economic benefits of creating trans-regional employment opportunities on both sides of the Mediterranean is currently absent from this debate, where youth unemployment levels in southern Spain and Greece are officially higher than their North African equivalents. At the heart of the Mediterranean Basin, external EU policy can no longer be excluded from domestic European social and economic policy needs. In early 2015, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, set out both long and short-term proposals for resettling Mediterranean refugees across a wider number of European states, but many EU members lag behind. The UK's Prime Minister David Camer-

on, newly re-elected in May 2015, made restricting net migration to 100,000 entrants a year a central plank of his new mandate. His government also planned to cut funds to police forces tasked, along with other agencies, with tracking down an estimated 300,000 illegal migrants already in the UK, as well as refusing to accept new migrant allocations proposed by the EU.

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This sits uneasily with the essence of the European project, based, as is oft-repeated, on its core liberal values subject to the rule of law. In the face of immediate crises, short-term political expediency and catering to popular domestic concerns over uncontrolled migration is understandable. Yet, it also encourages others to take what ought to be promoted as universal values as a disposable and optional extra, as well as undermining them in Europe's own multicultural societies. Even the West's most solid allies in the Middle East, Israel and Egypt among them, have veered towards illiberal interpretations of their own political mandates in respect of the legal oversight of their actions and the status of minorities; amidst the mildest of international protests, Egyptian courts continue to pass death sentences, including on former President Morsi, after perfunctory trials.

This downgrading of universal values in Europe's external relations is dangerous for any prospect of building the necessary apparatus for inclusion and consensus in Europe's own backyard. It also does little to offer compelling alternatives with which to combat the rise of racism and ethno-religious divisions within Europe itself. The spread of liberal values is also now under the direct attack of those, like China and Russia, who are not in the business of promoting human rights and democracy. In the wake

¹ <http://pomed.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Letter.pdf>

of the 'Arab Spring,' the aspiration to acquire both has not declined so much as the conditions to meet even minimal standards for the rule of law, where social and economic survival has become the overriding priority for many in the Middle East.

In this respect, the credibility of Western governments to enforce universal norms sanctioned 60 years ago at the United Nations is not just being undermined by the vetoes imposed by Russia and China as permanent members of the UN Security Council, but through the failure of European and North American leaders to find any traction for their defence in the fragmented Middle East policies their governments are pursuing.

It is now nearly 20 years since the European Commission and British government both sought to promote variants on a 'human-rights-led' foreign policy. Then, as now, this aspiration was dismissed as naïve and impractical when confronted by the *realpolitik*, hard security challenges and commercial realities of an increasingly volatile world. Yet, the alternatives have just as naïvely failed to promote and sustain the necessary conditions for the economies and values of the West to flourish. The West's 'soft power' policy add-ons have been too reliant on the active cooperation of regional governments to meet the needs of the majority populations they ostensibly serve. As a result, the citizens of the Middle East continue to be seen as the passive victims of the chaos to have befallen them, rather than as critical players in redressing the failings of their own states.

By funding the direct needs of the Middle East's growing refugee population, Western aid has clearly saved lives and staved off greater humanitarian crises. By failing to engage the largest of these populations, the Syrians, as actors in their own destiny, the West is also storing up the kind of intractable problems that generations of similarly assisted Palestinian refugees now represent. The majority of displaced people wish to live and work unencumbered by an open-ended reliance on external aid and hand-outs. Yet, unless Western governments perceive this ambition to be consonant with their own best interests, the ranks of illegal migrants penetrating Europe's borders combined with violent acts fuelled by marginalisation and exclusion will, through contamination, ineluctably increase in the West itself.

Over the short-term, there may be nothing even the frontline states of Europe can constructively do to

stem the immediate sources of violence in the Middle East. The promotion of democracy and the defence of human rights may well seem forlorn endeavours when millions of refugees need shelter and food, the onward march of ISIS has infiltrated to the core of European societies, and the precarious existence of peoples in the hinterland of the MENA region has added West and East Africans to the tide of Syrian refugees seeking an escape in Europe. *Realpolitik* suggests that the West's best interests now lie in supporting and maintaining regional stability where it still exists.

The violence will eventually cease, as it did after civil wars lasting 15 years in Lebanon and 10 in Algeria from the mid-1970s to late 1990s. The West's beleaguered defence of its values needs to prepare for this day by adjusting its *realpolitik* lenses to look at where the Middle East can be helped now, and in much more detailed and interlinked ways than hitherto. The money that few Western taxpayers want to see their governments spending on ill-fated military or migration-prevention ventures could be put to much better use in the hands of regional actors already seeking to prepare for their own future, often below the radar of current conflicts. This includes Syrians providing their own healthcare and educational facilities in war-torn Syria, beyond the reach of UN agencies, but accessible to Western funding via local NGOs; start-up businesses and professional networks seeking know-how and sector-specific assistance to overcome local blockages to funding and trade; students of all ages needing more creative solutions to their disrupted education; and refugees and vulnerable communities seeking alternatives to the encroachments of predatory traffickers, armed groups and ideologies.

The opportunities are well-documented within social and mainstream media, and outlined in the conclusions to the many conferences convened to address the region's challenges. What needs fine-tuning is the match between Western assistance and the specific needs of its regional targets. 'Soft power,' in other words, needs another look; not as the charitable or palliative alternative it is often taken to be in face of the harsher and more destructive forces of conflict, but as a necessary and proactive corollary to the reactive logic of the currently failing policies of Europe and the US towards the Arab world.