



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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U.S. Military Assistance: Obstacle or Opportunity for Reform?

Heldref Publications Ballroom, 1319 18th St.

12:00 – 1:30 pm, December 11, 2009

POMED and the Heinrich Boll Foundation hosted a panel discussion to discuss the role of U.S. military assistance in America's attempt to maintain strategic interests without undermining democracy promotion and human rights. The event was the third in a series examining U.S. credibility on human rights and featured both **Steven Cook**, Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations and an expert on Arab and Turkish politics as well as U.S.-Middle East policy, and **Emile Hokayem**, a non-resident Research Fellow with the Henry L. Stimson Center's Southwest Asia/Gulf program and Politics Editor of the Abu Dhabi-based newspaper *The National*. The event was moderated by **Sebastian Grafe**, Program Director for Foreign and Security Policy and Transatlantic Issues at the Heinrich Boll Foundation. Grafe opened by clarifying the focus of the event by asking several pointed questions: does military assistance undermine U.S. credibility? Are existing mechanisms sufficient to monitor human rights abuses? Are the provisions that govern assistance in need of updating?

Cook then began with a discussion of the political implications of military assistance to the Middle East. In terms of principles, he asked whether the U.S. is committed to promoting democracy, to which he answered an "easy yes," but the country's record on the issue is tremendously inconsistent. As to why the U.S. has not been effective, the questions become: What are Washington's real security concerns? How does aid advance U.S. interests? Does assistance promote democracy? Can assistance be leverage for political change? **In Egypt, he argued that military assistance has neither created a strong interoperable force nor consistently advanced U.S. strategic interests.** As such, U.S. decisions are shaped by the inertia of previous decisions, with a real need to rethink the core understanding of American foreign policy. While it is true that the regimes receiving assistance have worked to create a political order conducive to U.S. interests, he questioned whether the aid was the key factor or whether these regimes would have sided with the U.S. in any case.

Cook is skeptical of using military aid to leverage democracy because it requires a political will he does not see in the average American politician. U.S. policymakers view Middle Eastern militaries as a safety value to prevent the political unrest that threatens U.S. interests as seen in the 1979 Iranian revolution and Algeria in the 1990's. Even though the State Department thoroughly tracks abuses by recipient governments, he believes that security concerns always take precedence over human rights and that Arab leaders have demonstrated a capacity to handle numerous threats to their legitimacy without democratizing. He argued that the U.S. could use aid to promote democracy, but that punitive measures are ineffective because administrations are not willing to sacrifice security concerns. **The U.S. should instead adopt a "more honey, less vinegar" approach that offering supplementary military assistance in exchange for genuine reform measures.** This investment would secure U.S. interests while hopefully constraining regimes such as Egypt, because they are in need of reform their military. He is doubtful about the success of such a venture, but is confident that it would be more constructive than failed attempts to punish regimes by cutting existing aid.

Hokayem focused on military aid from the regional perspective, explaining that there are many different types of militaries receiving assistance, but that a number of Arab states received their military training from the Soviet Union. Hokayem noted that **the U.S. does not bear primary responsible for the authoritarian regimes**

in the region, in contrast to the situation in Latin America where the U.S. had trained military officers that mounted coups and repressed their societies. Within this debate there are two perspectives: first there is the “high politics” question of how military aid can transform governments, while the second is to ask how aid can reform Arab militaries. He believed this second point offers a considerable avenue for reform because the regimes are dependent on their militaries. Transforming the professional nature of militaries will change security culture and work to address the abuses militaries carry out on behalf of their governments.

Breaking down different military aid relationships in the region, Hokayem argued that **military assistance has not been able to leverage democracy in Iraq and Afghanistan because the situations are too massive.** The U.S. army was asked to build a force of several hundred thousand troops in such a short time that they could not assure that new troops were properly retrained. In addition, the U.S. forces were asked to create a national security apparatus for which they were unaccustomed and it is only the shift to a COIN strategy that has begun to shift the military paradigm toward focus on building a relationship between the Iraqi military and the people.

He saw the Palestinian security force as the most successful and professional outcome of U.S. aid, but he questioned its ability to become a legitimate national force. In Lebanon, he highlighted the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program, which trains officers in the U.S. and instills them with an American sense of military professionalism, but the weakness of Lebanese institutions will not support these new attitudes. In Yemen, he warned that ongoing COIN training was positive, but that the same tactics learned to fight insurgents can be used by regimes to suppress dissidents. Lastly, he argued that in the absence of security the military emphasis is much less on political reform and more on capacity building. This cannot be blamed on the U.S., but he did not have an answer on how to offer assistance to transform such situations.

Responding to a question from Grafe, Cook explained that following September 11th, **security became the overwhelming concern for military-to-military relations and as a result there has been little cooperation on human rights.** He joined in Hokayem support of the IMET program, saying that the U.S. sense of professionalism sought to make the military always subordinate to civilians. But in Egypt, decision-makers in key positions generally received their training from the Russians, and those officers that participate in U.S. training programs like IMET are often discriminated against professionally within the Egyptian military.

In the Q&A session, Cook argued that **China’s influence as a competitor to the U.S. for relations with the Arab world is overblown because Arab regimes don’t view China in that way and the regimes clearly prefer U.S. military hardware.** He is skeptical that the Muslim Brotherhood would win an election if the Egyptian political system were to open up. He reiterated that U.S. politicians base their policies around fear of the 1979 Iranian revolution and so they build short-sighted aid programs that secure the free flow of oil, protect Israel, and prevent other powers from becoming dominant in the region. While the Bush administration made grievous errors in pursuing its freedom agenda, its goals should remain a part of U.S. foreign policy.

Hokayem responded to another question by expressing real skepticism that military assistance can be leveraged to produce political reform. Regimes need to maintain the loyalty of internal security apparatuses in order to maintain political control and legitimacy. To that end regimes are willing to establish massive military budgets that facilitate patronage networks within the ranks, dependent on the foreign funding. He also worried that it is not possible to develop a formula clearly defining the relationship between governments and their militaries. Cook explained that his idea of “more honey” is not intended to build a wedge between regimes and militaries because wedging the two apart could provoke the military to suppress society, as happened in Algeria. Hokayem, lastly, argued that the best way to change these institutions is to elevate the conversation to a higher level, while acknowledging that this is extremely difficult because ministries of defense are not willing to accept American practices that they view as intrusive. Changing the military culture in the region toward one more respectful of democratic values and civilian control would take a long time but is essential to bringing real reform.