

Friends Like These: *Pompeo recasts ties in Cairo*

By Jon B. Alterman

FOOL'S GOLD?

“Russian gold rescues Jordanian women from spinsterhood” boasts a 2017 headline from [Al-Arab](#). As the price of the required dowry of jewelry, or *shabka*, rises beyond the reach of many young men, couples are turning to gilded copper—also known as “Russian gold”—to allow the wedding to proceed while keeping up appearances.

Years ago, alarmed observers in [Egypt](#), [Jordan](#), and [Palestine](#) saw Russian gold as a trick to hoodwink brides into marriage without securing the wealth that would cushion them in case of divorce. Now, Russian gold helps solve a problem.

A *shabka*'s value fluctuates based on the economic status of the betrothed, but the typical set includes one to two ounces of gold and costs a couple thousand dollars. In Egypt, where the average monthly income is [3,000 ££](#) (or \$167), the *shabka* is a big investment. Those who had been saving for years were especially hard-hit by a currency devaluation, which caused the price of an ounce of gold to surge from [9,150 ££](#) in 2015 to [22,000 ££](#) in 2018.

Stories of engagements called off due to wedding costs have sparked [campaigns](#) to end the *shabka* requirement altogether. Other alternatives have been floated, too: renting jewelry for the party, replacing gold with less pricey [silver](#), encouraging [cash](#), or allowing more modest gifts. Resistance to this custom is not merely coming from poor young men and their families. Many well-to-do couples have decided that their money is better spent elsewhere, and religious scholars have emphasized that there is no [Islamic precedent](#) for extravagant *shabkas*.

Nonetheless, amidst a whirlwind of social and economic change, what endures is tradition—or at least an imitation of it. ■ HP

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or the last century, a duality has lain at the foundation of U.S. foreign policy. The U.S. government maintained robust relations with other governments, but it was helped by a not-so-secret weapon. The image of the United States as a cultural icon, an economic model, and a political beacon stood alongside the government as a force-multiplier of U.S. influence around the world, reaching deeply into public perceptions. The U.S.

government did its part with traditional diplomacy and institutional support, but the government's effectiveness was due in part to the fact the United States as a nation has long been a force on the world stage independent of the government.

The U.S. government has capitalized on this uniquely powerful duality by maintaining ties with governments while always keeping an eye on foreign publics as well. It was the U.S. government working with governments *and* the people that facilitated the peaceful end of the Cold War in Europe. It was working with governments *and* the people that helped spread prosperity and democracy in East Asia. From the days of decolonization after World War II to the fall of the Soviet Union, the U.S. government has been conscious of the power that the *idea* of the United States has around the world, and it has maintained a useful tension between working with governments while still being conscious of the United States' impact on populations.

In his speech last week in Cairo, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo abandoned that useful tension. He criticized the human rights performance of hostile governments (Syria and Iran) and voiced full-throated support of all the rest, which he termed partners and allies. He criticized the Obama administration for its “eagerness to embrace only Muslims and not nations,” but his concept of “nations,” consistently expressed throughout the speech, was not the broader understanding of nations that the United States has long maintained, of people and their rulers. In his construction, it was limited to governments.

There is an irony underlying all of this. A U.S. administration with an unprecedented amount of distrust for the workings of the U.S. government is seeking to double down on its ties to Middle Eastern governments, which, in almost all cases, lack the honesty, efficiency, and efficacy of their U.S. counterparts. The concept of a “deep state,” rogue intelligence operations, officially sanctioned torture, bribery and

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NEW COMMENTARY: THE NORTH AFRICAN MAGHREB IN 2019

In a recent commentary from CSIS's Middle East Program, “Turbulence Ahead: The North African Maghreb in 2019,” Haim Malka outlines eight key trends to watch in 2019 that point to uncertainty in the Maghreb. These include elections, public protest, and economic developments that all create the potential for crises that will be difficult to solve. The commentary discusses some of the region's positive developments as well, such as Tunisia's political pluralism and Morocco's expanded infrastructure. Read the full piece [HERE](#). ■

IN CASE YOU MISSED IT

In a Critical Questions analysis published last month, Jon Alterman and Will Todman discuss the implications of President Trump's decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria. Read the full piece [HERE](#).

IN THE MEDIA

Jon Alterman spoke to [Vox](#) about U.S. troop withdrawal from Syria, explaining, "ISIS is down, but not out, and one of the challenges of ISIS is it's strong because it's always been a very adaptive organization." 1/8/19

Haim Malka spoke with the [Washington Post](#) about the killing of two tourists in Morocco, and why this incident does not point to a larger wave of terrorist attacks. 12/20/18

Will Todman was interviewed by [Foreign Policy](#) about U.S. troop withdrawal from Syria and implications for other regional players. 12/19/18

Jon Alterman spoke to the [Associated Press](#) about the Middle East's looming economic troubles in 2019 and the rising sense of hopelessness among broad populations. 12/18/18

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CSIS MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM

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corruption, executive meddling in the judiciary, and a host of other governmental abuses are both commonplace and tolerated in the Middle East. They are rare and prosecuted in the United States. Juxtaposing the administration's suspicion of one and affinity for the other is more than a little jarring.

Because of the abuses and ineffectiveness of Middle Eastern governments, citizens sometimes have strained against them. Americans, recalling the bill of particulars contained in their own Declaration of Independence, have straddled a middle line. They supported maintaining close ties to governments while remaining open to legitimate popular appeals. U.S. diplomats strived simultaneously to help improve the governmental capacity of allies while also helping citizens improve their own capacity to promote change through non-governmental organizations. It has not made the United States popular among Middle Eastern publics—"approval" of the United States is often in the low double-digits among the populations of key allies—but it served to nudge governments and their publics toward a middle ground where each sought to be more accommodating of the other. The U.S. government has traditionally kept a distance from the region's most oppressive regimes, and it has been publicly critical of abuses among allies and adversaries alike.

There have been times when people inside and outside of government have abandoned that balance. For example, in the late 1980s, the Middle East scholars Daniel Pipes and Laurie Mylroie [argued](#) that the United States should "tilt" toward the murderous and repressive Saddam Hussein as a counterweight to Iran. Iraq, they argued, had become "the de facto protector of the regional status quo" and was a potential partner. Six months before, the U.S. Department of State's Human Rights Report had stated that in Iraq, "Antiregime activity is dealt with harshly, often by extralegal means, including torture and summary execution, employed by a large internal security police force and the intelligence services." Looking back, the approach to curry favor with such a repressive regime—in order to counter another repressive regime—seems deeply misguided and doomed to failure.

And yet, that seems precisely the path that Secretary Pompeo's speech advocates: In order to rally forces against Iran, friendly but repressive governments are unequivocally embraced as partners and allies, and the U.S. vision for the region is reduced to a game of checkers. Our friends are other governments, we need them, and we have no business second-guessing them. As an approach, it is one-dimensional, it yields quick results, and it is easy to keep score. But that doesn't mean it's right.

Admittedly, there is not much evidence that the United States has fundamentally changed a Middle Eastern government's approach to human rights. Similarly, there is not much evidence that U.S. support for human rights has won it hordes of fans in the Middle East (or many other places, for that matter). But it has not been for naught.

The sustained U.S. interest—among the government and the public—in human rights has affected the calculations of governments around the world, including in the Middle East. There is abundant evidence that the U.S. attention to human rights pushed governments to act in ways that they otherwise would not have, helped induce them to improve their governance, and made them somewhat more accommodating of demands from below. U.S. attention also encouraged individuals and groups pushing for positive change, and examples abound in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco, and beyond. Events have not always turned out the way the U.S. government might have liked, but the government was able to sustain—and even grow—an appreciation that it was not merely guided by narrow, immediate, and direct benefit.

Secretary Pompeo's Cairo speech represented a deviation from a long U.S. tradition. It may be the beginning of a new trend, but if it is, it is hardly an improvement. ■ 1/18/19