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Weighing Western Human Rights Policies Towards Turkey, Iran and Egypt

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Available at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/bhrlr/vol10/iss1/9
BOOK REVIEW: KATERINA DALACOURA, ENGAGEMENT OR COERCION? WEIGHING WESTERN HUMAN RIGHTS POLICIES TOWARDS TURKEY, IRAN AND EGYPT (LONDON, ROYAL INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS, 2003)

Susan M. Cimini

In this post-September 11th world, Europe and the United States have been paying more attention to the impact of Western foreign policy on Islamic states. This book comes at a time when many in the West are critical of Islamic fundamentalism and the perceived neglect of human rights in Islamic states.

Dalacoura introduces her book by setting out the background of Western foreign policy. Post cold-War, the Clinton and Blair administrations made human rights a foreign policy priority, while the European Union set respect for human rights and democracy as a criterion for new members wishing to become a part of the EU. During this same period, NGO's and ethnic minorities residing in the West urged Western governments to scrutinize the human rights records of Turkey, Iran and Egypt.

Dalacoura argues that there is a discrepancy between the rhetoric of human rights and reality of State practice. Even the States that had the best record of promoting human rights reduced foreign aid while keeping their own economic interests in sight. It is from within this framework that Western human rights policies towards the Middle East should be viewed. The West was interested in keeping the Middle East stable following the first Gulf War, and in promoting democracy while preventing the spread of fundamentalism. The tension between democratization and stability lead to double standards and inconsistencies, which have in turn reduced the effectiveness of Western human rights policies in Turkey, Iran and Egypt, Dalacoura argues.

Chapters 1-3 cover Turkey, Iran and Egypt, respectively. With each case-study chapter, the author begins with an introduction to the domestic political context, which is helpful to readers who are unfamiliar with the domestic politics in these countries. Dalacoura then analyzes the Western policies toward each country and makes conclusions as to the effectiveness of those policies. In the case of Turkey, she argues the success of American policy was limited by U.S. failure to pressure Turkey on human rights. Europe made human rights a priority for EU membership, which put
pressure on Turkey to pursue more human rights-friendly policies in order to achieve their long-standing goal of EU membership.

In the case of Iran, the U.S. and Europe once again had divergent policies. Europe chose to engage Iran, while the United States chose to isolate Iran through a system of diplomatic and economic sanctions. These sanctions had little, if any, success on a nation already suffering from economic mismanagement and decreased world oil prices. The U.S. had no credibility with the Iranian people, and therefore little ability to influence policy within Iran. Europe chose to engage Iran, with mixed success. Europe had an economic interest in Iran, rather than the strategic interest the U.S. had, and so chose to engage Iran rather than lose a valuable source of oil.

Chapter 3 covers Western foreign policy efforts in Egypt. Dalacoura analyzes U.S. and European policies together, and declares that they enjoyed little success. The U.S. and Europe both had an interest in keeping Egypt stable and preventing further violence against Israel, and gave Egypt quite a bit of economic aid in order to do so. This aid did not come with the condition that human rights ideals be respected or promoted. However, the conclusion Dalacoura reaches is that while the Western policy of dialogue and financial aid did not secure a positive outcome in Egypt, there is no indication that a more coercive policy would have had a positive effect on the human rights situation in Egypt either. She urges that the West be patient, and predicts a long, slow road for human rights improvement in Egypt. Dalacoura’s recommendations are standard: Civil society must get involved, and foreign aid should be directed away from the ruling elite when possible. Lastly, diplomatic pressure at the highest levels should be put on Egypt, and applied consistently.

In the final chapter, the author concludes that there are two main reasons for the limited success of Western human rights policies towards Turkey, Iran and Egypt. First, change cannot be imposed from the outside without a desire for change from within. Second, states have self-interests to defend and human rights policies tend to be “selfless” policies. She takes lessons already learned, and then applies those lessons to the situation in Iraq. Dalacoura concludes that, in order for democracy to flourish in Iraq, the occupying powers will have to fully take over and reconstruct Iraq. If the U.S. and Britain withdraw before democracy has a chance to flourish, the West’s commitment to human rights will be discredited in the eyes of Middle Easterners. Dalacoura cautions readers not to be too optimistic about U.S. policy in the post-Sept. 11th Middle East.

This book is appropriate for those who want to gain basic knowledge about U.S. and European human rights policies toward Turkey, Iran and Egypt, but, at only 82 pages, the book is far too short to provide any in-
depth analysis of the important issues it raises. Many of the issues raised have been analyzed in far greater depth elsewhere. As a primer, though, the book is well-written and requires little, if any, prior knowledge in order to understand the author’s argument.