Is Trump’s “America First” Policy Truly Putting America First?
Sahar Khamis

From the very beginning of his presidency, and even during his presidential campaign, President Donald Trump raised the slogan “America First” to signify a new chapter in American foreign policy, which, according to his rhetoric, is intended to “Make America Great Again,” by prioritizing U.S. interests and restoring America’s superiority, in the military, political, and economic arenas. As a populist leader, he was able to sell this promise of American greatness and superiority to his base of followers, who echoed his rhetoric and repeated his claims.

However, it is important to take a closer look at Trump’s foreign policy, and its isolationist underpinnings and broad ramifications, which many of his critics indicate is missing strong foundations, clear vision, and strategic planning, and which seems to be doing more harm than good to America’s interests, domestically, regionally, and globally. This became evident in weakening America’s relationship with its traditional allies, such as the European Union, for example, while weakening its stance in the face of tyrants and dictators, whether in Russia, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, or elsewhere.

This paper will pay special attention to why and how this policy has been particularly dysfunctional, and even dangerous, in the Middle East. We can argue that announcing unprecedented steps, such as declaring Jerusalem the capital of Israel and moving the American embassy to Jerusalem, while cutting all sorts of direct and indirect aid to the Palestinians, signifies an “Israel First,” rather than an “America First,” policy, which diminishes the credibility of the United States as an even-handed broker in the Middle East peace process.

Moreover, as Muqtedar Khan (2019) puts it, this policy clearly reveals that “the Trump administration has no firm interests or principles guiding its foreign policy in the Middle East. It is not interested in promoting stability, democracy, human rights, good governance or economic development in the region. If it was, it would have articulated plans, announced budgets and identified time-bound benchmarks to realize them.”

Finally, by turning a blind eye to human rights violations in the Middle East region, whether it is the 60,000 prisoners currently behind bars in Egypt’s jails, during its worst phase of autocratic military rule, or Saudi Arabia’s horrific murder of Saudi journalist and Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi (Khamis, 2018a) and its imprisonment of women activists, America’s moral leadership is both compromised and challenged. This became especially evident when President Trump refused to hold the Saudi Crown Prince MBS responsible for ordering
Khashoggi’s murder, despite CIA reports confirming his involvement and ordering of the killing “with high confidence.” (Khamis, 2018b).

It is safe to conclude that all of the above mentioned points are indicative of a policy which will not put “America First,” as suggested by President Trump’s rhetoric, as it threatens America’s relationship with its allies; weakens its stance in the face of its opponents; and shakes its moral leadership in the face of dictators. Moreover, it lacks the strategic planning needed to succeed. As Khan (2019) rightly points out “no speech can ever be judged in a vacuum. It has value only when it is followed by actions. The Trump administration’s policies have not been consistent with its rhetoric.”

References:

