

New York Times (MAY 21, 2017).

To Trump, Human Rights Concerns Are Often a Barrier to Trade

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RIYADH, Saudi Arabia — Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson had some advice on Saturday for Iran’s newly re-elected president. The Trump administration, he said, hopes Tehran “restores the rights of Iranians to freedom of speech, to freedom of organization, so that Iranians can live the life that they deserve.”

As he said that at a news conference, Mr. Tillerson was standing next to the Saudi foreign minister, Adel al-Jubeir, who represents a government that does not guarantee free speech or many other rights. When Mr. Tillerson turned to leave, a reporter asked if he had anything to say about human rights in Saudi Arabia. The secretary departed without answering.

President Trump’s visit to Saudi Arabia underscored the calculation he and his foreign policy advisers have made when it comes to questions of human rights around the world.

Mr. Trump and his team made clear they were willing to publicly overlook repression in places like Saudi Arabia and other Gulf nations whose leaders met here over the weekend — as long as they are allies in areas the president considers more important, namely security and economics.

To the president and his advisers, human rights concerns can be an impediment to the flow of commerce between countries and a barrier to beneficial partnerships for the United States. In their view, trade equals jobs and prosperity, and concern about human rights too often backfires, getting in the way of efforts by the United States government to increase all three.

As they see it, the big mistake that President Barack Obama made was to publicly shame countries rather than to first build working relationships based on common interests. Only then, they say, can the president privately raise human rights concerns. Aides point to Mr. Trump's success in persuading Egypt's president, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, to release an American aid worker.

"We are not here to lecture," Mr. Trump said in a speech here on Sunday. "We are not here to tell other people how to live, what to do, who to be or how to worship. Instead, we are here to offer partnership — based on shared interests and values — to pursue a better future for us all."

Mr. Tillerson outlined the approach during a speech this month to State Department employees that distinguished between American values and American interests. "If we condition too heavily that others must adopt this value that we've come to over a long history of our own, it really creates obstacles to our ability to advance our national security interests, our economic interests," he said.

"It doesn't mean that we don't advocate for and aspire to freedom, human dignity and the treatment of people the world over. We do," he added. "But that doesn't mean that's the case in every situation."

In Iran's case, pushing on human rights is an easy decision, since the Trump administration sees little cost. Iran has emerged as one of the top two or three foreign adversaries of the new president, and he is not seeking economic or security ties with Tehran that could be jeopardized.

In Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, Mr. Trump sees an economic partner and the anchor of a Sunni Arab alliance to counter Iranian influence in the region. He announced \$110 billion in arms sales to Saudi Arabia on Saturday, as well as billions of dollars' worth of business deals.

But the Saudi human rights record is no better than Iran's. By some measures, it is worse. Iran just completed an election for president, albeit a flawed one, for an office subordinate to the theocratic supreme leader. Saudi Arabia is ruled by an absolute monarchy that does not meaningfully share power or even allow women to drive.

The latest human rights report produced by Mr. Tillerson's own department mentions Saudi Arabia's "restrictions on universal rights, such as freedom of expression, including on the internet, and the freedoms of assembly, association, movement and religion," as well as the country's "pervasive gender discrimination." Raif Badawi, a writer, has been in prison since 2012 after starting a blog called Free Saudi Liberals Network.

Freedom House, an advocacy group based in Washington, ranks Saudi Arabia among the 11 least free nations in the world, giving the country a score of 10 out of 100 on its freedom index, below Iran's 17. Some of the other countries whose leaders met with Mr. Trump on Sunday also have less-than-sterling human rights records, including Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar.

Michael J. Abramowitz, the president of Freedom House, said, "We are very glad that Secretary Tillerson called out Iran for its egregious failures to respect free speech and free association."

He added: "We should be holding all countries in the region to account for such violations, including his hosts. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran are among the world's most oppressive regimes when it comes to fundamental freedoms."

Mr. Trump is hardly the first president to view human rights through a selective lens. Mr. Obama and President George W. Bush often spoke of the importance of encouraging other governments to guarantee basic rights but played down that message when it might have conflicted with other interests.

Mr. Obama, for instance, negotiated an agreement with Iran to limit its nuclear program and reopened diplomatic relations with Cuba after more than a half-century without making human rights an impediment to a deal.

"U.S. administrations' overall stance on human rights — and not just Trump's administration — is not one of principle," said Mohammed al-Jasem, a prominent journalist in Kuwait who has been jailed and otherwise pressured by the government over the past 14 years. "At times, the support was strong enough to put an end to the human rights violations I was experiencing, while at other times, the U.S. barely acknowledged them."

Mr. Trump, however, has shown a seeming affinity for strongman leaders like Mr. Sisi, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey and President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia. In an interview during the campaign last year, he indicated that he would not presume to tell them what to do at home. "I don't know that we have a right to lecture," he said. "Just look about what's happening with our country."

A measure of Mr. Trump's approach came on Sunday when he delivered what aides have called the centerpiece speech of his trip at a ceremony in Riyadh to introduce a new center for combating extremism. The goal, aides said, was to suggest a way forward for nations that have served as incubators for radicalism to instead stand together against it.

“The speech,” Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster, the president’s national security adviser, said before leaving Washington, “is intended to unite the broader Muslim world against common enemies of all civilization and to demonstrate America’s commitment to our Muslim partners.”