

THE WEST'S STIGMA, AND WHY IT LOSES GLOBAL SUPPORT BY ITS OWN ACTIONS

The Ukraine war has exposed, yet again, the deep skepticism of Western intentions across the Global South, undermining efforts to strengthen the rules-based liberal global order. But this is not inevitable as it is a result of policies the West has been pursuing for a long time, which it now must change if it wants to fix its credibility

By Ayman Zaineldine

Whenever the war in Ukraine comes up in policy discussions or a casual chat in one of Cairo's coffee shops, chances are that the rare individual calling it an unjustified Russian invasion is overwhelmed by those who squarely blame the West, particularly the United States, for conniving to besiege Russia with the help of a puppet regime in Ukraine.

In his article, "Why Does Some of the Arab Public Support Putin's War in Ukraine?" published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in June 2022, Egyptian writer and researcher Amr Salah explains how polarization in the Arab World after the 2011 uprisings—commonly yet unhelpfully referred to as the Arab Spring—led people to look at external events through the prism of domestic divisions. Those who support democratic change take the side of Ukraine and its Western backers, while the skeptics support Russia and Russian President Vladimir Putin in particular, adopting the narrative that movements demanding democratic change—whether in the Arab World or in Eastern Europe, Ukraine included—are mere Western conspiracies aimed at creating instability to achieve strategic and economic gains.

Salah adds two further points to explain the prevalence of this pro-Russia sentiment. One is the appeal of the idea of a strong leader who can bring order and progress, while standing up to the West, embodied by Putin. The other is the desire to see a multi-polar global system, where the West and the United States are balanced in global influence by opposing powers like China and Russia.

While those arguments are relevant and sensible, evidence shows that this



phenomenon is older than the polarization left behind by the 2011 Arab revolutions and wider than the Arab World. In fact, a strong case could be made that the Arab World's polarization around issues of democracy and change is equally a result of the division of the public's attitude toward the West, as it is its cause. Understanding this phenomenon could be crucial for the advancement of both the cause of democracy and international peace and stability.

△ While addressing a joint session of Congress, former President George W. Bush is seen on a screen in Times Square as the words of the national anthem scroll below, New York, Sept. 20, 2001. *Rick Wilking/Reuters*

It is important to mention that what is meant here by “the West” is the group of countries in Europe and North America that define themselves as an alliance of liberal democracies that act globally in concert, and are viewed as such in the rest of the world, without ignoring the fact that the policies of individual Western countries differ and change over time.

Similarly, the term “Global South”, or “South” in the context of this article, refers to those developing countries in Africa, Latin America, and Asia—including Arab and Muslim countries—which have mostly been colonized by countries of the West, while noting that their views of the West vary significantly across countries and over time. The discussion here is meant to present the views in the South that are critical of the West's common foreign policies, and consequently undermine the West's ability to pursue those policies.

Older than the Ukraine and Wider than the Arab World

Skepticism toward the West's Ukraine policy, and receptiveness to Russia's arguments, transcends the Arab World and is present to some degree or another in many countries of the South that did not have anything to do with the "Arab Spring" or which had their own transitions to democracy.

Numerous public opinion polls taken during the West's years-long confrontation with Iraq's former leader Saddam Hussein, or in the aftermath of September 11 in the Arab and Muslim worlds, and even across the Global South, showed significant levels of skepticism of the United States and the West, and their intentions and conduct.

Moreover, long before the upheavals of 2011, numerous public opinion polls taken during the West's years-long confrontation with Iraq's former leader Saddam Hussein, or in the aftermath of September 11 in the Arab and Muslim worlds, and even across the Global South, showed significant levels of skepticism of the United States and the West, and their intentions and conduct. Some polls at the time even revealed some understanding of or sympathy toward Saddam Hussein, and, to a lesser extent, Osama Bin Laden. The existence of such

sentiments, even if not among the majorities, indicates that even when the cause was clear and little grounds existed for sympathy with the West's opponents, such attitudes emerged. More accurately, suspicions and even *schadenfreude* toward the West surfaced.

In his address to the joint session of the U.S. Congress on September 20, 2001, just over a week after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in north Virginia, former U.S. President George W. Bush wondered rhetorically "Why do they hate us?", reflecting the bewilderment many American citizens felt after the attacks. He attempted to offer his own answer:

"They hate what we see right here in this chamber a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.

They want to overthrow existing governments in many Muslim countries, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. They want to drive Israel out of the Middle East. They want to drive Christians and Jews out of vast regions of Asia and Africa.

These terrorists kill not merely to end lives, but to disrupt and end a way of life. With every atrocity, they hope that America grows fearful, retreating from the world and forsaking our friends. They stand against us, because we stand in their way."

Whether he was right or not, when it came to the feelings of those who were directly involved in the attacks, his argument certainly did not explain why “they” decided to act on this “hatred” in this way, nor why they found this level of sympathy among significant minorities in the Arab and Muslim worlds and beyond.

This is not a minor theoretical point, but rather one that has direct relevance to the discussion about Ukraine today and could have significant impact on the coming world order. The September 11 terrorists, as well as Saddam Hussein, knew at the time that challenging the West, the United States, or Israel, was so politically beneficial that it justified taking such immensely risky moves. They knew that no matter how much people in the Arab and Muslim worlds, and the Global South in general, admired Western culture, and bore no hostility toward Western society—as is evident by the continuous flow to the West of tourists, students, and emigrants—they nevertheless held deep suspicions toward it as global actors.

These find their roots in a history that is deeply etched in memories across much of the South which produced a conviction that the West is often motivated by selfish or bad intentions, no matter how lofty its rhetoric. This stands in stark contrast with the widely held view the West has of itself, especially regarding how the aftermath of World War II was conducted in Germany and Japan, and how the West supported many countries in East and Southeast Asia during the Cold War—economically, strategically and in advancing their transition toward democracy.

Seen from most of the South, it remains a history of self-serving, unjust, and unprincipled Western policies. These include slavery, colonialism, and economic exploitation; wars and aggression such as in Suez, Vietnam or Iraq; and the production, use, and export of arms to the invention and use of nuclear weapons and blatantly applying double standards regarding their proliferation, not just between nuclear and non-nuclear states, but also between the different non-nuclear states, such as Iran on the one hand and Israel, India and Pakistan on the other.

People remember how the West meddled in domestic politics and applied divide-and-conquer tactics in their colonies—and continues to do so even though these have become independent sovereign states. They feel the West is all too eager to deal with and even prop up loyal dictators (something Roosevelt is believed to have succinctly articulated: “He may be an SOB but he’s our SOB”), and is far less supportive, if not outright hostile to more democratic

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governments if they take positions or adopt policies not favorable to the West.

They also detest how the West is asking developing countries to share in the burden of combating climate change, which was essentially caused by its own rapid industrialization, and thus driving them to take a slower and costlier path for growth. This while the West drags its feet in providing financial assistance to those same countries to help them in dealing with the burdens of mitigating the phenomenon and adapting to its repercussions.

Even regarding causes as clear as Apartheid or the plight of the Palestinian people under Israeli occupation, much of the West has found it difficult to pursue principled policies, taking decades before standing up to South Africa's racist regime; it remains hesitant to this day to take a similar stand in support of Palestinian rights.

These causes are not only of interest to intellectuals or those engaged in public policy; rather they are issues of justice, liberty, and livelihood that millions in countries of the South, for decades, if not centuries, lived and died for. In fact, they have become the prism through which the West's foreign policies are being viewed, even those which seemingly are not related to such issues.

What makes matters worse is that the West continues to ascribe levels of legitimacy and even morality to its foreign policies, including those that have very little of either, while audaciously holding other countries accountable for opposing those policies or even taking a neutral posture toward them. This not only taints the West's claims to legitimacy and morality, but also indicates a level of hypocrisy that hits at the heart of its standing and credibility, and, more importantly, its ability to pursue its more legitimate objectives.

This deep-rooted skepticism of the West's policies is reinforced by two additional influences. One, which is instinctive and raw yet quite influential on policymakers as well as the general public, is spite. The heavy legacy left by the West created a deep desire to take positions against it or to welcome adverse events that hurt it, simply out of spite, especially when national interests weren't at stake. The other more considered and rational influence is the desire particularly since the end of the Cold War to see a counterbalance to the West in the international system, which could increase the South's foreign policy options and lower the leverage the West holds. This too can sometimes translate into sympathy or support for those actors that seem to challenge the West, particularly when they present visions or espouse causes that connect with their own.

The above sums up a view that is widespread in much of the South, but which is rarely properly presented in the West. To be fair, the September 11 attacks were

immediately followed by some introspective soul-searching among scholars and national security bureaucrats in the United States and Western Europe, who voiced their concern that the long legacy of injustice and immorality in the West's policy toward the South might have had a role in motivating the attacks. They also suggested that ignoring this legacy while trying to combat terrorism, would certainly undermine attempts to eradicate its root causes.

Some critics of Western policies specifically point to the lack of resolution to the "Palestinian Question" and the West's positions toward this conflict in general as key reasons for the persistent anger in the Arab and Muslim worlds. These entice actors like Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden to capitalize on such sentiments by undertaking anti-Western actions and policies. However, this introspection was summarily shut down by the overwhelming voices of Western politicians who considered any form of self-criticism to be directly justifying and legitimizing terrorism.

Instead, the policy of choice of the United States and many of its Western allies in response to September 11 was to launch a war in Afghanistan, which had a logical justification despite sporadic skepticism across the world. This was followed by the unjustified invasion of Iraq in 2003, which damaged the legitimacy of the Afghanistan war and the credibility of a law-based international order. Seen in this context, the seriousness of the West's subsequent protestations against Russia's invasion of Ukraine appears woefully lacking.

Perhaps most important to the Middle East point of view is that those wars were accompanied by the sharpest pro-Israel, anti-Palestinian shift in U.S. policy in decades, damaging the already difficult, yet promising peace process. Ironically, this peace process was launched at the Madrid Conference in 1991 in a rare moment where the West, led by the administration of former U.S. President George H. W. Bush, realized that it had to seriously address the "Palestinian Question" to ensure its international credibility, particularly in the Arab and Muslim worlds, or risk facing major difficulties in ending Iraq's occupation of Kuwait. This set back any hopes that the end of the Cold War would usher in a new version of the West that is more aware of its failings and therefore more willing to address them, and instead re-confirmed the region's longstanding views of the West's intentions.

This skepticism of the West is widely shared in the South among politicians,

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bureaucrats, and the general public alike but governments often choose not to act on it out of prudence and need. They do, however, find it often convenient to invoke this skepticism either to discredit Western policies they dislike, out of fear that they could gain public support—such as demands to respect civil liberties, human rights, and democracy—or use them to distract from their domestic failures and shift the focus of their displeased public.

Time for Change Is Running Out

If the West was able to live with this level of skepticism in the aftermath of the Cold War, it is far less capable today. During the Cold War, the West acted as if it did not need to pay a significant price for building wider global alliances, believing that countries of the South had no alternatives, and that the West faced few serious challenges internationally. But the international situation has been changing profoundly during the past decade-and-a-half, culminating in the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the growing tensions between the West and China, widening the gulf in the worldviews of the West and those powers.

This is particularly complicated by the fact that much of the West sees the emerging global confrontation as one between liberal democracy and autocratic nationalism, between the rule of law and the law of the powerful. So not only does the West need to gain the support and trust of more countries from the South, but it also needs this to be based on democracy and the embrace of values of liberty, respect for human rights and the rule of law.

The West's legacy puts it at a serious disadvantage in terms of credibility, respect, and support in the countries of the South, and works in favor of the West's opponents who share much of the South's grievances toward it. The West's claim to be defending international law, justice, liberty and human rights will not be credible or gain the needed support in the South as long as it drags its feet in matters such as building a fairer global economic system; bearing its proportional responsibility in combating climate change; consistently working to advance causes of human rights, liberty and democracy, whether in Ukraine, the countries of Eastern Europe and the Arab World or Israel and Palestine; or pushing toward a world free of nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction without distinction.

In short, for the West to pursue the strategic objectives it set out for this new era in the international order, it will have to better align its policies with the values of justice and liberty it espouses, and to do so consistently over time, in order to gradually build a new global perception for itself. This entails hard work and sacrifice because old habits, as the saying goes, die hard.

Token moves, like what many Western countries often make in order to make tactical gains internationally, will not suffice. Instead, what the West needs is

major revision of the internal foreign policy thinking and discourse, not just at the official level but across society including civil society, political parties, and the research community. This is necessary to build a strong public understanding of the strategic and moral necessity of this change, and demonstrating the gains that come with it, to ensure that such a critical matter does not become subject to the usual domestic political jockeying and haphazard swings every time a new government is elected in another Western country.

The West has enough military, economic, moral, and cultural power to shape the norms that govern the international order. But it is not powerful enough to unilaterally determine those norms. By continuing to pursue policies that are mostly self-centered and self-serving, and that advocate for principles but act opportunistically, it helps the creation of a chaotic world, in which it might be able to win tactical battles yet lose in standing and influence in the long term. But if the West is willing to act globally in a more self-restrained manner, where it consistently upholds those principles even when it comes at a cost, it can expect a more receptive South, and a more effective and respected foreign policy. ®