‘You are not my type’: The role of identity in evaluating democracy & human rights promotion

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Abstract

In this article, we examine the impact of the democracy and human rights promotion efforts that are supposed to bolster positive attitudes among the public abroad and act as a tool to reach hearts and minds. Yet, we suggest that a salient in-group versus out-group dichotomy within a society could activate a reactive devaluation bias, and hence, conditions how individuals perceive and react to foreign actors and their policies depending on the source country and its links with in- and out-groups within the target state. By employing an original public opinion survey from Lebanon, we find that identities, and the level of attachment to the identity, affect individuals' attitudes towards human rights and democracy promotion efforts. Our results offer important policy implications: practitioners should comprehensively reconsider the benefits of hearts and minds tools, as pre-existing attitudes are the main drivers of how these policies will be evaluated by the public abroad.

Keywords

democracy promotion, foreign policy, human rights, identity, Lebanon, public opinion abroad

Introduction

‘(T)he ultimate victory will depend on the hearts and minds of the people who actually live out there’ said President Lyndon B. Johnson when outlining the United States' strategy to win the Vietnam War.¹ Almost thirty years later, President George W. Bush addressed foreign publics saying, ‘America will defend liberty and justice. . . [and] will always stand firm for the non-negotiable demands of human dignity’ when justifying the US invasion of Iraq with the goal of ‘bring democracy to Iraqi people’.² Not only the United States but also other global and regional powers set their agenda to promote a favourable environment for their national interests. While Russia indirectly engages with

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various groups in Syria and Lebanon using her connections with Iran to access the Middle East (Nizameddin, 2008), Turkey has adapted a 'new foreign policy' investing in public diplomacy efforts in the region (Davutoglu, 2000; Kalin, 2011), Iran aspires to develop close relations with the publics of Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon based on a common sectarian identity (Barzegar, 2008; Gonzalez, 2009), and Saudi Arabia leads Sunni Muslims under its religious leadership (Patrick, 2016).

Nevertheless, these public diplomacy efforts, which are broadly defined as 'government-sponsored programmes intended to inform or influence public opinion in other countries',³ may not always produce the desired outcomes. In fact, the quantitative studies examining the outcomes of such efforts, though limited in number, cannot reach a conclusion in confirming the effectiveness of these policies. Goldsmith and Horiuchi (2012) find that high-level visits do not necessarily create positive effects among the public abroad. (Goldsmith et al., 2005) argue that the influence model of foreign policy that aims for transnational influence on foreign public opinion presents insignificant or weak effects in shaping public attitudes abroad. These controversial findings constitute the central puzzle of this article: Could hearts and minds policies positively influence individuals' attitudes towards the promoter countries? And what are the conditions that could curb the desired impacts of such strategies?

States' foreign policy choices play a role in shaping the attitudes of publics abroad. However, public interests are neither homogeneous nor free of conflict within any country; also, individuals are influenced by their group identities in forming their attitudes. This is mainly because group-based dominance and subordination determine group members' access to resources. Thus, any foreign policy choice of a foreign state, whether specifically targeting particular groups or not, affects the domestic status quo within the targeted country. Even though public diplomacy efforts aim to win the hearts and minds of individuals, the social identity of individuals, as well as the domestic context, may transform perceptions about and reaction towards the policies that supposedly aim to serve 'the good' of publics abroad.

Building on the realist interpretation of inter-group conflict, we suggest that people are motivated to see any gains and losses from a zero-sum perspective (i.e. a gain for the out-group is automatically a loss for the in-group). Furthermore, they may extend their attitudes towards a domestic out-group to the foreign states engaging in friendly relations with the out-group. Once activated by an in-group versus out-group dichotomy and extended nationally beyond borders, individuals may deprecate foreign states' policies, as the reactive devaluation bias suggests, simply because they are coming from an 'adversary'.

In this article, we specifically focus on human rights and democracy promotion efforts⁴ as a hearts and minds policy is one of the most common rhetoric embraced by states, regardless of their democracy and human rights practices. To test the proposed theoretical frame, we employ an original public opinion survey from Lebanon, where a salient ethnic/sectarian cleavage divides the society. We find that foreign states' relations with different groups within Lebanon predict people's attitudes towards human rights and democracy promotion efforts. Our findings reveal that individuals have well-ordered foreign policy preferences built around their identities; indeed, the ethnic/sectarian identity of the Lebanese moderates their attitudes towards these efforts when it comes from an adversary who has a positive link with an out-group, as the reactive devaluation theory suggests.

Our contribution in this article is four-fold. First, the current study differs from previous works examining the impacts of human rights and democracy promotion efforts by

accounting for the role of social identities in shaping individuals' attitudes and inter-group relations. In this sense, we do not only relax the unitary actor assumption in foreign policy analysis but also bridge the gap between individual, group, and state level factors as a conditioning force in individuals' attitude formation towards foreign states' hearts & minds policies. Second, by focusing on one of these policies, specifically human rights and democracy promotion, this research offers important policy implications by demonstrating that even 'benign' foreign interventions may not positively influence the attitudes of individuals, as such policies impact the existing payoff structure and group interests within the domestic politics. Third, the article specifically lays out and empirically tests a theoretical mechanism, namely reactive devaluation bias; the findings clearly demonstrate how identity ties and various attachment levels determine individuals' assessments about foreign countries' policies. That said, our results do not only demonstrate which ethnic/sectarian groups are in favour or against which countries' policies, but also display the cognitive mechanism operating at the individual level. Fourth, and last, unlike previous studies, this article embraces a comparative approach by analysing peoples' attitudes towards multiple countries, including global and regional powers such as the United States, Russia, Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. In other words, combining the third and fourth points, the findings of this article can be generalizable beyond the Lebanese context; hence, it contributes to the comparative foreign policy and public opinion literature with a specific focus on soft power and public diplomacy arguments.

In the remainder of the article, we first briefly summarise the goals and tools of the hearts & minds policies. In so doing, we aim to demonstrate why states are engaging in certain strategies in the expectation of winning hearts and minds and summarise previous studies' findings of how these efforts influence attitudes of foreign public opinion. Second, we explain the role of inter-group relations in shaping individuals' attitudes, and we utilise the reactive devaluation theory to argue for the crucial role of policy source in people's reactions to the human rights & democracy promotion initiatives. Third, we elaborate on the case selection and hypotheses, focusing on the reactions of Sunnis, Shiites, and Maronites in Lebanon towards the policies of United States, Russia, Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. Fourth, we report the results of the two studies and then conclude with a brief discussion of the implications of our findings.

Promotion of human rights and democracy abroad

Many global and regional powers, such as the United States, Russia, China, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Brazil, heavily invest in soft power strategies to attract positive attention from the global public. By providing foreign aid, building schools and hospitals for public good, facilitating the visa regimes, offering educational programmes, promoting inter-societal interactions, and hence, using various public diplomacy tools, effectively states aim to win hearts and minds abroad (Gallarotti and Al-Filali, 2012; Kirisci, 2005; Lee et al., 2010; Thompson, 2005; Tsygankov, 2006). The very idea of getting what you want through influencing people's mind-set is not novel, however. Previous studies also discuss and analyse the importance of controlling the hearts of common people to gain control over their decision-making process (Gramsci, 1992; (Morgenthau, Thompson, and Clinton, 2005). Lately, Nye (2004: 256) redefined the concept of power by arguing for the importance of soft power, which 'is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments'. By using their soft power, states can reach the hearts and minds of individuals and shape their attitudes through their goals and interests.

Although public diplomacy has many dimensions and is not limited to states' efforts, it typically stands for the organisation and conduct of governmental efforts, which include various activities to influence the public abroad, such as developmental and humanitarian aid programmes, cultural exchange and language training, educational exchange programmes, radio and television broadcastings, and leadership visits (Zaharna, 2009). Needless to say, these efforts are not limited to such activities. Any effort using a declaratory or actual goal to improve the conditions of individuals living abroad can boost the promoter state's image and reputation in the targeted country.

The spread of human rights and democracy has always been a part of US Presidents' rhetoric and has been utilised to project soft power in Latin America and the Middle East.⁵ For example, Carter declared a US guarantee for human rights as:

We stand for human rights because we believe that government has as a purpose to promote the well-being of its citizens. This is true in our domestic policy; it's also true in our foreign policy. The world must know that in support of human rights, the United States will stand firm.⁶

Similarly, the Obama administration publicly underlined the United States's role in promoting human rights abroad many times during the Arab Spring.⁷ The United States has also called out regimes for their human rights abuses and tailored foreign policy in ways that punished human rights violations (Cingranelli and Pasquarello, 1985).⁸ Likewise, the National Security Strategy of the United States (White House, 2006; 2010; 2014) highlighted the role of human rights promotion efforts to win hearts and minds abroad.

Like the United States, some other countries (such as Turkey) have recently favoured the spread of democracy and human rights in the Middle East, arguing for the fall of authoritarian regimes in the region and highlighting the importance of public preferences. In one of his declarations about the vision of 'new' Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East, then Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu stated that:

[Turkey] will not keep silent on oppression by autocratic leaders. . . will not take steps that will alienate us from the hearts and minds of our region's people. . . [and] will work towards the establishment of a more peaceful and prosperous regional order and support people's quest for basic human rights and democracy.⁹

The Chief Adviser to the Turkish President and Press Secretary Kalin (2011) also highlights the role of legitimacy in 'new' foreign policy and argues, 'the most important among those elements . . . To achieve a soft power status [is to] prioritizes freedoms and liberties, guarantee fundamental rights and freedoms'.

Despite these efforts, neither country has succeeded in projecting soft power in the region. Anti-Americanism is at its peak, and putting Israel aside, the majority of citizens in the Middle East hold unfavourable attitudes towards the United States (see Figure 1); however, the very same individuals express high support for the spread of democracy and human rights in the region. Similarly, the model of Turkey as a democratic country with a Muslim majority seems to have failed. Insomuch that the 'zero-problem with the neighbours' doctrine is replaced by 'precious loneliness in the neighbourhood' (Israyelyan, 2015).¹⁰ Hence, despite the fact that people of the Middle East are openly expressing their support and desire for democracy and human rights (Chiozza, 2009), they do not always welcome such efforts by foreign states. In fact, previous works demonstrate that the reaction of individuals in target states for human rights and democracy promotion efforts are

Figure 1. Anti-Americanism in the Middle East 2002 – 2018.

not homogeneous. Corstange and Marinov (2012) reveal that active US promotion of democratisation through intervening in electoral processes polarises the domestic politics of the target country. Bush and Jamal (2014) show that American endorsement of women in politics does not have any impact in Jordan. Tokdemir (2017) demonstrates that US developmental assistance may create backlash among some citizens of the target countries depending on the aid distribution regimes.

Hence, contrary to the conventional wisdom, human rights and democracy promotion policies may lead to a negative reaction among the citizens of the target country, though the citizens may not be necessarily against the policy itself. Yet, given almost all previous studies that focus on US-offered policies, it is not easy to assess whether the negative reactions are aimed at the source country, the human rights and democracy promotion efforts, or the way such efforts are offered. Therefore, in the following section, we will build on the premises of social psychology to explain how identity and inter-group conflict in domestic politics condition individuals' attitudes towards human rights and democracy promotion by foreign countries despite the fact that such efforts do not necessarily favour some groups over others.

The role of identity in evaluating democracy and human rights promotion efforts

Group identity can provide individuals with lenses through which they can perceive and interpret politics, as individuals actually seek information and short cuts to rely on in developing their attitudes as cognitive misers who rely on heuristics (Lau and Redlawsk, 2001; Popkin, 1991). This interpretation, though, will build upon group interests and values as social identity transforms the concept of self and redefines it as a part of the

group (Huddy, 2013; Tajfel, 1982). In this regard, individuals may redefine self-interest, and those with salient group identity may prioritise group interests over self-interests. Hence, group members are primarily motivated to defend group interests and integrity as well as to enhance group gains (Brewer, 2011).

Inter-group conflict emerges when group interests diverge. A realist approach to inter-group conflict suggests that the very competition for resources results in in-group favouritism bias, which makes group members favour each other as access to resources requires a collective effort (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). In-group favouritism may not always trigger hostility towards the out-group. However, the political context built upon ethnoreligious conflict may lead to out-group negativity because of increased threat perception, saliency of the identity, rigidity of the group borders, and ethnocentrism (Coser, 1956; Hewstone et al., 2002). That said, salient group identities that acquire political relevance increase their reliance on the identity and bias reasoning of individuals in interpreting the effects of these policies (Kunda, 1990; Lodge and Taber, 2000; Spears, 2011)

Inter-group conflict and zero-sum nature of the gains: Reactive devaluation

In the existence of a salient inter-group conflict, identities have a key role in assessing the antecedents and consequences of policy choices because individuals rely more on their biased reasoning informed by identity cues. Inter-group conflict and perception of threat may cloud any rational cost-benefit analysis in evaluating the pros and cons of each policy offering, and they transform the political considerations into a zero-sum game. In this realist approach, which is motivated by the in-group versus out-group dichotomy, group members are inclined to take any gains by the out-group as a potential loss for their group, and any loss as a potential gain.

People who belong to an identity group seek group-based dominance, as individual interests are mostly aligned with group interests (Pratto et al., 1994; Tajfel, 1981). Accordingly, it is more important to be a member of an identity group that dominates other groups than to be involved in individual-level competition because group membership makes the dominant group's members better off than the subordinated ones (Pratto et al., 1994). This inter-group competition also motivates the subordinated group members to challenge the status quo and to acquire an advantaged position, which eventually fuels a vicious cycle of in- versus out-group dichotomy as well as an adaption of a zero-sum understanding of politics.

As a psychological consistency theory, reactive devaluation bias suggests that people heavily weight the source of ideas and policies. Should an offer be coming from an out-group, adversary, or antagonist, then the value of the proposal decreases in the eyes of the recipients (Ross and Stillinger, 1991; Ross and Ward, 1996). As a matter of fact, the very pillars of the reactive devaluation theory lay under the prospect theory, which contends that every individual interprets gains and losses using heuristics differently. Hence, regardless of what a proposal actually offers to all parties, each will rely on their biased divergent construal in assessing the pros and cons of the proposal, depending on how they perceive the 'source' (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979; Ross and Ward, 1996).

Ross (1995) provides the initial evidence for the reactive devaluation theory by surveying Americans' opinions about a possible arms reduction deal between the United States and the Soviet Union. Their findings show that 90% of the respondents found the

proposal more favourable when they were told that the US President made the proposal. If the proposal was coming from a third party, 80% of the respondents expressed that the deal favoured the United States or was at least even-handed. Only 44% of the respondents actually thought that the very same proposal favoured the United States. So, the source of the proposal mattered for individuals' consideration of the deal. Another application of the bias is in the context of another identity-based inter-group conflict situation, namely the Palestine-Israel conflict. Maoz et al. (2002) asked both Palestinians and Israelis' opinions about a specific peace plan. The findings show that Israelis who were told the plan was coming from Palestinians mostly rejected a deal, which was, in fact, an Israeli peace proposal. Likewise, Palestinians who were told that the plan was offered by Israel were against the deal, which was this time a Palestinian proposal.

These two studies show that individuals based their opinions about a policy offering on its source. One of the underlying reasons for this cognitive bias is scepticism. Human beings are more inclined to look for ambiguities and inconsistencies when an out-group that is untrustworthy and antagonistic makes a proposal (Ross and Stillinger, 1991; Ross and Ward, 1996). In fact, it is quite easy to point out inconsistencies when it comes to the hearts and minds strategies of foreign states. For instance, while the US promotes the spread of universal values of democracy and human rights, it is also establishing alliances with the regimes that are authoritarian and who suppress their citizens. This, in return, may lead individuals to question the sincerity of the US human rights and democracy promotion efforts in their countries. Similarly, favouring Sunni identity in domestic politics and establishing alliances with Sunni groups in the Syrian Civil War understate Turkey's multicultural rhetoric and inclusive 'new foreign policy' in the Middle East.

Human rights promotion efforts seem costless in winning the hearts of people in target states as they do not come at the expense of other groups' rights and freedoms. As exemplified by both the United States and Turkey's efforts to promote human rights and the establishment and consolidation of democracy, they do not solely aim to improve the rights of particular groups while giving up on others. Accordingly, human rights gains for certain groups do not necessarily imply human rights deficits for other groups. However, as discussed above, individuals' perceptions of such policy offerings mostly rely on their biased reasoning (i.e. reactive devaluation makes the source of policy critical in their assessment). Regardless of the mechanism, the in-group/out-group dichotomy conditions the attitudes of group members towards policies of foreign states depending on their linkages with an in-group or an out-group. Hence, we contend that individuals that are motivated by inter-group conflict within the domestic politics evaluate human rights and democracy promotion efforts through a zero-sum perspective.

When a foreign state engages in democracy and human rights promotion efforts, the attitudes towards this policy and the foreign state is conditioned by the domestic inter-group conflict as modelled in Figure 2. Once an in-group member considers that there are friendly relations between the foreign state and the out-group, she will also see the foreign state as an adversary and try to maintain a cognitive consistency/balance. Otherwise, if an in-group member thinks there are friendly relations between the in-group and the foreign state, she will welcome its policies and develop positive attitudes towards the foreign state. Whereas in the same scenario, an out-group member will balance her attitudes, and develop a negative stance towards the foreign state. In light of this theoretical framework, we derive the following hypotheses:

Figure 2. Inter-group conflict and activation of reactive devaluation.

Hypothesis 1: An individual expresses a favourable opinion towards a promoter country for its human rights and democracy promotion efforts if there are friendly relations between the promoter country and her in-group.

Hypothesis 2: An individual expresses an unfavourable opinion towards a promoter country for its human rights and democracy promotion efforts if there are friendly relations between the promoter country and her out-group.

Research design

To test our hypotheses, we collected data via an original public opinion survey conducted in Lebanon. Our goal is to demonstrate how inter-group conflict conditions the attitudes of individuals towards foreign states promoting human rights and democracy in Lebanon in a comparative setting. The Lebanese case provides an appropriate setting to test our hypotheses for the following reasons: (1) the presence of a salient inter-group conflict within domestic politics, which can trigger a reactive devaluation bias in individuals' attitude formation, and (2) the intense and visible public diplomacy efforts of foreign actors.

Lebanon has gone through decades of civil war that have pitted the Muslim Sunnis, Shiites, and Christian/Maronites against each other and intensified the local cleavages embodied in the clear-cut memberships and boundaries around these three identities. Although the Taif Accords ended the civil war that started in 1975, it created an uncertain duopoly of power divided between Sunni and Shia leadership, and led to a fierce Muslim contention against Christians. Hence, the accord provided only a fragile coexistence among the communities by failing to mend the ever-existing ethnoreligious division (Bahout, 2014). In fact, consociational democracy, where all identity groups share political power in proportion to their population, has created a rigid and salient cleavage by fuelling the fragmentation (Salamey, 2009).

Three historical events reinforced the ethnoreligious cleavage in Lebanese politics: (1) the ambush of Phalange, a Christian Lebanese militia, on Sabra and Shatilla refugee

camps, which caused hundreds and thousands of Palestinian Muslim to die, (2) the assassination of Sunni Saad Hairi and the overthrow of the government by Shia Hezbollah vigilantes in 2005, and (3) the subsequent partial takeover of Beirut by Hezbollah, a group aided by Syria and Iran, in 2008. Recently, crisis in the presidential elections, paralysis in the parliament, and a slow fragmentation of the Lebanese Armed Forces under the influence of Hezbollah have fuelled the ethnoreligious division and further endangered the fragile peace in Lebanon.

Along with its lengthy history of inter-group conflict, Lebanon has always attracted the attention of foreign actors due to its strategic location. While France has special relations with Lebanon based on the colonial past, the United States showed interest in Lebanese politics during the Cold War era as a step to prevent the Soviets from spreading their influence in the region. Starting with Operation Blue Bat in 1958, which aimed to support the pro-western government of Lebanon, the United States has heavily engaged in the contentious politics of Lebanon. In this regard, the United States has poured aid into the Lebanese economy, and human rights and democracy promotion efforts through either public diplomacy or hard power have taken place for years.

Not only Western powers but recently regional powers, too, have become involved in Lebanese politics through transnational identity ties. For instance, Turkey has developed its political, economic, and social relationship with Lebanon through the 'new foreign diplomacy' perspective (Aras, 2009; Bilgin and Bilgiç, 2011; Oniş, 2011). Turkey initiated a free trade zone under the name of 'Levant Business Forum' and with the participation of Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan; the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency has built schools, hospitals, and housing in (mostly) underdeveloped neighbourhoods of Lebanon; and Turkish Armed Forces sent troops for UN peacekeeping efforts under the UNIFIL task force (ORSAM, 2010). Iran has also displayed a considerable interest and deeply engaged in Lebanese politics through Hezbollah (El Husseini, 2010; Norton, 2007). As part of a Shia-Crescent strategy and as leverage against Israel, Iran aided the foundation and development of Hezbollah, a Shia political party with a heavily armed militia. In 2006, Hezbollah succeeded to challenge Israel's invasion of South Lebanon militarily, and became popular among Lebanese Muslims, especially Shiites. Increasing its political power, Hezbollah became a prominent actor in Lebanese politics with its rigid ethnoreligious political agenda. Finally, as a newly emerging regional power, Saudi Arabia also engaged in the contentious politics of Lebanon to counterbalance Iran's spread of influence. To this end, Saudi policies are mostly to bolster Lebanese Sunnis' political and economic impact in Lebanese politics (Gillis, 2016). In this respect, Saudis promised over three billion USD in economic and military aid to Lebanon to have a seat in the race to get control of Lebanese politics.

Given the interest of regional and global powers, and the presence of salient identity cleavages in Lebanon, the country constitutes an appropriate setting to see how inter-group conflict activates reactive devaluation bias in the attitude formation process and how individuals react to the policies of different foreign actors, accordingly.

Data

We employed nationally representative original survey data from Lebanon, in which face-to-face interviews were conducted in October 2015 with a sample of 1200 adults. The sample was composed of surveys conducted in 1361 subunits covering all governorates of Lebanon. Using the Probability Proportional to Size Sampling technique, we selected

Table 1. Questionnaire for dependent variables.

	1. Strongly negative	2. Negative	3. Neither negative nor positive	4. Positive	5. Strongly positive	9. Don't know
1. Saudi	1	2	3	4	5	9
2. Turkish	1	2	3	4	5	9
3. Iranian	1	2	3	4	5	9
4. American	1	2	3	4	5	9
5. Russian	1	2	3	4	5	9

How would you evaluate _____ foreign policy promoting the rights of political, ethnic and sectarian groups in Lebanon? Please respond in a scale where 1 corresponds to 'strongly negative' and 5 corresponds to 'strongly positive'.

150 clusters among 27,550 from all districts, and each single cluster includes 100 to 150 households. We then chose 8 to 10 households from each cluster. Using the Kish table, we chose a random respondent. The respondents were visited three times, maximum. If they were not accessible because they were unwilling to answer or the interviewers were not able to reach them after three trials, we randomly chose the next household to visit. Hence, our sample is representative of Lebanese socioeconomic and confessional distribution.¹¹ Taking into account the design effect due to cluster sampling rather than simple random sampling, the margin of error for this survey is +/- 3%.

Dependent variable

Focusing on Lebanese politics and the role foreign countries have recently played within, we see that Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey shine out as the major regional actors who have a stake in the country utilising identity cleavages as described in the previous section. The role of the United States and Russia as global powers are only indirect to ensure the security of the region and their allies within the region. Accordingly, the United States's major goal is to prevent the formation of a puppet country under the control of Iran via Hezbollah, and Russia would prefer a Lebanon that has friendly ties with the Iranian and Assad regime in the region to increase her sphere of influence. That said, we see these global powers engaging with Lebanese politics at best using intermediaries and backing their allies, namely Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran.

Nevertheless, we have five dependent variables, each focusing on one of these global or regional powers that has been involved in the international politics of the Middle East. As shown in Table 1, each survey respondent respectively answers how they evaluate the efforts of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, the United States, and Russia in promoting the rights of political, ethnic, and sectarian groups living in Lebanon, regardless of whether these countries truly promote human rights or democracy in Lebanon.¹² Therefore, instead of directly asking respondents' for assessments of these countries' human rights and democracy promotions, we deliberately frame it as 'promoting the rights of political, ethnic, and sectarian groups in Lebanon' without pointing to any of these groups. Following this method, we aim to have respondents assess the source country's efforts without questioning the details of the policies, which would radically differ from each other, and hence, would fail us to test the reactive devaluation bias by introducing another factor. Respondents provide their response on a five-point Likert-type scale, 1 for strongly

negative attitudes towards these policies by a given foreign state, and 5 for strongly positive attitudes. Given the structure of the dependent variable, we estimate an ordinal logistic regression with robust standard errors.

Our operationalization to extract respondents' attitudes towards various countries deserves a detailed explanation. In our design, we ask respondents about their attitudes towards all countries, not by providing details regarding the content but by giving generic information by saying they promote the rights of identity groups in Lebanon and not mentioning any targets. By not giving further details of the policy and whom it targets, we aim to trigger the mental shortcuts of individuals and to see whether the identity ties or the human rights and democracy promotion efforts lead their attitudes. Alternative design options were, first, embracing an experimental design and randomising country names each time we asked respondents about their attitudes towards the country that engages in democracy and human rights promotion efforts; and second, asking respondents about their attitudes towards all countries and providing them with the content of the efforts. The reason we eliminated the alternative design options was twofold: to have a more conservative test to the reactive devaluation bias argument (unlike the first alternative) and to not bias the results with the distinct policy efforts of each country (unlike the second alternative).

In the current design, we ask respondents about their attitudes towards United States, Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran's foreign policies that promote the rights of identity groups in Lebanon. We asked about the countries one by one, without giving any additional information about the content of the policies themselves. This makes our empirical test stronger in the following way: the respondents can be influenced by their previous answers as a result of anchoring. Accordingly, by revealing their attitudes on the policies of each country one by one, they can refer to their initial evaluations, which may result in a limited variance across the questions (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979). This, in return, may decrease the effect of reactive devaluation bias in revealing their attitudes. After all, by not being informed about the content of such policies, respondents might use their previous answers as anchors to answer further questions to avoid inconsistency. If an individual radically differs in her responses based on generic information depending on the source of the policy, this correctly tests the role of reactive devaluation bias. Hence, with this format, the respondents are directed to think about the consequences of the strengthening of various identity groups living in Lebanon based on the source country. Further, it helps us to not bias possible answers, as *ceteris paribus* conditions are ensured by not providing various information about specific countries' policies.

Independent variable

Our independent variable is each respondent's self-reported ethnic/sectarian identity as we argue that ethnoreligious identity conditions people's attitudes by creating adversaries and activating reactive devaluation bias for foreign actors' policy choices. In the survey, respondents are asked to report their ethnoreligious identity, and we dummy out each identity (namely Shiite, Sunni, and Maronite) and employ them as separate binary variables in the analysis.

Using self-reported identity as an independent variable may be problematic because individuals may not be sincere in their self-identification. Accordingly, they may hide or intentionally give incorrect information regarding their ethnoreligious backgrounds, especially when inter-group conflict is salient. Although social desirability bias is a threat

to the validity of responses in every single survey, Lebanon, having a consociational governing system and a balanced ethnic/sectarian structure, can alleviate these problems. The political structure and practices in Lebanon encourage ethnic/sectarian groups to become more visible and acquire high organisational capacity through proportional representation. More importantly, a power-sharing system, where the President is elected among Maronites, the Prime Minister among Sunnis, and the Speaker of the Parliament among Shiites, empowers all ethnic groups. Moreover, the three main identity groups in Lebanon that are subject to our research happen to be in similar sizes and organisational capacities, indicating similar political mobilisation power. Therefore, under- or over-representation is not a serious problem in our nationally representative public opinion survey. Comparing the estimated percentage of different identity groups and their composition in our survey also alleviates our concerns about the accuracy of the data on self-reported identities.¹³ Finally, we use level of attachment to the ethnoreligious identity as a constituent term to see whether it moderates the relationship between self-reported identity and attitudes towards the human rights and democracy promotion efforts of various countries. To this end, along with their ethnoreligious identity (i.e., Maronite, Sunni, Shiite), we also ask survey respondents how important their identity is in a 5-point Likert scale.

We control for a set of demographics, political, social, and economic factors which may influence individuals' attitudes in their evaluations. Accordingly, we account for respondents' age (continuous), gender (binary, male=1), education level (ordinal), income (ordinal), and religiosity (ordinal) as the usual suspects of individual attitudes. Moreover, we also control for egocentric evaluations about their economic situation (binary, positive=1), as it is more likely to proxy for the group level evaluation than socioeconomic evaluations focusing on all groups in Lebanon. To control for political activism, we include a variable indicating whether the respondent voted in the most recent Parliamentary elections in Lebanon in 2009. We account for the frequency with which the individual is exposed to media sources such as TV, radio, or newspapers as individuals who are frequent recipients of political news should have a greater awareness of the political events locally and abroad. Finally, to account for a possible social desirability bias, we added a variable to see whether the respondent is employed in the public sector (binary) as employees in the public sector may intentionally falsify their preferences regarding their job security. We reported the summary statistics in the Supplemental Appendix.

Results

In Table 2, we report the results of the ordered logistic regression analysis predicting the Lebanese attitudes towards Turkish, Iranian, Saudi, American, and Russian efforts to promote the rights of political and identity groups in Lebanon. Again, in measuring our dependent variable, we have not specified the content and target group of these efforts, but merely provide the source country information. In return, we ask the respondents to express their attitudes in a 5-point ordinal scale, which constitutes why we run an ordered logistic regression analysis as post-estimation analysis does not indicate any violations in the assumptions of the model specification.

Overall, the results confirm Hypotheses 1 and 2. To begin with Shiites, whose political party Hezbollah is a long-term ally of Iran and who share a common ethnoreligious identity with Iranians, they express positive attitudes towards Iranian efforts to promote the rights of individuals in Lebanon. This finding confirms the expectation of Hypothesis 1,

Table 2. Attitudes towards human rights and democracy promotion efforts.

Dependent Variable: Attitudes towards Public Diplomacy efforts of	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
	Iran	Iran	Turkey	Turkey	Saudi Arabia	Saudi Arabia	United States	United States	Russia	Russia
Maronites	-0.157 (0.157)	-0.239 (0.170)	-0.167 (0.162)	-0.159 (0.172)	-0.035 (0.162)	-0.169 (0.172)	-0.004 (0.158)	-0.074 (0.174)	-0.098 (0.155)	-0.244 (0.169)
Sunnis	-0.851*** (0.161)	-0.922*** (0.172)	1.748*** (0.166)	1.696*** (0.181)	1.731*** (0.166)	1.625*** (0.181)	0.120 (0.157)	0.105 (0.178)	-0.986*** (0.156)	-1.059*** (0.164)
Shiites	2.137*** (0.167)	2.036*** (0.173)	-0.638*** (0.166)	-0.828*** (0.170)	-1.423*** (0.188)	-1.611*** (0.200)	-1.303*** (0.172)	-1.477*** (0.183)	1.337*** (0.161)	1.401*** (0.173)
Male		0.194 (0.112)		-0.259* (0.123)		-0.282* (0.128)		-0.088 (0.119)		0.223 (0.114)
Religious		-0.033 (0.095)		-0.263** (0.092)		-0.042 (0.097)		-0.218* (0.097)		0.111 (0.094)
Ego-centric		0.083 (0.098)		0.328*** (0.099)		0.326*** (0.108)		0.312** (0.099)		0.153 (0.094)
Voted in 2009		0.132 (0.119)		-0.214 (0.126)		-0.033 (0.130)		0.123 (0.126)		0.231 (0.120)
News		-0.017 (0.055)		-0.008 (0.060)		-0.096 (0.062)		0.065 (0.057)		-0.121* (0.056)
Income		-0.123* (0.049)		-0.059 (0.047)		-0.104* (0.047)		-0.073 (0.046)		-0.045 (0.046)
Education		0.060* (0.028)		-0.005 (0.028)		-0.002 (0.030)		0.047 (0.027)		0.042 (0.027)
Age		0.004 (0.004)		0.000 (0.005)		0.009 (0.005)		0.011** (0.004)		0.003 (0.004)
Public Employment		0.084 (0.241)		0.088 (0.296)		-0.040 (0.349)		-0.123 (0.283)		-0.640* (0.306)
Observations	1185	1136	1173	1125	1182	1134	1183	1134	1170	1121
Pseudo R ²	0.112	0.118	0.084	0.096	0.116	0.126	0.034	0.046	0.065	0.078
Log likelihood	-1601.615	-1527.614	-1467.204	-1388.980	-1411.489	-1334.913	-1480.996	-1393.656	-1739.661	-1643.892
χ ²	404.686	411.460	269.768	288.939	371.635	337.870	105.610	131.850	243.243	280.461

Cur points are not reported, robust standard errors in parentheses.

*p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

which claims that positive links between the source country and the in-group will make individuals' reveal more favourable attitudes. However, confirming Hypothesis 2, Sunnis, who are in conflict with Shiites in Lebanese politics, poorly evaluate the very same policies of Iran (as shown in Models 1, 2).

On the contrary, when such efforts originate from Saudi Arabia and Turkey, countries with majority Sunni populations who are in close relations with Sunnis in the region, Lebanese Shiites are against both countries' policies, again confirming Hypothesis 2. Nevertheless, in line with Hypothesis 1, Lebanese Sunnis welcome both Saudi Arabia and Turkey's promotion of rights of political and identity groups in Lebanon as reported in Models 3–6. Contrary to Shiites or Sunnis, Maronites do not show significant negative or positive attitudes towards the human rights and democracy promotion efforts of either the regional actors that have direct ties to Shiites and Sunnis (such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey) or to the global actors (such as the United States and Russia). Given that Maronites have shifting alliances with Sunnis and Shiites as explained in the previous section, and that the United States and Russia either side with Lebanese Sunnis or Shiites in their alliances with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, it is not clear to conclude definitive expectation for positive or negative attitudes towards these countries. In other words, being a Maronite does not reveal a significant group effect on the evaluation of the policies coming from these five states.

In Figure 3, in line with the results presented in Table 2, we report the substantive effects of different ethnoreligious identities on the efforts of foreign actors. Lebanese Shiites are 22% more likely to show high support for Iran's efforts, while 11% less likely for Saudi Arabia's efforts and 3% less likely for Turkey's efforts compared to all other ethnoreligious groups. Lebanese Sunnis, on the other hand, are 9% more likely to support Saudi Arabia's policies and 4% more likely to support Turkey's policies, but 9% less likely to support Iran's efforts compared to other groups.

In support of global powers, neither being Sunni nor Maronite has any statistically significant effect towards United States and Russian policies. However, Shiites express significantly lower support for the United States and higher support for Russian efforts in Lebanon. This should be a result of the fact that the United States recognises Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation. In addition to this, Lebanese Sunnis are largely against Russia's efforts (8% less likely compared to others), whereas Shiites are in favour of these efforts (19% more likely compared to other groups). We think that this finding clearly demonstrates how inter-group conflict triggers reactive devaluation bias towards a foreign actor that is linked to an out-group. Accordingly, Lebanese Shiites show support for Russian policies because of the contemporary alliance between Russia and Iran against the United States in the region. In this regard, Lebanese Shiites may see Russia's effort critical to their survival in the region. This could also explain Sunnis' negative attitudes towards Russian efforts, as they are meant to make their out-group, Lebanese Shiites, better off eventually.

Finally, the findings do not reveal any strong pattern for control variables across the countries. To elaborate more on the covariates, the richer an individual is, the less likely they are to support Iran and Saudi Arabia's engagements. Those who think they have been doing well in last 12 months are more likely to support United States, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey's policies targeting Lebanon. Men are more likely to support Russia and Iran's efforts, and less likely to support Turkey and Saudi Arabia's policies. The more religious an individual is, regardless of which religion they belong to, the less likely they are to support Turkey and United States' involvement in Lebanese politics. More educated

Figure 3. Effect of group identity on attitudes.

people are more likely to support Iran’s and United States’s policies. Finally, age is not a significant predictor of individuals’ attitudes.

Although the empirical results confirm our hypotheses, there are three issues that might potentially bias our findings: First, despite the existence of a salient inter-group conflict in Lebanon, the presence of three groups that are in conflict against and shifting alliance with each other makes it harder to come to a conclusion. For example, we can explain the lack of statistical significance in Maronites’ attitudes towards Iran and Saudi Arabia through the shifting alliances of Maronites with Shiites and Sunnis. Second, possible confounding factors make it more difficult to test the role of inter-group conflict in evaluating foreign actors’ policies. For instance, while conventional wisdom may expect Maronites to be for and Sunnis and Shiites to be against the United States, widespread anti-Americanism and its causes may deeply affect the attitude formation process. Third, our post-estimation analysis shows that parallel-regression lines assumption is violated in some models (see Supplemental Appendix), biasing our findings derived from the ordered logistic regression analysis.

To address these potential problems, we run an additional analysis to check the robustness of our findings. To begin with the latter, we run OLS models to see whether our findings are sensitive to our estimator selection. As reported in Table A2 in the Supplemental Appendix, our findings are robust to the OLS regression analysis; hence, we can confidently conclude both hypotheses. Regardless of the content of the human rights and democracy promotion efforts, the source country triggers positive or negative attitudes towards such policies. In other words, reactive devaluation bias could be a major predictor of the evaluation of soft power promotion strategies.

To address the potential biases associated with shifting alliances between three identity groups and the confounding role of already existing attitudes, we decided to interact

Figure 4. The effect of ID attachment among Sunnis.

the ethnoreligious identity of the respondents with the level of their group identification. As Tajfel (1982) points out, not only self-identification with a specific group but also the level of identification with the group determines the group consciousness of individuals. Hence, along with the self-reported identity of respondents, their self-reported attachment to the group is integral in order to determine to what extent identity provides cues to evaluate the political processes.

We transformed our attachment variable to a binary one recoding 4 (important) and 5 (very important) as 1 indicating ‘high attachment’, and 1 (not important at all), 2 (not important), and 3 (neither important nor not important) as 0 indicating ‘low attachment’. Then, we run OLS regression given that our estimations violate the parallel regression lines assumption of ordered logistic regression analysis. Figures 4 and 5 report our findings for Sunni and Shiites, respectively (see Supplemental Appendix for the Table).

To begin with Figure 4, we find that attachment to identity is a significant predictor for attitudes towards the efforts of Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Russia. As expected, higher attachment with Sunni identity makes the Lebanese more favourable of Turkish and Saudi efforts and less favourable of Iranian and Russian efforts. Given that we run OLS for a dependent variable ranging from 1 to 5, interpreting the substantive effect looking at the figures is straightforward. We see an almost one-point increase or decrease across all the figures with significant findings, which refers to around +/- one standard deviation change in the attitudes.

Contrary to the Sunnis, attachment to identity does not significantly alter the attitudes of Shiites in Lebanon. We already see very favourable attitudes towards the efforts of Iran and Russia and very unfavourable attitudes towards Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Yet, overlapping confidence intervals clearly point out that attachment has no role in predicting

Figure 5. The effect of ID attachment among Shiites.

Shiites' attitudes. This may result from two things: First, the ceiling effect (having already very favourable or unfavourable attitudes among Shiites towards these countries) may prevent us from seeing the differential impact of the attachment. Second, the very presence of Hezbollah and the ongoing conflict between Lebanese Shiites with all other identity groups within the country and across the region might solidify the role of identity, no matter how they express their attachment to it.

Conclusion

Foreign actors act strategically in making their foreign policy preferences. One of the pillars of their strategy is winning hearts and minds abroad. To this end, many states engage in various hearts and minds strategies, including human rights and democracy promotion efforts. In this article, we investigate individual-level reactions to such efforts by examining the role of social identity and identity-based inter-group conflict in targeted states. To test our theoretical claims, we conduct an original public opinion survey in Lebanon, where ethnoreligious cleavages are deeply rooted within the society. In our research design, we make two critical decisions to directly and robustly test the role of reactive devaluation bias in the assessment of democracy and human rights promotion efforts: first, by not providing any details regarding the content of the policies but solely changing the name of the source country; and second, by employing a more conservative design by asking for respondents' attitudes towards all countries' policies in an attempt to trigger the anchoring mechanism instead of simply asking about one country through an experimental design.

The findings reveal that reactive devaluation bias is a strong conditioner of individuals' attitudes in assessing human rights and democracy promotion efforts. Accordingly, individuals express divergent attitudes towards such efforts solely based on the source country as well as the source country's pre-existing links with other groups in the targeted country. While Lebanese Shiites welcome Iran's promotion of rights and freedoms, Lebanese Sunnis reveal their discontent about these strategies because they come from an adversary, an ally of Lebanese Shiites. The same goes for Lebanese Shiites, this time against Turkey and Saudi Arabia; both states are in alliance with Sunnis, yet Lebanese Sunni largely enjoy these policies if they come from Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

Moreover, we find that attachment to identity further moderates this relationship. Those who attach more importance to their ethnoreligious identity reveal stronger positive (or negative) attitudes towards these policies, conditional on the source country. Accordingly, Lebanese Shiites with high identity attachment express more positive attitudes towards Iran's policies, and more negative attitudes towards Turkey and Saudi Arabia's policies; vice versa is true for Lebanese Sunnis. In light of these findings, we conclude that a salient inter-group conflict that generates an in-group versus out-group dichotomy also activates reactive devaluation bias in people's mind towards foreign actors that are somehow linked to the in- or out-group.

One limitation of the current study is that it focuses on the single case of Lebanon. Lebanon provides a very appropriate setting to see how domestic identity cleavages shape individuals' evaluation of the policies offered by third states, and the empirical design takes advantage of the saliency of ethnoreligious divisions within the Lebanese society to ensure the internal validity of the findings. We acknowledge that focusing on other cases could ensure the external validity of the empirical findings. Therefore, replicating the findings in various settings where the in/out group dichotomy is salient would definitely contribute to understanding the possible scope conditions of the theoretical framework.

Moreover, an experimental design could help us determine to what extent an in- versus out-group dichotomy could spoil individuals' attitudes by investigating the impact of different framings of such policies. Providing the content of human rights and democracy promotion strategies or priming the possible outcomes of these strategies in domestic politics could also show us the limits of the effectiveness of soft power building strategies.

This study offers important policy implications for scholars and policymakers. We suggest that foreign actors' efforts to make a positive influence at the micro-level may actually be in vain. This is because domestic dynamics in the targeted state condition citizens' evaluations of these policies and their sources. The proposed mechanism and the major role reactive devaluation bias plays in shaping individuals' attitudes can hint at, to some extent, why Turkey's efforts to gain power in the Middle East through soft power and public diplomacy investments could not turn out as anticipated in the midst of 'Turkey as a role model for democracy in the Muslim world' debates, or why US policies to promote democracy and individual liberties in post-war Iraq have mostly failed, or why Saudi Arabia's economic investments in Lebanon have even further consolidated her enemies.

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Notes

1. 'Remarks at a Dinner Meeting of the Texas Electric Cooperatives, Inc'. on 4 May 1965.
2. President George W. Bush, 'State of the Union Address, 29 January 2002', Please, see Dietrich (2006).
3. US Department of State (1987), p. 85.
4. The article's main motivation is to investigate the impact and externalities of hearts and mind strategies through human rights and democracy promotion efforts. We acknowledge the fact that there are various public diplomacy strategies in effect simultaneously; hence, our goal is no doubt to assess whether a state's public diplomacy strategy is overall successful or not. Instead, we aim to offer a generalizable theory to explain and predict the outcomes of such efforts and strategies.
5. Please see Choi et al. (2020) for a more detailed account of US human rights enforcement efforts across the globe
6. Jimmy Carter (1978) State of the Union Address
7. Please see President Barack Obama's (2011).
8. US Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, which, under Section 116, specifies that foreign aid cannot be distributed to countries that engage 'in a consistent pattern of gross violations of internationally recognized human rights unless the aid is intended to help needy people' (Department of State, 2006: 73).
9. Committee on International Relations and Committee on Foreign Relations (2006).
10. Please see for details including Kalin's statement about the term <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-not-lonely-but-dares-to-do-so-for-its-values-and-principles-says-pm-adviser.aspx?pageID=238&nID=53244&NewsCatID=338>
11. Please see Tokdemir et al. (2020) for further discussion about the representative power of the data.
12. One can, and should, think that most or all of the enlisted countries are neither democratic or caring for human rights, nor have any interest to promote human rights and democracy in Lebanon. The reason why to choose this policy intentionally is the fact that almost all countries use it as part of their declaratory policies regardless of their actual intentions, and to wash out the idiosyncratic aspects of various policies regarding their impacts on attitude formation. We remind the readers that our goal is not to answer, 'which policies do a better job' but 'how identity politics introduce bias in the individuals' evaluation of foreign states'.
13. There is no official census conducted in Lebanon after 1932, therefore, we compare the distribution of ethno-religious identities in the data with CIA the World Factbook data (CIA, 2012). The latter predicts that Sunni and Shiites each consist of 27% of the population, Maronites are around 28%. This is in line with our distribution in the survey data; only Maronites are overrepresented a bit (see Supplemental Appendix).

Supplementary information

Additional supplementary information may be found with the online version of this article.

Content

Table A1. Descriptive Statistics.

Figure A1. Representative Power of the Survey.

Table A2. OLS Regression Analysis of The Effect of Identity.

Table A3. Effect of Identity on Evaluation of Human Right and Democracy Promotion Efforts Conditional on Attachment to ID.

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