

# Thinking the Unthinkable

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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**W**hat do Georgia, Ukraine, and Lebanon have in common? Their publics have said no to fear. They would not be silenced or intimidated as they rejected the fraudulent elections and corrupt governments imposed on them. Iraqi Shiites and, to a lesser extent, the Kurds could be added to this list of the fearless as they defied threats of death in order to vote. Is democracy suddenly sweeping the globe, including the Middle East, which has been immune to its allure for so long? It's too soon to draw that conclusion. But there is one big change taking place: People in the former Soviet Union and, now, in parts of the Arab world have shown dramatically that they will not give in to the rule of fear.

In the Middle East, this may have profound consequences. Nearly every Arab regime has ruled on the basis of coercion and intimidation. It was not just Saddam Hussein; our friends there have done so as well. They may have been less brutal than Saddam, but they, too, have been authoritarian, claiming that stability required it. And their publics, like us, simply acquiesced. But no more. Suddenly, challenging the regimes is no longer unthinkable. In Lebanon, the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, the former prime minister, has been the catalyst for unleashing the latent fury of the public against Syrian control.

What was brewing below the surface in Beirut? And will it manifest itself elsewhere in the region? Surely, there was frustration, but that was not new in Lebanon. No doubt seeing what has happened in elections in Iraq, the Palestinian territories, and the Orange and Rose revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia had an emboldening effect. But as someone who has been critical of al Jazeera's editorial bias, I think we also have to acknowledge that al Jazeera has contributed to an environment in which taboos could be challenged and autocrats questioned. The power of example, the power of seeing the Ukrainian people bring down a government and watching Ukrainian security forces refuse to fire on demonstrators, may be as important an influence as any. So far, there has been no crackdown in Lebanon, and even some Syrian officials say it can no longer be business as usual there.

Sounds good, but regimes that have monopolized the power and wealth of their societies are unlikely to suddenly preside over their loss of both. Holding on to power may lead Arab leaders to make symbolic gestures on reform, designed to defuse the anger and show they are ready for change. Certainly, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak has now taken a small step, allowing multiparty competition for the office of president. Syria's Bashar Assad has signaled a readiness for at least a partial pullback of his troops in Lebanon-and a new willingness to be responsive to us on Iraq, hoping clearly that we will relieve external pressure on him at this delicate moment. In Saudi Arabia, we may see Crown Prince Abdullah go beyond the limited elections for municipal councils and actually seek to co-opt reformers who believe in evolution, not revolution. But make no mistake, if the Lebanese succeed in producing a stable government free of Syrian control and Hezbollah coercion, every regime in the Middle East will wonder whether mere gestures can work and whether they can prevent more-profound challenges to their survival. Whether Arab security forces will decide to follow the lead of those in Ukraine and Georgia will do much to determine whether the loss of fear we see in Lebanon today will spread across the region.

## High Cost

What can we do to make that more likely? The Bush administration needs to forge an agreed-upon common response with the Europeans and the Japanese on what they will do in the event of a crackdown or bloodbath in Lebanon or elsewhere. The certainty of collective condemnation, isolation, and sanctions needs to be made clear to regimes like Syria in advance of any crackdown. This doesn't mean trying to foment mass demonstrations where there is no public will but to convince these regimes that the cost of turning their armies on their people will be high.

We are entering uncharted territory in the Middle East. Arab publics may be losing their fear of their regimes, and nothing has been more central to keeping those leaders in power than fear. If the fear is being eroded, this, far more than any election, will herald a new day in the Middle East.

Dennis Ross, former U.S. envoy to the Middle East, is author of *The Missing Peace* and counselor at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

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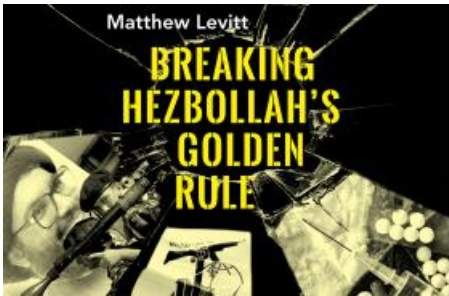
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