

# Assessing the Bush Administration's Policy of 'Constructive Instability' (Part II):

## Regional Dynamics

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Mar 16, 2005

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.



### Brief Analysis

In Lebanon, the Bush Administration's regional policy of "constructive instability" is approaching a critical juncture, with important decisions looming about how the further implementation of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1559 relates to other U.S. strategic interests. More generally, the policy is having an effect throughout the region, from the Atlantic to the Gulf. Inter-Arab dynamics and the survival instinct of Arab leaders together work to U.S. advantage.

### The Allure of Instability

Historically, the pursuit of stability has been a central feature of U.S. Middle East policy. In other regions of the world, U.S. strategists debated the wisdom of stability -- should the United States reach a modus vivendi with the Soviets or seek to rollback the Soviet empire? -- but George W. Bush was the first president to argue that stability was itself an obstacle to the advancement of U.S. interests in the Middle East. Triggered by the events of September 11, the administration has since pursued what can be termed a policy of "constructive instability," based on the notion that the protection of U.S. citizens and the security of U.S. interests are best served by fundamental change in Middle East regimes toward welcoming -- rather than stifling -- the full participation of their citizenry in political and economic life. In this effort, the United States has employed a range of coercive and non-coercive measures, from military force to implement regime change in Iraq and Afghanistan; to a mix of carrots-and-sticks first to isolate Yasser Arafat and then to encourage new, peaceful, accountable Palestinian leadership; to the gentle (and increasingly less so) use of the bully pulpit to nudge Egypt and Saudi Arabia down the reformist path.

Though the president has termed this a "generational" project, the pace of activity on this issue has been remarkably swift -- certainly by regional standards, even by global ones. Part of the reason for this is the nature of inter-Arab politics. In every Arab capital, leaders are scratching their heads to figure out what will satisfy the White House, where U.S. priorities really lay, or how to turn America's reformist instinct to their best advantage.

Every country has a different formula and some are pursuing multiple tracks at the same time. In Tunisia, an authoritarian ruler is playing the Israel card, inviting Ariel Sharon to a UN information conference, which will

convene, ironically, in a country that routinely blocks access to websites of its political critics. In Saudi Arabia, a religious despotism is trying the democracy card, holding male-only municipal and regional elections, a welcome measure that still does not bring Saudi representative institutions to where they were seventy years ago. In Kuwait, the long-standing debate about women's suffrage is coming to a head, with a parliamentary vote soon. In Egypt, where the stakes are highest, the long-serving president is playing both the Israel and the democracy cards, raising the temperature of the "cold peace" with Jerusalem, and promising constitutional reform of sorts.

Collectively, the fear of the American elephant in the Arab china shop is so great that Arab leaders have dropped all pretense to "hanging together" and are willing to have others "hang separately" if it buys them time and sufferance in Washington. This explains Saudi Arabia's decision to welcome Syrian president Bashar al-Asad to Riyadh with a stab-in-the-back public call for Syria to withdraw from Lebanon. This is certainly not what the hapless Asad expected to hear from the country that hosted the Taif Accord. Recompense for the Saudis came in the form of President Bush's National Defense University speech one week later, during which the president soft-pedaled calls for the next step in political reform in Saudi Arabia but listed a series of measures that Egypt needs to take to fulfill its recent commitment to competitive presidential elections, i.e., freedom of assembly, access to media, legalization of political parties. The outburst against U.S. pro-democracy policy by Egypt's foreign minister that followed the NDU speech, as reported in the Washington Post, should be viewed in this light; though Cairo also called for Syria to respect UNSCR 1559, Riyadh got the credit and subsequent "pass" from the president.

(Interestingly, this dynamic is not limited to Saudi Arabia and Egypt. In the Maghreb, for example, Algeria scored points last September for abstaining on UNSCR 1559 and thereby enabling it to pass without opposition, even though Algeria had followed Syria as the Arab representative on the Security Council. Lest the Algerians get too far ahead in the race to Washington, Morocco last week called 30,000 demonstrators to the streets of Rabat to protest the continued imprisonment of Moroccans by the Algeria-backed Polisario Front. There, too, the idea is to try to focus the international spotlight -- especially U.S. attention -- on the misdeed of another Arab state.)

### The Uniqueness of Lebanon

Several factors set the Lebanon/Syria situation apart from these others:

- Lebanon is the first in which the United States has not been a main catalyst of the pace of events. The assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri triggered the current cycle of activity, even though it has been in train since the Syrians strong-armed the reelection of Emile Lahoud as president and the subsequent passage of UNSCR 1559.
- Lebanon is the first in which the United States has been joined by European countries, especially France, as full partners, giving Washington the luxury of allowing other capitals and institutions (e.g., the United Nations) to take the lead.
- Lebanon is the first to touch on core aspects of regime stability -- in this case, the regime stability of two countries, Lebanon and Syria. However disquieting U.S. pro-democracy efforts may be to regimes elsewhere in the region, those efforts have not even begun to pose the sort of heat that the Asad and Lahoud regimes feel from current events.
- Lebanon is the first to marry one country's problematic foreign policy (Syria) with another country's democratic process (Lebanon). That is because, after twenty-five years, the international consensus has shifted, now characterizing the Lebanon issue as one of foreign military occupation.
- Lebanon is the first to link the democracy agenda to traditional strategic concerns, in this case, the international effort to negotiate a peaceful solution to the Iranian nuclear problem. Given the deep investment that Iran has made in Lebanon, not least in the provision of thousands of short- and longer-range missiles to Hizballah, as well as the enhanced partnership announced between Tehran and Damascus, it is difficult to imagine that Iran will not view the

EU-3 negotiations and UNSCR 1559 as complementary parts of an international campaign to diminish Iranian regional influence.

•Lebanon is the first to touch on Israeli security and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, prompting both an internal Israeli debate over the benefits of democracy versus stability and an unprecedented level of international vigilance about anti-peace terrorism (witness last week's designation by the European Parliament of Hizballah as a terrorist organization and President Bush's fingering of Syria as host to the perpetrators of the recent Tel Aviv bombing.)

While each of these is a distinct attribute of the Lebanon situation, in reality they are closely linked to one another. Israel and Iran, Europe and the United States, Syria and the Palestinians -- all these roads merge in Beirut.

#### Promoting Democrats, not Just Democracy

Not everything in the region, however, is determined by the outcome in Lebanon and U.S. officials should keep this in mind. The Beirut endgame, for example, will have little impact on the fate of the democracy experiment in Iraq, though removing Syria as a source of support and safe haven to Iraqi opposition insurgents will surely be welcome. Similarly, the campaigns for political reform inside Saudi Arabia and Egypt are indeed long-term projects, whose outcomes will be clear long after the dust settles from the Cedar Revolution. In those countries, Washington should pursue pro-democracy efforts the way financial advisors suggest contributing to retirement nest eggs -- regularly and consistently, whether the market is rising or falling.

In this arena, it is essential to have a clear answer to the "democracy conundrum" -- i.e., the urgency of promoting freedom in the Middle East versus the fear of empowering anti-West Islamists. The solution lies in Washington's responsibility to invest in the success of flesh-and-blood democrats, not just the abstract ideal of democracy. While the region undoubtedly thirsts for more of the latter, that objective will never be achieved without encouraging the courage and assertiveness of the former. There is nothing hypocritical about channeling U.S. support for democracy into active backing -- political, moral, financial, and otherwise -- for Arab liberal democrats. Indeed, diverting Washington's gaze into "dialogue" with moderate-sounding Islamist politicians only lends legitimacy to them at the expense of America's natural allies. It is up to the Lebanese and the Palestinians -- not to U.S. policymakers -- "to accept" or "to reject" the role of Hizballah or Hamas in local elections. It is up to Washington, however, to determine whether such groups deserve support from the United States. And as long as there are Arab liberals who share American values as well as an affection for a system that can bring them to power, their claim on our attention trumps all others.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute.

Read [Part I \(templateC05.php?CID=2278\)](#) of this two-part series. ❖

Policy #975

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## [Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## [Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

## [Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

### TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Lebanon \(/policy-analysis/lebanon\)](#)

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](#)

