

The Arab Coalition

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

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



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While many European leaders remain deeply fearful of the fallout from a war with Iraq, many Arab leaders in the Middle East began several weeks ago to adjust to what they perceive to be a new reality. They stopped trying to prevent the war and instead began signaling that they wanted neither to be on the wrong side of the conflict nor on the wrong side of the U.S. -- or our broader agenda in the region.

Consider Egypt's press, which has been emphasizing that Saddam Hussein is bringing the conflict on himself. In his trip to Berlin, Hosni Mubarak emphasized to his hosts that it was time to get the conflict over and remove Saddam. In Washington, a high-level Egyptian delegation made it clear recently that they would not oppose us and, in anticipation of our emphasis after the war, also suggested that Egypt did have a serious, if measured, approach to internal reform.

The Saudis, though more circumspect on the war, have also indicated a greater willingness to permit U.S. operations out of the kingdom during the conflict. Crown Prince Abdullah is now openly calling for a new charter on reform to be adopted by the Arab League. Both the Egyptians and Saudis seem to have anticipated President Bush's speech in which he proclaimed that the liberation of Iraq might be a springboard to broader transformations in the region. And both seem to see the way the wind is blowing in the area -- and they intend, at least tactically, to be on the right side of those winds.

They are not the only ones. Jordan publicly announced that an American contingent would come to the country to man Patriot missile batteries. Can anyone doubt that the Jordanian government was making a statement about where it was lining up in the event of war with Iraq? Contrast this posture with Jordan's posture during the Gulf War 12 years ago.

Syria's behavior is even more surprising. Not only has it been restraining Hezbollah of late, but as if to convey that it will not be a problem, Syria has withdrawn 4,000 troops from Lebanon.

What is going on? The political culture in the region has always put a premium on power and adjusted to it. The Arab leaders in the Middle East have accepted that we will go to war and that Saddam will be removed. For them, it is a given.

Does that mean that we don't face hostility from the so-called Arab street? No, but it means that no one is out there defending Saddam. And it also means that the anger -- though genuine -- was bound in some ways to become more pronounced at the point when our buildup to war was increasing, when the anticipation of the Iraqi people paying a terrible price was most acute, and yet when the results of the war could only be an abstraction.

Assuming the war goes well, anger among Arab publics is going to abate once Saddam has fallen and pictures of Iraqis rejoicing over their liberation are beamed throughout the Arab world. Who in the Arab world will say that President Bush was wrong as images of a people released from the enduring hell of Saddam's rule are appearing on their television screens? Similarly, who will say war was a mistake when Iraqi scientists and technicians emerge from the woodwork after Saddam's demise to reveal the chemical and biological agents he has denied having?

But anger abating is not the same as the anger going away. The liberation of Iraq will create a window for us and for the region. If our liberation begins to look like an occupation, if our use of democracy continues to look like a slogan to be used against those we don't like, but never against those we do, and if we continue to appear to be indifferent to the sourness created by the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, we will find that regime adjustments are temporary and hostility toward us is more permanent.

To avoid that eventuality, we must act in several ways. First, with regard to postwar Iraq, we must move quickly to internationalize our peacekeeping responsibilities. If we are to look like liberators, not occupiers, Tommy Franks must not become the new governor of Iraq. To meet our responsibilities for law and order and the provision of services in an environment in which the administrative structure in Iraq has collapsed, we must prepare the ground for others to join us, perhaps with different roles and responsibilities in different regions of Iraq, relatively quickly after the war. We will want to help set up an international administration for dealing with the civil needs of Iraq. And we will want to establish an inclusive Iraqi institution -- an executive council -- representing all groups, including the returning exiles, that will work in tandem with the peacekeepers and the international administration. Thus we will demonstrate that we are working with others and the Iraqi people to create a stable transition to a broad-based, representative government.

Second, we must be advocates for reform in the region. We must be humble, acknowledging that one size does not fit all and that we don't have a blueprint that we are trying to impose. But we must also be true to our values, making clear that tolerance, the rule of law and inclusion of women are the best pathways to progress. We must also be clear that we will not remain silent when reformers are suppressed or jailed -- even if our friends are doing the suppression. Finally, we must emphasize that expanding the scope for political and economic participation is the best prescription for restoring hope and competing with those who prey on despair.

Third, we must show we are serious about promoting peace, or at least defusing the devastating conflict, between Israelis and Palestinians. After the war, Arab leaders are going to come to President Bush and declare that he proved what he could do in war -- now he must prove what he can do for peace. They will be right to say that we must invest seriously in peace efforts and not simply go through the motions. But so must they. The time for Arab leaders to offer slogans, but no serious investment, is past. Now they must be prepared to help Palestinian reformers delegitimize and confront those Palestinians who refuse to give up terror as their instrument. They must publicly endorse executive power being put in the hands of a Palestinian prime minister -- practically reducing Chairman Yasser Arafat to a ceremonial figure only. They must provide real economic assistance to the Palestinian Authority. And they must reach out to the Israeli public by sending delegations to Israel to explain what Israel will gain in any peace and what they require in return.

If Arab leaders, led by the new troika of Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, act in this fashion, the administration will have a critical prerequisite for success. Though not a substitute for what Palestinians and Israelis must do directly and on their own, Arab leaders stepping up to their responsibilities will make those behaviors more likely. And in

such circumstances, the administration will also have to decide that it is time to do the hard work of peace diplomacy. ❖

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