

[Illusion and Reality](#)

The violence in the Middle East shows the negative consequences of the administration's contempt for engagement. But the tough talk has failed.

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On the evening of September 11, 2001, I was one of a small group of State Department staffers called in to confer with Secretary of State Colin Powell and work through the night to produce a diplomatic strategy for assembling an international coalition to destroy Osama bin Laden's base in Afghanistan. Powell took this strategy to the White House on the morning of September 12, and it became the blueprint for marshaling international support for Operation Enduring Freedom, launched months later.

In the weeks following 9-11, my colleagues and I at State developed a comprehensive diplomatic strategy to support the war on terrorism. This strategy envisioned, beyond a military campaign in Afghanistan, a sustained global effort to "wrap up" bin Laden's operational networks and affiliates in the Middle East and elsewhere. Iraq would continue to be contained. As other state sponsors of terrorism like Iran and Syria came to the United States to offer assistance against al-Qaeda and the Taliban, that help would be accepted; this tactical cooperation would then be used as a platform for persuading these states to terminate their own involvement with anti-Israeli terrorist groups in return for a positive strategic relationship with Washington. The United States would also develop a credible plan for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In March 2003, the invasion of Iraq clearly committed America to a very different strategy, aimed at creating what President Bush described as a "new Middle East." The main elements of this alternative strategy were diametrically opposed to the strategy my colleagues and I had outlined a year and a half earlier. Now:

- Beyond Afghanistan, "rogue" regimes were to be uprooted, either by military force (as in Iraq) or through diplomatic isolation and political pressure (as the administration has tried with Iran and Syria). The United States would not offer "carrots" to such states to induce positive changes; diplomatic engagement would be limited to "sticks."
- Traditional "allies" like Egypt and Saudi Arabia were also to be fundamentally changed, through U.S.-mandated political transformation. Such transformation would bring a wider range of elites into these countries' decision making; these elites would be more focused on internal reform and grateful to the United States for their empowerment, which would

improve the regional security environment.

- In White House meetings, I heard President Bush say confidently that democratization would even facilitate a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by shaping a Palestinian leadership more focused on internal governance (i.e., providing services such as collecting garbage) and less “hung up” on final-status issues like territory, settlements, and Jerusalem.

Three and a half years after the invasion of Iraq and five years after 9-11, the outbreak of armed conflict between Israel and radical groups in the Palestinian territories and Lebanon has revealed how badly the president’s chosen Middle East strategy has damaged the interests of the United States and its allies in the region. The current conflict -- which comes alongside a growing likelihood of strategic failure in Iraq -- shows the negative consequences of the administration’s disdain for diplomatic engagement with problematic but pivotal players in the region. It is far from clear that the administration or, sadly, opposition Democrats will learn the right lessons from this episode. If they do not, the United States will likely suffer further damage to its position in the Middle East, with dangerous implications for America’s ability to protect its interests and ensure the long-term security of Israel.

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The Realist Legacy

The basic flaw in the Bush administration’s Middle East strategy is that it departs from the essential propositions of foreign-policy realism. In his days as the principal architect of American foreign policy under Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, Henry Kissinger established a paradigm for U.S. grand strategy in the Middle East. In this paradigm, American policy should seek always to empower moderates and marginalize radicals. The best way to do this was through careful management of the region’s balance of power, primarily through diplomatic means. The essence of such diplomacy is “carrots-and-sticks” engagement -- credibly threatening negative consequences for regional actors who work against U.S. goals, but also promising strategically significant benefits in exchange for cooperation.

This paradigm guided U.S. policy in the Middle East throughout Kissinger’s tenure in office and through subsequent administrations. At the height of the Cold War, for example, the realist paradigm guided American efforts across three administrations to draw Egypt out of its alliance with the Soviet Union and into a strategic partnership with the United States, which provided subsequent administrations a dramatically improved platform for projecting political influence and, when necessary, military power in the region. By taking Egypt out of the Arab-Israeli military equation through the U.S.-brokered Camp David accords in 1978, the realist paradigm also fundamentally strengthened Israel’s security by rendering impossible a recurrence of a generalized Arab-Israeli war like those of 1948,

1967, and 1973. Similar logic animated America's ongoing strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia and, after the first Gulf War, the launch of a more comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace process at the 1991 Madrid conference. Although the Clinton administration's efforts to broker peace treaties between Israel and the Palestinians and Israel and Syria in the late 1990s proved unsuccessful, the peace process nonetheless bolstered the American and Israeli positions in the region by establishing conceptual frameworks for an ultimate resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. It also provided a practical framework for keeping a lid on "hot spots" such as southern Lebanon and, as a result of Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation in the late 1990s, significantly reducing the incidence of anti-Israeli terrorism by groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

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The Bush Experiment

The current Bush administration argues that 9-11 exposed the Middle Eastern "stability" provided by the realist paradigm as an illusion. The region's radicals -- whether running "rogue" regimes or operating through non-state movements -- were too threatening to be managed through diplomatic engagement and long-term political processes. And so-called "moderate" regimes in the Arab world, while they might cooperate with the United States militarily and strategically, indirectly encouraged radical forces by refusing to liberalize internally; in some cases, these regimes seemed to directly support radicals through internal security strategies that sought to buy off domestic opponents by quietly funding their activities abroad.

To address what it perceived as the shortcomings of realism, the Bush administration articulated its alternative approach to the Middle East. The conceptual discontinuities between the Bush approach and that of its predecessors make the record of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East in the five years since 9-11 as close to an "experiment" as one is likely to get in the indeterminate realm of strategic analysis. The results of this experiment so far have been devastating: Over the last five years, U.S. policy in the Middle East has emboldened radicals and weakened moderates.

The Middle East is today more unstable than at any point in the post-Cold War period, and there is no evidence to suggest that this instability will give rise to a more secure and prosperous region in the future. Look at the trends: With regard to rogue regimes, Saddam may be gone, but Iraq has become a greater source of regional instability than it was during the last years of his rule. Iran's influence in the region is growing and the Iranian leadership is increasingly inclined to use that influence to threaten U.S. interests. Despite the forced withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon last year, the regime of President Bashar al-Assad has actually strengthened its grip on power and bolstered its support for Hamas and Hezbollah. The administration's biggest success in taming a regional rogue -- Libya's abandonment of its weapons of mass destruction programs and ties to terrorists -- was achieved through traditional "carrots-and-sticks" engagement with the Quaddafi

regime, an idiosyncratic exception to the broader pattern.

Regarding democratization, the administration's three examples of U.S.-engineered democratic empowerment in the region -- Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanon -- are all basket cases. Hamas' electoral victory earlier this year has invalidated the administration's "garbage collection" model for lowering Palestinian national aspirations and encouraging Palestinian acceptance of final-status terms less demanding of Israel than those outlined by President Bill Clinton at the end of his tenure. There is no evidence that democracy reduces the incidence of terrorism, and ample evidence from places like Egypt and Saudi Arabia that holding more open elections in most Arab societies would produce governments that are more anti-American and less reformist than incumbent "authoritarians."

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The Current Crisis

Seen against this backdrop, the current conflict represents a deliberate attempt by a loose coalition of some of the Middle East's more problematic actors -- Hamas, Hezbollah, the al-Assad regime in Damascus, and hard-line elements in the Iranian power structure -- to re-radicalize the Arab-Israeli arena. The conflict began on June 25, when Hamas militants kidnapped an Israeli soldier from inside "Green Line" Israel. The operation -- which was ordered by Hamas' external branch, lead by Khalid Mishal in Damascus -- grew out of a competition for influence within Hamas between Mishal and Ismail Haniya, leader of the Palestinian Authority's Hamas government elected in January. Before the outbreak of violence, Haniya and other Hamas leaders in the territories had begun to explore ways to moderate the party's posture toward Israel (an effort reflected in a recent op-ed by Haniya in *The Washington Post*). These efforts had no effect on official thinking in Israel or Washington, but they did prompt Mishal to initiate an anti-Israeli terrorist operation calculated to undermine Haniya and assert his own primacy.

By declining to provide avenues for engagement with the international community that might have been politically plausible for Haniya, the Bush administration left him vulnerable to pressure from more extreme competitors. Israel's military response to Mishal's provocation -- including the arrest of Palestinian cabinet members -- has further weakened Haniya's position, but in ways not likely to help Israel in the long run. On July 10, two weeks into the conflict, Mishal gave a high-profile press conference in Damascus, at which he suggested that he, not Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas or Haniya, is the true leader of the Palestinian national movement.

Two days after Mishal's press conference, Hezbollah conducted operations in the Sheb'a Farms area along the Israeli-Lebanese border that resulted in the deaths of eight Israeli soldiers and the kidnapping of another two. Hezbollah claimed that the operations were intended to obtain "bargaining chips" to swap for Lebanese prisoners held by Israel. In

pre-9-11 days, the disposition of prisoners would have been handled through political channels -- primarily, U.S. engagement with Syria and third-party engagement with Iran and Hezbollah itself. But with the Bush administration's refusal to engage directly or indirectly with such "bad actors," there were no operative political channels for dealing with the issue. And with the launching of Israel's military campaign in Gaza, Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, had an opening to link his group's "resistance" activities with the Palestinian cause in a manner that has greatly enhanced his regional standing. Once Hezbollah struck, Israel had no choice but to respond militarily, even if the strategic logic of its response is highly dubious.

Neither Hamas' external branch nor Hezbollah would have undertaken such provocative initiatives without approval from Syria and Iran. For al-Assad, the operations served to remind the United States and Israel that neither country could solve its security problems in the region without a strategic understanding with Syria. In the post-9-11 period, al-Assad has never been willing simply to accept the Bush administration's demands, insisting that U.S.-Syrian accommodation provide strategic gains to Damascus as well as Washington -- effectively asking for a road map for normalizing Syria's relationship with the United States and its place in the region.* As long as Washington gives al-Assad no incentive to cooperate, he will continue to work against U.S. interests.

In Iran, support for Hamas and Hezbollah's escalatory moves is a way for the most hard-line elements in the Islamic republic's power structure -- President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the Revolutionary Guard, which is closely linked to Ahmadinejad's Abadgaran political movement -- to push back against Tehran's move toward multilateral nuclear talks including the United States. The reassertion of a more radical line in Iranian foreign policy is one of the most profoundly negative potential consequences of the Bush administration's refusal to pursue "carrots-and-sticks" engagement with Tehran during the last five years, even though it had opportunities to do so.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has supported the move toward nuclear negotiations with the United States. While Khamenei is unquestionably conservative on many domestic issues, on foreign policy he is a traditional Persian nationalist prepared to think about Iran's national interests in pragmatic terms. During the tenure of reformist President Mohammed Khatami (1997-2005), Khamenei clearly worked against Khatami's efforts to liberalize Iranian society, but endorsed Khatami's many notable changes in the Islamic republic's foreign policy, such as an opening to Europe and rapprochement with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab states. In the aftermath of the 9-11 attacks, Khamenei approved Iranian cooperation with the United States, including a direct and authoritative diplomatic channel, to unseat the Taliban. Iranian diplomats who dealt with U.S. counterparts during this period indicated that there was interest in Tehran in using this cooperation to effect a broader opening to the United States. In 2003 -- when the Islamic republic was not yet spinning centrifuges and enriching uranium -- Khamenei sought to initiate a diplomatic process aimed at resolving differences between the two nations. The

Bush administration consistently refused to respond.

After Ahmadinejad took office last year, Khamenei took steps to limit the new president's influence on the nuclear issue and the broader question of relations with the United States. Ahmadinejad and his allies have been looking for a chance to reassert a harder line in Iran's foreign policy; the current escalation in the Arab-Israeli arena has given them that chance. Even if pragmatists are able to steer Iran into multilateral nuclear talks, the Bush administration's continued refusal to contemplate a U.S.-Iranian "grand bargain" means that the talks cannot succeed. And, as Iranian nuclear development proceeds, the quality of any deal that Washington might ultimately be able to negotiate with Tehran will continue to decline.

From the beginning of the current crisis, the Bush administration has clung to the increasingly discredited conceptual foundations of its approach to the Middle East. The president decided to stand back while Israel's military offensive against Hezbollah proceeded, hoping that, by weakening Hezbollah's military and political base in Lebanon, conditions would be established to bring about Hezbollah's disarmament and, by extension, deliver a blow to Iran and Syria. But it is evident that Israeli military action will not achieve these aims. Hezbollah is not some foreign entity, imposed on Lebanese society by puppet masters in Damascus and Tehran; it is a sectarian political and social movement with enormous popular support among Lebanese Shia, Lebanon's largest and most disenfranchised communal group. Disarming Hezbollah or moving it to the north would require the removal of the Shia population from southern Lebanon.

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A Recovery Strategy

To repair the American position in the Middle East, the United States must reject the false premises of the Bush approach. The most dangerous illusion guiding recent U.S. policy toward the Middle East is that stability somehow "caused" 9-11.

Under current circumstances, a realist strategy for restoring American leadership in the Middle East would include at least five elements:

- The United States needs to widen its approach to defusing the current crisis to include direct engagement with both Syria and Iran. To facilitate a cease-fire and introduction of a multinational force in southern Lebanon, Washington should recognize that Hezbollah's disarmament would come about only as part of a broader political settlement in the region.
- The United States should convey its interest in a broader strategic dialogue with the al-Assad regime in Damascus, with the aim of re-establishing U.S.-Syrian cooperation on important regional issues and with the promise of significant strategic benefits for Syria

clearly on the table.

- Washington should indicate its willingness to pursue a “grand bargain” with Iran, in which the Islamic republic would accept restraints on its nuclear activities and abandon its support for the terrorist activities of Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah in return for U.S. commitments not to use force to change Iran’s borders or form of government, to lift unilateral sanctions, and to normalize bilateral relations.
- The United States and key partners should articulate a more substantive vision for a two-state solution to the Palestinian question, including parameters for resolving key final-status issues that would meet the minimum requirements of both sides. This vision should incorporate the Saudi-initiated Arab League peace plan, which offers normalization of Arab states’ relations with Israel to complement peace treaties that end Israel’s occupation of Palestinian and Syrian territory.
- While the United States should engage moderate Arab partners more systematically on economic reform and human rights, Washington should drop its insistence on early resort to open electoral processes as a litmus test for “democratization.”

How feasible is the pursuit of such a strategy? Although Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and her team seem sporadically motivated to try to take policy in a more realist direction, their impact remains limited to tactical matters. It is highly unlikely that the administration will alter its basic strategic orientation.

This focuses attention on the role of Democrats as the nation’s “loyal opposition” and whether the party can articulate a “return to realism” in U.S. foreign policy. The party has little to be proud of in the way it has discharged its role on foreign-policy issues. It has endorsed (or acquiesced to) all of the fundamental tenets of Bush’s revisionist approach to the Middle East. Broad support for the Iraq War among congressional Democrats was intellectually legitimated by “experts” like Kenneth Pollack, who wrote a best-selling book using an analytically flawed assessment of the Iraqi WMD threat to argue that going to war against Saddam was the “conservative” option. Similarly, Democrats have not posed a significant challenge to the administration’s emphasis on democratization in its strategy for the war on terrorism or its non-historical approach to the Palestinian issue.

Democrats have fallen into a “soft neconservatism” that has dulled the party’s voice on foreign policy. Henry Kissinger once observed that the United States is the only country in which the term “realist” is used as a pejorative. The more progressive elements of the Democratic coalition have been especially strident in voicing their antipathy to Kissingerian realism. But it was the 20th century’s greatest Democratic secretary of state, Dean Acheson, who defined a fundamentally realist paradigm for U.S. foreign policy in Europe during the Truman administration that laid the foundations for eventual peaceful victory in the Cold War. America needs that kind of wisdom about the Middle East today. It is time for Democrats to understand that, when it comes to curbing the threats posed by

problematic states like Iran, encouraging reform in strategically important states like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, or ensuring Israel's long-term future, realism has become the truly progressive position on foreign policy.

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* **Correction:** In our September print edition, this article appears with an error that changes the meaning of a sentence. In the magazine, a sentence reads, in part: "In the post-9-11 period, al-Assad has never been willing simply to accept the Bush administration's demands that U.S.-Syrian accommodation provide strategic gains to Damascus as well as Washington." That sentence should read: "In the post-9-11 period, al-Assad has never been willing simply to accept the Bush administration's demands, *insisting* that U.S.-Syrian accommodation provide strategic gains to Damascus as well as Washington." The sentence reads correctly in this online version. We regret the error.

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