

## Bush at the UN: Annotated

By Stephen Zunes | September 20, 2006

President George W. Bush's address before the United Nations General Assembly on September 19 appeared to be designed for the domestic U.S. audience. Indeed, few of the foreign delegations or international journalists present could take seriously his rhetoric regarding the promotion of democracy in the Middle East, given the reality of U.S. policy in the region.

*"This morning, I want to speak about the more hopeful world that is within our reach, a world beyond terror, where ordinary men and women are free to determine their own destiny, where the voices of moderation are empowered, and where the extremists are marginalized by the peaceful majority. This world can be ours if we seek it and if we work together."*

Under President Bush, the United States has seriously undermined the ability of the international community to work together to empower voices of moderation and marginalize extremists. For example, the Bush administration has gone to great efforts to undermine the International Criminal Court, which could play a critical role in bringing to justice extremists responsible for crimes against humanity. Similarly, with bipartisan support in Congress, the Bush administration attacked the International Court of Justice for its landmark 2004 ruling on the obligations of signatories to enforce the Fourth Geneva Convention. The United States, the world's number one arms supplier, has also blocked UN efforts to curb the trade in small arms used by terrorists. Currently, the United States sends more arms and security assistance than any other country to autocratic regimes and other violators of universally recognized human rights in the Middle East and elsewhere.

*"Recently a courageous group of Arab and Muslim intellectuals wrote me a letter. In it, they said this: 'The shore of reform is the only one on which any lights appear, even though the journey demands courage and patience and perseverance.' ... Together we must support the dreams of good and decent people who are working to transform a troubled region ..."*

What President Bush failed to mention is that that letter, in which 90 of the region's most prominent intellectuals called on President Bush "to reaffirm—in words and actions—America's commitment to sustained democratic reform in the Arab world" also stated that it "is our belief

that the main problem with U.S. policies in the Middle East (in particular in Iraq, Palestine, and elsewhere) is precisely their failure to live up to America's democratic ideals of liberty and justice for all." The letter also called on President Bush to "break with 60 years of U.S. support for non-democratic regimes in the region, and to make that known to the world in unequivocal terms" and "to press for an end to regime repression of democratically spirited liberal and Islamist groups, and to emphatically distance itself from such repression and condemn it in the strongest terms whenever and wherever it occurs." There is no indication that the Bush administration intends to change its policies, however.

*"Some of the changes in the Middle East are happening gradually, but they are real ... The United Arab Emirates recently announced that half of the seats in its Federal National Council will be chosen by elections. Kuwait held elections in which women were allowed to vote and run for office for the first time. Citizens have voted in municipal elections in Saudi Arabia, in parliamentary elections in Jordan and Bahrain, and in multiparty presidential elections in Yemen and Egypt. These are important steps ..."*

None of the "elections" that President Bush mentioned is very real or important.

The Federal National Council in the United Arab Emirates serves only as an advisory body. All political power rests in the Supreme Council of Rulers, which consists of the seven dynastic emirs of the federation's emirates.

In Kuwait, in which only 15% of the country's population has voting rights, the royal family largely sets the policy agenda, dominates the country's politics, and controls any real political power. The unelected emir appoints the prime minister and cabinet, and the royal family holds



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virtually all key posts and can dissolve the parliament at will for years at a time, as it has done twice in recent decades.

Only men are allowed to vote in Saudi Arabia and only for half the seats in municipal councils. There is no constitution, no national legislature, and no political parties. The royal family exclusively wields political power in conjunction with input from the unelected ultra-conservative Islamic *ulema*. Torture, extra-judicial killings, and severe restrictions on freedom of expression are commonplace.

Few consider the most recent Jordanian elections for the lower house of parliament fair, due to the highly unrepresentative drawing of assembly districts in favor of the monarchy as well as restrictions on the political platforms parties can advocate in order to take part. In any case, the elected lower house cannot initiate legislation and cannot enact laws without the approval of the upper house, which is appointed by the king. The king can also dissolve parliament at will, as he did between 2001 and 2003 without any apparent objections from the Bush administration.

Though a more open society than neighboring Saudi Arabia, Bahrain's most recent parliamentary elections were boycotted by leftists and leading Shiite groups due to electoral gerrymandering and restrictions on political campaigning. The king—who comes from the country's Sunni minority—has ultimate control over the executive, legislative, and judicial branches.

Around the forthcoming presidential elections in Yemen, the government and police have been openly pushing for the incumbent's re-election amid widespread allegations of voter intimidation, ballot-rigging, vote-buying, and registration fraud. Just two days before the vote, President Ali Abdullah Saleh—who has held power for 28 years and claimed victory in the last election by 94% of the vote—announced the arrest on “terrorist” charges of a campaign official of his leading opponent.

Last year's presidential elections in Egypt were even worse than Yemen's in that the U.S.-backed Mubarak regime declared the largest opposition party illegal, effectively banned independent candidates, severely restricted media access and publication rights of opposition campaigns, and refused to allow international observers. Only 23% of the electorate bothered to go to the polls, and Mubarak won re-election with an improbable 88% of the vote. Government security forces beat up and arrested

protestors demanding more open elections, and the runner up in the presidential race received a five-year jail sentence.

Perhaps the freest elections in the Arab world last year took place in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. Within months, however, the United States backed Israeli attacks on these nations that killed hundreds of civilians and caused billions of dollars worth of damage to their civilian infrastructure—an indication of how the United States really feels about free elections.

*“Some have argued that the democratic changes we're seeing in the Middle East are destabilizing the region. This argument rests on a false assumption, that the Middle East was stable to begin with. The reality is that the stability we thought we saw in the Middle East was a mirage.”*

This is a terribly misleading characterization of the administration's critics:

First of all, the Middle East has not been seen as a stable part of the world since well before the fall of the Ottoman Empire. For many decades, outside observers have widely recognized the serious ongoing conflicts in that region. There was no “mirage” here.

More importantly, virtually no one argues that the very limited democratic changes in recent years have destabilized the region. Instead, critics of U.S. policy note correctly that the region has been destabilized by the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the large-scale killings of civilians in U.S. military operations, and other U.S. violations of international law and national sovereignty.

*“For decades, millions of men and women in the region have been trapped in oppression and hopelessness. And these conditions left a generation disillusioned, and made this region a breeding ground for extremism. Imagine what it's like to be a young person living in a country that is not moving toward reform: ... you have been fed propaganda and conspiracy theories that blame others for your country's shortcomings. And everywhere you turn, you hear extremists who tell you that you can escape your misery and regain your dignity through violence and terror and martyrdom. For many across the broader Middle East, this is the dismal choice presented every day.”*

The observation that having so many people “trapped in oppression” creates “a breeding ground for extremism” is quite valid. But the most dangerous extremists in the

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region have come from among Saudis, Egyptians, and Palestinians, all of whom have been victims of political repression by governments backed by the United States. And while extremists do cynically manipulate those suffering under such oppression into supporting their dangerous ideology and tactics, both the ongoing Israeli occupation and the control of a number of other Middle Eastern governments by autocratic rulers is made possible in large part by U.S. military, economic, and diplomatic support. The effected populations already widely recognize this reality, and it is the primary cause of anti-American terrorism.

*“To the people of Lebanon: Last year, you inspired the world when you came out into the streets to demand your independence from Syrian dominance. You drove Syrian forces from your country and you reestablished democracy. Since then, you have been tested by the fighting that began with Hezbollah’s unprovoked attacks on Israel. Many of you have seen your homes and communities caught in crossfire ... The United Nations has passed a good resolution that has authorized an international force, led by France and Italy, to help you restore Lebanese sovereignty over Lebanese soil.”*

This outreach to the Lebanese people is disingenuous on several fronts. First of all, the United States initially supported Syria’s military intervention into Lebanon in 1976 and their consolidation of power in 1990. Second, Israel planned its assault in close consultation with the Bush administration long before Hezbollah’s July 12 attack on an Israeli border post. Third, Lebanese homes and communities were not “caught in crossfire” but were victims of massive bombings and shelling by the U.S.-supplied Israeli armed forces, the vast majority of which were many miles from any Hezbollah military activity. Fourth, the United States repeatedly delayed and then ultimately weakened the UN Security Council resolution authorizing an international force.

*“To the people of Iran: The United States respects you; we respect your country ... The United Nations has passed a clear resolution requiring that the regime in Tehran meet its international obligations. Iran must abandon its nuclear weapons ambitions ... We’re working toward a diplomatic solution to this crisis. And as we do, we look to the day when you can live in freedom—and America and Iran can be good friends and close partners in the cause of peace.”*

Given that the United States was responsible for the coup that overthrew Iran’s last democratic government back in

1953 and subsequently backed the Shah’s brutal dictatorial regime for a quarter century, platitudes regarding respect for the people of Iran and hope that they may live in freedom do not carry much weight. Indeed, though Iran’s electoral process is seriously flawed on many levels, elections there have tended to be freer and more representative than those in the seven U.S.-backed regimes praised by President Bush.

Regarding Iran’s alleged nuclear weapons ambitions, the UN Security Council has indeed passed a resolution requiring Iranian compliance with the unusually strict safeguards demanded by the UN’s International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). However, President Bush has shown little regard for the enforcement of other UN Security Council resolutions regarding nuclear issues. For example, the United States has not only blocked enforcement of UN Security Council resolution 1172 requiring Pakistan and India to eliminate their nuclear weapons arsenals but President Bush has also signed a nuclear cooperation agreement with India and has announced the sale of sophisticated nuclear-capable jet fighter-bombers to Pakistan. In addition, the United States has blocked enforcement of UN Security Council resolution 487 requiring Israel to place its nuclear facilities under the trusteeship of the IAEA and has continued to provide Israel with nuclear-capable jets and missiles.

Finally, given the Bush administration’s rejection of Iranian diplomatic overtures, its lack of support for European diplomatic initiatives, and widespread reports of Pentagon preparations for a U.S. military assault on Iran, there are serious questions as to whether the Bush administration is really “working toward a diplomatic solution to this crisis.”

*“To the people of Syria: ... Today your rulers have allowed your country to become a crossroad for terrorism. In your midst, Hamas and Hezbollah are working to destabilize the region, and your government is turning your country into a tool of Iran. This is increasing your country’s isolation from the world. Your government must choose a better way forward by ending its support for terror, and living in peace with your neighbors, and opening the way to a better life for you and your families.”*

While the Syrian regime certainly does not have clean hands, that country is hardly a “crossroad of terrorism.” Few governments, for example, have been more helpful to

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the United States in the struggle against al-Qaida. Syria has also ended support of the Kurdish PKK.

The political wing of Hamas has offices in Damascus, as it does in a number of other Arab capitals. But their military operations are based in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, not Syria. Similarly, Hamas's financial support has traditionally come from the U.S.-backed monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula, not Syria. In addition, Syria has long ceased its once-active support for leftist Palestinian groups guilty of a series of terrorist attacks in the 1970s.

Syria has substantially reduced its ties with Hezbollah, which had not attacked Israeli civilians for well over a decade until Israel began attacking Lebanese civilians on July 12. Similarly, Hezbollah ended its attacks on Israelis when Israel ceased its attacks on Lebanese. Indeed, the European Union and most governments do not characterize Hezbollah as a terrorist group anymore.

No educated observer sees Syria, with its strong tradition of Arab nationalism, as "a tool of Iran." Ironically, Bush administration officials have recently been claiming that Syria was backing Sunni Iraqi factions fighting Iranian-backed Shiite Iraqi factions.

And rather than refusing to "live in peace with your neighbors," Syria has offered a peace treaty and full diplomatic relations with Israel in return for its withdrawal from Syrian territory seized in the 1967 war. The current Israeli government has refused to consider such a proposal, however, with no apparent objections from the Bush administration.

Finally, Syria is hardly isolated from the world, having recently signed trade deals with Russia, Turkey, and the European Union and having won election just a few years ago to a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

*"I'm committed to two democratic states—Israel and Palestine—living side-by-side in peace and security. I'm committed to a Palestinian state that has territorial integrity and will live peacefully with the Jewish state of Israel . . . Yet extremists in the region are stirring up hatred and trying to prevent these moderate voices from prevailing."*

This is a good and important vision. But—as with President Bush's visions of a democratic Middle East—his actual policies tell a very different story.

In endorsing Israeli Prime Minister's Ehud Olmert's "convergence plan," President Bush has demonstrated he is not really interested in a viable Palestinian state existing alongside Israel. The Israeli government, with the support of the Bush administration and a large bipartisan majority in Congress, appears ready to annex large swathes of occupied Palestinian lands in the West Bank that would leave the Palestinians with a small non-contiguous archipelago of territories surrounded by Israel. Across this archipelago, Israel would control air space, water rights, and the movements of people and goods between each segment of the Palestinian "state" and neighboring Arab states.

Finally, the hatred one finds in many parts of the Palestinian community toward Israel stems from years of suffering under a brutal and humiliating U.S.-backed Israeli occupation. Instead of blaming "extremists" for "stirring up" such hatred, the best way to help moderate voices to prevail is to press Israel to end its illegal occupation and colonization of occupied Palestinian land.

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