

March 21, 2003

*The View From Lebanon*

In relative safety, another group of Arabs watches regime change in Iraq.

By [Tim Cavanaugh](#)

"It's like there's a big party going on," says my neighbor in Lebanon, "and one fella over on the side falls down and breaks his leg. Who's gonna notice?" He's referring to a theory of regional politics currently making the rounds in the country—that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon will use the cover of an American war on Iraq to launch a new attack on southern Lebanon.

In Lebanon, any given event is likely to generate predictions of some new outrage by the Israelis, so this rumor is not precisely news. (It's also not to be dismissed; I have in the past laughed off dire warnings about Israeli aggression here, only to see them come true almost to the letter.) Gauging this country's "mood" is a mug's game even under the best circumstances, and the sort of generalizations I'm about to make are inexcusable. But a tour of official statements, analysis by political observers and comments from the peanut gallery indicates some unexpectedly creative thinking on the Iraq war that began Wednesday, and suggests why the Lebanese appeared slightly [less](#) pessimistic about this war than the average of (overwhelmingly pessimistic) Arabs polled recently by University of Maryland professor Shibley Telhami.

First, to nobody's surprise, opposition to the war is universal here. In most informal conversations, the war is judged to be about either taking Iraq's oil, eliminating the one Arab country capable of threatening Israel, or both. This theory does not differ substantially from those advanced by many opponents of the war in the United States, but an interesting secondary note is that many here frame the war as part of a blood feud or family vendetta carried out by two generations of Bushes against the Husseins. Whatever good reasons President Bush may have had for insisting that Saddam and his sons must all be eliminated from Iraq, his demand only strengthened that belief.

This capacity to receive a message directly opposed to the one the west believes it is sending can't be overstated. One example: Depending on their political bent, Americans tend to treat the U.S. relationship with Saddam during the Iran/Iraq War as an afterthought, a proof of right-wing perfidy, or, even a past error that adds to our responsibility to remove Saddam from power today. Arabs treat this history as paramount, and view it through very specific narrative—in which Saddam fought faithfully for American interests during the 1980s, only to be betrayed by his patron at the end of the decade. This view in no way lessens, and in fact probably increases, their contempt for Saddam (another feeling that is universal here), but for Arabs the moral of Saddam's story isn't that a tyrant is finally being checked; it's that the American state cannot be trusted. (I am not endorsing this view, merely recording it.)

Which makes it odd that, despite their opposition to this campaign, a few Lebanese appear willing to entertain the notion that some good may come out of it. "Public opinion here is not substantially different from what it is in Europe and the United States," says [Chibli Mallat](#), a lawyer and human rights advocate, at his office in Beirut. "You'll find the same continuum of opinion, with some additional elements. People here are very suspicious, justifiably, about the history of U.S. interventions, and they're not happy about the Israeli situation. At the same time they're hopeful that something might finally be breaking in this region."

Mallat is an organizer of Indict, a group dedicated to getting an indictment of Saddam at the International Criminal Court. He is also close to Ahmed Chalabi and the Iraqi National Congress, and though he does not admit to optimism, his interest in the pending changes in Iraq outweighs his considerable reservations about the war.

"I've worked for 12 years to get America to be serious about Iraq," he says. "I'm not about to back off now. I'm opposed to this war, because there were better ways to get rid of Saddam, and to organize international support. The situation the administration is in right now in Iraq is the result of a huge diplomatic failure. To some degree I think the diplomacy failed because Powell's heart wasn't in it; he was more interested in containment than in regime change. But when the President makes a decision, people have to get behind it."

"But the issue should not have been framed through the term 'regime change,' which sounds like an imperial order. It should have been described in terms of ending the dictatorship and bringing Saddam to justice for his crimes against humanity. Instead, Bush opted to play this very weak card of weapons of mass destruction—which Saddam could easily trump by inviting the UN inspectors back in. There are very strong grounds for an indictment of Saddam, and the Europeans would have had a harder time refuting an argument based on international justice. Instead, you had the worst *realpolitik* imaginable, the most miasmatic type of negotiation."

Now that the war *has* started, Mallat sees his role as helping to bring international human rights monitors into postwar Iraq. "If Bush is serious about bringing democracy to Iraq, that's the only way it's going to happen. I think he understands that a situation where the U.S. governs Iraq outright is ridiculous. Are you going to have a situation where American soldiers are overseeing an election in Iraq?"

"Finding people interested in democracy will not be hard, because the people most yearning for democracy are the people who know what a dictatorship is. But there's another element to democracy, the participatory part, and the struggle for power. That's difficult because there are no institutions left in Iraq. In these cases, the most radical elements will take over. That's why you need Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch, international monitors who will say, 'We don't care who runs the country as long as you don't kill each other.' Because the Iraqi opposition will start killing each other."

This vision has at least two serious obstacles: President Bush's manifest lack of interest in international institutions, and the need for the United States to pay off its war and reconstruction bills—a payment that will almost certainly involve the U.S. in disposing of Iraq's resources in the short term. "That's difficult," Mallat says. "I

opposed the compensation scheme after the Gulf War, because it had the Iraqi people paying for Saddam's invasion of Kuwait." As for the unlikely prospect of Bush suddenly warming to international institutions: "A successful foreign policy has to be thought through over time. The administration has to consider democracy a priority for the national interest of the United States. That will render the philosophical shift easier."

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