

Anthony Bubalo  
**Let's stop looking with stars and stripes in our eyes**  
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Both sides of the Iraq debate have been scrambling to capture the high ground over the ferment in the Middle East. The US President, George Bush, has triumphantly declared the region's autocrats to be the "last gasp of a discredited past". And earlier this week, the Prime Minister, John Howard, argued the positive changes we are witnessing were, in large part, a result of the Iraq war.

Critics, among them the Federal Opposition Leader, Kim Beazley, have been quick to dismiss such claims as another desperate attempt to find an adequate justification for the war. But my recent travels around the Middle East have convinced me that Bush and Howard are right about one thing. It is niggardly — if not foolish — to claim that the Iraq war has not shaken the region from its politically stagnant state.

Of course, most Syrians, Jordanians and Egyptians will tell you that everything the Bush Administration is doing is bad for the region. Nonetheless, I was surprised by the number of reform advocates in these same countries who told me that while they had not supported the Iraq war and were still highly suspicious of US motives, they could not deny that Washington had thrown a giant stone into a politically stagnant Middle Eastern pond, causing ripples of change around the region.

The situation in Lebanon is a prime example of what happens when a regime is unsettled and its opponents feel emboldened enough to capitalise on its mistakes. If Syria was responsible for the assassination of the former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri, it is highly likely that this stupendous miscalculation was a result of the regime's extreme nervousness about Washington's new assertiveness. This blunder could cost it its hegemony over Lebanon, if not see dramatic changes in Damascus.

But if I were Bush or Howard I would not be too quick to claim credit, either. For one thing, it is still not clear where all this upheaval will lead. In Lebanon, for example, Hezbollah has now entered the political fray, after weeks of sitting on the sidelines, to remind the Lebanese opponents of Syria that they should be careful about cosyng up too closely to the West.

It is also evident that much of what is happening in the region, while a result of the Iraq war and Bush's elevation of democratisation in US policy rhetoric, is neither the product of a grand US design, nor something that the Bush Administration will be able to direct. Washington — with Canberra's modest help — may have set the dominoes falling but it has very little control over how and where they might land.

Take events in Egypt, where Hosni Mubarak's regime recently said it would allow other parties to contest this year's presidential elections — though don't expect Mubarak to lose. It is true that Mubarak would not be making such a decision if the Bush Administration was not slapping his wrist over the recent arrest of a leading Egyptian liberal activist, Ayman Nour.

But pressure on the regime has also come from the "kifaya" movement — literally "enough" in English. This popular movement was not inspired by Washington's democracy push, and grew out of opposition to US policies, emerging from among those groups that had taken to Cairo's streets to protest against the Iraq war.

What this illustrates is that arguing the rights and wrongs of US policy in the Middle East, while important, is ultimately not very illuminating. Indeed, our continued preoccupation with US policy risks blinding us to what is happening on the ground and limiting our understanding of what could well be a great, if probably messy, political transformation.

None of this is to say that the US can be removed from the Middle East picture completely. As the region's preponderant power, the US will be a significant factor in the success or failure of democratisation. As one liberal advocate remarked to me, the US does not have to impose democracy in the Middle East, but it does need to stop supporting imposed autocracies.

But what we must avoid is allowing any distaste for the Bush Administration to colour our appreciation for current events in the region. We need to stop viewing the Middle East exclusively through the prism of US policy. Indeed, we should be able to conceive of positive change in that part of the world without our analysis being taken hostage by the neo-cons or their ideological foes.

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