



MIT CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

August 2006  
06-12

# Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

*“We will not talk with Iran,  
Damascus or Hezbollah—or  
at least not without precondi-  
tions that amount to preemptive  
capitulation to our position. And  
therein lies a cores problem of  
U.S. diplomacy.”*

## Channel Surfing: Non-engagement as Foreign Policy

Barbara Bodine

MIT Center for International Studies

**T**he adoption of Security Council Resolution 1701 brought a halt to the month-long Israeli-Hezbollah war. UNIFIL will be greatly expanded with a more vigorous mandate to back Lebanese assertion of full sovereignty and control over southern Lebanon and the disarmament of Hezbollah’s militia and missile sites. But is an agreement hammered out in Manhattan sustainable on the ground? Was success in New York confirmation that the Bush administration has come to terms with the utility of the United Nations and the facility of our friends and allies? Or does the agreement’s ambiguity and fragility underscore the costs of dogged non-engagement with our adversaries, even in times of crisis?

Resolution 1701 can succeed only if it is the beginning of a process. That process can only succeed if all players are brought to the table—the players within Lebanon, the players in the region, and possibly the player beyond, Iran. While the resolution could be negotiated by remote, a process that gets at the real root causes requires direct, protracted, patient engagement by the highest levels of the administration.

This is the third major policy challenge where the Bush administration turned to its friends from Old Europe and some former enemies to help broker a way out. Friends and allies provide channels and political cover into regimes we otherwise prefer not deal with. The Europeans and the Russians seek a graceful but credible way for both Washington and Tehran to back down and save face on the nuclear weapons issue, and the “Gang of Six” provides cover for efforts to manage Pyongyang. While neither of these efforts has succeeded, neither have they failed, if by failure one means a resort to military action.

To some, this shift reflects the maturation of the administration’s foreign policy—that it has learned that the United States cannot and need not do everything alone, and that

*continued on page 2*

### Center for International Studies

Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
Building E38-200  
292 Main Street  
Cambridge, MA 02139

T: 617.253.8093

F: 617.253.9330

cis-info@mit.edu

[web.mit.edu/cis/](http://web.mit.edu/cis/)

[web.mit.edu/cis/acw.html](http://web.mit.edu/cis/acw.html)

# Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

---

**Barbara Bodine** is a Visiting Scholar at the MIT Center for International Studies. Her long diplomatic career was largely devoted to the Middle East and the Arabian Peninsula. She served as Deputy Principal Officer in Baghdad during the Iran-Iraq War, as Deputy Chief of Mission in Kuwait during the Iraqi invasion and occupation, as U.S. Ambassador to Yemen, and, in 2003, as coordinator for post-conflict reconstruction for Baghdad and the central governates of Iraq.

---

## **citation**

Barbara Bodine. "Channel Surfing: Non-engagement as Foreign Policy." MIT Center for International Studies Audit of the Conventional Wisdom, 06-12 (August 2006).

there are other tools in the tool box besides a hammer. The cynical would say that the change is not by design but by default; bogged down in Iraq, we have few real options beyond the diplomatic. The same cynics would note that the administration's credibility is at such ebb that we have abdicated our role as an honest broker while others, such as France, step into the vacuum.

The truly cynical would say that the administration decided to utilize the U.N. not in spite of its reputation for desultory debate but because of it. Going to the U.N. created the image of "doing something," while Israel tried to finish the job on the ground or at least set the markers for the internationally refereed neutral zone.

Make no mistake, Hezbollah provoked this round of violence and destruction, counting on an Israeli response to create a second front to Gaza, and bolster its credentials as the only true bulwark against Israel—and thus validate the need for it to remain armed. The provocation was so naked that initial reactions from the region, and many Lebanese, were neutral to negative. That Hezbollah underestimated the fury of the Israeli response is a fair guess.

Israel, for its part, walked into the Hezbollah trap, responding as predicted, albeit ramping up the assault on the Lebanese infrastructure faster and more extensively than anticipated. While Hezbollah may have underestimated the scale and scope of the Israeli response, Israel's intelligence failure on the generosity of Hezbollah's friends in both the quantity and the quality of missiles poised to hit Israel is stunning. Despite a month of artillery pounding, 10,000 bombing sorties, 20,000 ground troops, the leveling of the Lebanese infrastructure and somewhere around 1,000 Lebanese casualties, Hezbollah continued to launch upwards of 200 missiles a day. Haifa was within missile range, as was the Galilee. Hezbollah remained unbowed. The mystique of Israeli invincibility was irreparably shattered.

The Bush administration, beyond unequivocal support for Israel's right to disproportionate self-defense, rejected calls for an immediate ceasefire as nothing more than a return to an untenable status quo ante. The administration insisted that the "root causes" be resolved as part of—not as a result of—a ceasefire. A noble goal. Yes, Israel should be secure. Yes, Hezbollah should be disarmed. Yes, the Lebanese government should enjoy full sovereignty over its territory. It's not the goals but the getting there that is the problem.

The criticality of an international peacekeeping force to an agreement suggests some logic to negotiations through the U.N. It was certainly more efficient. No need to go jetting about capitals as previous secretaries of state or special envoys have done.

But the move to New York reflects another truth—we have cut ourselves off from so many of the players that direct U.S. diplomacy is not an option. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's shuttle-lite—Washington, New York, Crawford and sometimes Israel—underscores the costs of non-engagement as policy. We will not talk with Iran, Damascus or Hezbollah—or at least not without preconditions that amount to preemptive capitulation to our position. And therein lies a core problem of U.S. diplomacy.

## **Shunning as a Foreign Policy**

Americans think diplomatic engagement and direct negotiations are rewards we bestow or withhold. There is the conceit that the recall of an ambassador, the loss or threatened loss of a U.S. embassy or the departure of American diplomats is so traumatizing that it will force a change in a state's policies. However, to be cast as pariahs, as rogues, as outlaws by the U.S. is to some more often more a badge of honor than of shame.

Shunning the world's unpalatable regimes will not make them go away; ignoring their leaders will not lead to regime change. Such an approach limits our options more than it damages, discredits much less destabilizes the regime. We default to the most artful, or shrill, of exiles and expatriates, and to second-hand information from third-country diplomats, the news media, businesses and others able to get beyond the bramble bushes we put in their paths. We send messages back and forth and play the game of "telephone" with our national security.

Suggestions that the secretary of state include Damascus on her itinerary, or in the talks, was rebuffed with reference to former Secretary of State Warren Christopher's twenty-nine visits to Hafez al-Assad in Damascus a decade ago. The futility of those trips is cited as proof that it makes no sense for his successor three times removed to visit Assad's successor, his son. President Bush in Crawford, when asked why there is no direct dialogue with Syria, explained that, *au contraire*, we do have direct talks in Syria. Secretary of State Colin Powell, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, and Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs William Burns, the president informed the journalists, have all visited Damascus. The implication was that these were somehow recent, somehow connected with the current crisis; in fact, all these visits occurred during the president's first term.

Repeatedly, those speaking from within and on behalf of the administration explain that we don't need to go to Damascus or bring them, or anyone else we don't like, into the talks since they "already know what we want and what they need to do." The belief persists that a blunt and unequivocal message conveyed through third party channels is enough. "Because we want it" is considered a sufficient talking point.

Somewhere in here are two fundamental misperceptions and one inherent contradiction. The misperceptions are that diplomacy is an art practiced among friends and that real men (or women) don't engage in dialogue; instead, they demand. Dialogue is unmanly, unseemly, and unnecessary for a great power. The inherent contradiction is that while we refuse to deal directly for any number of historical or policy reasons, we count on somebody somewhere who will be willing to act as our surrogate when demands no longer work.

### Supporting Moderate Regimes

Another justification heard over the past month was "our policy is to support moderate regimes." This is good as a general proposition, but has nothing to do with the resolution of the Israeli-Hezbollah conflict. Our refusal to engage all the parties, most especially those with the most influence over Hezbollah, begs the question of whether we are serious about getting to root causes. Nightly images of the destruction of Lebanon do more to undermine moderates than the secretary of state flying to Damascus.

Our friends in the region watched a newly democratic, precariously stable and relatively moderate Lebanon dismantled piece by piece. The grim irony of expedited shipments of U.S.-made precision bombs to Israel with pledges of humanitarian assistance to Lebanon, if lost on Washington, is not lost on our friends.

The "New Middle East" being born in Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine were not witnesses to the transformational power of freedom, as the president proclaims, but harbingers of humiliation, chaos and extremism. The violence was a caldron not a crucible; what King Abdullah II of Jordan called "the heavy clouds." Repeated statements by the administration that this crisis created opportunities, and that it was all for Lebanon's own good—echoes of "we had to destroy the village to save it"—does more to undermine moderate regimes than our

talking with the Syrians. Our friends took away their own lessons of what this says about the American commitment to democracy. To the moderates, it was the chill that the United States would not be there for them. At the end of the day, they are expendable. To which our enemies, and theirs, replied: We told you so.

### Not All Democracies are Created Equal

Whether we like it or not, Hezbollah is a legal political party in Lebanon. It holds seats in the parliament and the cabinet. Our refusal to deal with them is seen not as a statement of principle but of hypocrisy.

When asked about our refusal to deal with an elected HAMAS government and elected officials from Hezbollah, Noah Feldman—the NYU law professor and a frequent commentator on the Mideast—explained that while we recognize a people's right to elect whomever they wish, we are not obligated to deal with governments "that violate other state's borders, contravene international law or are contrary to American interests." It is not the validity of the process that decides whether we will accept a democratically elected government; it is whether we like the outcome.

Since the United States deals regularly with states and governments that violate borders and contravene international law—Ethiopia and Eritrea being two easy examples—it would appear that the operative criterion is contrarianism. But even this is selective. We deal regularly with any number of governments that are contrary to our interests, and with any number of non-state actors, including some considered by any standard to have been major terrorist organizations. To cite a basic truism: you negotiate with your enemies, not with your friends.

### A Return to Universality of Relations

Secretary Rice repeatedly stated that a ceasefire that does not address the root causes of the violence cannot bring lasting peace to any of the parties in the region. Absolutely true. If "root cause" is narrowly defined as the presence of a hostile armed militia on Israel's border, and resolution is at least the appearance of full Lebanese sovereignty over its territory, then Resolution 1701 looks to go in the win column. But the Lebanese government is no more able or willing to "disarm" Hezbollah than it was before, probably less. Hezbollah has said it will simply fade into the countryside. Others believe it will be absorbed into the army. Short of a blockage in perpetuity, Syria and Iran will continue to provide support.

At the start of the conflict, the G-8 described the root causes more broadly—the lack of a comprehensive peace. If so, working toward that goal demands sustained engagement with all of the parties. All of them. It demands a return to the practice of universality of relations, of a recognition that we need to be directly engaged with those very governments who are most contrary, even hostile, to our interests and those of our friends. Hostile, inconvenient and recalcitrant regimes need to hear from us regularly and directly. We need to be in their face. We need to hear from them directly as well, to have a dialogue, not a lecture. This is not something you can do by remote.



MIT CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

August 2006

# Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

## Channel Surfing: Non-engagement as Foreign Policy

Barbara Bodine

MIT Center for International Studies

PSB 06-08-0594



Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
Building E38-200  
292 Main Street  
Cambridge, MA 02139

MIT CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

