



## President Bush's Broken Promises

By Michael Rubin

*President George W. Bush's failure to uphold an assurance to Turkish officials that the United States would take action against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a terrorist group, is merely the latest in a series of broken promises. Bush has backtracked on both the philosophical underpinnings of his foreign policy as well as individual promises to specific nations and world leaders. The president's record of broken promises will haunt future administrations and mar Bush's foreign policy legacy.*

Promises matter. While pundits blame the loss of U.S. standing on the Iraq war alone, the deterioration of Washington's relations with once-staunch allies has less to do with a lack of diplomacy and more to do with its kind. Too often, the Bush White House has sacrificed long-term credibility for short-term calm. Pledges must have meaning. If they are forgotten or issued lightly, the failure to uphold them can aggravate crises.

### The Debacle with Turkey

Take Turkey: today, the Turkish army remains poised to enter Iraqi Kurdistan to eradicate PKK terrorist camps. Turks blame the Maoist group for the deaths of 30,000 people between 1984 and 1998. But Iraqi Kurdish leader Masud Barzani sees the PKK as an outgrowth of legitimate Kurdish nationalism. On June 29, 2007, two weeks after ruling out expulsion of the PKK from his territory, he warned Ankara of a "catastrophe for the entire region" if Turkish forces crossed the border. There is no sign of a peaceful resolution. "I'm afraid they're getting themselves worked up into a position where they can't back down from the statements that they have made," a U.S.

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official told Reuters on July 19. On July 29, the Turkish army shelled PKK positions inside Iraq near the city of Zakho.

Anti-Americanism in Turkey has increased in proportion to PKK attacks. While Turks once embraced the United States as perhaps their closest friend, today ordinary Turks do not understand why the global War on Terror ignores terrorists who attack them. At the June 2004 NATO summit in Istanbul, President Bush promised Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan that the United States would take action against the PKK. Secretaries of State Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice repeated the promise, but Washington has yet to sanction Barzani or direct U.S. forces to take action against known PKK bases in his territory. While more than 225 people have died in PKK-related violence in Turkey this year, PKK officials are now so brazen as to sleep in the same Erbil hotels as U.S. government contractors.

A June 2007 Pew Global Attitudes Project poll found that Turkey has, over the course of just four years, become the most anti-American country in the world. Only 9 percent of Turks have a favorable impression of the United States; 83 percent of Turks hold the opposite view. Turkey has become an example of the cost of sacrificing long-term credibility for short-term calm.

## Flip-Flopping on Foreign Policy

When Bush entered office, he repudiated such a vision. Speaking at the twentieth anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy on November 6, 2003, Bush spoke of the cynicism directed by many European allies toward Ronald Reagan when he refused to make accommodation to Soviet satellites. About the Middle East, Bush declared, “Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe—because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty. . . . It would be reckless to accept the status quo.”

The status quo improved neither stability nor security. During the George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton administrations, diplomats sought to engage adversaries, even those who tried to leverage terrorism into political gain. From the high point of the 1993 Oslo Accords, terrorism eroded security until, in the spring of 2002, the situation hit its nadir. In March and April 2002, there were suicide bombings almost every day in Israel. More than a hundred Israelis died and many more were wounded.

In a high-profile speech on June 24, 2002, Bush eschewed the status quo and instead enunciated a zero-tolerance policy toward terrorism. He declared, “The United States will not support the establishment of a Palestinian state until its leaders engage in a sustained fight against the terrorists and dismantle their infrastructure.” But less than a year later, his State Department reversed course when it interpreted the “Road Map for Peace” to drop cessation of terror as a precondition for engagement. While isolation of Yasir Arafat continued until his death, U.S. officials began to reach out to Arafat’s lieutenants. As their isolation faded, Palestinian terrorism grew. Suicide bombings, which declined after Bush’s speech, again grew frequent in 2005. Rocket attacks on the Israeli town of Sderot have become commonplace ever since.

While the White House now condemns Hamas terrorism, President Mahmoud Abbas’s Fatah movement has been just as culpable as Hamas. The Al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigade, its military branch, ridicules the State Department notion that Fatah’s political and military wings are separate entities. On October 4, 2006, Abu Ahmad, an Al Aqsa commander in northern Gaza, said that the brigade was “one and the same” with the Fatah movement. On April 17, 2006, the Al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigade claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing at a Tel Aviv bus station that killed nine and wounded thirty. The next

month, it issued a leaflet threatening to “strike at the economic and civilian interests of these countries [the United States and Israel], here and abroad,” and on June 24, 2007, it claimed responsibility for a rocket attack on Sderot. Yet far from abiding by his promise of zero-tolerance for groups embracing terror, Bush reverted to the status quo of years past, which he had once condemned. He endorsed Abbas’s “vision” and announced \$500 million in financial assistance, including \$80 million for the security forces complicit in terrorism against Israel.

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## Breaking Individual Promises

Such broken promises undercut the wider War on Terror, as political leaders conclude that—lofty rhetoric aside—terrorism provides the fastest way to win political concession. While terrorists and dictators benefit, Arab liberals pay a high price for having accepted Bush’s word. Bush’s second inaugural declaration that “[i]t is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture” rings hollow as Egyptian police beat, arrest, and then sodomize protestors who rally peacefully to demand the rule of law. For example, on May 25, 2006, Egyptian security forces detained Muhammad al-Sharqawi—a twenty-four-year-old blogger and member of the reformist Kifaya (Arabic for “enough”) movement’s Youth for Change offshoot—after he had displayed a sign reading “I want my rights.” After inflicting severe abuse, Egyptian authorities denied him medical care for four days. It was not an isolated case. That autumn, videos taken from an Egyptian policeman’s cell phone surfaced showing similar abuse of a number of secular and liberal political detainees.

Changing the political status quo can be difficult. Many in the foreign policy establishment resented Bush’s rhetoric; some sought to undercut implementation of his policies. Bush might be sincere, but absent the ability to follow through on promises, disillusionment rises. Some Arab liberals and democracy activists note that Bush’s record of abiding by commitments remains spotty not

only in the case of broad shifts, but also with individual promises. At the Democracy and Security Conference in Prague on June 5, 2007, Bush, together with National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley and Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte, met with several liberals and dissidents, many of whom have found the U.S. bureaucracy less than supportive of their cause. Rather than just listening and empathizing, Bush promised specific actions to resolve their cases. Almost two months later, though, the president has yet to act on his personal pledge to resolve the case of Palestinian banker Issam Abu Issa, whose visa the Powell State Department revoked in February 2004 as he prepared to testify before the House Financial Services Committee on mechanisms of Arafat's corruption. Nor has Bush yet fulfilled a promise to demand the release of Libyan dissident Fathi El-Jahmi, whom Muammar Qadhafi imprisoned on March 26, 2004, two weeks after Bush cited his release as a sign that the Libyan leader had changed. Instead, State Department officials say Bush will send Rice on a victory lap to Tripoli this autumn, regardless of El-Jahmi's fate.

As his speech in Prague concluded, the president drew a standing ovation when he not only endorsed the Prague Declaration, which calls upon governments to "instruct diplomatic emissaries to non-democratic countries to actively and openly seek out meetings with political prisoners and dissidents committed to building free societies through non-violence," but also when he announced that he had tasked Rice to implement it. Many dissidents took the president at his word. Rice, after all, is his appointee and one of his closest advisors. His commitment, though, remains unfulfilled. U.S. embassies in the Middle East have yet to reach out to any democratic dissident or political prisoner. While the promise may be forgotten in Washington, its violation leads friends and foes to conclude, respectively, that the United States is an unreliable ally and a paper tiger. Long after Bush leaves office, potential allies, be they individuals or governments, will think hard before they tie their future upon the promise of the president. Adversarial regimes will conclude Washington's red-lines to be ephemeral and its commitments to its allies easily erased.

## A National Security Nightmare

While the Middle East might be the focus of immediate concern in Washington as Congress debates the Iraq war, the State Department seeks to reinvigorate the

Palestinian-Israeli peace process, and the Iranian nuclear crisis looms. In the long term, Bush's failure to fulfill his promises to U.S. allies may have far greater consequence in Asia should nuclear powers such as China or North Korea conclude White House commitments to be more rhetorical than real. It is this latter possibility that threatens to transform Bush's broken promises into a national security nightmare. On April 25, 2001, Bush established a clear, moral redline when he declared that the United States would do "whatever it took to help Taiwan defend herself" in the face of Chinese aggression. But then Bush backtracked. Amid Beijing's steady military build-up, the president stood

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beside Wen Jiabao, the People's Republic's premier, in the Oval Office and condemned Taiwanese president Chen Shui-bian for holding a referendum on missile defense. Unlike President Clinton, Bush has yet to send a single cabinet-level official to demonstrate commitment to the island nation. Even in the confines of multilateral organizations in which U.S. influence still matters, he was less than energetic in opposition to Beijing's veto of World Health Organization (WHO) assistance to Taiwan during the 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic. The United States, for example, did not prevent a Chinese official from subsequently assuming leadership of the WHO. When Bush does not exert minimal leverage within the confines of a multilateral organization to fulfill a very public commitment to a threatened ally or show that Chinese threats and actions have consequence, it raises dangerous doubts about U.S. resolve and may encourage Chinese officials to test U.S. resolve.

Failure to uphold promises and declarations may convince other nations that aggression pays dividends. After promising Japanese prime minister Junichiro Koizumi in May 2003 that Washington would "not settle for anything less than the complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement of the nuclear weapons program," Bush directed his administration to settle for less. Amid the

self-congratulations over its ephemeral February 2007 deal with North Korea remains the fact that, against its allies' wishes, Washington acquiesced to Pyongyang's continued custody of its reactor and nuclear weapons. It is a broken promise guaranteed to haunt the next U.S. administration. Not only might North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il conclude that intransigence will be rewarded, but the Iranian leadership and other proliferators could also

conclude that development of nuclear weapons is the fast path to prestige and reward.

Kicking diplomatic problems down the road is not a strategy. Addressing crises with insincere promises is as counterproductive as treating a hemorrhagic fever with a Band-Aid. Empty promises amplify crises; they do not solve them. While farsighted in vision, Bush's failure to abide by his word will most shape his foreign policy legacy.