

Dream of democratic Middle East fading

NEWS ANALYSIS

Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON (NNPA) - Entering the fourth week of war between Lebanon's Hezbollah militia and Israel, the George W. Bush administration's ambitions to transform the Arab Middle East into a pro-Western, more democratic region are fading fast.

Not only is Washington's thus-far staunch support for Israel losing Arab "hearts and minds" at an astonishing pace, but the "moderate" governments and non-governmental forces which the administration had hoped would act as catalysts for reform are increasingly isolated across the region, according to Middle East specialists.

"I have never seen the United States being so demonized or savaged by Arab commentators, by Arab politicians," Hisham Melham, veteran Washington correspondent for Lebanon's An-Nahar newspaper, told a conference two weeks ago at the Brookings Institution, an influential think tank.

"People are clinging to Hezbollah, clinging to Hamas, because they see them as the remaining voices or forces in the Arab world that are resisting what they see as an ongoing hegemonic American-Israeli plan to control the region," he said.

"Right now, the United States is the kiss of death," Shibley Telhami, an expert on Arab public opinion at the University of Maryland, observed at the same meeting.

"If you really are trying to empower the ruling elites and nudge them to reform and be more representative, you have to deliver policies that are going to empower," he said.

"What we see in Lebanon is a policy that is not empowering them. It is widening the gap (between the moderate elites and the people), and people are moving toward the militants."

That point was echoed by none other than Jordan's King Abdullah who, in the early days of the current round of fighting, had joined the Egyptian and Saudi governments in denouncing Hezbollah for "adventurism" in attacking across the Lebanese border, thus provoking Israel's devastating military campaign.

"A fact America and Israel must understand is that as

long as there is aggression and occupation, there will be resistance and popular support for the resistance," Abdullah, arguably Washington's closest Arab ally, said a week ago.

"People cannot sleep and wake up to pictures of the dead and images of destruction in Lebanon and Gaza and... say 'we want moderation'. Moderation needs deeds."

"Unfortunately, Israeli policy... has contributed to the rise in the wave of extremism in the Arab world, and this war has come to weaken the voices of moderation," he went on, warning that even if Israel destroyed Hezbollah in Lebanon — an increasingly unlikely prospect — "a new Hezbollah would emerge, maybe in Jordan, Syria or Egypt" unless a comprehensive peace settlement was reached.

Even before the outbreak of this latest war between Israel and Hezbollah, Washington's hopes of regional transformation appeared to be dimming fast.

Besides Lebanon, whose "Cedar Revolution" last year was repeatedly cited by the Bush administration as vindication of its domino theory of democratic change, the two other Arab polities in which it has invested most of its hopes for transformation — Iraq and the Palestinian Authority, or PA — were already in deep trouble.

In the PA, not only had Hamas, the Islamist party on the State Department's terrorism list, won last January's democratic parliamentary elections, but a subsequent U.S.-led aid and diplomatic embargo against its government only strengthened its popularity at home, partly at the expense of Washington's preferred interlocutor, the Fatah Party's Mahmoud Abbas, president of the PA.

Moreover, Israel's U.S.-backed military campaign against Hamas, now in its sixth week, does not appear to have reduced its hold on public opinion.

In Iraq, where Washington is currently spending nearly \$7 billion a month, a series of U.S.-organized elections appears only to have hastened the country's descent into a brutal sectarian civil war, a scenario conceded by two of

Washington's top generals last week as having become increasingly possible.

"Sectarian violence probably is as bad as I've seen it, in Baghdad in particular," Gen. John Abizaid, the head of U.S. Central Command, told a Senate hearing here. "If not stopped, it is possible that Iraq could move toward civil war."

His remarks were echoed by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Peter Pace, who was reacting to a leaked memo from Britain's outgoing ambassador to Iraq who warned Prime Minister Tony Blair that "the prospect of a low-intensity civil war and a de facto division of Iraq is probably more likely at this stage than a successful and substantial transition to a stable democracy."

Now, Israel's onslaught against Hezbollah, which has included the destruction of key infrastructure throughout the country, as well as Shia strongholds in southern Lebanon and south Beirut, has quite possibly dealt a lethal blow to the government of the moderate, pro-Western Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, even as it has boosted the popularity of Hezbollah — contrary to the initial expectations in both Washington and Tel Aviv.

Even Hezbollah's fiercest

Smokers

(Continued from Page 5)

ards, including: —Increased risk of lung cancer by 20 percent to 30 percent. Secondhand smoke also causes approximately 3,000 lung cancer deaths among U.S. nonsmokers each year.

—Nonsmoking adults exposed to second-hand smoke increase their risk of developing heart disease by 25 to 30 percent. The evidence indicates that even brief secondhand smoke exposures [few minutes] can have immediate adverse effects on the cardiovascular system. Secondhand smoke causes tens of thousands of heart disease deaths each year among U.S. nonsmokers.

—Respiratory conditions in children, including acute respiratory infections such as bronchitis and pneumonia, respiratory symptoms such as cough, phlegm, wheezing and breathlessness, more frequent and severe asthma attacks, slowing of lung

Lebanese foe, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, who during the "Cedar Revolution" praised Bush's transformation strategy as "the start of a new Arab world" comparable to the fall of the Berlin Wall, told the *Financial Times* last week that he was forced to support the Shia militia against "brutal Israeli aggression" that would result in the weakening of the central government and the strengthening of Hezbollah and, through it, Syria and Iran.

"All American policy in the Middle East is at stake because their failure in Palestine, then failure in Iraq and now this failure in Lebanon will lead to a new Arab world where the so-called radical Arabs will profit," he said, adding that "this is... not the new Middle East of Ms. (Secretary of State Condoleezza) Rice."

Moreover, the situation in Lebanon — particularly the devastation wrought by Israel's military campaign against Hezbollah and Washington's support for it — increasingly threatens the U.S. position in Iraq by further alienating its majority Shia population and its leadership, many of whom have close ties to their Lebanese co-religionists.

While faction leader

growth, and ear infections have all been proven to be results of exposure to secondhand smoke in children.

—A cause of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). Infants who die from SIDS tend to have higher concentration of nicotine in their lungs and higher levels of cotinine (a biological marker for secondhand smoke exposure) than infants who die from other causes.

Still, habitual smokers stand by their right to partake of tobacco products.

"As long as they've got tobacco plants, people are going to smoke it," said William McFadden, 45, a friend of Herrera's who said he has also smoked since childhood. "Which ever way you choose to go [die], you go."

Though the Marriott and the Westin will not accommodate people's smoking habits, most other hotel chains will.

"We continue to offer guests a choice," says Kendra Walker, spokesperson for

Moqtada al-Sadr's Mehdi Army, which battled U.S. forces in 2004, has been holding big anti-U.S. demonstrations in Baghdad since the Israeli offensive began in mid-July, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the single strongest and most influential voice for moderation in Iraq's Shia community, warned last Sunday after a particularly deadly Israeli air strike in which dozens of civilians were killed in Qana that "dire consequences will befall the region... if an immediate ceasefire in this Israeli aggression is not imposed."

According to Juan Cole, a Middle East expert at the University of Michigan and president of the U.S. Middle East Studies Association, Sistani's warning was aimed directly at the United States. "Sistani could call massive anti-U.S. and anti-Israel demonstrations," noted Cole.

"Given Iraq's profound political instability, this development could be extremely dangerous," he wrote on www.juancole.com, his Web blog.

"The U.S. is already not winning against a Sunni Arab insurgency... If 16 million Shiites turned on the U.S. because of its wholehearted support for Israel's actions in Lebanon, the U.S. military

Hilton Hotels Corporation of its 500 Hiltons worldwide. "The brands generally offer five to 15 percent on average of rooms that enable guests to smoke."

While the Omni's 40 hotels also give guests a choice of smoking or non-smoking rooms, they acknowledge that laws have forced them to prohibit smoking in some public parts of the hotels.

"Smoking has been banned by either city ordinance or state law in 31 Omni Hotels' bars and or restaurants since 1998. Of these, seven went into effect in 2005 and four in 2006," says Ann Tramer on behalf of Omni Hotels. "This is only for the bars and restaurants within the Omni Hotels properties. Omni Hotels does not have a policy regarding the hotel rooms aside from assigning smoking and non-smoking rooms."

Cigarette smoking accounts for 440,000 deaths, or nearly 1 of every 5 deaths, each year in the United

States, according to the Atlanta-based Center for Disease Control. About 45,000 African-Americans die from tobacco-related deaths each year. If current smoking patterns of African-Americans continue, an estimated 1.6 million Black people currently under the age of 18 will become regular smokers, and about 500,000 of them will eventually die of a smoking-related disease, the CDC estimates.

Smokers often speak defiantly about their rights to light up despite the imminent danger. Herrera says his cigarettes give him calm when he is upset or depressed.

Of his three times quitting over three decades, he says the longest he's ever gone is eight months. Contemplating the odds against him, born out by the death of his mother, he suddenly softens his position, thinking of his wife and five children.

"I tell them not to smoke," he said. "Because they never told us that."

mission in Iraq could quickly become completely and urgently untenable." Meanwhile, Washington's most loyal Sunni-led allies, as noted by Jordan's King Abdullah, also feel under growing threat by popular support for Hezbollah and the radicalization among their subjects provoked by the current Israeli campaign. "Arab leaders are seen by the public as American puppets who have no standing of their own," according to Hassan Barari, a senior researcher at Jordan's Centre for Strategic Studies, writing for the www.bitterlemons-international.org website.