

Bush Tour Diminished by Hezbollah Show of Force

by Jim Lobe via rialator - IPS *Wednesday, May 14 2008, 7:06am*

international / social/political / other press

WASHINGTON, May 12 (IPS) - While this week's trip by President George W. Bush to Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt was never conceived as a triumphant "victory lap" around the region, the swift rout of U.S.-backed forces by Lebanon's Hezbollah Friday has provided yet another vivid illustration of the rapid decline in Washington's influence in the Middle East during his tenure.

The events in Lebanon will no doubt cast a long shadow over Bush's tour, which begins Tuesday. After all, it was only three years ago that he hailed the "Cedar Revolution" there as vindication of the kind of democratic transformation of the region that he insisted the invasion of Iraq was designed to launch.

Three years and a brief war between Israel and Hezbollah later, the Iranian- and Syrian-backed group appears more powerful and entrenched than ever, just as its Sunni Islamist ally in the Palestinian Territories (PT), Hamas, remains solidly in control of Gaza and grows in popularity in the West Bank in major part due to the apparent lack of progress in peace talks -- formally initiated by Bush himself at Annapolis last November -- between the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the Israeli government.

"The politics on the ground are absolutely miserable," Jon Alterman, a Middle East specialist at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) here, told the New York Times Sunday. "It's hard to remember a less auspicious time to pursue Arab-Israeli peacemaking than right now. U.S. power and influence are at low ebb in the region," he added.

Bush will travel to Israel Tuesday to help it celebrate the 60th anniversary of its founding and then fly on to Saudi Arabia, presumably to appeal -- as he did in January when he last traveled to the region -- for a major increase in oil production to bring some relief to U.S. (and Republican candidates), and then to Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, where he will address the World Economic Forum and meet with a collection of Sunni Arab leaders, including Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Jordanian King Abdullah.

Apart from Israel, to which Bush has been by far the most indulgent president in the Jewish state's history, he is likely to get his warmest -- if most anxious -- reception when he meets with the assembled Sunni leaders, many of whom are as concerned about Shi'a Hezbollah's show of force as is Israel.

Like Bush himself, not to mention Israel, they see Hezbollah's victory as another in a series of advances by Iran in its effort to shift the balance of power in the Gulf and the wider region against Washington and its allies there. It is an impression that Bush, somewhat ironically, will be eager to reinforce, if only to revive the dying embers of his hopes for a de facto U.S.-Sunni Arab-Israeli coalition against Tehran, even without a viable Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

"To me, it's the single biggest threat to peace in the Middle East, the Iranian regime," he told an interviewer from Israel's TV Channel 10, according to a partial transcript released Monday. "Their

funding of Hezbollah -- look what's happening in Lebanon now, a young democracy trying to survive... (I)t's in Israel interest that the Lebanese democracy survives. You need to be concerned about Iran, and you are concerned about Iran and so are we."

Indeed, five years after the White House declared "Mission Accomplished" on the deck of the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln, virtually all analysts here agree that almost everything Bush has done in the region -- from invading Iraq and ousting Saddam Hussein and then rejecting an Iranian offer to negotiate a settlement on all outstanding issues; to pressing for the total isolation of Hamas after it won (U.S.-backed) democratic elections in the Palestinian Territories (PT) and egging on the Israelis in their attack on Lebanon and Hezbollah in 2006 -- has undermined U.S. standing and influence, even as it enhanced Tehran's.

Even in Iraq, recent U.S. attacks on Muqtada al Sadr's "Mahdi Army", particularly in Baghdad's Sadr City, appear to have bolstered the government factions with the closest and most-longstanding ties to Iran -- the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC) and its Badr Organisation, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's Da'wa party.

The fact that Tehran itself played a key role in brokering the truces between Sadr and the government in both Basra last month and in Sadr City last weekend underlines the degree to which Iran is effectively challenging Washington in what neo-conservative hawk Reuel Marc Gerecht of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) admits "is the only arena (in the region) where the administration is capable of moving effectively against Tehran."

And while there is little evidence that Washington played any role in pushing the Lebanese cabinet to order the dismantling of Hezbollah's communications network at Beirut's airport -- the act that provoked Friday's offensive -- its staunch support for the "March 14" Coalition; its deployment of a U.S. naval destroyer off Lebanon's coast as the political crisis in Beirut intensified in March; its supply of some 400 million dollars in military aid and training to the Lebanese army and security forces (which stayed out of the fighting); and its covert backing (with Saudi Arabia and Jordan) of Sunni militias, in some cases disguised as private-security firms, intended to counter Hezbollah no doubt contributed to a grave miscalculation by the government.

"These Sunni militiamen proved a complete failure, and America's proxies in Lebanon barely put up a fight despite their strident anti-Shiite rhetoric," noted Nir Rosen, a regional expert at the New America Foundation who described Hezbollah's offensive as "the death throes of the Bush plan for the 'New Middle East'."

"Now it is clear that Beirut is firmly in the hands of Hezbollah, and nothing the Americans can do will dislodge or weaken this popular movement, just as they cannot weaken the Sadrists in Iraq or Hamas in Gaza," he said.

Still, some observers believe Hezbollah's victory may yet serve the administration's ends, if only by reminding the Sunni leaders with whom Bush meets later in the week that, in Gerecht's words again, "Tehran is on a roll", and they need the U.S. and even Israel to contain it and roll back its influence.

Indeed, some analysts believe the weekend's events may add to the gradually growing clamour by hawks in and outside the administration to take military action -- if only, for now, limited strikes on weapons factories and training sites inside Iran allegedly used by the Revolutionary Guard to train "terrorists" in Iraq, Lebanon, and the PT -- to "put Iran in its place".

"The next couple of days may be critical," said one former senior Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)

officer with expertise on the region, who added that any decision to "strike will actually motivated by an irresistible urge, stemming from pure frustration over continuing American impotence throughout the region, just to 'do something'...even though the actual positive gain in this case would be minimal, while the downside risks are enormous."

© 2008 IPS-Inter Press Service

<http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=42337>

Cleaves Alternative News. <http://cleaves.lingama.net/news/story-1055.html>