

The Persistence of Illusion

By Conn Hallinan | August 30, 2006

The Middle East has always been a place where illusion paves the road to disaster. In 1095, Pope Urban's religious mania launched the Crusades, the reverberations of which still echo through the region. In 1915, Winston Churchill's arrogance led to the World War I bloodbath at Gallipoli. In 2003, George Bush's hubris ignited a spiral of chaos and civil war in Iraq.

Illusions once again threaten to plunge the Middle East into catastrophe. The central hallucination this time is that the war in Lebanon was a "proxy war" with the mullahs in Tehran, what one senior Israeli commander has called "Iran's western front." Behind this hallucination is yet another. According to William O. Beeman, a professor of anthropology and Middle East studies at Brown University, there is "a longstanding U.S. foreign policy myth that believes terrorism cannot exist without state support."

In short, if Hezbollah exists, it is solely because of Iran. This particular illusion, according to a number of journalists, is behind the *carte blanche* the White House handed the Israelis during the war in Lebanon (see Stephen Zunes, *How Washington Goaded Israel*).

Israeli Fallout

As a result of the Lebanon debacle, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's Kadima Party is almost certainly dead. A Dahaf Institute poll found that 63% of Israelis want the Prime Minister out, and 74% want to oust Defense Minister and Labor Party leader Amir Peretz. The latter is busy trying to shift the blame to Israeli Chief of Staff Lt. General Dan Halutz (54% want him to resign) for claiming that Hezbollah could be destroyed from the air.

The army is whispering that the politicians held them back, and the politicians are grumbling that the army mishandled its budget. Olmert is stonewalling a formal inquiry on the war, which almost 70% of the population is demanding, and the reservists are up in arms. After 34 days of war, Hezbollah is intact, and the two soldiers whose capture kicked the whole thing off are still in its hands. Last but not least, the war knocked 1% off Israel's GNP.

The war's outcome is giving some Israelis pause, and there are some interesting straws in the wind. Amir Peretz, for

instance, has called for negotiations with the Palestinians. Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni says she is willing to "explore" the idea of talks with Syria. Public Security Minister Avi Dichter has gone even further and says Israel should give up the Golan Heights.

It is not clear where these discussions are going. If nothing else, however, the war has energized an Israeli peace movement, one rather more inclusive than such movements in the past.

Islamofascists?

For the Bush administration and its neoconservative allies, the ceasefire is just a break between rounds in the president's war on "Islamofascism." Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich says the United States is "in an emerging third world war." William Kristol calls the Lebanon war an "act of Iranian aggression" and urges the United States to attack Iranian nuclear sites. Writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, neocon heavy Max Boot calls for a U.S. attack on Syria.

According to journalist Sidney Blumenthal in *Salon*, the neocons in the administration, specifically Vice President Dick Cheney and National Security Agency Middle East Director Elliott Abrams, have been funneling U.S. intelligence intercepts to the Israelis as part of a plan to target Syria and Iran (see Tom Barry, *Hunting Monsters with Elliott Abrams*).

Those intercepts were behind the recent House Intelligence Committee report blasting U.S. spy agencies for their reluctance to say that Hezbollah is nothing more than an extension of Iran, that Tehran is on the verge of acquiring nuclear weapons, and that Iran poses a clear and present danger to the United States.

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The author of the House report, Frederick Fleitz, was a former special assistant to current UN Ambassador John Bolton. Bolton was a key figure in gathering the now-discredited intelligence that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction.

According to Blumenthal, Cheney and his Middle East aide David Wurmser have dusted off a 1996 document called “A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm.” The study was authored by Wurmser, ex-Pentagon official Douglas Feith, and Richard Perle, disgraced former head of the Defense Policy Board.

The “Break”—originally written for then-Likud prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu—advocates that the Israelis, with support from the United States, dump the 1992 Oslo Agreement with the Palestinians, target Syria and Iraq, and redesign the Middle East.

A key ingredient in the document, and one central to current administration thinking, is that since terrorism is state-supported, the war on terrorism can be won by changing regimes. Hence, to defeat Hezbollah, you have to overthrow Syria and Iran.

Iran’s Non-Role

Brown University’s Beeman argues that Iran has no direct control over Hezbollah. While Iran does provide the organization some \$200 million a year, that money “makes up a fraction of Hezbollah’s operating budget.” The major source of the group’s funding is the “sakat,” or the tithe required of all Muslims.

Georgetown University professor Daniel Byman, writing in *Foreign Affairs*, says that Iran “lacks the means to force significant change in the [Hezbollah] movement and its goals. It [Iran] has no real presence on the ground in Lebanon and a call to disarm or cease resistance would likely cause Hezbollah’s leadership, or at least its most militant elements, to simply sever ties with Tehran’s leadership.”

If a wider war is to be avoided, argues Christopher Layne of the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University, the United States “will have to engage in direct diplomacy with Syria and Iran—both of which have important stakes in the outcome of security issues in the Middle East, including those involving Israel’s relations with the Palestinians and with Hezbollah in Lebanon.”

Recently a group of 21 former generals, admirals, ambassadors, and high ranking security advisers proposed exactly that, calling on the Bush administration to “engage immediately in direct talks with the government of Iran without preconditions.” The group warned that “an attack on Iran would have disastrous consequences for security in the region and U.S. forces in Iraq. It would inflame hatred and violence in the Middle East and among Muslims everywhere.”

Just as Middle East illusions have done for almost a millennium.

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