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## Bush's Worrisome Middle East Visit

**Recent experience suggests that we should be very worried that US President George Bush is coming to the Middle East this week to promote peace, says Rami G. Khouri.**

BEIRUT - Recent experience suggests that we should be very worried that US President George Bush is coming to the Middle East this week to promote peace. The last time he made such a journey - June 2003 - his legacy turned out to be an accelerated cycle of violence and ideological battle that now sees most of the Middle East region today wracked by active warfare, routine terrorism, and intense political confrontations, threats and stress.

This has been more or less typical of what the Middle East and adjacent areas have experienced in recent days:

- major bombings of civilian and government targets in Algeria and Turkey,
- continued foreign militarism and indigenous ethnic warfare in many parts of Iraq,
- worsening mutual attacks by the Turkish army and anti-government Kurds,
- political stalemate that threatens to spill over into something worse in Lebanon,
- spreading reassertion of power by the Taliban in Afghanistan,
- assassinations and political danger in Pakistan,
- worsening and continuing clashes among nationals and invading Ethiopians in Somalia,
- accelerating tit-for-tat attacks and killings by Palestinians and Israelis, and
- assorted other smaller conflicts and localized problems.

Meanwhile, most governments - trying to keep the lid on their turbulent societies - increasingly resort to tighter authoritarianism. Policemen, armed forces personnel and undercover security agents are now the most common symbol of government on the street. In some places - central Cairo, parts of Beirut, much of Jerusalem - uniformed men with guns define the public sphere.

Consequently, the welcoming party for President Bush, as he visits the Middle East again, is a regional landscape of conflict, killing and suffering, orchestrated by local and foreign political leaders who seem totally baffled by the mess they have created. This situation has worsened in the past four and a

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half years since President Bush visited Egypt and Jordan, in what turned out to be a failed - perhaps an originally insincere - bid to foster Palestinian-Israeli peace. A few days after Bush was in the region, the US State Department's senior Middle East official, David Welch, said in Aqaba, Jordan on June 9, 2003: "We are all very concerned now to move forward with implementation of the steps in the roadmap as was agreed among the leaders when they met. The summit meeting hosted in Sharm El-Sheikh by President Mubarak was an outstanding success..." He added that Arab foreign ministers conveyed their "appreciation for the role of the President of the United States and our interest in advancing peace and stability in this area."

If the past 54 months reflect Bush's idea of how the US can work with the people of the region to "advance peace and stability in this area," then maybe we need a little less peace and stability for a while, and a little more rational analysis of the forces driving this region in its current self-destructive trajectory.

So why is President Bush coming to the Middle East? Ideally, a responsible leader in his position would use this visit to honestly and dispassionately assess the balance sheet of both regional trends and American policy and interests in the region. It seems self-evident that Bush administration policies in the past seven years have not achieved the peace, stability, freedom and democracy that he preaches. Instead, his policies have helped the region to become even more bogged down in a chronic and worsening maelstrom of political violence, which is sometimes directly funded, militarily supplied, and ideologically spurred by the US government.

The United States and Europe also seem to have hit some roadblocks in their campaigns to pressure the Syrian and Iranian governments, and the Hezbollah and Hamas movements. More pressure will elicit more resistance. There will be no victors in this battle, only victims. If the US-led camp and the Iranian-Syrian-led camp decide they are prepared to fight this out to the finish - mostly on other people's lands, like Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine - the entire region will suffer escalating and, in some cases, permanent damage. This is not to mention the global ramifications, when the price of oil has already passed the \$100 per barrel mark. This regional trajectory of escalating and widening conflict should be redressed and terminated, not affirmed and perpetuated.

With all due respect, President Bush might do the region and the entire world a favor by staying home - if he plans to visit the Middle East only to speed up the same American policy of blindly supporting Israel, sending arms and money to Arab authoritarian regimes, opposing mainstream Islamist groups that enjoy widespread Arab popular legitimacy, ignoring realistic democratic transitions, and actively pressuring governments and movements that defy the United States.

He will not be in office much longer, so he may not care whether 54 more months like those that have just passed are good for the Middle East, the United States and the rest of the world. Most of the world does care, though, as do most people in this region.

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