The Bush Administration’s Legacy in the Middle East
by Jon B. Alterman

The United States is far worse off in the Middle East than it was eight years ago. There is an easy way to tell this is so: those whom the Bush Administration has most avidly sought to weaken and isolate are stronger than they were, while the United States and the secular liberals that the Bush Administration sought to nurture are weaker.

While the world does not miss Saddam Hussein, the governments of Iran and Syria did not cower after his fall. To the contrary, by acts of omission and commission they helped deepen Iraq’s agony despite the presence of more than 100,000 U.S. troops intended in part to intimidate them. Their allies, Hezbollah and Hamas, have also seen their fortunes rise, despite U.S. insistence on their isolation. Hezbollah’s influence in Lebanon has increased, and it now has veto power over the government. Hamas not only won an election that the Bush Administration pressed forward, but it now controls territory of its own.

Although the Bush Administration denied it vehemently at the time, the invasion of Iraq was always a roll of the dice, and a trillion dollars in, it remains unclear how those dice will land. Given the intelligence information available in 2002-2003, one could make a plausible argument for going in, but it is impossible to either justify or excuse the rank incompetence that characterized the first years of the occupation (which, in the best-case-scenario reasoning that underlay the military planning, was only supposed to last 90 days). Driven by hubris and a belief that with the events of September 11, “everything had changed,” officials were selected for loyalty over experience, with predictable results. Saddam’s fetish of loyalty had destroyed Iraq the first time; the Bush Administration’s fetish of loyalty helped destroy it a second.

Bloodied in Iraq, the United States has far less pull in the region than it had a decade ago. In the Gulf, friendly governments actively undermine the Bush Administration’s policy and engage in energetic diplomacy among Palestinians and Lebanese to make up for the administration’s shortfall. While these governments remain reliant on U.S. arms, they are working to balance U.S. influence with that of other outside powers such as France and China, and they seek to assuage the Iranians out of fear that U.S. cannot protect them.

The bright spot is that there has been a good deal of progress on counterterrorism, especially in the last several years. A series of attacks within the Arab world persuaded governments that the problem is not merely a Western one, and their security services are both better prepared and better informed than a decade ago.

Their newfound skills have helped decrease the number of attacks against civilian targets around the globe, and deeper intelligence cooperation has helped protect U.S. civilian lives.
Yet, much of the progress in counterterrorism has come at a cost. In 2003, the Bush Administration appeared convinced that the brutality and ineptitude of Middle Eastern governments were principal drivers of terrorism; by 2007, it was clear that regional governments were the U.S. government’s chief allies. The U.S. government went suddenly from seeking to reform the status quo to zealously supporting it; abruptly abandoned were a wide range of opposition figures who had taken risks out of confidence in U.S. backing.

While there have been a series of U.S. missteps in the region, what has not happened is as important as what has. After the death of Yasser Arafat, the United States had an unprecedented opportunity to move forward on Arab-Israeli peace issues. A new Palestinian president came into office with broad support and legitimacy, and a record of speaking hard truths to Palestinians in Arabic. Yet, the opportunity to build up Mahmoud Abbas as a credible peacemaker was lost, in part out of an ambition ceaselessly to wring yet one more concession out of him.

The setbacks that the United States has suffered in the Middle East are reversible, but it will take years of effort to bring the United States back to the same level of regional influence enjoyed in 2000. The Bush Administration has little of which to be proud.\(^1\)

\(^1\) This article was published on the blog: Middle East Strategy at Harvard
http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/mesh/