



America the fearful by Donald K. Emmerson

[Editor's note: While this article does not deal with the Asia Pacific region specifically, many of the concerns it raises are relevant to the region. We hope it provides some food for thought over the Fourth of July weekend. Happy 4th.]

BEIRUT — Do Americans traveling in more or less Muslim countries have nothing to fear but fear itself? Not quite, but almost. Should their government and their media be doing more to help Americans overcome irrational fears of the post-9/11 world? Yes.

For a week now my wife and I have been strolling the streets of Beirut and traveling by bus in its hinterland — a fool's amusements in the scary light of official and media images of the Middle East as a dangerous place. Yet everywhere we have gone we have felt welcomed.

I own a t-shirt that advertises CANADA beneath a maple leaf. Back in California I thought, only half-facetiously, of bringing it along. I am glad I left it behind. The Lebanese we have met have been hospitable not hostile.

I am not advising naiveté; Lebanon's horrific civil war in the 1970s, '80s, and '90s destroyed much of this city. Washington intervened. More than 200 American soldiers died in a building shrunk to rubble, apparently by Hezbollah — a self-described Party of Allah that the U.S. still considers a terrorist organization. Beirut became a synonym for mayhem.

Echoes of this city's frightening reputation have been heard this year in a series of bombings that have killed nearly two dozen Lebanese, including Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in February, scholar-journalist Samir Kassir in May, and opposition politician George Hawi on June 21.

An American visitor's initial impressions of Beirut today are ambiguous. Inspiring confidence are the relaxed atmosphere at the new, ultra-modern, and just-renamed Rafiq Hariri Airport and, seen through taxi windows, the attractively renovated downtown area. But then one's taxi skirts the burned-out hulk of the St. George Hotel and, alongside it, behind police tape and armed guards, the twisted carcasses of cars — detritus from Hariri's assassination.

This juxtaposition of alarm and assurance has become the unnerving natural condition of American travel to and in Muslim or mostly Muslim countries. Survey research shows approval of the United States among the world's billion-plus followers of Islam near an all-time low. The U.S. is viewed unfavorably by 58 percent of Lebanese, according to a just-released Pew Research Center opinion poll. Lebanon and other Muslim-majority societies account for more than half of the 29 countries to which the State Department discourages travel. Yet in these mainly Muslim destinations the odds that

a prudent American tourist will become a casualty of terrorism remain infinitesimal.

I came to Lebanon to do research, to lecture at the American University of Beirut, and to help celebrate the 100th anniversary of the American Community School. For decades, Arab sons and daughters have vied for entry into these and comparable institutions in other Muslim countries, including the American University in Cairo. Here in Lebanon, in the upland village of Deir al Qamar, a sign on a small photo shop identifies its owner, by name, as a proud U.S.A. GRADUATE, BOSTON.

These signs of U.S. popularity must seem incomprehensible to Americans fearful of Muslim wrath. But what really makes no sense is the apocalyptic vision of the Muslim world that Americas media tend to purvey, a vision that encourages would-be travelers to stay in Indiana and skip Indonesia.

Overseas Muslims in my experience have a split-level view of America. Most of them dislike — some detest — U.S. policy while simultaneously admiring the freedom and openness that Americans, at their best, represent. Many Americans feel the same way. Meanwhile, security concerns have encircled U.S. embassies with enough protective barriers and identity checks to make diplomacy resemble self-imprisonment.

As relaxed interactions at the official level have become a casualty of the war on terror, people-to-people contacts have become more vital than before. The fewer Americans Muslims meet, the less contested will be the image of the U.S. as a cruel montage of Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib.

A task force ought to brainstorm ways of overcoming unrealistic fears of travel. It would help, for example, if U.S. embassy website warnings included figures on how many Americans have actually been killed and how many actually wounded by terrorist acts in the preceding 10 years.

The Bush administration has acknowledged the need to win Muslim hearts and minds abroad. It is time to win back unrealistically fearful American hearts and minds as well.

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