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World Events Challenge US Assumptions

By William Pfaff

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PARIS — Three recent developments in the Muslim Middle East and Central Asia challenge Washington's conventional assumptions about Pakistan, the Taliban, Lebanon and Iran.

The first is the revolt of tribesmen against the Taliban in part of Pakistan's northwest tribal area, including the well-known tourist region of the Swat Valley, where the "students of religion" recently infiltrated and seized power from the Pakistani authorities and police. This provoked alarm there and in the United States that the religious extremists are a menace to Pakistan.

This fear was exaggerated from the start; Pakistan has a serious government and army. Now, popular anger at Taliban abuses and imposition of unacceptable religious and social norms has erupted among tribesmen and traditional leaders. The formation of popular militias has resulted in expulsion of the Taliban from the positions they have taken, while Pakistan's army has successfully retaken territories further south, at a cost to the population, blamed on the Taliban, of tens of thousands of refugees. These refugees are a grave problem for a government under stress.

The significance of all this is major: The Taliban with their religious rigor do not automatically win converts among their own people.

However, a second lesson is that American bombing operations in the tribal areas remain the principal force behind the earlier Taliban successes. The important conclusion is that foreign intruders should let the Pakistanis settle their own problems, as they now are doing.

The second highly interesting development has been the spectacular presidential election campaign in Iran. The vote takes place this Friday. The battle against President Mahmoud

Ahmadinejad and his politically conservative and culturally reactionary backers has turned into an unprecedented brawl.

Ahmadinejad's leading opponent, Mir Hossein Moussavi, who led the country during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, attacks Ahmadinejad for "adventurism, illusionism, exhibitionism, extremism and superficiality," including his notorious Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism, all disgracing the country internationally.

Ahmadinejad and his supporters attack Moussavi because his wife, Zahra Rahnavard, a university professor of politics, has assumed a public role at her husband's side in the campaign, and demands expanded higher education for women. They are also attacking corruption amid Moussavi's establishment backers.

The campaign has included dramatic television debates on usually forbidden issues of policy and religion, and has taken to the streets in a way that Western correspondents compare with raucous and acrimonious Western presidential campaigns.

There are nightly street demonstrations and weekend stadium rallies with tens of thousands of young participants. To quote *The New York Times*, "Every night, parts of the capital become a screaming, honking bacchanal." This is unprecedented in modern Iran — and surely not the conduct of the "false democracy" that Washington likes to call Iran.

It is true that these are public manifestations that both reveal and conceal shifting rivalries and alliances among the senior clerical forces who intend to have the last word (one more time?). But this is again an affair in which the U.S. will profit from keeping its distance.

The last item of interest has been the unexpected defeat of the Hezbollah-led coalition in Lebanon's parliamentary election last weekend. The winner was an American-supported alliance of familiar conservative Sunni forces with rightist Maronite Christians, including the Phalangists of former President Amine Gemayel.

America's support, which included Vice President Joseph Biden's hint last week that if America's friends did not win, U.S. financial aid would be ended, caused scandal, and was expected by many to backfire.

That it did not was a surprise of the election. Another was the success of the alliance with Hezbollah of a part of the Maronite Christian electorate, led by Gen. Michel Aoun, a commander during the civil war, when he was a fierce opponent of Syria.

A reason for his new alliance with the Syrian-supported Hezbollah is that his intransigent opposition to all foreign interference with Lebanon's independence has led him to see this independence now mainly endangered by America with its Saudi Arabian allies, together with the major Maronite Christian formations, which include elements that have collaborated with past Israeli efforts to install a puppet non-Muslim regime in Beirut. He no longer thinks Syria and Iran are the major threats to Lebanon. Instead he thinks the danger comes from Wahhabi fundamentalism, backed by the Saudi Arabians, fueled by oil money and the U.S., and hostile to all Christians.

Gen. Aoun's movement wants to end the system of sectarian allocation of political offices in Lebanon, and wants a secular state. The French analyst Nicolas Dot-Pouillard writes in *Le*

Monde Diplomatique that Lebanon's political scene is revolutionized by this alliance of a mass movement of Christians willing to collaborate with the Islamist, nationalist, and anti-American Hezbollah.

The alliance won enough votes to continue to play a big role in the national assembly, but neither of the two major coalitions has a mandate to govern alone, so not much short-term change can be expected. If there is change, it will be caused by whatever happens in the present clash between Barack Obama and Benjamin Netanyahu over Israeli action on settlements and on a Palestinian state. Lebanon may want to stay on its own course, but it is not in a neighborhood where small countries find that easy.