Mideast still mired in conflict 3 years after Sept. 11
Some see unyielding nature of Arab regimes as root cause of
frustration that breeds extremist violence

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BEIRUT: The devastating suicide air attacks against New York and Washington three years ago Saturday are often said to have "changed the world."

Saudi lawyer and Islamic scholar Mohsen al-Awajy recently found out just how much his world had changed when he received a death threat from Islamic militants.

"I was sent an envelope containing a letter and three bullets, a small one, a medium one and a large one. The letter said 'Choose which one you want for your head,'" Awajy told The Daily Star.

Ironically, Awajy has close ties to Saudi militants, and he believes his death threat is emblematic of the heightened extremism besetting the Middle East since U.S. President George W. Bush started his war on terrorism in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks on the U.S.

"This (Islamist) violence is a direct result of the unjust policy of the U.S. against Muslims and Arabs," he said. "Of course, the U.S. government has every right to defend its interests, but not in the way they are attacking, demolishing and destroying the interests of the Arabs."

But others see the authoritarian and unyielding nature of Arab regimes as the root cause of the frustration that breeds extremist violence.

"Resentment is being fueled by blocked societies because there is no change at the top that represents the will of the people," said Chibli Mallat, professor of international law at Beirut's St. Joseph University. "The violence is a result of people not having the normal means of voting in governments and leaders."

Three years after Sept. 11, the Middle East remains a region mired in conflict, crippled by extremism, burdened by poverty and bereft of democracy.

Osama bin Laden, the architect of Sept. 11 still eludes capture; the stabilization process in Iraq is collapsing amid worsening violence; Saudi Arabia is grappling with the most serious internal unrest in recent memory; the Israeli-Palestinian conflict shows little sign of easing; and Arab regimes continue to skirt reforms.

In all, it paints a bleak picture of the Middle East and U.S. policy toward the region, a fact that Ayman Zawahiri, Al-Qaeda's number two, sought to highlight in a statement released on the eve of the Sept. 11 anniversary.

"Americans will no longer be safe while their government commits crimes against Muslims in Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine," the Egyptian cleric said in his first statement in a year which was aired on Al-Jazeera Thursday. "The American defeat in Iraq and Afghanistan has become just a question of time, God willing," he added.

Indeed, the violence in Iraq has steadily worsened since the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority handed over to an interim Iraqi government at the end of June. The Sunni areas of Iraq are more dangerous than ever - several Sunni towns north and west of Baghdad have become no-go areas for foreigners, including Fallujah, Baqouba and Samarra.

What was a low-key insurgency a year ago has escalated into a full-blown multi-dimensional guerrilla war. Furthermore, the presence of U.S. troops in the heart of the Middle East has served as a magnet for Islamist militants from around the Arab world.

The Sept. 11 anniversary coincides with the death toll among U.S. soldiers in Iraq reaching the 1,000 mark. Between 12,000 and 14,000 Iraqis are estimated to have been killed since March last year.

The threat of kidnappings has led to most non-governmental organizations (NGO) and many foreign journalists pulling out of the country.

"What we are witnessing in Iraq at the moment is near total anarchy," a Western adviser to an Iraqi NGO wrote in a private memo last week.

Hostility toward the U.S. shows no sign of abating, even among members of the U.S.-backed interim government.

The U.S., said Ibrahim al-Jaafari, Iraq's vice president and one of the most popular politicians in Iraq, "does not understand Arab culture or customs" and "came into Iraq like an elephant, astride its war machine."

Yet the American architects of the invasion to unseat Saddam Hussein envisaged Iraq becoming a beacon of democracy and modernity in the heart of the Arab world, potentially providing an example for other Arab countries to emulate.

Despite the grim realities in Iraq, Arab intellectuals and human rights activists continue to pin their hopes on the shockwaves of the invasion and occupation spurring a reform process in neighboring countries.

"The lack of vision in the conduct of the war on terror and the invasion of Iraq made things worse, on the short run," said Ammar Abdel-Hamid, a Syrian social analyst and a visiting fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Washington-based Brookings Institution. "This said, we have to say that it has also emboldened some reformers and put pressures on states to reform themselves using their own devices."

Still, most Arab regimes have done little more than pay lip service to reforming their societies, despite the theme having been promoted by the Bush administration this year.

The Greater Middle East Initiative, Bush's bid to encourage democratic reforms in the Middle East, met with a hostile reaction from Arab governments after its contents were leaked earlier this year. It was attacked as unwarranted U.S. meddling in Arab affairs and derided for failing to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a root cause of the region's problems.

But the initiative, which was later toned down and released in June, did spur Arab leaders to discuss reform, albeit with some reluctance, at the Arab League summit in Tunisia in May.

The summit produced the Tunis Declaration, a tepid commitment to promoting human rights, freedom of expression, judicial independence and widening the role of women in society. Yet it contained no pan-Arab mechanism to oversee and help implement reforms, leaving it up to individual countries to decide the rate of change. And that rate generally has been at a snail's pace.

Abdel-Hamid said Arab societies remain at risk from the "inability of existing regimes, opposition and intelligentsia alike to provide new visions for peaceful change and reform in their own countries and in the region as a whole."

"This failure invites foreign dabbling, as we can see in Iraq and Darfur (in Sudan). In turn, foreign dabbling encourages extremism - nationalist and Islamist," he said.

In Saudi Arabia, that extremism in the past 18 months has fueled a campaign of suicide bombings, shootings and kidnappings mainly against foreigners waged by militants seeking to overthrow the royal family.

Awajy, who was jailed for four years in the 1990s for criticizing the Saudi royal family, says that the campaign of violence has effectively stalled the reform process.

"We reformists in Saudi Arabia are losing our platform because the royal family is arguing that getting rid of violence is the main priority for all Saudis. What can we do?" Awajy asked.

Another source of extremism is the festering conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians. The plight of the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories joins Iraq and Afghanistan as a rallying call for anti-American militants.

Many Arab analysts believe that the perceived double standards employed by the Bush administration in its dealings with Arab states and Israel stymies its efforts to promote democratic reform in the region. Settling the Arab-Israeli conflict would also deny some Arab regimes the excuse of delaying internal reforms.

Still, in an upbeat assessment, Mallat said he believes the Arab world is progressing toward an inevitable improvement.

"The promise of better societies in the Arab world is far more serious than it was on Sept. 10, 2001," he said, adding that for the trend to continue, the U.S. "should stay the course on democracy and give it a reality."

Otherwise, he added, "as long as Arab societies remain blocked... then their will be violence erupting here and there, domestically, like in Saudi Arabia, and internationally."