

THE BARDS OF NEJD

Arabs are far more urbanized than is commonly thought, and what is considered to be the archetypical Bedouin society—Saudi Arabia—is now more than 90 percent urban. Yet young urban Saudis are leading a newfound appreciation for Bedouin poetry after almost a millennium of neglect.

Bedouin verse is characterized not by specific meter or language but rather by direct, simple language addressing the shared themes of classical Arab poetry: romance, nature, and beauty. Many Bedouin poems invoke the imagery of the unique desert landscape, where severity and majesty coexist.

The Bedouin style was once a standard form of Arabic poetic expression, but it lost favor a thousand years ago as Arab culture increasingly identified with the great Muslim capitals of Baghdad, Damascus, and Cairo, rather than with the nomadic Bedouin.

Now, Bedouin poetry is making a comeback. Neda Almuebarek, a young Saudi studying in the United States, described its appeal by saying, "I am of the first [truly modern] Saudi generation...and there is a sense amongst this generation that we are beginning to lose the traditions of our past. This poetry provides a way to get back to understanding the identity of our ancestors, and thus who we are."

Almuebarek said the classical Bedouin style is popular with teenagers, in part for its directness, in part because of its sense of authenticity, and in part because it allows discussion of otherwise taboo subjects like romance. Bedouin verse is sometimes set to contemporary music, creating a new and modern style rooted in antiquity. ■

- LP, 3/10/04

EARLY INDICATORS

It is rare to read an article these days on political change in Iran that does not include a long passage on how liberalization in women's dress is a sign of coming political liberalization. First come the jeans, then comes the makeup, and then comes sweeping political change, the argument seems to go, although people differ on the timeframe.

At the same time, many authors writing on secular Arab countries view rising conservatism in women's dress as a sign that what avenues of freedom exist are threatened by a wave of religiously grounded authoritarianism. Although the image of angry bearded men shaking their fists in the air is a staple of television broadcasts about the difficult present facing Western powers in the Middle East, the presence of veiled young women, often in the background, serves as a chilling portent of the future in the region.

The two cases are opposite, yet they enjoy striking similarities. In each case, observers see governmental systems in danger of falling to their ideological foes, with social trends as harbingers of political trends. They see the efforts of authoritarian governments to grant concessions to their foes in the social sphere as an effort to buy time, but a game which governments will ultimately lose. Western governments (and to a degree, conservative Arab governments) are therefore tempted to look to the social sphere as an early indicator of change and as an important battleground for influence.

But what are the odds that regional governments have it right? Perhaps they have found a formula that may not generate optimal macroeconomic growth or foster social tranquility but will maintain their grip on power for the foreseeable future.

In ceding social space, authoritarian regimes are seeking to relieve political pressure. Unable to control everything, they retain control over what is essential while relinquishing control over what is incidental. Even Saddam Hussein—perhaps the most totalitarian of leaders in the region in the last half century—left wide room for indi-

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CHARTING A NEW POLICY TOWARD THE ARAB WORLD

The Middle East Program has launched a project aimed at crafting a new policy vision for the Arab world. Former U.S. ambassador to Morocco Edward Gabriel is the project's chairman, and former U.S. secretary of defense William S. Cohen chairs an advisory board of some twenty leading experts from think tanks and academia. This month, a small CSIS delegation is traveling to seven countries in the Middle East to engage in dialogues with government officials, opinion makers, and emerging young voices in the region. The group will deliberate over the summer and fall and will issue a final report in late 2004. ■

vidual freedom in some realms, as the thousands of Arabs who flocked to nightclubs and resorts in Baghdad and Basra throughout the 1980s can attest.

But authoritarian governments do far more than merely allow pressure to escape. They simultaneously maintain a strong apparatus for repression, another for cooptation, and work hard to depoliticize their populations, at least in regard to domestic affairs.

The last component is an important change from the 1950s and 1960s, when ideology was a key tool of mobilization for many Middle Eastern countries. Florid speeches drew hundreds of thousands into the streets of Baghdad, Cairo, and Damascus, and martial music stirred the troops to battle. But the time for that has passed. The 1979 Iranian revolution appears to have been the last gasp of ideology as a governing tool in the Middle East; much more typical is the recent Libyan turn toward realpolitik and the rising Iranian discourse about “the national interest.” Ideologies in the Middle East today tend to be nationalist ones, and rather than paint pictures of a utopian future, they tend to blame outsiders for a lackluster present.

Though poll after poll in the Arab world demonstrates a desire for democracy, there are few signs that populations are demanding it. There is a deepening perception in the Arab world that internal politics constitute a high-risk, high-reward pursuit, with the punishments for most outweighing the benefits.

When people are polled, their real desire seems to be for a better-functioning government, not necessarily a democratic one. Many see an American democracy captured by ethnic lobbies, and an Israeli democracy bent on anti-Arab hostility. The muddle in Iraq makes many Iraqis and others wish for a “kinder, gentler authoritarianism,” in which some liberties would be bypassed but personal security would be protected. Such a system of government may not be optimal, but many may see it as the “least bad option.”

This is not to argue that Arabs are incapable or undeserving of democracy or that it would be undesirable for them to have it. Instead, it is to suggest that regional governments may be held together by what looks like twine and baling wire, but they still have proven remarkably durable.

The Bush administration’s Greater Middle East Initiative arises out of a broad consensus that the status quo is a recipe for radicalization, instability, and immiseration. In fact, only the last part may be true. The poor tend not to revolt, and middle classes will not revolt unless they see a realistic alternative to the status quo. None is yet on the horizon.

A shining success story—in Iraq, Morocco, or elsewhere—could show the way to a better future, as could the immolation of a thuggish regime. But such change would, at its core, be about politics and accommodating difference (or repressing it), rather than shifting social mores. When it comes to politics, Middle Eastern governments are survivors, and it is hard to bet against them. ■

—JBA 3/11/2004

Links of Interest

<http://www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/2004/03.04/13-arabliberals.html>

An article on Middle East program director Jon Alterman’s talk last month at Harvard’s Center for Middle Eastern Studies entitled, “Is It Time to Give Up on Arab Liberals?”

http://www.csis.org/energy/040224_transcript.pdf

The transcript of February 24 presentations at CSIS by Matthew Simmons and Mahmoud Abdul-Baqi and Nansen Saleri of Saudi Aramco giving differing assessments for the future of Saudi oil reserves.

<http://www.twq.com>

The Spring 2004 issue of *The Washington Quarterly*, now online, features an analysis of federalism in Iraq.

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