



Middle East NOTES AND COMMENT

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SUMMER READING

The market for books in the Middle East is starting to sizzle this summer, at least in relative terms. In a region in which sales of 3,000 copies is highly respectable, books can be considered bestsellers despite having a limited market. In Jordan, one bestseller is a bootleg: Saddam Hussein's novel, *Get Out, You Cursed One*. Saddam's daughter has published the 2003 book despite a Jordanian government ban. The novel centers on a character named Salem, who unites Iraqi Arabs against foreign infidels.

In Iran, J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter stories join John Grisham and Danielle Steel novels on the bestseller list. Recently, former president Clinton's *My Life* hit the shelves as a two-volume hardcover set retailing at a pricey \$16.50. Given that the former first lady's own memoirs, *Living History*, sold over 12,000 copies, the publisher is optimistic about his prospects. The former president's memoirs needed to undergo some revision, however: sales were initially halted because of a fear that Clinton's cover photograph "would be arousing for women."

In Egypt, George Bush's controversial biography of the Prophet Mohammed is gaining headlines. The book, now in its fifth Egyptian printing, was written not by the 43rd U.S. president, but by a distant relative of the same name. It was out of print for more than a century until it was resurrected in 2002. ■ - RF

HARD CHOICES AHEAD

By Haim Malka

Though this month's synchronized bombings in London persuade even more people of an unholy link between Islam, politics, and violence, some Islamists in the Middle East are seeking to prove just the opposite.

Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood—a large and influential group despite being officially banned—is pursuing a National Alliance for Reform, to include parties and movements from across the political spectrum. The alliance's platform is not particularly Islamic. Instead, it has demands common to many pro-democracy movements in Egypt and beyond: a cancellation of emergency laws, freedom of the press and political parties, separation of powers, and free elections. Islamists from Morocco to Iraq and beyond are making similar moves, reaching out not only to local political forces, but also exploring dialogue with the United States and other foreign powers as well.

U.S. policy seems mixed on the matter. U.S. officials meet regularly with the *Adl wal Ihsan* (Justice and Welfare) movement in Morocco, one of the largest sociopolitical groups in the country despite being barred from the parliament. In Iraq, U.S. officials have met repeatedly with figures representing Shia and Sunni religious organizations in their efforts to promote stable Iraqi politics and blunt the ongoing insurgency. U.S. strategy toward the January 2005 elections was largely guided by the utterances of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, and indeed the success of the current policy hinges on the success of Islamist parties such as Ibrahim al-Jaffari's Islamic Dawa party and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq.

Yet, there are limits. When an Egyptian asked Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at a public gathering last month whether the United States was conducting a dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood, she went further than she had to, saying, "We have not engaged the Muslim Brotherhood and we don't. We won't." The U.S. government has declined feelers to meet with Hamas and Hizballah representatives as well.

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NEW ADDITION

The Middle East Program is delighted to welcome **Michael Balz** as the new program coordinator/research assistant. Mike recently graduated with a bachelor's degree from Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, where he received a certificate in Arab studies. He also studied at the prestigious Institut National d'Etudes Politiques in Paris. While a student, he worked at the State Department on the 9/11 declassification project and as an editor at Georgetown's largest student newspaper, *The Hoya*. He replaces Anna Morhman, who moved over to CSIS's Office of Strategic Planning. You can reach Mike at (202) 775-3179 or mbalz@csis.org.

There certainly are good reasons to decline meetings with unrepentant killers or with those who seek to enter political processes only to subvert them. Yet, in some cases, U.S. policy toward meeting with religious groups seems to hinge as much on the attitudes of host governments as it does on the actions of the groups themselves.

American interests, however, require constant scrutiny of the horizon for opportunities. This is a long and difficult process, which requires both sides to cross a psychological barrier. Political stirrings in the Middle East make this process even more important. Islamist groups are competing in elections and often winning them on the local level. More democratized systems will almost certainly mean more victories for religiously inspired candidates and movements. These movements' suppression by many of the secular governments in the region has made them the only semi-organized opposition to the status quo, and their grass-roots popularity gives them a leg up on wealthy, urban, and secular liberal elites. In many cases, Islamists are at the forefront of the struggle for accountable and representative government in their countries, and the elites represent nothing so much as the status quo.

Opponents of dialogue argue that such recognition will legitimize movements like the Muslim Brotherhood, making the United States complicit both in the marginalization of those more liberal and secular voices that finally have the courage to speak up and in the imposition of Islamic governance throughout the Arab world. But none of these groups will rise or fall based on U.S. recognition. They already have legitimacy—on the streets and increasingly at the ballot box. By remaining purposively aloof, we are likely to find that rather than isolating these movements, we are isolating ourselves.

The objective of engagement with religious groups is not merely to have a dialogue, but to confront these movements with clear choices: choices that necessarily must have rewards for compliance and penalties for noncompliance. Calibrating both will be difficult, especially because our politics will gravitate toward realities in Washington rather than realities on the ground. Our inclination will be to stress the stick over the carrot and to collect a long list of preconditions before we will consider entering into discussions. Our interests, however, require us not to be standoffish but active, engaged, and alert.

This debate makes many U.S. friends and allies in the region uncomfortable. Rising calls for reform agitate many of them, and they accuse the Bush administration of "flirting" with Islamists. For at least some, playing the Islamic card is a way to dissuade the Bush administration from pushing forward on democratization. Ultimately, however, U.S. interests lie not in promoting a person or leader but in strengthening democratic institutions that ensure transparent government and irrevocable basic freedoms. The disenfranchisement of religious voices is just as objectionable as the disenfranchisement of liberal and secular ones, and greater democracy will need to mean that both have a voice. ■ 7/11/05

Links of Interest

The text of Rev. George Bush's *Life of Mohammad*:

http://www.muhammadanism.org/bush/bush_mohammed.pdf

U.S. State Department clarification on George Bush's writing career:

http://usinfo.state.gov/media/Archive_Index/Life_of_Mohammed_Book_NOT_Authored_by_Grandfather_or_Ancessor_of_President_Bush.html

Read CSIS Burke Chair in Strategy Anthony Cordesman's new report on Iraq's insurgency:

http://www.csis.org/features/050623_IraqInsurg.pdf

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Please visit our Web site at www.csis.org/mideast to learn more about the program's work.