

REALITY CAN BE TOO MUCH

Many television programs last only one season and some even less. But in the Arab world, the reality program *Big Brother* lasted just one week.

The program was not an Arabic-dubbed rerun of the popular MTV series. It was a show with a coed Arab cast, ranging from a salsa-dancing Jordanian jeweler to a Kuwaiti karate instructor. The show created an uproar.

Reality television programming is popular in the Arab world for the same reasons it is popular in the rest of the world: it is often gripping television, and its production costs are a mere fraction of those for dramas or comedies.

Some of the programs are clear copies of Western originals: *Fear Factor*, *Star Academy*, and *Superstar* are all closely modeled on Western programming (as was their wildly popular predecessor, *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*). Others seek to chart a more independently Arab course, such as *Al Hawa Sawa*, in which eight women live together in an apartment while family members and a voting audience help them choose a spouse.

Although the shows attract millions of viewers, they also attract critics. Clerics have issued edicts against the programs and barred followers from participating in voting. Over 1,000 protesters gathered outside the set of *Big Brother* in Bahrain, and 500 protested a *Star Academy* concert in Kuwait.

Intriguingly, Islamist legislators have turned to parliaments to rein in the programs. In Bahrain, seven Islamist MPs demanded to question the information minister over the filming of *Big Brother*, and in Kuwait similar parliamentary protests over a concert with performers from *Star Academy* resulted in tighter rules for public concerts. It is not quite democracy in action, but it comes close. ■

- NK, 6/23/04

IS IT TIME TO GIVE UP ON ARAB LIBERALS?

Arab liberals are in unprecedented demand. Viewed by many in the West as the hope of their region and the antidote to Al Qaeda, government officials dine them (and often wine them) in salons in Washington, London, Paris, and beyond.

A surge in Western support for Arab liberals, however, is more likely to have precisely the opposite effect of what is intended. Rather than strengthening such groups, it more probably will marginalize them further, brand them as foreign agents, and make more doubtful the very change in politics many Westerners aim to promote.

Building out from a core of Arab liberals is an understandable starting point for Western policy. As a group they are a congenial bunch, well educated and fluent in English (and often French). They are comfortable with Westerners, and Westerners are comfortable with them.

But if we are honest with ourselves, we have to admit that, as a group, Arab liberals are increasingly aging, increasingly isolated, and diminishing in number. Among their own populations, they have little fire, and still less legitimacy. In the eyes of their compatriots--and especially the youth--they represent the failed ideas of the past rather than a bold hope for the future. They are rapidly losing the battles for the hearts and minds of their own countries.

Increased Western attention threatens to exacerbate their condition. In part, this is because such support would cast them even more as the agents not of progress and freedom but of purported Western efforts to weaken and subjugate the Arab world. Even more troubling is that increased Western attention causes them to shift their attention to the West, where they receive a friendly reception, instead of their own societies, where the reception is frostier.

All too often, Arab liberals seem to be waiting for the United States to deliver their countries to them. Conservative groups conduct active, creative, and impressive

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ARAB & WESTERN MEDIA

The Middle East Program is coordinating a conference entitled "Arab and Western Media in the 21st Century: Engaging the World" to be held in February 2005 in Salzburg, Austria. The conference will gather some 25 leading journalists, editors, and news executives from Western and Arab media for three and a half days of frank and constructive conversations. Guided by an expert staff of facilitators and faculty, the discussions will focus on shared professional concerns, journalistic ethics, and critiques of performance during hostilities in Iraq. Support for this conference is being provided by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and both Western and Arab television news channels. ■

programs to deliver an array of services that affect peoples' daily lives, yet too many liberals consider their jobs done when they deliver copy to their editor.

More Western support is unlikely to turn these individuals inward to their own societies. To the contrary, it would create even more incentives for them to learn better the language of Western aid organizations. In the words of one friend in the U.S. government, "The typical U.S. aid recipient in the Middle East is the son of an ambassador, who has a German mother and happens to run an NGO." More aid to such organizations does not make them seem more homegrown, but less so.

Rather than bet on the liberals, a wiser policy would follow three principles. The first would be to invest in liberalization--not only for those who support our ideas, but for those who oppose them as well. Many perceive pressing Arab governments to move forward on free speech and free association as too dangerous, especially in the midst of a global war on terror. But doing so is also necessary. It is only in a free market of ideas that liberal voices can truly gain popular support instead of being seen as the co-opted alternative to nationalist, conservative, and radical voices. We often proclaim the need for bloated and antiquated state monopolies in the Middle East to give way to competition; so, too, should we welcome a healthy competition of ideas on a level playing field.

Second, we need to lower some of the standards we apply to groups we support. We properly bar funds to organizations that carry out acts of terror, but burdening groups with a litany of political litmus tests tied to support for our policies is self-defeating. We end up not only isolating ourselves, but also weakening the credibility of everyone with whom we want to work.

Finally, we need to think more creatively about activities that do not carry a clear U.S. government label. Some such activities could be done in partnership with European allies--many of whom feel a much more imminent threat from political and social strife in the Arab world. Other activities could be done through nongovernmental organizations, through universities, and other institutions. The goal here is not to cover the U.S. government's footprints but rather to engage broad sections of Middle Eastern societies with broad sections of our own.

We should not abandon Arab liberals. Many are courageous fighters for the ideas we cherish, and tossing them aside would send all the wrong signals. But at the same time, we cannot let all of our hopes ride on their ultimate success. We will be much better off winning partial victories with broader publics than more complete success with isolated but unempowered elites.

The important audiences for liberalism in the Arab world are in Cairo, Baghdad, and Beirut, not Washington, London, and Paris. Their most important supporters must be in their own governments, not ours. If we forget this, we not only do a disservice to ourselves, but to them as well. ■

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Links of Interest

http://www.clingendael.nl/cli/publ/conf_proceed/pijpers_2004_06_09.pdf

Proceedings of a recent Transatlantic Dialogue on Middle East Policy in which Program Director Jon Alterman participated.

<http://www.policyreview.org/jun04/alterman.html>

"The False Promise of Arab Liberals," from which this newsletter's main article was excerpted.

<http://www.hawasawa.com>

Website for Al Hawa Sawa, described in this month's sidebar article.

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