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West Bank Hip-Hop

Born in 1970s New York, hip-hop has long been associated with the African-American community, but it is emerging as a new vehicle for activism in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As in the United States, Middle Eastern hip-hop artists—Arab and Israeli—talk about struggle. In fact, Tamer Nafer, an Israeli Arab and lead singer of the band Dam (which means "blood" in both Arabic and Hebrew), names American rapper Tupac Shakur as one of his biggest influences.

The most famous Israeli Jewish rapper, Subliminal, sold over 40 million records in 2004, proving that hip-hop is a small but significant part of the Israeli music scene. Fans downloaded Dam's 2001 single "Min Irhabi?" ("Who's a Terrorist?") more than a million times from a hip-hop Web site. The artists freely admit the political nature of their songs, pointing out that rap expresses their feelings of alienation from the politics that control their lives. One young female rapper of the duo *Arappeyat* explains her determination in the trailer for the upcoming documentary on Palestinian rappers, *Slingshot Hip Hop*: "Many people tried to stand in our way, but we won't stop for anyone."

Though gaining popularity, the hip-hop scene remains largely underground. Mainstream radio stations in Israel refuse to play the music, which often carries a raw and explicit political message. Many Arab rappers play in local nightclubs and personally distribute their homemade CDs. Some, like the group Ramallah Underground and rapper Iron Sheik, rely on the Internet for publicity. ■ *- CR*

RELIGIOUS MINORITIES, RELIGIOUS MAJORITIES

By Jon B. Alterman

A rule of thumb among many observers of the Middle East is that when religious parties are allowed to compete in open and fair elections, they win about 20 percent of the vote. While the number of data points for such an assessment is admittedly limited, it is built on observations in countries as varied as Jordan, Kuwait, and Morocco.

The recent elections in Iraq, and the elections scheduled for next summer in the Palestinian Authority, may challenge that assumption. The United Iraqi Alliance coalition that took half the seats in Iraq's Transitional National Assembly did include a number of secular figures—not least of them Iraqi National Congress head Ahmed Chalabi—yet there is no disputing the religious character of the slate or the importance of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's imprimatur. Constituent party names like "The Islamic Call" and "The Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq" leave little doubt as to their sympathies, and mosque networks were a vital component of the coalition's get-out-the-vote efforts.

Highlighting the importance of religious groups in Iraqi politics is not to argue that Iraq is headed toward being a theocratic state like Iran. In fact, it is not. If anything, Iraq is becoming more like Lebanon, with religion being a marker for communal identities and the benefits and protections that flow from them. Yet, to ignore the importance of religious sentiment and religious institutions in promoting the winning coalition's victory is to misread much of what is happening on the ground in Iraq today.

Similarly, Hamas-backed politicians have done remarkably well in Palestinian local elections in recent months, besting the secular nationalist Fatah-backed candidates in West Bank votes in December, and in Gaza votes in January.

Surely part of the appeal of these movements is that they reject the acceptability of the status quo. Interim Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Alawi came across to many as Washington's candidate, selected for office by former CPA Administrator L. Paul

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Arab Media Conference at the Salzburg Seminar

The CSIS Middle East Program, in partnership with the Salzburg Seminar and with cooperation from the Imagining the Future Fund, hosted "Broadcast Media in the 21st Century: Engaging the World," February 4-7, 2005. Jon Alterman traveled to Salzburg, Austria, to facilitate the conference along with Khaled Hroub of the Cambridge Arab Media Project and Frank Sesno of George Mason University. The conference brought together twenty-eight journalists and academics from the United States, Europe, and the Middle East, for a series of candid discussions about the current and future challenges of global broadcast media. More information on the Salzburg Seminar's activities may be found on their website at www.salzburgseminar.org ■

Bremer and virtually stumping with President Bush during the U.S. presidential campaign. An anticipated split with Washington never came in the weeks before the election. Allawi was roundly defeated, drawing less than 15 percent of the vote despite his incumbency.

Hamas has worked for more than a decade and a half to define itself as the most ardent advocate of Palestinian rights and the most ardent foe of the Israelis. When the Palestine Liberation Organization morphed into the Palestinian National Authority in the 1990s and in the minds of many Palestinians failed to either liberate or administrate with any competence, Hamas stood in opposition. It continued to proclaim maximalist goals, while its social institutions like clinics and schools functioned far better than their nationalist counterparts.

Religious parties are about much more than mere opposition, though. They also draw on deep roots in society. With all of the talk about the rise of religious radicalism in the Middle East, what often gets lost is the deep roots of individual piety. For example, in a poll conducted by the International Republican Institute in Iraq during December 2004, 56.3 percent of respondents identified "faith in God" as the single most important value to them. By comparison, "family" was the only other value ranking in double digits, and "personal freedom" was the first choice of a mere 1.3 percent. More than 77 percent ranked "faith in God" among their top three values, far exceeding any other response.

To many in Washington who aim to spread democracy in the Middle East, this makes little sense. Western elites often view faith as intellectually suspect and identify "modernity" with an individualistic, secular humanist outlook. Even among President Bush's evangelical Christian supporters, confidence in the universality of the American experience draws on a specific religious framework.

There are indeed some Arabs who share Western ideas about the role religion should play in their societies, and most are secular nationalists. Yet in many countries, the failures of the last half century have discredited these people. Publics see them as intellectual dinosaurs, the products of the unsatisfactory status quo rather than challengers to it. They see the nationalists as people who were quick to promise but slow to deliver; men who set out to build a nation but mostly built their own bank accounts.

Instead, Arab publics increasingly tie modernity to religiously influenced institutions, which are often more technologically advanced and better funded than secular counterparts.

What is missing is not a rising secular tide in the Middle East but instead a more nuanced understanding of the potentially diverse interactions of faith and politics there. For some governments that seek to continue authoritarian rule, it suits their interests to ensure that the only opposition to them is a radical alternative that represents no real alternative at all. It is these groups that garner some 20 percent of a vote.

Confusing democracy and liberalization in the Middle East with the spread of secularism is a mistake. However much one may wish for the latter, it is the former two that are truly vital. ■ *2/23/05*

Links of Interest

Information and links about the upcoming documentary about Palestinian rappers:
www.slingshothiphop.com

Home page for Palestinian hip-hop group Ramallah Underground:
www.ramallahunderground.com

Rapper Iron Sheik's website:
www.ironsheik.biz

Recent paper delivered by Jon B. Alterman on the lessons of Libyan-American rapprochement:
www.csis.org/mideast/041213_libya.pdf

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