

## MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

## Traditional Remedies

by Haim Malka

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In the decade after the September 11 attacks, the U.S. government promoted democracy as an antidote to al Qaeda's violent ideology. Whether or not U.S. democracy promotion had much to do with it, the revolts and revolutions of 2011 recast Arab politics. To many U.S. allies, the principal product of casting aside dictatorships was not more democratic governance, but instead weakened security structures. As they see it, the new environment provided public space for violent extremist ideology to spread and reignited a debate over how to fight it. This time around, U.S. voices will be much less relevant to the debate.

Rather than promoting Western values, which can imply separating religion and state, governments in the region are doing the opposite. They see controlling religious space, both physical and ideological, as the key to combating extremism. Their strategies are not about creating "moderate Islam," as some Americans have advocated, but strengthening an interpretation of Islam that accepts state authority. In North Africa, defining a "traditional" or "national" Islam is at the core of this effort. The outcome of this struggle and whether governments can create viable religious alternatives to extremist narratives will shape the next generation of Islamic values across the region.

Local North African Islamic traditions have competed with Gulf-inspired salafi teaching for decades. Scholars and students studied in the Gulf and returned with new ideas; satellite television programs brought foreign preachers into households; and Gulf charities supported salafi mosques and organizations across the region. Puritanical salafi interpretations are part of a rebellion against traditions and practices that have existed in North Africa since the eighth century.

Morocco has responded to Gulf-inspired salafi teachings with a comprehensive strategy to try to strengthen its brand of Islamic values and interpretation based

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## In Memoriam: Ambassador Samuel Lewis

We mourn the passing last weekend of Ambassador Samuel Lewis, the U.S. ambassador to Israel from 1977-1985 and a longtime friend of the program. He told Jon Alterman many years ago that his own greatest advantage in life was to have a mother who thought the world of him. Ambassador Lewis attributed much of his later success to the resultant self-confidence. It was typical not to give himself much credit. In truth, he brought a penetrating intelligence, a constant pragmatism, and a fundamental decency to everything he did. He never tried to show he was the smartest person in the room, although he often was, and his honesty and directness were disarming. He didn't agree with all of our conclusions, and he told us when he thought we were wrong. We took it as a sign of respect, which is surely the way it was intended. We will miss him. ■

## An Uphill Battle

In August 2013, Saudi Arabia established its first obesity treatment center, just days after King Abdullah ordered weight-loss treatment for a Saudi man so heavy he had to be moved via forklift and airlifted to the hospital.

While many older Gulf Arabs remember years of hunger, the region now has some of the highest rates of obesity in the world. Sedentary lifestyles and diets full of fats and sugars are major culprits. As obesity has risen, so have related diseases, particularly diabetes. Obesity-related diseases alone are estimated to cost Gulf governments \$68 billion annually by 2022.

The GCC states have drafted a regional policy aimed at increasing physical activity. Each nation has also taken its own, sometimes unconventional, approach to the issue. The UAE has hosted a 'Your Weight in Gold' diet program, a fitness campaign featuring cycling sheikhs, and appearances by famous athletes such as Kobe Bryant to inspire physical activity. A program in Abu Dhabi linked the renewal of government-funded insurance policies to diabetes screening. Saudi Arabia has expanded its healthcare services, building over 120 new hospitals and funding an estimated 11,000 bariatric surgeries in 2012 alone.

Yet stifling summer temperatures discourage exercise, and traditional clothing is intended to provide protection from the elements rather than freedom of movement. Gulf cities are rarely walkable, and cultural barriers to women's sports mean that schoolgirls are often not even exposed to exercise. It may be an uphill battle, but at least uphill would mean more exercise. ■

on the Maliki madhhab, one of Sunni Islam's four schools of jurisprudence. Maliki Islam has historically coexisted with local cultures, and its adherents have rejected takfirism, the practice of declaring someone an unbeliever, which extremists often use to justify violence. Morocco requires all mosques to register with the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and it put all religious workers on the government payroll. It has also reformed training for preachers and religious educators, and it launched religious television and radio stations to compete with satellite programming.

Some in Tunisia seek to follow a path similar to Morocco's in building a state religious network that can compete with extremists. Following the revolution, violent extremist preachers spread in Tunisia's mosques, creating a chaotic environment with no government oversight. This coincided with a surge in religiously-inspired violence that threatened Tunisia's fragile political transition. Many Tunisian religious and political leaders responded to this growing threat by calling for rebuilding what some describe as "traditional Tunisian Islam" or "Tunisian Islamic values." Tunisia has a long history as a center of Islamic learning in North Africa, also rooted in the Maliki school. Yet, while diverse actors from across the political spectrum use the same language to describe their unique tradition, they vehemently disagree over the meaning of that tradition and the role Islam should play in public life.

Tunisia also faces a number of other hurdles. For one, it is trying to revitalize state religious institutions after a half century of neglect. Moreover, competition between the Islamist Ennahda party (which led efforts to centralize religious authority when it headed the government), secular political forces, salafists, and sufis means that no single actor can determine religious policy and what messages are propagated. In contrast, Morocco's national identity is intertwined with a king who plays an overt central religious role as commander of the faithful. While some religious forces in Morocco, such as the Justice and Charity movement, reject the king's religious role, he nonetheless has the tools and resources to promote a unified Islamic interpretation through state-funded mosques, schools, foundations, and research institutions.

Promoting local Islamic traditions is both a bureaucratic and an ideological battle. Governments are generally more effective in the bureaucratic component, which is about controlling religious space including mosques, religious schools, religious endowments, charities, and imam training programs. The majority of mosques in Morocco and Algeria, for example, are registered with the government, and mosque workers are state employees. State control of religious institutions makes a unified policy possible. While unlicensed prayer meetings exist and in some cases are tolerated, this is at the indulgence of the state.

Ideology is a weaker link. The credibility of state institutions has eroded in part because they are less appealing to younger audiences. Since strengthening state religion requires depoliticizing religion, state-employed preachers are unwilling to address the challenges of daily life which are inherently political: poor governance, economic exclusion, and corruption. By steering to safe topics, state clerics undermine their credibility with young people, who are then more susceptible to violent extremist messages. While some religious leaders and scholars understand the need to improve their outreach to younger audiences, their ideas of tolerance of and respect for authority are out of step with the rebellious spirit of the Arab uprisings.

This ideological struggle poses deep challenges for U.S. policymakers because there is no obvious U.S. role in this debate. Yet, a deeper understanding of the forces at play is crucial. Governments in the region seek to deradicalize their populations by making them more religious, not less. These messages may not always sound tolerant to American ears. Yet governments in the region are not looking to please the United States in this debate. They are betting that more controlled religious messaging can ultimately produce populations that are less rebellious. It is a gamble whose outcome will help determine the religious values of the next generation in the region. ■ 03/14/2014

## Links of Interest

The February 19, 2014 CSIS Gulf Roundtable with Deputy Secretary of State Ambassador William J. Burns on "[A Renewed Agenda for U.S.-Gulf Partnership](#)" received widespread coverage in the media.

[C-SPAN](#) and the [U.S. Department of State](#) featured video of the event on their websites.

Articles on the speech and its implications for U.S.-Gulf relations appeared in the [Los Angeles Times](#), [Al-Monitor](#), [Xinhua](#), and [SEAPOWER Magazine](#), among other outlets.

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