

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

Politics of Piety

by Jon B. Alterman

Many in the United States—and in the Middle East—worry that religious extremists in the Arab world are on the cusp of something big. Across the region, groups that blend religion and politics are injecting more religion into more open politics. Ennahda dominated the Tunisian elections in October 2011, and there is widespread speculation that the Muslim Brotherhood will dominate Egypt's elections. In Libya, there seems little doubt that the post-Qadhafi order will have a more religious cast, as did the post-Saddam order in Iraq.

More religion in politics, the thinking goes, must be a bad thing, because it would bring extreme voices closer to power. Yet, seen in a clearer light, the coming challenge for Arab societies is not to find ways to exclude religious voices from politics. Instead, it is to find new ways to combine piety and tolerance. Such a combination is not farfetched, and it can lay the basis for far more resilient societies across the Middle East.

The world has known many governments that combined piety and intolerance. Because piety often presumes some knowledge of divine intent, pious individuals in power have often arrogated divine sanction to their actions and equated political opposition with apostasy. In medieval Spain, conversion was a sign of loyalty to the crown, and those who refused were put to death. One arguably sees such a phenomenon at work in the seventeenth century Massachusetts Bay Colony, whose expellees founded Rhode Island.

Islamic history is rife with examples. Warriors played a key role spreading Islam, especially in the early centuries. Groups through the centuries have tried to impose their vision of Islam on broader societies, from kharijites in the seventh century to takfiri groups today.

And yet, there is no innate connection between piety and intolerance. Across the world, many pietistic groups are essentially apolitical. This is as true of Buddhist monks as it is of Saudi salafi quietists. They see the divine will as a personal challenge rather than a communal dictate. While many of the world's

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The Prophet's Pharmacy

The World Health Organization has identified an “exponential” growth rate of herbal and traditional medicine in recent years, with the fastest-growing markets in the Middle East and other developing countries. In the Middle East, however, some herbal medicines come with an interesting twist.

With the growth of the herbal supplement industry has come the spread of marketing that relies on a neo-traditional movement called al-tibb al-nabawi, or “The medicine of the Prophet.”

For Muslim consumers, some herbal companies have created marketing with a decidedly religious undertone. Advertisers for black cumin regularly reference a saying of the Prophet claiming that the seed is capable of “healing every disease but death.” Muhammad also recommended the twigs of the miswak tree, one native to the Middle East and Africa, for its teeth-cleaning properties. Today, a company called Misfaco uses miswak as an active ingredient in its toothpaste, marketing it as “toothpaste just like the Prophet used to use.” Honey is prescribed for a range of ills including diabetes, although some suggest it first should be mixed with vinegar.

Many of these products are manufactured in modern facilities around the world, with shipments going to Singapore and Sweden as well as Saudi Arabia. The batch the factories send to religious Muslims, however, comes with a different kind of branding. Having a model endorse a product is good, but being able to invoke the name of a prophet is divine. ■ RT

Strengthening the Middle East Public Policy Environment

On October 31, Dr. Jon Alterman delivered a talk at the New York-based Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs built on his paper, “Towards a More Robust Policy Environment in the Middle East.” The talk highlighted the need for sustained investment in creating a policy community, concrete incentive structures, durable business models and attention to issues that Middle Eastern governments will both care and speak openly about. Rather than replicate institutions that exist in the United States, Alterman described a path to help build robust research organizations that are aligned with regional aspirations. A full transcript of the lecture can be found [HERE](#). An audio version can be found [HERE](#). The paper on which the talk was based can be found [HERE](#). ■

most pious individuals prefer to live in homogeneous communities, for many, it means withdrawing from society rather than molding society to their will. This is as true of the Hasidic Jews in New Square, NY as it is of Coptic monks in desert monasteries.

For decades, the battle over political Islam has been different. Islamist groups have fought for the public square, and secularists have fought to keep them out. In many monarchies, the kings have inserted themselves between the two antagonists, protecting (and in some cases rewarding) each while reminding both that their fate lies with the ruler. It is a dynamic that has tended to radicalize both sides while encouraging the endurance of the conflict between them.

One of the most promising developments of the Arab world's political upheavals is the suggestion that it need not be so. Ennahda's leaders have begun to build bridges to the secular parties in Tunisia. In Egypt, the emergent electoral coalitions blend secular and religious parties. While most Western observers project a religious-secular split in Egyptian politics, it is far from clear that is the principal axis on which Egyptian politics will turn. In practice, the Islamist camp is as fractured as the secular camp, with a whole host of doctrinal differences layered on top of differences that have as much to do with regional strength and patronage relationships as religion.

These religious-secular alliances may all fall apart, and it is naïve to assume that there is no danger inherent in blending more piety into politics in the Middle East. Yet, it is similarly naïve to assume that there can be more resilient Middle Eastern societies without it. The systematic repression of Islamist politics in the region, combined with the fact that the mosque has been one of the few places in which opposition movements could gather, has allowed aspiring Islamist politicians to cast themselves as the alluring alternative to a dissatisfactory status quo. Some sort of Islamist surge, even if it is temporary, is inevitable.

The U.S. government has long stressed the importance of democracy in the Middle East, but the more appropriate focus is on tolerance. One can see any number of ways in which democratic governments could be ones in which homogenous religious or ethnic majorities restrict freedoms and persecute minorities. Writing more than 200 years ago in Federalist 10, James Madison warned against just such an outcome in the United States, a far more diverse society even in early America than most Middle Eastern ones are today.

A focus on tolerance, however, protects the rights of difference, whether it is of religion or level of observance, sect or religion, or even gender. Tolerance has been on the wane in the Middle East in the last half-century, but it has a long—if somewhat checkered—history in the region and is far from a foreign import.

The transition to tolerance is a hard one to make. In part, this is because unlike democracy, the journey toward greater tolerance is never done. Tolerance is, by its nature, always contested and never perfected. The United States has become progressively more tolerant over two centuries, yet it has a significant way still to go. The Arab world has a much longer journey to make.

Neither democracy nor tolerance is inevitable in the new Arab world that is emerging. Intolerant democracies would be scant improvement on the systems they replace, veering toward populism and ultimately back toward the authoritarian systems they displaced. More tolerant societies, even if they are not fully democratic, would work to smooth some of the rough edges of the new order and ease the inclusion of a range of new groups without prejudicing the rights of existing ones.

Piety is not the threat; intolerance is. ■11/17/2011

Links of Interest

[The Washington Post](#) quoted Jon Alterman in “Saudi crown prince’s death sparks succession talk.”

[The Financial Times](#) quoted Jon Alterman in “US troops to leave Iraq by end of year.”

[NPR’s “All Things Considered”](#) quoted Jon Alterman in “Foreign Policy a Fresh Target for GOP Hopefuls.”

[USA Today](#) quoted Jon Alterman in “News analysis: Obama builds on national security record.”

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