

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

In Praise of Failure

by Jon B. Alterman

Today's Middle East often seems more like a tragedy than a comedy, but an American comedian's recent [article](#) in the *New York Times* contains a lot of wisdom that the Middle East could use.

Mike Birbiglia is not a household name. He is a standup comic who recently starred in a film about an improvisational comedy troupe. As he describes his own expertise, "I make small films, small one-man shows Off Broadway, and small comedy specials for Netflix." He doesn't come across as a guru.

Birbiglia writes that he is often asked how to be successful in comedy and suggests six tips. At least half are about failure. That's unusual. We're used to successful people telling us about their successes, not their failures.

Yet Birbiglia admits that he wrote 14 drafts of his first movie and 12 drafts of his second. He adds that his first five-minute set on "The Late Show with David Letterman" was a distillation of three hours of material he had been developing and discarding in open-mike nights in bars and comedy clubs for six years. For his most recent movie, he kept gathering his friends for pizza parties. When they were relaxed and happy, he pumped them for information about what they disliked in his scripts. Mike Birbiglia's quest wasn't to be told that he was good. It was to be told how he could be better.

As the [Arab Human Development Report](#) (AHDR), the [World Bank](#), and others have observed, most Arab educational systems take a different approach. Arab schools' approach is often didactic, the AHDR observed, "supported by set books containing indisputable texts, and by an examination process that only tests memorization." In the words of the AHDR, Arab schools often seem to see "education as an industrial production process, where curricula and their content serve as molds into which fresh minds are supposed to be poured." Often times, there is one thing to learn and one way to learn it. Their motivated students imitate, they do not innovate. Rarely do these students seek to learn from mistakes or use failure as a spur to novel action.

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Bully Pulpit

An oud plucks in the background of the TV promotion as the words "Terrorism: It has no religion" explode in flames. A new message appears: "Terrorism: Its religion is Islam," along with the logo of the sponsor, a popular Arabic Christian channel. Religious programming is spreading in the Middle East, and an increasing amount of it borders on incitement.

Majorities in many Arab countries report that TV is their main source of religious information. And the number of free-to-air avowedly Sunni, Shi'ite, and Christian satellite channels is growing, [rising 50 percent from 2011 to 2014](#). In a more crowded market, competition pushes programmers to find ways to be more exciting and more emotionally engaging.

Clearly on the wane are the old statist religious stations featuring clerics delivering sonorous lectures to an obedient flock. Talk shows and debates rage over social and political topics, and well-dressed young presenters use emotional stories to bring tears to the eyes of their audiences.

Religious satellites have also become a bitter front in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, as Riyadh and Tehran accuse one another of bankrolling sectarian programming.

While Islamic media tend to hog the world spotlight, the rise of divisive Christian channels is [unsettling some in the region](#). Many such channels are locally run, but one of the most extreme, *Al Hayat*, is produced in California with funding from U.S. evangelists. Other Christian networks—such as the Lebanese *Nour Sat*—promote comity, but it can be hard to compete against fear-mongering with snappy production values. ■

Making Choices: The Future of the U.S.- Egyptian Relationship

The changes of the last five years have shaken the U.S.-Egyptian relationship to its core, and a new publication released by the CSIS Middle East Program examines the outlook for the relationship. In this report, Jon Alterman considers the interests that a close bilateral relationship serves and also highlights the consequences of a different kind of U.S.-Egyptian relationship. You can access the full report [HERE](#).

اتخاذ الخيارات: مستقبل العلاقات الأمريكية المصرية

قد هزت تغيرات السنوات الخمسة الأخيرة العلاقات الأمريكية المصرية بشكلٍ جوهري. ويناقش جون ألترمان في هذا التقرير المصالح التي تخدمها العلاقة الثنائية الوثيقة، كما ويجري تسليط الضوء على ما ستكون عواقب نوع مختلف من العلاقات بين الولايات المتحدة ومصر. ويمكن الحصول على التقرير الكامل باللغة العربية [هنا](#).

While Birbiglia's approach differs from Arab schooling, his determination to experiment and fail constructively is consistent with youth sports culture in the United States. While the spotlight in that culture is on the winner's podium, the broad societal impact is on the losers, the legions who commit themselves to work harder so the next time they are the ones who are the winners.

A generation ago, youth sports were a part-time hobby. Athletes played different sports in each season, relying on innate ability and playing experience to carry them through. Increasingly, children pick a single sport by the age of ten or twelve. They train single-mindedly for ten months a year or more, combining strength training, aerobic conditioning and sport-specific skills training to hone their skills.

And even when they do that and become remarkable successes, failure is the norm. A spectacular hitter in baseball gets a hit about 30 percent of the time. An amazing soccer player scores on only a small fraction of shots on goal. There are some sports in which winners necessarily fail less than half the time—tennis, for example—but even a champion tennis player will lose dozens of points in a match.

The *New Yorker* writer Malcolm Gladwell popularized the idea that mastering any skill takes 10,000 hours of effort. Even if he was a little imprecise in his conclusions, success in many fields takes an awful lot of failure.

Many Arabs treat failure as a humiliation to be avoided, not a challenge to be overcome. And in recent years, some of the Arab Gulf states have been engaged in an effort to show that everyone is a winner, regardless of the effort expended. As in sports for very young children in the United States, everyone gets a trophy. Like the children in Lake Wobegon, everyone is presumed to be above average.

The approach may make some people feel better about themselves, but it's unlikely to make them perform better. The approach seems directed toward making them comfortable. It does not seem intended to make them truly excellent.

The easy explanation is that this approach is merely a ploy to buy loyalty. Display loyalty to people so that they show loyalty in return. But that cannot be the whole story. Surely a part of these actions are intended to engender conservatism. Questioning assumptions, truths, and authority can be very disruptive. In the very near term, an individual and a society are almost certainly better off modeling behaviors on what has worked in the past.

Looking further forward, however, societies are almost certainly better off encouraging constructive failures. In part, a pattern of constant experimentation explores if even better outcomes can be obtained from present conditions. More importantly, though, experimentation creates a certain resiliency in societies that enables them to withstand future shocks.

It is easy to argue that the Middle East suffers from too much instability right now. But at the same time, too much stability in the region is perilous as well. As commodity pricing, demographics, and communications technology all change conditions in the region, governments and societies must find a way to be agile, not merely solid.

Birbiglia concludes his piece with the point that cleverness is overrated and heart is underrated. "Sometimes people say, 'One thing you have to offer in your work is yourself.' I disagree. I think it's the only thing."

Think about who is passionate about his or her cause in today's Middle East. Think about who is constantly experimenting and learning from failure. Think about who is willing to really sacrifice for what he or she believes. It is not all of the people who are winning participation trophies. It is, instead, the people who want to disrupt the awards ceremonies. There is an important lesson in that.

■ 9/21/16

Links of Interest

Bloomberg quoted Jon Alterman in "Saudi Arabia's Clout in Washington Isn't What It Used to Be."

The Wall Street Journal quoted Jon Alterman in "Obama Heads to United Nations With Mixed Foreign-Policy Record."

Asharq Al-Awsat quoted Jon Alterman in "Obama Adamant to Veto JASTA Bill."

The Washington Post's "The Fix" blog interviewed Jon Alterman in "President Obama's no-win scenario on whether to allow 9/11 families to sue Saudi Arabia."

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