

## MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

## Justice is a Virtue

by Jon B. Alterman

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The most pivotal speech President Obama gave in the 2008 presidential campaign may have been the one he gave on race in America. In March 2008, attention focused on sermons that Obama's pastor had given which seemed to reflect racism, intolerance and a paranoid hostility to the very government that Obama was seeking to command. The airwaves were full of criticism. Obama responded with a nuanced speech in Philadelphia that laid out his own understandings of race, diversity, and the continuing imperfection of American society. The speech not only defused the issue; veteran newspaper columnist David Broder suggested that it was the most important speech given on race in America in four decades.

There continue to be signs that, in the coming months, Obama will give another landmark speech, this one addressing the world's Muslim community. Such a speech would be without precedent, and it could help shape a set of relationships that, by most accounts, have been growing more hostile in the last decade.

If Obama gives such a speech, the idea of justice must be at the heart of it. For many Americans, this would seem like a mistake. But it isn't.

Justice is a complicated idea in any culture, encompassing very different concepts. For many, there is a punitive sense of justice, when perpetrators are brought to justice. There is a more liberal sense, when the weak rely on justice to protect them from the strong. And there are others.

But for most Americans, the core image of justice is the idea of a blindfolded goddess holding a scale. This is a sense of justice as fairness and balance.

On a scale, what favors one side disadvantages the other, and applied to a Middle Eastern context, raising the specter of justice would mean rebalancing between our friends and foes. It would have the effect of penalizing allies—regional governments in general, and the government of Israel in particular—

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## Virtually Islamic

Islam is no longer confined to this life and the afterlife—it is increasingly bound to the virtual life. A growing number of software products create virtual spaces in which Muslims can deepen their connection to their faith and non-Muslims can explore with Muslim identities.

One such product, created by Yusuf al-Qaradawi's IslamOnline.net and connected to the popular online venture Second Life, creates a simulation of the pilgrimage to Mecca. Through their online avatars, users can perform all of the rituals of the pilgrimage in an accurately rendered simulation of the Grand Mosque in Mecca and its surrounding sites. Second Life, a three-dimensional virtual world with more than sixteen million users, also contains virtual representations of a Ramadan tent, Cordoba's Mezquita mosque, Casablanca's Hassan II Mosque, Istanbul's Blue Mosque, and a reconstruction of the community that surrounded Spain's Alhambra as it existed in the thirteenth century. This reconstruction, named the Caliphate of Al-Andalus, is replete with Muslim, Christian and Jewish quarters and allows users to experiment with living under medieval Islamic rule.

Out of Finland comes another online community, Muxlim Pal, that creates a virtual world in which users can socialize with fellow Muslims. The site emphasizes that it is a safe space that bans violent, drug-related, and sexually explicit content.

With so much user-driven content, it remains unclear whether the sites will encourage more exchange between Muslims and non-Muslims or virtual wars between them—or between Muslims themselves. In a way, it's just like real life. ■ GG

## Gamal Mubarak at CSIS

Gamal Mubarak, who heads the Policy Secretariat of Egypt's National Democratic Party visited CSIS on Monday, March 1. Mubarak spoke in an off-the-record session with a small group of experts from the Washington policy community. The wide-ranging discussion touched on a number of issues, including the effects of the global economic downturn on the Egyptian economy, the U.S.-Egyptian bilateral relationship, political reform, civil-military relations and Egypt's energy policy. Mubarak has headed the Policy Secretariat since it was created in 2002 and is the deputy secretary general of the party. ■

and rewarding the causes of those who fight them in the name of “resistance.” It would restrain the strong and reward the weak. Most problematic from the US perspective, it would seem to be giving in to terror.

But such a reading is tied into American understandings of justice, not the understandings of the intended audience. Muslims would have a different reading because the emphasis of traditional Islamic understandings of justice is different.

Justice is one of the most prominent themes in Islam. Rather than being centered around the idea of achieving a balance, however, Muslim understandings of justice tend to be based principally in morality. To Muslim audiences, the core aspect of justice is not that it is redistributive or even-handed, but that it is ethical.

By extension, injustice is linked to immorality. Injustice, too, is a key concept in Islam. According to the magisterial *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition*, the word for injustice “can be seen as one of the most important negative value-words” in the Quran, appearing in more than 280 places.

Americans have been unwilling to talk about justice in the Middle East because they haven’t wanted to tip the balance away from friends. By seemingly skirting the issue of justice, however, the effect has been to suggest to Muslim audiences that U.S. policy in the Middle East is both immoral and illegitimate, and that those fighting against it have right on their side.

This analysis has its limits. It is clear that most in the Middle East would favor the United States pursuing a more “balanced” policy in the Middle East. The desire for redistributive justice, common in the United States, is clearly there. In addition, there is no denying that American notions of justice have a moral component as well, which helps explain the role religious movements have played in efforts to pursue “social justice” or “economic justice.” And of course, ideas about justice and injustice are complex and inconsistent not only within every society, but often within individuals. There is no simple way of seeing this.

But the important thing to note is that Americans are increasingly at odds with Muslim audiences for the wrong reasons. Many Muslims see the U.S. aversion to embracing a goal of justice as an indifference to—if not an embrace of—immorality. That doesn’t help the United States or its Muslim friends around the world.

Bringing justice into a U.S. discussion of the Middle East would be difficult, but Obama could do it successfully. In his political career, he has proven adept at promoting agreement on common principles and winning broad support to work toward them. In his 2008 speech on race, he showed great empathy for blacks and whites alike, and he was frank about the difficulty of creating greater unity in a diverse country. Similarly, in his 2006 speech on religion, he talked of the “grounding of faith in struggle” in his own journey toward Christianity.

Should he choose to, Obama has an opportunity to connect Muslims and Americans in a shared journey toward justice, even if differences remain about the precise destination. The important outcome would be to demonstrate our commonalities and that, whatever our differences, we must embark on that journey together. At the same time, such an approach would reveal that those who shroud themselves in the cloak of justice have no monopoly on morality; indeed, many have little morality on their side. The moral ground is occupied by those who strive for justice, not those who kill in the name of it. An American president needs to make that case. ■ 3/04/09

## Links of Interest

The CSIS Middle East program hosted a Congressional Forum on Islam event “What Should President Obama Say to Muslims?” with Dr. Emad Shahin.

Jon Alterman, was quoted by the Associated Press, “UAE Signs \$3bn Deal with Boeing, Lockheed.”

Dr. Michael Herb of Georgia State University presented “The Democracy Tax: Accountability, Transparency and Efficiency in the Gulf” at the most recent Gulf Roundtable event.

Jon Alterman, was quoted by Reuters, “Clinton Dives Into Arab-Israeli Peacemaking.”

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