

BRAVE NEW WORLD

Science fiction has had little foothold in the Middle East, but the situation appears to be changing. Sales for *The 99*—an Islamic-themed comic book whose characters use the 99 attributes of God to battle intolerance, fanaticism, and evil—have reportedly exceeded those of *Spiderman* and the *Fantastic Four* throughout the Arab World. The comic book, published by a Kuwaiti firm and financed by an Islamic bank in Bahrain, garners wide praise for merging traditional sci-fi with issues relevant to Muslim youth.

The 99's success is typical of a broader trend. Nahdet Misr, the Arabic publisher of *Harry Potter* and *Goose Bumps*, doubled its catalogue of sci-fi novels between 2005 and 2006; Dar al-Fikr tripled its selection of anthologies written by Syrian science fiction author Taleb Omran between 1997 and 2004. Kalima, a new translation foundation based in Abu Dhabi, will include two sci-fi titles among the hundred it will translate into Arabic this year. They hope to increase the number in the future. Surging popularity prompted the Syrian Ministry of Culture to hold a conference in June 2007 titled "The Science Fiction of Arab Nations." The conference highlighted the barriers to science fiction's acceptance in the Arab World, and authors' success despite them.

Rising literacy, large youth populations, greater science education and the influence of fantasy television programs all help explain the growing demand, and the growth of small and mid-sized publishing houses helps explain the growing supply. What is less predictable, but fascinating to watch, is the growth of creativity. In the coming years, *Spiderman* and *Harry Potter* will be making room for a new sci-fi player: Muslim superheroes. ■ -MS

TAKING IT TO THE STREETS

By Haim Malka and Jon B. Alterman

The age of bread riots in the Middle East may be over. With each passing year, people in the Middle East seem to expect less and less from their governments. The governments, for their part, seem to be encouraging the trend.

For decades in the Middle East, governments fed their publics a steady diet of populist rhetoric and subsidies. Now, the governments are betting that they do not need to control local economies to prove their relevance or win the loyalty of their subjects. Moving away from subsidies on staples such as bread, rice, sugar, and cooking oil liberates regional governments from millions—or billions—of dollars in expenses every year. Still, the potential challenges are clear. Other organizations may step in and provide services the government no longer does, creating loyalties that undermine government control rather than extend it. More worryingly for the government, citizens may become not merely passive but actively hostile to governments that do not provide for them. So far, though, the governments' bet seems to be paying off.

Subsidies have been a relatively recent phenomenon in the Middle East. They exploded in the 1950s, as Arab socialist governments promised a better life for the working classes and the poor, and in the 1960s when oil monarchies began accruing greater wealth. Governments of many states sought to mobilize the masses, and used financial rewards—subsidies, free education and jobs—to maintain their support.

When the basic deal of subsidies for loyalty was violated, however, the masses took to the streets. Massive riots broke out in Egypt in 1977 after President Anwar Sadat raised the price of basic subsidized goods, including bread. In Morocco, hundreds of protesters were reportedly killed in clashes with police during the bread riots of 1981, when the government attempted to lift food subsidies. Several years later, Tunisia had its own violent crackdown on demonstrators protesting the removal of food subsidies. Jordan has also had its share of protests, including two days of rioting in the city of Karak in 1996 after the government lifted wheat subsidies.

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PATHWAYS TO MUSLIM RADICALIZATION

The CSIS Middle East Program hosted Professor Mohammed Hafez, a visiting professor of political science at the University of Missouri, on September 21, 2007 as part of its Congressional Forum on Islam. According to Hafez, the common presumption that a principal root cause, whether economic deprivation, fundamentalist ideology, or authoritarian repression, can explain the growth of Islamic radicalism is simply wrong. Instead, "there are many pathways to radicalization," influenced by various entry points, variables, and personality types. For more information on the event, please click [HERE](#). ■

Those disturbances mostly followed a regular pattern. Regimes facing rising debts, inflation, and pressure to liberalize their state-centered economies adopted austerity measures as part of structural adjustment programs. The moves were often at the request of the International Monetary Fund and came with little warning to the population. Violent protests and riots would erupt, and in the face of mounting public opposition, regimes usually, though not always, reversed their decisions, seeking to avoid further tension.

These reversals were often temporary. Once passions subsided, the governments looked for new ways to decrease the financial burden of subsidies. In Egypt and elsewhere, subsidized bread is increasingly difficult to find, and the size sometimes shrinks to limit production costs. Governments also purposefully lower the quality of subsidized goods, leading those who can to choose higher priced options.

Over time, the strategy seems to be paying off. In the last few months, prices for staples have risen significantly, and Middle Eastern governments have passed most of those costs on to consumers. Wheat costs twice what it did a year ago, and a combination of high fuel prices, drought, and growing demand have driven up prices on many food products. Bread prices are rising. Yet a curious thing has happened. The response has been surprisingly mild.

Last month when the Moroccan government announced it would lower bread subsidies several days before Ramadan, protests were restricted to a rally in the town of Sefrou. In Jordan, a small crowd gathered outside of Amman to protest a similar cut in subsidies. Fuel price hikes still bring people into the streets, but for days, not weeks. Governments may have inoculated themselves from the massive unrest of the past associated with food costs.

If so, it is a victory for the economists. For decades, they have argued that subsidies sap funds that should be put into investment in infrastructure, health, and education. Subsidies in Iran absorb fully a quarter of the country's gross national product, and many in the legislature are calling for their end. An Israeli government commission appointed to investigate the rise in bread prices turned around and called for ending bread subsidies by January 1, 2008. The tide has clearly turned, and publics accept this.

But the poor are not thrown out on the street. Religious organizations and international development agencies have filled the void, providing food aid and other in-kind assistance. Whereas the U.S. government has subsidized school children's lunches for more than 60 years, in the Middle East it is often Islamic organizations—which are often critical of existing governments—that provide students a hot meal. While there is no direct correlation between the rise of Islamist opposition movements and their social service networks, nor between the decline of secular nationalism and the diminished public subsidies that secular nationalist governments provide, there is certainly a relationship.

Rather than confront these religious opposition movements, the governments' strategy appears to be to blunt them by engendering popular apathy. In past years, when governments relied on mobilizing their people, they needed a way to reward them. Now, a number of governments seem driven to anesthetize their people, hoping that low expectations will excuse low performance.

So far, the trend seems to be working. Food prices are rising, but people have not taken to the streets in large numbers. There may be a lurking and more insidious problem, in which people increasingly question the legitimacy of a government that seems only to take and never to give. That hasn't happened yet, as booming oil profits have translated into an expansion of oil-rich and oil-poor economies alike. The boom will not last forever, though. Governments need to use the current lull in public engagement to build their capacity, not as an excuse to become complacent. ■ 10/24/07

Links of Interest

Jon Alterman wrote an article for the [CSIS Smart Power blog](#) about a dinner with President Ahmadinejad.

CSIS hosted [Mowaffak al Rubaie](#), National Security Adviser of Iraq, to discuss the current situation in Iraq and coalition involvement in the region.

CSIS hosted [Dr. Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu](#), Secretary General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, for a talk on the "Islamic World and the West."

Jon Alterman was [quoted by the Associated Press](#) about President Bush and the United Nations.

Haim Malka was [quoted by the Associated Press](#) about the Israel-Hezbollah prisoner swap.

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