

## A NEW ARAB HOLLYWOOD

Arab cinema is booming. With the recent creation of a \$1 billion "Film City" in Morocco, and the opening of a fully equipped film production set in Dubai's "Studio City," Arabs are producing an unprecedented number of films in a remarkably diverse array of countries.

In years gone by, Cairo was the heart of Arab filmmaking, and the Gulf was a consumer of pan-Arab entertainment. The artistic director of this month's Dubai International Film Festival, Massoud al-Ali, notes that 120 films of all types—shorts, features, documentaries and others—are being made every year in the GCC states, up from a mere handful six years ago. In Morocco, the film industry went from producing two to three films annually since its inception in 1969 to around 15 films now. Growing regional wealth explains part of the growth. Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal's entertainment company, Rotana, accounts for half of the Arab film market; his company has found ways both to distribute and sell its products across many countries, and also protect against the endemic piracy of copyrighted materials.

Film producers' other problem is finding ways to produce content that appeals to audiences but does not antagonize conservative forces in the region. Thus far, they have been successful. The 2006 Egyptian hit film, "The Yacoubian Building," presented sensitive themes such as homosexuality, corruption and fundamentalism. It drew protests in Egypt, but it was not banned—and it made the producers a lot of money. ■ -CF

## THE DEATH OF POLITICAL ISLAM?

By Jon B. Alterman

The obituaries for political Islam have begun to be written. After years of seemingly unstoppable growth, Islamic parties have begun to stumble. In Morocco, the Justice and Development Party (or PJD) did far worse than expected in last September's elections, and Jordan's Islamic Action Front lost more than half its seats in last month's polling. The eagerly awaited manifesto of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, a draft of which appeared last September, showed neither strength nor boldness. Instead, it suggested the group was beset by intellectual contradictions and consumed by infighting.

It is too early to declare the death of political Islam, as it was premature to proclaim the rebirth of liberalism in the Arab world in 2003-04, but its prospects seem notably dimmer than they did even a year ago.

To some, the fall from grace was inevitable; political Islam has collapsed under its own contradictions, they say. They argue that, in objective terms, political Islam was never more than smoke and mirrors. Religion is about faith and truth, and politics are about compromise and accommodation. Seen this way, political Islam was never a holy enterprise, but merely an effort to boost the political prospects of one side in a political debate. Backed by religious authority and legitimacy, opposition to Islamists' will ceased to be merely political—it became heresy—and the Islamists benefited.

These skeptics see political Islam as having been a useful way to protect political movements, cow political foes, and rally support. As a governing strategy, however, they argue that political Islam has not produced any successes. In two areas where it recently rose to power, the Palestinian Authority and Iraq, governance has been anemic. In Iran, where the mullahs have been in power for almost three decades, clerics struggle for respect and the country hemorrhages money to Dubai and other overseas markets with more predictable rules and more positive returns. The most avowedly religious state in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia, has notably less intellectual freedom than many of its neighbors, and the guardians of orthodoxy there carefully circumscribe religious thought. As the French scholar of Islam,

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## AL QAEDA'S DISSIDENT VOICES

The CSIS Middle East Program hosted Brynjar Lia, a research professor at the Norwegian Defense Research Establishment (FFI), on December 4, 2007 for its most recent Congressional Forum on Islam. Lia discussed the ideas of one of the most critical voices in the jihadist movement, Abu Mus'ab Al-Suri. Suri has been an outspoken critic of some jihadi tactics, and his writings have shed light on some of the important debates within Al Qaeda. Lia is the author of *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al Qaeda Strategist Abu Mus'ab Al-Suri* (Columbia University Press, 2007), in which he translates part of Al-Suri's *Global Islamic Call*. For more information on the event, please click [HERE](#). ■

Olivier Roy, memorably observed more than a decade ago, the melding of religion and politics did not sanctify politics, it politicized religion.

But while Islam has not provided a coherent theory of governance, let alone a universally accepted approach to the problems of humanity, the salience of religion continues to grow among many Muslims.

That salience goes far beyond issues of dress, which have become more conservative for both women and men in recent years, and beyond language, which invokes God's name far more than was the case a decade ago. It also goes beyond the daily practice of Islam—from prayer to charity to fasting—all of which are on the upswing.

What has changed is something even more fundamental than physical appearance or ritual practice, and that is this: A growing number of Muslims start from the proposition that Islam is relevant to all aspects of their daily lives, and not merely the province of theology or personal belief.

Some see this as a return to traditionalism in the Middle East, when varying measures of superstition and spirituality governed daily life. More accurately, though, what we are seeing is the rise of "neo-traditionalism," in which symbols and slogans of the past are enlisted in the pursuit of hastening entry into the future. Islamic finance—which is to say, finance that relies on shares and returns rather than interest—is booming, and sleek bank branches contain separate entrances for men and women. Slick young televangelists rely on the tropes of sanctifying the everyday and seeking forgiveness, drawing tens of thousands to their meetings and television audiences in the millions. Music videos—viewable on YouTube—implore young viewers to embrace faith and turn away from a meaningless secular life.

Many in the West see secularism and relativism as concrete signs of modernity. In the Middle East, many see them as symbols of a bankrupt secular nationalist past that failed to deliver justice or development, freedom or progress. The suffering of secularism is meaningless, but the discipline of Islam is filled with significance.

It is for this reason that it is premature to declare the death of political Islam. Islam, increasingly, cannot be contained. It is spreading to all aspects of life, and it is robust among some of the most dynamic forces in the Middle East. It enjoys state subsidies to be sure, but states have little to do with the creativity occurring in the religious field.

The danger is that this Islamization of public life will cast aside what little tolerance is left in the Middle East, after centuries as a—fundamentally Islamic—multicultural entrepôt. It is hard to imagine how Islamizing societies can flourish if they do not embrace innovation and creativity, diversity and difference. "Islamic" is not a self-evident concept, as my friend Mustapha Kamal Pasha once observed, but it cannot be a source of strength in modern societies if it is tied to ossified and parochial notions of its nature.

Dealing with difference is fundamentally a political task, and it is here that political Islam will face its true test. The formal structures of government in the Middle East have proven durable, and they are unlikely to crumble under a wave of Islamic activism. For political Islam to succeed, it needs to find a way to unite diverse coalitions of varying faiths and degrees of faith, not merely speak to its base. It has not yet found a way to do so, but that is not to say that it cannot. ■ 12/12/07

## Links of Interest

Jon Alterman and Jon Wolfsthal answered questions about the new NIE Iran assessment for the [CSIS Critical Questions](#) series.

Haim Malka wrote a [web commentary](#) examining the outcome of the Annapolis conference.

[The South Asia Monitor](#) of the CSIS South Asia Program explored the growing India-Gulf relationship.

Jon Alterman was interviewed by [CBS Evening News](#) and quoted by the [New York Times](#) regarding the Iranian nuclear situation.

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