

NOKIA ENVY

Cellular telephones have long teetered on the brink between luxury and innovation. In the last decade, the cell phone has been ever evolving, getting smaller and lighter, sporting chrome and flashier screens, and with features—like a camera—that few ever thought belonged on a telephone.

Innovation has been especially pronounced in the Middle East, where government monopolies had lagged a decade or more behind in supplying regular telephone service to subscribers. Pent-up demand, combined with young populations, has made the region a hothouse of cellular experimentation.

Text messaging—in both Arabic and English—is far more common in the Middle East than in the United States. Activists use instant messaging to organize impromptu rallies, and foreign embassies use it to communicate with reporters.

Political mobilization is not its only use, however. In the last two months, regional satellite broadcaster Al Jazeera launched a service providing breaking news to subscribers, and schools in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) began using a “school mobile service” to share announcements with parents and students. Another service in the UAE prompts cell phones to play the call to prayer at appropriate times, depending on exactly where a person is in the country.

Although mobile phones are far from replacing fixed-line phones, a September study by the Madar Research Group in Dubai found a 19 percent increase in mobile phone subscriptions in the Arab world in the first half of 2003, outstripping the increase in fixed-line phones and bringing the total number of regional users to just under 30 million. ■

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RAY OF HOPE OR FALSE DAWN?

Two weeks ago, former hard-line Saudi clerics Nasser al-Fahd and Ali al-Khudeir took to the airwaves to condemn acts of violence in the kingdom. Their action goes to the heart of a debate that so far has been woefully insufficient: the proper role that orthodox Islam should play in efforts to confront those who carry out violence in the name of Islam.

Religious sectors have traditionally been centers of political opposition in the Middle East, often acting as a check on governmental power. Regional governments have variously tried to repress, hobble, or co-opt religious elements for years.

But the increasing association of politico-religious opposition with violence directed against civilians, and the transnational connections of such opposition, poses a new set of challenges for Middle Eastern rulers.

Some governments have responded by forcing a split among religious opposition forces, ruthlessly repressing some while seeking to co-opt others. The most interesting case in this regard is Egypt, and it has not received nearly the attention it deserves.

In the early 1990s, what had started as communal strife in Upper Egypt morphed into anti-regime violence in downtown Cairo. Bombs were placed under buses in front of the Egyptian Museum, and cafes and banks were bombed as well. Attackers stabbed novelist and Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz outside his home. Gunmen attacked policemen and foreign tourists, and in 1995 they sought to assassinate the president in Addis Ababa.

The government's response was fierce. Tens of thousands of Islamists were arrested, and many were reportedly tortured. Hundreds, if not thousands, of others were killed in shootouts or in the process of arrest, and tens were executed. The government sent tanks into Imbaba, a Cairo slum where it had seemingly lost control to antigovernment militants. Nongovernment-controlled mosques were shut down, and clerics were put under surveillance.

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RECENT EVENT: LIBYA'S RELATIONS WITH THE WORLD

On November 17, 2003, the CSIS Middle East and Africa Programs cohosted a daylong conference entitled “Libya's Relations with the World.” Country experts, senior U.S. and foreign government officials, academics, and private-sector participants debated the potential for U.S. reengagement with Libya, obstacles to improving relations, and how to qualify Libya's recent attempts to improve relations with the United States. Jon Alterman, Middle East Program director, and Stephen Morrison, Africa Program director, have coauthored a report that summarizes some of the many perspectives shared at the event and proposes policy recommendations for future engagement with Libya. Full text of their report, entitled “Is it Time to Engage Libya?” can be viewed at http://www.csis.org/mideast/MEN_0312.pdf. ■

Little noticed, however, was an apparent and simultaneous effort at co-optation. Government broadcasting became more welcoming to religious programming, as long as it did not espouse violence. The government turned a blind eye toward efforts to intimidate or silence secularists or to ban books from curricula. The government of Egypt made a conscious effort to demonstrate that it was not against Islam per se, but only against the violence some were carrying out in the name of Islam.

At the same time, government-supported clerics worked energetically with Islamists in prison, and especially with the leadership of the hard-line Gama'a Islamiyya, to convince them of the error of their ways. That effort was rewarded by the publication of a raft of books starting in the late 1990s in which former leaders renounced their previous beliefs.

In late September of this year, the government of Egypt released almost 1,000 Gama'a Islamiyya members. Among these was Karam Zohdi, a founder of the group who had been imprisoned for 22 years for his role in the assassination of former president Anwar Sadat.

There is a key judgment going on here, and it has received little of the attention it deserves. The judgment is that orthodox Islam has a vital role to play in drying up support for Islamist violence. In this reasoning, orthodox Islam delegitimizes the use of violence against civilians for religious purposes.

There are two elements to this that need to be taken into account. The first is that orthodox Muslim figures will likely also seek to increase the general level of religious observance in their societies and will presumably demand concessions in that regard as part of the bargain they make with governments. What strikes them as a move toward virtue can strike secularists and non-Muslims as intimidation and restrictions on freedom.

The second is what might keep freed former militants from becoming militant again. It is widely believed that Sadat's decision to free Islamists from prison in the 1970s, as a way to keep Nasserists and leftists in check, resulted in those same militants assassinating him in 1981. Have these former militants indeed been "scared straight," or are they merely going into hibernation until conditions are right for a resurgence? How could one test this proposition in any event?

There are no easy answers to these questions, but it is important to note that the questions are not even being asked. We hear a great deal about "engaging" with Muslims, but we hear far less about whom one should engage with and under what parameters. More distressing is a belief that no trade-off is required; that somehow, one can steer countries toward secular liberalism, promote democratization, and delegitimize violent Islamists all at one time.

In the eyes of some, the cure the Egyptians have pursued may be worse than the disease. But beyond rhetoric and posturing, the Egyptians' course is one that bears watching. How one judges the success or failure of their efforts should shape how one addresses challenges in the rest of the Middle East and beyond. ■ —JBA 12/4/2003

Links of Interest

<http://www.arabiestrends.com/Archives%20apVI.htm>

Program director Jon B. Alterman analyzes potential shifts in U.S. policy following the next presidential election.

<http://www.csis.org/features/031114toouncertain.pdf>

Report by Arleigh A. Burke Chair Anthony Cordesman on his November Iraq trip.

http://dailystar.com.lb/opinion/05_12_03_b.asp

Program director Jon B. Alterman examines what was unexamined in the Arab Human Development Report.

<http://csis.org/isp/pcr/index.htm#overview>

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The CSIS Middle East Program

JON B. ALTERMAN, Director

EDWARD M. GABRIEL, Visiting Scholar

MONA YACOUBIAN, Adjunct Scholar

KARI FRAME, Research Assist. & Program Coordinator

Interns: REBECCA ADELMAN, ALIA FATTOUH,

GRETA MILLIGAN, LARA PANIS, & ABBAS RAVJANI

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