



ARABIAN PIRATES

It is hard to imagine stranger bedfellows than bearded and robed Islamic clerics and Bill Gates, yet they are united in the war against software piracy. Sheikh Ibrahim Atta Allah, Director General of Proselytization and Religious Publicity at al-Azhar in Cairo, has declared the trade in illegally duplicated software forbidden by Islam. Saudi cleric Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah Al-Sheikh called piracy a sin after the Saudi Chamber of Industry examined the loss of revenue that fake software creates.

Pirated software is cheap, available, and widespread throughout the Middle East. In Iraq, which lacks laws against copyright infringement, pirated versions of Microsoft's forthcoming Windows operating system were available three years ago for about one dollar. Windows XP and Adobe programs are widely available at similar prices.

Police raids on office buildings and new, stringent copyright laws are recent signs that government leaders, especially in the Gulf, are serious about curtailing widespread piracy. In cooperation with the Arabian Anti-Piracy Alliance, police in the UAE, Kuwait, and Qatar have confiscated over 2 million illegally duplicated CDs and jailed 15 people. Through similar copyright legislation is also emerging in the Levant, Gulf countries hoping for investment from software companies have pursued pirating most aggressively.

Microsoft nonetheless recognizes that it garners some benefit from piracy. As Gates said, "As long as they're going to steal it, we want them to steal ours. They'll get sort of addicted." ■-ET

THE LEAST BAD OPTION

By Haim Malka

If the Hamas government fails in Palestine, much of the reason will be that virtually every single Arab government wants it to fail. Never mind the Bush Administration, which has its own reasons for watching Hamas fall flat on its face. It is Arab governments, struggling to maintain their legitimacy, that have the most to fear from a successful and popular Hamas government. If an elected Islamic government succeeds in the Palestinian Authority, the demonstration effect could shake the Middle East to its core.

The United States should have another fear, which is that the catastrophic collapse of the Palestinian Authority would reverberate far beyond Ramallah and Gaza. Unpalatable as it seems, the United States should seek to promote a national unity government in the Palestinian Authority—not in the interests of Hamas, but in the interests of the United States. The U.S. cannot rely on Arab governments to do so, for they are far more likely to do the opposite.

Despite their financial pledges to the Palestinian Authority (PA) and commitments to the Palestinian people, Arab governments ultimately want to see Hamas stuck in the mud, or worse. Arab rebuffs to the Bush Administration's initial requests to isolate Hamas were just part of the charade. Regional leaders want to appear to support the Palestinian people, but their key goal is undermining Hamas. These governments will publicly counsel Hamas to transform itself into a moderate and responsible actor, but at the same time, they have no intention of letting that happen.

More than any single event since the rise of Arab nationalism in the 1950's, Hamas' victory challenges the existing order of emergency laws and corruption that permeates Arab politics. The movement is genuinely popular, and it won its elections fair and square. In so doing, it displaced a sclerotic secular nationalist government that had little legitimacy, little capacity, and existed mainly as a mechanism of patronage. For opponents of ineffective secular governments throughout the region, Hamas' victory is an inspiration.

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THE IRAQ STUDY GROUP

Program Director Jon B. Alterman is serving as an expert adviser to the Iraq Study Group, a bipartisan advisory committee chaired by former Secretary of State James A. Baker III and former congressman Lee Hamilton. The group's membership includes Leon Panetta, Rudy Giuliani, Sandra Day O'Connor, and others. The Iraq Study Group will conduct a forward-looking, independent assessment of the current and prospective situation on the ground in Iraq, its impact on the surrounding region, and its consequences for U.S. interests. The United States Institute of Peace is hosting the effort, with support from CSIS and a small number of other organizations. More information about the group can be found at <http://www.usip.org/isg> ■

There certainly is no guarantee that Hamas or other Islamists will behave any differently from their autocratic foes once in power. In addition, Hamas and many other Islamist groups continue to brandish the legitimacy of violence. The fruits of democracy may well prove bitter. Regional governments are averse to that risk, and they are averse to losing power. They will labor hard for Hamas to fail.

Such failure is unlikely to be easily contained, however. The collapse of the Hamas government could plunge the Middle East into contortions of violence. The eruption of internal Palestinian violence or intensification of Israeli-Palestinian violence is not unlikely, and either scenario could lead to a flight of Palestinians to Jordan, massive demonstrations throughout the region, and militia rule in the Palestinian territories. Despite the likely chaos, for many Arab governments such scenarios are worth the risk.

Egypt and Jordan clearly have the most to fear. Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood won over 60% of the seats they contested in Egypt's recent parliamentary elections. Despite government repression and electoral tampering, the Brotherhood managed to make an impressive showing. In Jordan, the Islamic Action Front is declaring its "natural right" to govern should they win elections in Jordan which are scheduled for 2007. The Islamist specter has successfully shelved any discussion of political party reform in Jordan.

As things stand now, the Bush Administration and its Arab allies perceive a common threat in Hamas's success. Yet, if the democratic experiment in Palestine fails, it is unlikely that a stable and representative Palestinian government will emerge in its place in the foreseeable future. Clan and militia rivalries, organized crime, and petty criminals will prey on innocent Palestinian civilians. A potential humanitarian crisis could open up vast flows of attempted refugees, yet the surrounding countries are unlikely to allow any of the refugees to enter. Meanwhile, Israel's "convergence" plan will eat away more Palestinian territory and make a future agreement even less likely.

To prevent a total collapse, the U.S. should instead promote the same sort of unity government in the Palestinian Authority that it is working to nurture in Iraq. Rather than trying to further divide Palestinians, the U.S. should encourage Palestinians to share power, and to help heal the widening gulf that is emerging between the presidency and the parliament. The United States need not engage directly with a Hamas government, although it would need to engage with a government of which Hamas is a part.

The United States should not pursue this course because it creates a desirable outcome, but rather because the other outcome—the catastrophic collapse of Palestinian governing institutions, the outbreak of uncontrolled violence, and the political vacuum that would result—is even worse, in both the near and longer terms. Many Arab governments appear willing to take that risk as a small price to pay in order to discredit popular Islamic movements. Our interests are not identical to theirs, and we are better served in the long run by success in the Palestinian Authority rather than failure. ■05/16/06

Links of Interest

On April 28, the CSIS Middle East program hosted John Damis, professor of political science at Portland State University at the Maghreb Roundtable to discuss the crisis in the Western Sahara: http://www.csis.org/media/csis/events/060515_maghrebroundtable.pdf

Middle East Program Director Jon B. Alterman analyzed Iranian President Ahmedinejad's recent letter to President Bush, arguing that Ahmedinejad's letter was very effective in the Muslim world: http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/060515_alterman_iran.pdf

CSIS Senior Adviser Robert Einhorn recently testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the issue of a nuclear Iran: <http://www.csis.org/media/csis/congress/ts060517einhorn.pdf>

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