

MEDIA BAZAAR

Nowhere in the Middle East is the media environment more cacophonous than in Iraq, where the stakes are high, the images are gripping, and the freedoms are considerable.

After decades of tight state control, 150 or so newspapers and magazines are published regularly. Many have tiny readerships and low circulation: the second- and third-largest daily newspapers print fewer than 10,000 copies a day for a population of more than 22 million.

With plummeting costs and a wide array of choices, television remains by far Iraqis' preferred medium. Among terrestrial networks, the Coalition Provisional Authority has been struggling with al-Iraqiya, a news station with a heavy diet of meetings and public statements.

Also in the terrestrial market are an Arabic-language Iranian station, al-Alam, a local version of the U.S.-run al-Hurra and one supporting Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani based in Karbala. In late May 2004, Egypt's huge Orascom group will launch a new station, "Nahrayn," combining news and entertainment with a heavy dose of political development messages.

With so many willing to subsidize broadcasting, it is hard to come up with an alternative business model. Orascom's television station will rely heavily on advertising revenues from one of Orascom's other Iraqi businesses, its mobile telephone concession.

Like local broadcasters in other Arab countries, the Iraqi stations also have to compete with regional stations like al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya. With dishes costing as little as \$40 apiece and with no subscription fees, audiences have unprecedented choice. ■ - *KF, 5/21/04*

THE ANATOMY OF FASCISM

The last year or so has witnessed the rise of the term "Islamofascist." While many seem to use the phrase more as an epithet than for its explanatory value, the fascist experience carries cautionary tales for the Middle East for what it says about both the nature of politics in stressed societies and the perils of the ballot box.

In considering these issues, we are fortunate to have historian Robert O. Paxton's recent book, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, which surveys a broad range of successful and unsuccessful fascist movements in the twentieth century.

Many of the conditions that Paxton identifies as having given rise to fascist movements in the past are present in today's Middle East: a sense of deep societal crisis; a strong belief in victimhood; a heightened sense of group identity; and a perceived need to unify a population in the face of external threats. Broad swaths of the affected community increasingly consider traditional responses to growing threats to be inadequate, and they construct a new response out of a re-imagined historical memory. In addition, such movements often highlight the need for purity, dividing the world into allies and foes.

Not only do many of these characteristics fit al-Qaeda of today as well as they fit the Nazi Party of the 1930s; they are also a fair description of mainstream responses to domestic crises in many Arab countries.

Historically, the conditions that led to the creation of fascist parties only rarely have led to the ascent of fascist governments. Who recalls the fascist movement in Britain in the 1930s, or in Norway? At one point Romania seemed ripe for fascist agitation, but a campaign of outright repression nipped it in the bud. Indeed, among the lessons of Paxton's book are that fascist parties gain power only in a small minority of cases, and that authoritarian governments have been a particularly impressive bulwark against the rise of fascism.

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IRAQ AND THE FUTURE

Earlier this month, Program Director Jon B. Alterman participated in a conference sponsored by the Kuwaiti parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee. Entitled "The Region and the Future," the conference gathered almost 50 experts from the United States, Europe and the Arab world. Alterman spoke on a panel entitled "Iraq and the Future" along with Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari and the Deputy Administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority, Ambassador Richard H. Jones. Alterman told the group, "We all need to reach better agreement on our common goals for Iraq. Without better understanding and coordination, not only will none of us get what we want, but none of us will get what we need." The full text of Alterman's comments can be found at http://www.csis.org/mideast/040516_kuwait.pdf ■

Where fascism has found its most fruitful ground is in emerging democracies, especially those characterized by the entrance of newly politicized (and often, newly enfranchised) non-elite voters. In these cases, fascists successfully marketed themselves to incumbent conservative forces as a more palatable alternative to leftist agitators who threatened to remove those incumbents from power. Never able to form a majority alone, they gained sufficient support by promising conservatives they would preserve the status quo. Once they gained a foothold, however, they ended that status quo. Paxton reminds us that the ballot box has always been as vital an element of fascists coming to power as the fist.

Fascists always capitalized on fear of leftist groups overturning societal order. Yet in the Middle East today, there is no leftist opposition. The history of fascism, with its furtive coalition building and struggles for power across a wide range of ideologies, highlights the shallowness of so much of political life in the Middle East. In case after case, governments have manipulated local politics so that the only viable political opposition is a conservative—if not reactionary—one that is unpalatable to democracy advocates.

If the past is any guide, governments can counter fascism's particular blend of mass mobilization, violence, and authoritarianism through repression. But doing so does not solve the underlying political and social problems that make fascism attractive to broad publics in the first place. None of this argues for the strength of existing regimes. Instead, it points to the potentially vigorous future of authoritarianism in the Middle East.

Those looking for good news note that governments have increasingly allowed liberal speech in many cases. Still, governments have remained much more wary of liberal organizations. Liberalism has remained a strikingly elite phenomenon and broadly divorced from mass publics. The political liberals talk of governance, not mobilization. They provoke little fear of a crisis that would drive governments into the arms of fascists.

To successfully contest elections, liberal voices would need to construct a new vision and a new agenda that resonated deeply with their societies. So far, they have been unable to do so.

The consensus among governments that they face an existential threat from religiously justified violence creates an opportunity for liberal movements to do what fascist ones have done in the past—to gain entrance to government as part of a strategy of keeping populist conservative forces at bay. To do so, however, these movements would need to become as good at politics as they profess to be at governance. Existing governments would also need to believe that they were facing an acute crisis.

For the time being, the crisis is not yet acute enough, nor are liberal forces seen to provide a pathway out of it. The status quo does not yet seem imperiled. ■

—JBA 5/21/2004

Links of Interest

<http://www.alalam.ir>

Iranian television channel "al-Alam"

<http://www.csis.org/hill/ts040519cordesman.pdf>

On May 19, CSIS Burke Chair in Strategy, Anthony Cordesman, testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He offered his recommendations for future U.S. policy toward Iraq.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A33008-2004May17.html>

On May 17, Post-Conflict Reconstruction Project Co-Director Bathsheba Crocker participated in a *Washington Post* online discussion about reconstruction roadblocks in Iraq.

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