

CHRISTIAN ROCK IN MOROCCO

Morocco has a long tradition of religious tolerance and pluralism, but when a group of American evangelicals decided to hold a free "Christian Rock" festival in Marrakech last month, they raised more than a few eyebrows.

The independent Moroccan magazine *Telquel* labeled the festival a "Messianic offensive," and the avowedly Islamist Justice and Development Party complained in parliament that the event provided "an open door to the evangelization of Morocco." The Marrakech concerts constituted the first known contemporary Christian music festival of its kind in the Muslim world.

The concert's organizers said they saw the event as an opportunity to build bridges between communities, not to proselytize. In news reports leading up to the concert, Moroccan and evangelical officials labeled the festival an effort to dampen extremist rhetoric being traded between the Muslim and evangelical Christian communities. Evangelical groups also initiated development projects for Morocco's poor. Bridge-building faced limits, however: planners scrapped a "Dialogue of Muslim and Evangelical Leaders," which had been scheduled to coincide with the festival, after an outcry in Morocco.

Organizers claimed that 85,000 people came to listen to three days of free music. Singers like Martin Smith of the Christian alt-rock band Delirious was philosophical about the impact of evangelical songs such as "Majesty," "History Maker," and "My Glorious" on his Moroccan audience. "It's not like they could understand them anyway," he said.

■ YC

ARAB SPRING INTO LONG, HOT SUMMER

by Jon B. Alterman

There was a time last spring when enthusiasts of the Bush administration's policy to promote democratization in the Middle East were crowing. January's successful presidential elections in the Palestinian Authority and parliamentary elections in Iraq were followed by millions of Lebanese turning out in peaceful political protests and the promise of multiparty elections for Egypt's presidency. Speaking at the National Defense University, President Bush said, "Across the Middle East, a critical mass of events is taking that region in a hopeful new direction."

Yet, in each and every one of those cases, there have been significant setbacks in the last three months:

- *In the Palestinian Authority*, President Mahmoud Abbas has postponed July's scheduled parliamentary elections indefinitely. His Fatah Party remains in deep disarray and his government has thus far proven resistant to reform from within. By contrast, Hamas appears to be gaining in strength and is increasingly behaving like an ordinary—and powerful—political party.
- *In Iraq*, sectarian squabbling is on the upswing. The interim assembly spent fully one quarter of its term merely selecting its leadership, and factions claiming to represent the Sunni community remain largely disempowered. Rather than demonstrate competence, the new government has demonstrated its weakness and continued dependence on outside forces.
- *In Lebanon*, electoral turnout has been paltry—perhaps 29 percent of voters in Beirut—and machine politics have firmly displaced the ballot box as the determinant of electoral outcomes.
- *In Egypt*, it has becoming increasingly clear that none of the opposition parties will field a respectable candidate in September's presidential elections. Ayman Nour's *Ghad* party lacks popular support, and the *Kifaya* movement has been able to articulate only what it is against rather than what it is for.

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HOSTILE INTENTIONS?

Philip Zelikow, counselor of the U.S. State Department and former staff director of the 9/11 Commission, delivered the keynote address at a conference examining the future of U.S.-Saudi relations. In his address, Zelikow called for "a partnership that leaders in both countries will be proud to explain and defend." The conference which drew a large crowd of government officials, diplomats, journalists, academics, and business representatives was cohosted by the CSIS Middle East Program and the Arabic daily newspaper *Asharq al-Awsat*. Panelists at the conference included Gregory Gause, Danielle Pletka, Hussein Shobokshi, and Tariq Alhomayed. Transcripts of the proceedings can be found at www.csis.org/mideast/050524_US_Saudi.pdf. ■

For all of the enthusiasm in the spring—enthusiasm that brought President Bush to refer both to a “purple revolution” in Iraq and a “cedar revolution” in Lebanon—we are not seeing a Middle East either on the brink of revolution, nor tipping decisively in the direction of change. Two factors make this so.

The first is that for all of the talk of people power, governments in the region retain an overwhelming advantage in influence, in capacity, and in organization (to say nothing of money and firepower). For all that people criticize their governments, they are surrounded by them and remain dependent on them. In addition, regional governments retain the cloak of nationalist legitimacy, and they know how to use it effectively. Regional governments wrap themselves in the language of reform, pursue minimal change, and attack their opponents as traitors or agents of foreign powers.

Their success in doing so suggests the second factor, which is the lack of confidence in U.S.-led reform. Manufacturers seek protection for their industries, and bureaucrats fear layoffs. Religious and cultural conservatives fear an onslaught of Western popular culture, smut, and lasciviousness. Beneath the resistance is a fear that these efforts are intended to weaken the Middle East rather than strengthen it and a belief that this is a Western effort to dominate rather than empower.

History casts a dark shadow here. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is often the prism through which Arabs see their relationship with the outside world, and that prism is often one that emphasizes inequity, dispossession, and loss at the hands of outside powers, provoking an Arab response of resistance and steadfastness. Arabs see the United States not only as the inheritor of this legacy, but also as the party most responsible for its persistence.

Something is afoot in the Middle East, and communications technology, demographics, and economics are its most important drivers. But as we look toward change, two facts are salient:

- The ability of the United States to inspire Arab publics is remarkably weak and is likely to remain so for a long time to come. That this is driven partly by the efforts of allied governments to vilify the United States on the popular level while working closely on the professional level is irrelevant; what matters is that standing up for the United States is likely to remain an uncommon event in most countries in the Middle East for some period into the future.
- The United States and other governments' ability to influence regional governments remains quite strong. As governments struggle with a range of challenges—from counterterrorism to defense assistance to financial market creation—the United States remains an indispensable partner.

All of this suggests that Western governments' ability to affect the supply side of the civil liberties and reform equation is far greater than their ability to affect the demand side. They can effectively press Middle Eastern governments to allow more space, but they cannot prod publics to fill it. The people of the Middle East will determine the nature of change, and they will live with its consequences. The decisive battles, however, have not yet begun. ■ 6/13/05

Links of Interest

The Web site of the Friendship Fest in Morocco:

<http://www.friendshipfest.org/>

Link to the keynote address of Philip Zelikow at the May 24 conference, “Hostile Intentions? The Future of U.S.-Saudi Relations”:

www.csis.org/mideast/050525_zelikow.pdf

Asharq al-Awsat's new English Web site:

<http://www.asharqalawsat.com/english/>

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The CSIS Middle East Program

JON B. ALTERMAN, Director

HAIM MALKA, Fellow

EDWARD M. GABRIEL, Visiting Fellow

MONA YACoubIAN, Adjunct Fellow

RYAN FOGLE AND YOUSEF CASEWIT, Interns

Please visit our Web site at www.csis.org/mideast to learn more about the program's work.