

ROCK THE CASBAH

The mention of contemporary Arab life to many Americans conjures up images of angry men shaking their fists in anger or veiled women scurrying into the shadows. To many Arabs, however, it raises images of lip gloss, hair gel, and outfits that leave little to the imagination.

By now it is commonplace to talk about the ways in which regional news media—especially the television stations Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, and the Abu Dhabi Satellite Channel—have helped unify the Arab world, and in some cases have stoked its anger.

Yet at the same time, regional media have vastly expanded the market for young pop stars marketing their wares to a huge youth audience from Rabat to Riyadh.

Mindful of a regional audience, some artists even record songs in different Arabic dialects on the same album, boosting their appeal and demonstrating their devotion to a pan-Arab ideal.

So far, regional television has been a key driver of musical popularity. Radio stations remain largely stolid and under government control, but satellite television provides hundreds of outlets with a huge regional audience. Happily for television programmers, music videos make for cheap programming: the same video can be shown over and over again, unlike situation comedies or soap operas.

Arab musicians are working more and more with Western artists, and their music videos are increasingly slick. Last March, the popular American singer Lenny Kravitz released an anti-war single entitled "We Want Peace," recorded with the Iraqi musician Kazem el-Saher; it was a bigger hit in Beirut than in Boston. ■ - AF, 1/23/04

ARE WE THERE YET?

In his State of the Union address last week, President Bush pointed to Libya's decision to disclose and dismantle its programs to develop weapons of mass destruction as a diplomatic victory for the administration. Libya's actions do give cause for satisfaction, but it is too early to put Libya in the "win" column. Further, if the administration fails to use the Libyan experience to convince other Middle Eastern regimes to follow suit, a great opportunity will have been squandered.

The administration's narrative on Libyan disarmament is rather simple: Mu'ammarr Qadhafi saw the U.S. military take out Saddam Hussein last March, decided he didn't want to be next, and quickly proposed unilateral disarmament. In this way of telling, the "positive dominoes" from Iraq have begun to fall.

In fact, this development has been the result of a long and sometimes tedious process over many years (described well by my former State Department colleague Flynt Leverett in the *New York Times* last week).

Since suddenly announcing their intention to disarm, the Libyans are proceeding with stunning speed and completeness. In so doing, they put the Bush administration in a couple of quandaries.

The first is how to preserve the range of U.S. interests vis-à-vis Libya. Disarmament is not the only item on the bilateral agenda. The U.S. government also remains concerned with the Libyan government's internal behavior, as well as Libya's activities in Africa, which it views as destabilizing. Embracing Libya too quickly could undermine the president's clear message that democratization, reform, and human rights in the Middle East are at the core of the administration's strategy for the Middle East, or they could suggest turning a blind eye toward continued dictatorship in Africa.

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UPCOMING EVENT: SAUDI ARABIA AT A CROSSROADS

On Friday, January 30, members of the CSIS delegation to Saudi Arabia will discuss their December trip to the kingdom. Anthony Cordesman, Daniel Benjamin, and Robert Ebel will join Jon Alterman to reflect on their visit and what lies in store for the country. Analysis will focus on terrorism and security challenges, prospects for political reform, and the future of the economic sector. Patrick Cronin, CSIS director of studies, will moderate the discussion. This meeting is open to all who are interested and will be held from 10 a.m. until 11:30 a.m. in the CSIS conference center, B1 level. For additional information, please visit www.csis.org. ■

The second is that normalizing relations with Libya in the midst of a presidential campaign carries political risks. Col. Qadhafi is fond of making dramatic and bold statements and, as recently as October, advocated armed resistance against U.S. troops in Iraq. A headline-grabbing speech in the midst of a U.S. political campaign could be extraordinarily inconvenient. Further, compromise with Libya now opens the administration up to partisan charges that it is fully captive to the oil industry, bartering U.S. interests for barrels of oil.

For these reasons, the administration is likely to seek to slow the process, while at the same time the Libyans appear to be chomping at the bit. Negotiations are far from over, but look to see the increasingly politically savvy Libyans accede to U.S. requests to push off some of the most significant signs of reconciliation until after November's elections.

Even more important than what happens in U.S.-Libyan relations is the effect of Libya's moves on others—especially the governments of Syria and Iran. Those governments surely will be looking to the Libyan experience to see if meeting U.S. demands really does improve the bilateral relationship and serve the national interest, or whether it only leads to more demands. Put another way, is the U.S. government willing to take "yes" for an answer, or is it bent on hostility, sanctions, and regime change regardless of what these governments do?

Whatever their assessment, the Syrians and Iranians will have a much harder time meeting U.S. demands than the Libyans. Libya long ago severed its ties to Palestinian rejectionist groups, and at one point Col. Qadhafi even went so far as to suggest Israeli membership in the Arab League after a peace deal.

Opposition to Israel is deeply embedded in the governing ideology of Syria and Iran, and those governments' relations to rejectionist groups remain intimate. At the same time, they each face much more complex threat environments than the Libyans do, and they will certainly seek to maintain a more diverse deterrent capacity than the Libyans have done.

There are few in Libya, in Syria, and in Iran who do not look around and see their countries suffering from ailing economies, sclerotic political systems, and aging defense capabilities. Some argue that the only way forward is a strategic reorientation that ends decades of animosity with the United States and its allies. But even advocates of that approach wonder what the costs of such a reorientation might be and what benefits might accrue, to say nothing of the critics who charge that the U.S. government is seeking the submission and humiliation of its foes while offering little reward.

Enumerating goals, managing expectations, and rewarding performance are delicate diplomatic operations at any time. They are especially so in an election year. Success is necessary, but it is not yet certain. What we have seen so far is not victory; it is more properly seen as opportunity. ■ —*JBA 1/23/2004*

Links of Interest

<http://csis.org/mideast/menc.htm>

Links to previous editions of *Middle East Notes & Comment*

<http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/1215/p11s01-coop.htm>

A young Arab's ambivalence toward the United States, by CSIS Middle East Program intern Alia Fattouh.

http://www.csis.org/mideast/Moroccan_040108.pdf

Remarks by the prime minister of Morocco during his visit to CSIS earlier this month.

<http://www.haifawehbe.com>

The website of Lebanese pop star Haifa Wehbe.

<http://www.twq.com/currentissue/index.cfm>

The winter issue of the CSIS journal, *The Washington Quarterly*, with articles on Iraq and Europe's new role in the Middle East.

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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: ALIA FATTOUH, NESLIHAN KATPANOGLU, ANNA

MOHRMAN & LARA PANIS

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