

AXIS OF SELF-HELP

American audiences accustomed to imagining Iranians as a collection of scowling men and black-cloaked women might be surprised to learn that the works of American authors such as life coach Tony Robbins and John Gray (author of *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*) are flying off the shelves. Local versions by Iranian authors that promise swift success, happiness, and marital bliss are also hot commodities.

The advice would be familiar to Western readers. In *Self-confidence in One Day*, for instance, Fakhrian Khoshiar points out that, "not only do you have to respect others, but you have to respect yourself."

The self-help wave is being driven by young consumers, particularly among the secular, educated class in Tehran. Some see it as a sign of disillusionment with politics, especially with the weakening of the reformist movement in recent years.

Yet other analysts view the trend more as one blending traditional Islam and modernity. For example, Islamic tradition stresses the differences between the sexes and specifies how men and women should treat each other to promote happy marriages—which is a theme in *Men Are From Mars* as well.

The Iranian Shiite concept of a *marja*, or spiritual guide, could also account for the popularity of self-help books by successful people such as former GE chairman Jack Welch and Iranian-American fragrance designer Bijan Pakzad. To many young people, these authors may appear to be preferable role models to clerics. ■

- JJ

POLITICAL SPECTACLE

By Jon B. Alterman

At a recent conference on the political effects of Arab satellite television, a prominent Arab talk show host blurted out, "I will tell you a secret about television. It is all about spectacle. It is about spectacle first, spectacle second, and spectacle third." Although he did not intend it, he may have put his finger on the reason why an eruption of free speech in the Arab world has thus far produced little political change, let alone democracy.

It is undeniable that the satellite television age has spawned a body of debate in the Arab world that scarcely existed before. On talk shows throughout the region, clerics debate secularists, radicals debate moderates, and apologists for one regime lay into the apologists for another. Previously taboo issues such as politics, sex, and religion—and sometimes a combination of all three—are a staple of lively debates and discussions almost nightly.

When such broadcasts began a decade ago, many saw the walls of political repression beginning to crumble. Censorship had been a pillar of authoritarian rule in the Middle East for decades, and satellite television was chipping away at it.

Yet, a decade later, no regime has fallen, and a scarce few have opened up the political process. There is certainly more talk, but little more action.

Part of the reason appears to be that even after a decade, political debate in the Arab world is still largely about spectacle. Raucous debates create fireworks, but they rarely change behaviors. Spectacle creates spectators, but it creates neither participants nor actors; indeed, it only rarely transcends entertainment.

What would make a difference? Other news coming out of the Arab world holds some clues. At the same conference, a scholar resident of Egypt made a fascinating presentation on the Egyptian-born televangelist Amr Khaled. Starting out about a decade ago

(continued on page 2)

NEW VISITING FELLOW

The CSIS Middle East Program is delighted to welcome Mr. Loay El-Shawarby as a visiting fellow from October 2004-January 2005. El-Shawarby, who recently completed his LLM at Georgetown University, is an Egyptian lawyer especially interested in trade and investment. A graduate of the American University in Cairo and the faculty of law at Cairo University, he was elected president of Foreign Lawyers at Georgetown. El-Shawarby can be reached by email at lelshawarby@csis.org or by phone at 202-741-3920. ■

speaking at Cairene country clubs and in upper class living rooms, Khaled became a sensation due to his clear talk about how Muslims can—and should—sanctify the everyday. Khaled (an accountant by training) adopted neither the hectoring tone of clerics, nor the anger of militant Islam; instead, his tone is empathetic and almost plaintive. It seems to resonate most among women, and especially younger ones.

Khaled has created more than a community of viewers, however. First through huge revival-style events in Egypt, and increasingly through satellite television broadcasting, Khaled has created a community of participants. Khaled's followers do more than write and call in to his programs. His increasingly global audience participates in charity drives, organizes study groups, and seeks to apply his specific lessons to their daily lives.

Although Khaled is avowedly apolitical, he has successfully moved his audience to break out of passivity. Far from mere spectators, he has made his viewers and listeners feel like participants.

While many have questioned Khaled's motives, what is significant is how he has done what personalities as diverse as Oprah Winfrey, Martha Stewart, and Stephen Covey have done: he has leapt out of a two-dimensional medium to not only change minds, but change actions.

Successful social movements have often incorporated some aspect of dress or display not only to remind members of their membership in a group, but also to signal membership to others, and thus, help create a sense of community. Amr Khaled's followers can not only buy books and CDs, but also t-shirts and key chains. These items play a role similar to those bracelets popular in the United States a few years ago bearing the legend "WWJD" (for "What would Jesus do?"). Traditions as diverse as the Amish, Hasidic Jews, and yes, Muslims—through different styles of dress and veiling—continue to do this as well.

Politics in the Arab world might seem to follow a similar pattern, but they do so only rarely. The ubiquitous images of presidents and monarchs are more often displayed out of fear or a desire for favor than out of loyalty. Images of Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock are a sign of solidarity for (and sometimes with) Palestinians, but they do not have personal or political programs attached to them.

The challenge for the noisier Arab politics of the last decade is to move beyond spectacle. Especially for those in political opposition, the challenge will be how to prove their relevance to the everyday life of their followers when the political figures themselves, when out of power, have no ability to affect those followers' lives.

Creating a personal connection, as Amr Khaled has done, is vital. Important as well, is combining belief and action in some way that promotes a feeling of membership. A subtle sign or symbol can help viewers feel that they are not solitary but part of a community. Such subtle signals do not immediately lead to change, but they do begin to move politics beyond spectacle. ■

Links of Interest

<http://www.amrkhaled.net/acategories/categories6.html>

Transcripts of Amr Khaled's pathbreaking show, "Life Makers."

<http://www.exploringislam.com/>

Publicity for a recent talk by Amr Khaled in the UK, cosponsored by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

<http://www.egyptsearch.com/forums/Forum2/HTML/003414.html>

A debate on Amr Khaled on an electronic bulletin board.

The *Middle East Notes and Comment* electronic newsletter is produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions; accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s). © 2004 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The CSIS Middle East Program

JON B. ALTERMAN, Director
 EDWARD M. GABRIEL, Visiting Scholar
 MONA YACOUBIAN, Adjunct Scholar
 ANNA MOHRMAN, Program Coordinator
 LOAY EL-SHAWARBY, Visiting Fellow
 IZZAT JARUDI, Intern

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