

Silverstein, K. (March, 2007). Parties of God: The Bush Doctrine and the rise of Islamic democracy. *Harper's Magazine*. (pp. 33-44).

Among the precepts of the "Bush Doctrine"—as loyalists to the current president call the set of foreign-policy principles by which they, and no doubt he, hope his tenure will be remembered—by far the most widely admired has been his stance on democracy in the developing world. The clearest articulation of this stance can be found in a November 2003 speech at the Washington headquarters of the United States Chamber of Commerce, when Bush sharply denounced not just tyranny in the Arab states but the logic by which the West had abetted it. "Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe—because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty," he said. "As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export." Saying it would be "reckless to accept the status quo," Bush called for a new "forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East." At least in its rhetoric, this was nothing less than a blanket repudiation of six decades of American foreign policy.

Since the president's speech, democracy's cause has suffered a series of setbacks in the Middle East. King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia has been arresting government critics and has rejected calls to hold elections for even a toothless "consultative council." (The kingdom has no parliament.) In Egypt, which receives \$2 billion per year in American aid, President Hosni Mubarak was "re-elected" two years ago in a landslide, nine months after his regime jailed his primary challenger, Ayman Nour, on the spurious charge that he had forged signatures for his party's registration. Political repression has also increased in Jordan, another recipient of vast U.S. financial aid. The government has imposed new restrictions on free speech and public assembly, a crack down designed to squelch overwhelming domestic opposition to the regime's close alliance with the Bush Administration. Notwithstanding President Bush's new "forward strategy of freedom," the United States has marshaled nothing more than a few hollow demurrals against the antidemocratic abuses by its allies, and it maintains close partnerships with all of America's old authoritarian friends in the region. When reaching out to opposition figures, it has chosen pro-Western elites such as Nour in Egypt or Ahmed Chalabi in Iraq, both of whom are more admired in Washington and London than they are at home.

Above all, America has refused to engage with Islamic opposition movements, even those that flatly reject violence and participate in democratic politics. It is true that many Islamists long rejected the concept of elections, which the more radical of them still argue are an infringement on God's sovereignty; others rejected democracy because they believed, with good reason, that elections in their countries were so flagrantly rigged that they offered no realistic path to change. (Of course, Islamic groups that did seek to campaign in elections were frequently barred from doing so by dictatorial regimes.) But since the 1990s, growing numbers of Islamists have concluded that reform from within can be achieved gradually, through electoral politics.

Today, there are dozens of active Islamic political parties, both Shiite and Sunni, with diverse political and ideological agendas. Their leaders are certainly not liberal democrats, and some, like Hamas in Palestine and Hezbollah in Lebanon, maintain armed wings. But it is not entirely accurate to describe them, as is frequently done

in the United States, as fundamentalist or backward or even necessarily conservative. The new Islamic movements are popularly based and endorse free elections, the rotation of power, freedom of speech, and other concepts that are scorned by the regimes that currently hold power. Islamist groups have peacefully accepted electoral defeat, even when it was obvious that their governments had engaged in gross fraud to assure their hold on power. In parliaments, Islamists have not focused on implementing theocracy or imposing shari'ah but have instead fought for political and social reforms, including government accountability.

And increasingly the Islamists have numbers on their side. Were democracy suddenly to blossom in the Middle East today, Islamist parties would control significant blocs, if not majorities, in almost every country. Hamas swept to victory in the Palestinian elections of 2006, in a vote among the freest ever seen in the Middle East.¹ The Shiite group Hezbollah, which, like Hamas, is designated by the U.S. State Department as a terrorist organization, picked up parliamentary seats in Lebanon's 2005 national balloting and entered the cabinet for the first time. Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood—despite being officially banned, and despite massive fraud and violence against supporters—won eighty-eight seats in parliament two years ago, making it by far the largest opposition bloc. The Islamic Action Front, Jordan's major Islamic party and a wing of the local Muslim Brotherhood, is generally considered to be the country's best-organized political movement and won 15 percent of the parliamentary seats in the most recent election.

One need not endorse either the ideology or the tactics of these groups to wonder if the wholesale rejection of dialogue with them is truly in the long-term interests of the United States. Indeed, looking beyond the disastrous war in Iraq, perhaps the central questions facing American foreign policy are as follows: How is it possible to promote democracy and fight terrorism when movements deemed by the United States to be terrorist and extremist are the most politically popular in the region? And given this popularity, what would true democracy in these nations resemble? It is impossible to answer these questions without first listening to these movements, but the U.S. government and, frequently, the media have deemed them unworthy even of this; their public grievances—over America's seemingly unconditional support for Israel, its invasion of Iraq, its backing of dictatorial regimes that rule much of the Muslim world—are dismissed as illegitimate or insincere, their hostility explained away as a rejection of "Western freedoms." In fact, as I discovered during my own visits with Islamist leaders over the past year, these groups are busy forging their own notions of freedom, some of them Western and some of them decidedly not. If we want to envision a democratic future for the region, we need not embrace these ideas, but we most certainly need to understand them.

Last fall, on a sunny and unusually clear day in smog-choked Cairo, I walked across a footbridge over a narrow stretch of the Nile that separates the city's central district from a neighborhood called Manial. On a mat halfway across, a solitary man in a long robe and a green head scarf sat selling tissues, packaged sweets, gum, and candy. Down below, a fisherman, his wife, and two young children were eating lunch in a small wooden boat tied up at the water's edge. Like the rest of the city, Manial looks dirty and rundown, and its streets are in perpetual gridlock; but by Cairo standards the district is solidly middle-class, its storefronts hosting not only a variety of small shops but also the Fatin Hamama Cinema, named after one of the country's most famous actresses, as well as a Kentucky Fried Chicken. The neighborhood is also home to the headquarters of the Muslim Brotherhood, which occupies the second floor of a nondescript apartment building overlooking the river. At a desk just inside the office door, a young man was cutting up newspapers with a razor and pasting stories to notebook paper with a glue stick. He motioned me into

the next room, where a half dozen Brotherhood members sat arrayed in identical green chairs, watching a TV newscaster discuss the death sentence that Saddam Hussein had just received from an Iraqi court. Similarly dressed in sober, inexpensive Western-style business suits, the men resembled nothing so much as a group of small-town insurance salesmen. After a few minutes' wait I was escorted down a hallway, where a long glass case held copies of the Koran and other religious texts, and into the office of Mohammed Habib, the Brotherhood's deputy general guide and chief political strategist, who sat at a small desk buried under piles of paper.

The Muslim Brotherhood is an international Sunni movement with affiliates across the Arab world and beyond, including in the West, but its first and preeminent branch is in Egypt. Established in 1928, the party has periodically been implicated in antigovernment violence. In 1948, one of its activists assassinated Prime Minister Mahmud Fahmi Nokrashi; the following year, government security agents murdered the Brotherhood's revered founder, Hassan al-Banna. Sayyid Qutb, an influential Sunni thinker and a hero to Al Qaeda, later became a leading member of the group, and in 1966 he and two others were executed for plotting against the regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser. Qutb, though, was long ago repudiated, and while the Brotherhood maintains as its slogan "Islam Is the Solution," it has embraced and reinterpreted the more pragmatic ideas of al-Banna. It renounced violence in the 1970s, apparently in good faith, and it openly endorses democracy as well as full citizenship rights for the Copts, a Christian minority that constitutes nearly 10 percent of Egypt's population.

The Brotherhood long shunned electoral politics. Al-Banna, the group's founder, took a dim view of political parties—partly because he saw them as divisive and partly because the parties of his day were tied to the British government, which exercised significant influence well beyond Egypt's formal independence in 1922. But in a landmark decision in 1984, the movement's ruling Guidance Council decided to reverse that stance. "The Imam Hassan al-Banna disliked political parties because during his time they were corrupt and incompetent," Habib told me, in explaining the change. "That is why he emphasized building a movement, not a party. But we have proclaimed our acceptance of democracy that is based on the peaceful exchange of power, with the umma—the community—the basis of all authority." Because the Brotherhood is technically banned, its political candidates run as independents, but the group also operates in the open. Independent political observers I spoke with all believed that if a fair election were held today, the Brotherhood would win a plurality, if not a majority, of the vote.

Habib has a short white beard and thinning hair, and wore a light blue jacket; white curtains hung across the windows behind his desk and billowed in a breeze off the Nile. Ahmed Ezz Eldin, another Brotherhood official, worked at a desk on the opposite wall, surfing the Internet on a laptop computer. The Brotherhood has a strong following among the poor, but the movement's backbone is made up of doctors, lawyers, engineers, and other middle-class professionals. Habib was a professor of geology until 1981, when he was arrested and fired from his job because of his Brotherhood activism. Arrested twice more since, he has spent a total of almost seven years in prison, most recently a fifteen-month term that ended in August of 2002. Habib has a relaxed, pleasant manner and still displays professorial airs, with a habit of counting off the points of his case on the fingers of one hand. "The Egyptian people have the absolute right to choose their own leaders and programs," he said. "We have a saying: the unjust state will vanish even if it is Islamic, but the just state will remain even if secular."

I asked Habib if participation in electoral politics had changed the Brotherhood, which is known locally as the Ikhwan. He waited to reply until an office worker set

down a tray with small cups of thick Turkish coffee. "The government has no interest in political reform," he said. "In such a situation, even a group as popular as the Brotherhood can't accomplish anything without allies. We've realized the importance of forming coalitions with other parties, even those with very different beliefs and ideologies."

Habib says concerns about the Ikhwan's religious rigidity are overblown. He laughed when I told him that one Cairo chain-smoker told me he worried that the Brotherhood would ban cigarettes, because some Islamic scholars consider tobacco to be haram, or forbidden by the Koran. "There are certain issues everyone agrees upon because it is written in the Koran, and we can't ignore that, but on other issues there is no agreement," he said, while checking an incoming text message on his cell phone. "So, yes, we will take an attitude on matters forbidden by the Koran, but if someone wants to drink alcohol or smoke in their home, that's their right. We will not be spying on them. It's the same with the veil. We want to create an atmosphere where each and every woman wants to wear a veil, because we know from verses of the Koran that they should. But no woman will be forced to wear a veil. It will be a personal decision."

Egypt has been Muslim for more than a millennium; but by the early nineteenth century, the British proconsul there would report home that "for all purposes of broad generalisation, the only difference between the Copt and the Moslem is that the former is an Egyptian who worships in a Christian church, whilst the latter is an Egyptian who worships in a Mohammedan mosque." Secularism dominated Egyptian political and cultural life through at least the 1960s, and even today the country does not remotely compare to, say, Saudi Arabia, where women are forbidden to drive and Christianity is essentially outlawed. But over the past quarter-century—mirroring trends elsewhere in the region—Egypt has become more and more "Islamized," as Muslims from all social classes have increasingly embraced (whether or not they strictly abide by) a conservative interpretation of Islam. In Cairo, especially in poor neighborhoods, it has become difficult to find small shops that sell cigarettes, due to the growing belief that smoking is un-Islamic. In the wealthy district of Zamalek, an island in the Nile, a single shop—forthrightly named Drinkie's—sells bottled liquor. The number of restaurants offering alcohol anywhere in the city has dropped sharply.

The turn to Islam has been fueled by scholars and televangelists, the latter of whom have been particularly successful in proselytizing to educated Egyptians. A TV preacher named Amr Khaled was deemed to be such a threat by the Mubarak regime that it banned him from his central Cairo mosque; for three years he lived in London, but his sermons continued to circulate in Egypt via satellite television, cassette tapes, and the Internet. Islamic ideas also have gained popularity because of the good works done by Islamists. The Brotherhood, for example, runs job-training programs and hospitals, and doctors affiliated with the group offer free treatment for poor patients. Students at overcrowded and underfunded public schools are tutored by Ikhwan volunteers, and the group distributes pens and paper at the start of the school year.

Young Egyptians, even those from solidly secular upper-class families, are increasingly devout. One person I met with in Cairo told me of her friend, a doctor whose university-educated son had become increasingly conservative and grown a long Islamic-style beard. Over the course of a recent Ramadan, the son spent hours daily at mosque and began lecturing his father about how he must live a simpler life or else risk going to hell. The daughter of another acquaintance, a man who holds a high position in government, suddenly broke off her engagement to a wealthy

businessman after deciding that he was not sufficiently religious. Up through the early 1970s, few female students at Cairo University displayed any sign of Islamic dress. I visited the university and found that virtually all women on campus wore at least a head scarf.

It is possible that Egyptian Islamists are insincere in their espousal of democracy; that the Muslim Brotherhood would, in the event it gained power, seek to impose a stifling brand of shari'ah-inspired rule on the nation. Occasionally, members of the group have heightened such concerns by making outrageous remarks. Last year, after the government approved the demolition of a mosque in downtown Cairo, a radical Brotherhood parliamentarian named AH Laban said that "mosques are the exclusive possession of God, and the officials who approve their demolition should be executed." Brotherhood legislators also furiously demanded the resignation of Culture Minister Faruq Hosni last November after he described the wearing of Islamic veils as "regression."

Yet overall the Brotherhood has undergone a marked shift since it began competing for public office more than two decades ago. Perhaps because of its increasingly young and educated base, the group's religious politics seem to have become more moderate. During its early years of politicking, the Ikhwan was preoccupied with the proper interpretation of the Koran and shari'ah law, and called for closing down nightclubs and government distilleries. Today, though, while the Brotherhood still rails against social evils, it is more focused on political reform. The Ikhwan's parliamentary officials have led anti-corruption campaigns, shaped debate on a consumer-protection bill, pushed the government to combat bird flu, and fought to lift a draconian twenty-five-year-old "emergency law" that allows the government to severely restrict political activity.

The strange collision of Western liberalism with Islamic tradition is starkest in discussions of the role of women. One day, I paid a visit to an organization called the International Islamic Committee for Woman and Child, which is located in a neighborhood called Mohandiseen. The district stretches along the Nile on land that up until the early 1970s was still home to farms and villages. During the Sadat era, it was swallowed up by the city, and cinder-block apartment houses sprang up to accommodate the newly emerging professional and middle-class residents who poured in. Today, Mohandiseen is a fashionable district known for its trendy boutiques and nightclubs; the Committee occupies the second floor of a small office building just down the road from the popular Bull's Eye Pub. The primary goal of the Committee, explained its president, Kamilia Helmy, is to protect the family, which she believes is threatened by feminists working through the United Nations. "Western feminists don't like the family," Helmy, an Ikhwan activist, told me. "They see it as an obstacle to modernization." Helmy has a university degree in engineering; a chunky woman, she wore an orange veil and a brown gown, and she doodled at her desk as she spoke. On the wall behind her was a framed tapestry with the word "Allah" at the center surrounded by the ninety-nine names of God. Feminists, she said, "call for liberating women from the family and any responsibilities toward husbands and children. They believe women should rule the world and men should be marginalized, which is rubbish in my opinion. I live my life in accordance with my religious beliefs and I resent... being pressured by a foreign agenda."

Helmy counts a number of American groups as allies, including the Utah chapter of an organization called United Families International, whose website says it is "dedicated to defending and promoting marriage," and describes homosexuality as "a behavior that it is possible to change with therapy." Indeed, quite a few of

Helmy's views might be readily embraced by conservative-minded Americans. Another of Helmy's charitable pursuits is setting up small development projects, one of which distributed ovens to poor women so they could bake and sell bread; she talked about charity with the tough-love rhetoric of an ardent free marketeer. "A beggar once went to our prophet, Muhammad, and asked him for money," she told me. "He refused, and said, Take an axe, cut down trees, and sell the wood.' That is precious advice. We teach the poor not to ask for money but to earn money, for their own dignity. And that way they will also listen to our message—a hungry stomach doesn't allow for listening."

Although women do not hold top positions in the Ikhwan's political hierarchy, they do play a notable role in the organization. In 1994 the Brotherhood issued a declaration supporting the right of women to vote and to run for public office. Makarim Eldery, a Brotherhood activist and the widow of the movement's former secretary-general, ran for parliament in 2005. She had a big lead in early returns, which would have made her the first female Islamist in the parliament, but the vote mysteriously shifted in favor of her opponent after Brotherhood officials were barred from the counting stations. (During the 2000 vote, Ji-han El-Halafawi, the wife of a powerful Brotherhood official, won a parliamentary seat, but the government blocked her from taking it.) "There's an image that the Brotherhood is patriarchal and doesn't want to give women space, to encourage them to be socially active," Helmy told me. "That is false. During the [parliamentary] elections, we sisters played a clear and prominent role. We voted, advocated for candidates, and guarded the ballot boxes to try to prevent fraud." She supports the idea of women running for office and says she would always vote for the most qualified candidate, whether male or female. The lone exception is the post of president, which Helmy believes should be held by a man—as mandated, she says, by Islamic law.

It is impossible to grasp Egyptians' contempt for the Mubarak regime without understanding the startling inequality this regime has bred. A majority of Cairo's 17 million residents live in trash-strewn slums, with open sewers running through the streets. Meanwhile, the richest Egyptians lead lifestyles so extravagant that they have become strangers in their own country. They vacation in Europe, spend weekends at summer homes on the Mediterranean coast, and escape the indignities of life in Cairo at private clubs—like the sprawling 150-acre Gezira Club, which was founded by the British colonial rulers and still boasts a golf course and manicured lawns for croquet and tennis. The military, a critical pillar of the regime, is also well looked after. Senior officers easily move into comfortable jobs after retirement, while those still on active duty are offered perks ranging from cheap beach houses to subsidized groceries.

The lifestyle of Egypt's ruling class is underwritten by considerable government corruption. Alaa Mubarak, one of the president's sons, became notorious for pressuring private businessmen to cede him stakes in their companies. A popular joke about him had a tourist spotting three photographs on the wall of a restaurant: one of Nass-er, another of Sadat, and the third of Hosni Mubarak. He asks the owner who the first man is, and the owner tells him it's the man who overthrew the Egyptian monarchy and served as the country's president. "Who's the second man?" the tourist wants to know. "That's Anwar Sadat, our next president," comes the reply. "He made peace with Israel but was assassinated in 1981." Next the tourist wants to know who the third man is. "Him?" says the restaurant owner. "That's my business partner's father."

For a time, the Mubarak regime actually seemed fearful that the Bush Administration was serious about its rhetorical calls for democracy in the Middle

East. But following the Ikhwan's impressive showing in the parliamentary elections in late 2005, and particularly after Hamas's victory in the Palestinian elections in 2006 and as the situation in Iraq unraveled, it became apparent that the United States had no intention of pressing the matter of political reform. That became clear last May when, on the day after security forces in Cairo violently broke up an opposition protest, Gamal Mubarak, the president's son and would-be successor, met in Washington with Vice President Dick Cheney and other administration officials.

The State Department has periodically criticized Egypt when it has jailed pro-Western figures, such as the former presidential candidate Ayman Nour. But it has uttered barely a word about the arrests this year (reported by Human Rights Watch) of more than one thousand Brotherhood members, many of whom have been charged, under the dubious Article 86 of Egypt's penal code, with belonging to an organization that "impairs the national unity or social peace." When Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Cairo in June 2005, she gingerly pressed the Mubarak regime on the need for political reform and described democracy as "the ideal path for every nation." Yet she declined to meet with anyone from the Brotherhood, saying, "Egypt has its laws, it has its rule of law, and I'll respect that."

A former CIA officer told me that the United States had unofficial but regular contacts with the Ikhwan until the late 1990s, before breaking off communication when the Mubarak regime complained. Since the September 11 attacks, the Egyptian government has worked closely with the CIA in the "war on terror," serving as a favored destination for "extraordinary renditions," i.e., the covert transfer of suspected extremists from U.S. custody to foreign intelligence agencies for the purpose of interrogation. Ironically, then, despite the dictates of the "Bush Doctrine," it is precisely Egypt's lack of democracy—the regime's willingness to throw Muslim terrorism suspects into secret prisons and employ torture against them—that has made it such a valuable ally. At the same time, of course, the Mubarak government presents itself to the West as the only hope of preventing a radical Islamic takeover. "These regimes are not stupid," the former CIA officer said. "They know the language they need to speak to ensure our continued support, so they raise the Islamist threat and we fall for it, because we want their counterterrorism cooperation. That has trumped the idea of democracy."

Augustus Richard Norton, an adviser to the Iraq Study Group with whom I met in Cairo, told me that he admires a number of leading liberal opposition figures, who he said would eliminate corruption and establish a free press "if they could twitch their noses and do it." But, he added, "they have no significant base. They are nice people with nice ideas and they have impressive handouts in English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese for Western reporters, but there's no grass roots. The only group that can turn out people is the Brotherhood."

Norton believes that the question of whether or not the Ikhwan is fully committed to democracy—a standard to which, it should be noted, the Mubarak regime is never held—is a red herring. "If I had my way, I'd drive as fast as I could, sleep until noon, and have all sorts of romantic dalliances with beautiful women," he said. "But life is constrained by practical realities. The question of the Brotherhood's intentions is interesting to discuss over coffee, but it's not a real question. There are structural constraints regarding what they could do, including what the army would allow and what the public would tolerate. There are 80 million Egyptians, and many of them, even devout Muslims who follow an Islamic lifestyle, are skeptical of the Ikhwan and would not tolerate anything like an Islamic takeover."

For American policymakers, Hezbollah—the Party of God—represents perhaps the biggest challenge posed by militant Islam. Initiated by Lebanese clerics and financed by Iran, Hezbollah has as a slogan "Death to America," and its yellow-and-green flag is emblazoned with a fist clenched around an assault rifle. The United States holds the group, which arose in response to Israel's 1982 invasion and occupation of southern Lebanon, responsible for the 1983 suicide bombing of a Marine barracks at Beirut Airport that killed 241 soldiers, as well as a number of other attacks during Lebanon's fifteen-year civil war that ended in 1990. Soon after the September 11 attacks, President Bush added Hezbollah to the U.S. "priority list" of terrorist organizations, and there was even talk of a possible military strike against its forces. In 2002, then Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage described Hezbollah as "the A-Team of terrorists" and Al Qaeda as "the B-Team."²

Yet the party has evolved dramatically from its founding days, when it expressed fealty to Iran, urged the "pummeling" of Christians, and smashed bottles of liquor. A key turning point came in 1992, when Hezbollah decided to participate in electoral politics, a move that caused a deep internal split and ultimately contributed to the expulsion of its first secretary-general. Today, the primary concern for many of its backers, especially the growing Shiite middle class, is not establishing an Islamic republic but ensuring that Shiite communities get their fair share from the government. Lebanon's political system, based on a National Pact that was negotiated in 1943 and allocated power on the basis of a census completed a decade earlier, limits Shiites to about 20 percent of parliamentary seats and mandates a Christian president and Sunni Muslim prime minister. At least a third of the Lebanese population is Shiite, forming the largest single sect, and their institutionalized political under-representation has left their communities badly served by the central government. (This is a central grievance in Lebanon's recent street demonstrations, which have been organized by Hezbollah and supported by the nation's largest Christian party.)

In a country where government corruption, patronage, and cronyism are endemic, Hezbollah has won support by running schools, hospitals, and health clinics, collecting garbage, and providing drinking water. In the southern suburbs, known as the Dahiyeh, a senior Shiite cleric runs a complex called Al-Saha, an ersatz castle that includes a restaurant, Internet cafe, hotel, and mosque. The profits support a Hezbollah-run orphanage; across the road from Al-Saha is the Martyrs Foundation, which receives funding from Iran and makes payments to the families of deceased Hezbollah fighters.

When I visited Lebanon last November, three months after the end of the war, bombs from Israeli warplanes had left the Dahiyeh pockmarked with ten-foot-deep craters; whole buildings had been reduced to tangles of concrete and cables. Damage was heaviest in the Haret Hreik, Hezbollah's political zone, where entire blocks lay in ruins. The six-story building that housed the party's TV station, Al-Manar, or The Beacon, had been completely obliterated. But the postwar cleanup began almost immediately: Hezbollah dispatched teams of engineers to evaluate damage and estimate the cost of repairs or rebuilding. Within days residents received cash payments of up to \$12,000 for homes that had been destroyed or damaged. At the peak of the cleanup, hundreds of trucks a day were carrying rubble to dump sites along a seaside road leading out of the city. I drove by the area and saw three vast mountains of building ruins, a melancholy mix of concrete, furniture, appliances, and clothing.

On a previous trip earlier in the year I had met Nawaf Musawi, Hezbollah's foreign affairs chief, at an office that was later targeted and destroyed by the Israelis during the early days of the war. Musawi now was working out of a temporary office in a drab residential building, in front of which three young girls sat chatting. The

elevator was out of service due to a blackout, so I climbed the steps to the fifth floor, where I was escorted into a room furnished only with a few small sofas and, on one wall, a large photograph of Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's leader. I sat on one sofa and Musawi on another, and soon an aide brought in a tray of cookies and glasses of berry smoothies, which he placed on a table between us. Musawi, who has a neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper beard, was dressed in tan pants and a light jacket. He clearly understands English without difficulty—he is a keen fan of Comedy Central shows, which air in Lebanon on a satellite channel, and he has given strict orders to his family not to disturb him during Malcolm in the Middle—but he spoke through a translator.

Probably the most common complaint heard about the United States in the Middle East is the political double standard, a theme Musawi returned to repeatedly. He was particularly scathing when discussing the Bush Administration's rhetoric about spreading democracy to the Middle East and its attacks on Islamic groups. "It's funny," he said as he fiddled with a string of black prayer beads, "how the United States is so strongly in favor of democracy, but it just so happens that all of its friends in the region are despotic regimes. Those regimes remain in power with American support. We also rely on support, but our support is internal, from our people, not external."

Musawi, who had forthrightly condemned the September 11 attacks when I saw him during my first visit to Lebanon, again spoke scornfully of bin Laden and his followers. "Al Qaeda and the Taliban and the Salafist movements in Algeria and Iraq are movements outside the framework of Islam," he said. "Their relationship with Islam resembles George Bush's relationship to democracy." As for Hezbollah, Musawi noted that democracy followed its own logic and course in different countries. "Swedish democracy is different from German, which is different from French, but they all have the same philosophical foundation," he said. "We have our own view, which is in keeping with the Islamic tradition and with a special emphasis on the Shia character. But we value democracy. Shias were kept out of power and persecuted for fourteen centuries; we know the danger of despotic authority."

Talking about political Islam, or Islam at all, is difficult for Americans because our stereotypes are so strongly held. Islamists are imagined as poor, uneducated fanatics who, having turned to God for comfort and sustenance, are particularly prone to irrationality and violence. They do not allow their women to drive (when in fact women drive in every Muslim country except Saudi Arabia); indeed, every woman in a veil is seen as a victim of male oppression. When Islamists in Indonesia attack Playboy or Muslim Brothers in Egypt denounce racy Lebanese dancers, it is a sign not only of backwardness but of sexual repression, which is smugly asserted to be a root of Islamic terrorism. (It is doubtful that Osama bin Laden, who has at least three wives, turned to terrorism out of sexual frustration.) Fear of appearing sympathetic to movements that are frankly hostile to the U.S. government is, I suspect, another barrier to frank discussion of Islamic movements, as is the media's clear bias in favor of Israel.

To write with any nuance about Islamists for an American audience is to invite controversy. I experienced this firsthand a year ago when, as a staff reporter for the Los Angeles Times, I visited Lebanon for a story that discussed Hezbollah's evolution from its origins during the country's civil war and the basis for its popularity. My trip fell during Muharram, a ten-day religious holiday for Shiites; during the holiday, Nasrallah was speaking in the southern suburbs every other night, and I went to see Hussein Nabulsi, head of Hezbollah's media relations center, to ask if it would be a problem for me to attend. Nabulsi initially balked, but

after looking me up and down he quickly relented: given my dark features, thin beard, and blue jeans, he concluded that I would be indistinguishable from most party militants. He insisted, though, that I speak no English while in the crowd and that I find a local Shiite to accompany me to the event. This latter role was filled by Mostafa Naser, an industrious, neatly groomed man in his mid-twenties who had been recommended by my rent-a-car agency when I had asked for a driver well acquainted with the southern suburbs.

That night we parked on a main road in the Dahiyeh and joined a stream of thousands of people heading to an auditorium in the heart of Haret Hreik, the district where Hezbollah's political offices are located and where Nasrallah was to speak. After passing through three checkpoints, where we were patted down for weapons, we reached an auditorium decorated with green, black, and red flags commemorating Muharram. (The first is the color of Islam; the second conveys grief for the death of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, the Imam Hussein, who was killed along with his followers at Karbala in 680 A.D.; and the last signifies Hussein's blood.) We dropped our shoes near the entrance and then tiptoed through the packed crowd, which was divided between men on the left and women on the right.

Nasrallah took the stage with such little fanfare or applause that I first mistook the man at the podium for a political warm-up act. Even to a non-Arabic speaker, Nasrallah's charisma was readily apparent. He spoke for an hour, seeming never to refer to notes, and kept the crowd alternately applauding and pumping fists throughout. Naser periodically whispered a few translated snatches from the speech, which mixed religious and political messages. Heavy anti-Israeli commentary drew a particularly noisy response; the crowd erupted in laughter when Nasrallah derided the United Nations as an American toady and heaped scorn on its call for Hezbollah to disband its militia.

As unsettling as Nasrallah's cult of personality may be, much of what I saw in the Dahiyeh surprised me. Although the area is often referred to as "Hezbollahland," it hardly has the feel of a so-called Islamofascist state. At corner cafes, men and women sip small cups of thick, black coffee or "cocktails" made with fresh fruit topped with whipped cream. In a small Christian section, bars serve alcohol—cloudy, anise-flavored arak is particularly popular—and attract a fair number of Shiite clients. Many women wear a long gown and hijab, the traditional Islamic head scarf, but Western-style clothing is not uncommon, and there were no Hezbollah Revolutionary Guards to enforce dress codes. On the street one day I saw a Shiite woman decked out in a short blue-jean skirt, low-cut top, and black boots—unusual dress for the area, to be sure, but she drew hardly a glance. Beyond such matters, it was obvious that Hezbollah was organically rooted in Lebanese political, social, and cultural life and that reducing it to the standard caricature—"terrorist group"—would be grossly misleading.³

I also saw how important it was to lay out Hezbollah's own political narrative, which is frequently given short shrift, at best, in American accounts. For example, virtually any news story about the group will recite the litany of civil war-era attacks on American targets in Lebanon, especially the bombings of the U.S. Embassy and the Marine barracks. But at the time, many Lebanese Muslims saw the United States as a hostile force that had intervened in the civil war on behalf of Israel and its Lebanese Christian allies in the government; the attack on the Marine barracks came after American warships battered antigovernment positions with shells. And although Hezbollah's control of its own militia is clearly untenable in a democratic Lebanon, the party's explanation for why it has thus far refused to disarm—that is, to defend against Israel—is hardly without merit from a Shiite point of view. Since 1982, some 20,000 people in Lebanon, many of them Shiite civilians, have been killed by Israeli attacks, and Hezbollah's militia is the only entity in the country that

represents any type of credible deterrent force.

After submitting my story, though, I ran up against insurmountable editorial obstacles. It was clear that I was deemed to have written a story that was too favorable to Hezbollah, even though any article seeking to examine its popularity would, by necessity, require some focus on the group's more attractive aspects. After the story was near completion, a new editor was called in to review it because, I was told, Hezbollah had a history of inviting reporters to Lebanon and controlling their agenda. The obvious implication was that this had happened in my case—despite the fact that, outside of my interviews with Hezbollah officials, I had had no contact with the party. I had hired my own driver (who turned out to be sympathetic to Hezbollah, like most Shiites, but not connected to the movement) and translators (all Christians), with no restrictions placed on where I went or who I met with; and in fact I had spent significant time with the group's critics.

The primary problem, it soon became clear, was fear of offending supporters of Israel. At one point I was told that editorial changes were needed to "inoculate" the newspaper from criticism, and although who the critics might be was never spelled out, the answer seemed fairly obvious. I was also told in one memo that "we should avoid taking sides," which apparently meant omitting inconvenient historical facts. Over my repeated objections, editors cut a line that referred to "Israel's creation following World War II in an area overwhelmingly populated at the time by Arabs." That, I was told in an email from one editor, David Lautef, was

the Arab view of things. Israelis would say, with some justification, that much of the area wasn't overwhelmingly populated by anyone at the time the first Zionist pioneers arrived in the first part of the 20th century and that the population rose in the mid-decades of the century in large part because of people migrating into Palestine in response to the economic development they brought about.

But that argument, which in any case doesn't refute what I wrote, was long ago rejected by serious Mideast scholars, including many in Israel. It also avoids confronting a root cause of the conflict. According to the Jewish Agency for Palestine, the original Zionist governing body in what was to become Israel, there were roughly 1.1 million Arab Muslims living in Palestine at the time of partition—twice the number of Jews. "Perspective is everything," I replied in an email to the editors. "If my name was Mostafa Naser and I grew up in the southern suburbs of Beirut, I seriously doubt I would be an ardent Zionist. If we can't even acknowledge that Arabs have a legitimate point of view—and acknowledge what the numbers show—we caricature them as nothing more than a bunch of irrational Jew haters." As I noted in a conversation with one editor, religious hatred, on both sides, is an element in the conflict, but it is fundamentally a struggle over land and national identity. If an Eskimo state had been created in Palestine in 1948, one suspects that anti-Eskimo feeling would have increased markedly in the Arab world.⁴ After days of unfruitful negotiations, and a final edit that in my view gutted the story, I decided to pull the piece rather than "inoculate" it to the point of dishonesty.

While the West debates whether the Islamic world is ready for democracy, an equally appropriate question is whether the West is ready for Islamic democracy. A rare dissenting voice on engagement with the Islamist parties has come from Conflicts Forum, a small group of retired Western diplomats and intelligence officials. "People say that talking to them [Islamists] gives them legitimacy, but they already have legitimacy," says Alastair Croke, formerly of MI6 and the head of Conflicts Forum. "They say you are empowering them, but they already have power.

These are the people that run the streets." In his view, American and British analysts see a "clash of civilizations" between the West and Islam while missing a fundamental struggle within Islam itself, between "revivalists" who see electoral politics as a path to gain a stake in society and "revolutionaries" like Al Qaeda who reject that path. Political dialogue with the revivalists is urgent, since anti-Western sentiment, inflamed by the Iraq war, is pushing the pendulum toward Osama bin Laden, Crooke believes.⁵

Heretical views also are held by Efraim Halevy, former head of the Israeli Mossad, and by Milt Bearden, a retired senior CIA official, both of whom I interviewed last spring over breakfast at the Watergate Hotel. (In 1985 the pair held a quiet middle-of-the-night meeting at the Watergate's bar, where they helped plan a rescue for 8,000 of Ethiopia's Falasha Jews.) Halevy is unrelenting in his hostility toward Hamas and Hezbollah, but he considers Al Qaeda's brand of terrorism to be *sui generis*. "Al Qaeda's ambitions are universal and unattached to territory, and it seeks to destroy the whole system of nations," he says. "[The revivalists] aspire to be part of the system. They have constituencies, property, social programs, and other assets that they are interested in protecting." Bearden draws a parallel with the post-World War II period, when Communist parties were gaining strength in Western Europe. "The choice was to counter that extreme with another extreme—the far-right wing—or to nurture the Social Democrats," he says. "There were a lot of people who didn't trust the Social Democrats, who saw them as being almost as bad as the Communists, but in the end working with them was the most effective way to achieve our goals."

Those favoring some sort of engagement, or at least accommodation, with political Islam argue that political exclusion breeds radicalism whereas participation requires negotiation, compromise, and moderation. Hence, the West should encourage political participation by Islamist movements—in the same manner that other groups from recent history, for years rejected as "terrorists," in fact eventually became mainstream political forces, among them the Palestine Liberation Organization, the African National Congress, and the Irish Republican Army.

This last example is instructive. For years the IRA was considered to be Europe's most dangerous terrorist organization. In the extremity of its rhetoric, it painted itself as incapable of reason or compromise. "This war is to the end," it stated in 1984. "There will be no interval.... When we put away our guns, Britain will be out of Ireland." But after twenty-five years of bloody attacks on civilians and soldiers aimed at ending British control of Northern Ireland, the IRA called a cease-fire in 1994 and began negotiations with the British government. The Clinton Administration strongly backed those talks and engaged with the IRA; the following year, the movement's political wing, Sinn Fein, was allowed to open a Washington office, and Gerry Adams, its leader, attended a St. Patrick's Day party at the White House.

Negotiations with the IRA took years and were not always smooth. For many years the group refused to dismantle its paramilitary wing, leading at times to the suspension of the cease-fire and to renewed bombings and violence. It was only last October, fifteen months after the IRA declared an end to its armed campaign and pledged to seek to achieve its goals "through exclusively peaceful means," that a government commission declared that the group had undergone a "transformation" and fully renounced terrorism. Meanwhile, Sinn Fein became a leftist, grassroots political party that in 2002, during Ireland's last parliamentary elections, won 6.5 percent of the vote, and it also holds 24 of the 108 seats in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

No perfect political parallel can be drawn between Islamic groups like Hamas and Hezbollah and the IRA, but Augustus Norton, the adviser to the Iraq Study Group, believes there are enough similarities to merit study. "It's imagined that Islamic groups are esoteric and exotic, and don't conform to the behavior of other groups in other settings," he said. "But that assumption skews the debate and should be turned on its head. Unlike the millenarian aims of Osama bin Laden, [political Islamists] have goals that are in many ways pragmatic and even prosaic, and they are amenable to reasonable solutions and compromise."

In fact, by scorning politically active Islamic movements and denying their legitimacy, the United States is essentially signaling to the Middle Eastern public that electoral politics are a meaningless dead end—precisely the same message that this public hears from Al Qaeda. Last year, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden's top deputy, issued a video that attacked the Muslim Brotherhood for participating in elections, saying it played into America's "political game" of "exploit[ing] the masses and their love for Islam"; in another video he criticized Hamas, saying that armed jihad, not elections, was the only way to liberate Palestine. If America refuses to engage with Islamist movements, however foreign or flawed their ideas may seem, al-Zawahiri's antidemocratic rhetoric may be increasingly well received.

Notes

1 In response to the vote, which was held with U.S. support, President Bush cut off aid to the new government and announced that the United States would not speak to its leaders.

2 Despite the group's reputation in America, a 2002 study by the U.S. Army War College found no evidence linking Hezbollah to international terrorist incidents since the attacks in Buenos Aires on the Israeli Embassy and a Jewish community center in 1992 and 1994, respectively, which together killed 114 people. Hezbollah has always denied responsibility for those attacks, but Argentine investigators determined that it was involved.

3 Another misconception that sometimes comes from American journalism is the impression, conveyed deliberately, one suspects, that meeting with Hezbollah requires a singular combination of unflinching perseverance and steely nerves. Such accounts are flattering to the writer but enormously misleading. Hezbollah is a media-savvy organization with a press office that is generally eager to help Western reporters.

4 When I asked Musawi about the Holocaust denial that has been espoused by some Arab leaders, and suggested it reflected an unwillingness to acknowledge Jewish suffering, he replied, "We are not denying that European racists persecuted an entire people or belittling the suffering of the Jewish people, and we say this with utter frankness and without compliment. But Europeans committed those crimes, and then we were made to pay for them with our land."

5 The Arab press commonly draws a similar distinction: It labels Crooke's revivalists as "national Islamists" and the revolutionaries as "international jihadist."