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COMMENTARY

Hungry For Asian Islam

By JOSEPH BRAUDE | December 21, 2006

AMMAN, Jordan -- As the Bush administration continues to puzzle over Middle East reform, a clear example of success might just be a Malaysian greasy spoon in the desert kingdom of Jordan.

The waiters at the Al-Rufaqa dinette in downtown Amman serve more than green tea and samosas. They're missionaries on behalf of a Malaysian cleric, Sheikh Ashaari Muhammad, whose preach-and-fry restaurant and gift shop has franchises as far west as Syria, Egypt and soon, Iraq. It isn't so much the content of Sheikh Ashaari's controversial take on Islam -- purveyed in books and pamphlets displayed beside the dining hall -- that bodes well for Arab Muslim societies; it's the fact a growing number of patrons appear curious enough to take it in.

"Asian Islam is pluralistic, tolerant and antiextremist," says Jordanian cleric Mustafa Abu Rumman. Mr. Rumman preaches at a government-controlled mosque across the street from a Kentucky Fried Chicken in the West Amman suburb of Swayfiya. "Arabs are tired of militant ideologies and hungry for an alternative. If the largest Islamic movements of Malaysia and Indonesia started sharing their teachings with Arabs the way Sheikh Ashaari does, they would find many followers and friends here."

In my travels through the region over the past three months, I've heard this view echoed by civic and spiritual leaders -- from quietists to militants -- spanning Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States and the Mediterranean. Even a turbaned champion of the Iraqi insurgency, former Saddam Hussein confidante Sheikh Abd al-Latif al-Humayyim, told me in November that he has his eye on the Muslim East. "After the Americans depart," he said confidently, "Iraqis will look to models in Malaysia, Indonesia and India to try and resolve our problems. These exemplars are crucial to the future of Iraq."

What kind of effect will Asia's Islamic influence have on Arab lands? That depends on the institutions and networks put in place to bridge the disparate cultures. Until now, it's been Saudi and Iranian coffers pouring money and manpower into madrassas, fostering a hard-line Islamist bent. But the beginnings of a more moderate trend are forming -- and a nudge from the U.S. may prove vital to the effort.

America has done relatively little so far to promote progressive Islam in Asia -- and even less to help advance the liberal Islamic tendencies manifest in Indonesia, for example, beyond that country's borders. But a pending bill in Congress manifests a heightened appraisal of the importance of Asian Islamic culture to the region. Among other stipulations, the bill allocates modest funds to support "moderation and tolerance" within Indonesian Muslim communities. What's more, it calls for the exportation of Indonesian ideals region-wide: "The Committee recognizes the significant achievements of the Indonesian people in consolidating and

strengthening their democratic processes and institutions, and believes this experience should be widely shared with other Islamic countries."

Such initiatives are crucial, judging from moderate Muslim leaders in Indonesia who lament their own government's disinclination to pursue a like-minded policy. "There's a reason Indonesian Islamic pluralism and tolerance don't get similarly exported," says Jakarta-based Islamic University rector Azyumardi Azra, one of Southeast Asia's most prominent Muslim liberals. "Our government doesn't finance such programs because Indonesia is not an Islamic state." Nor have homegrown grass-roots efforts filled the government's void -- perhaps due in part to the formidable language and cultural barriers separating much of Asia from the Arab world.

Nonetheless, Mr. Azra felt the need to impart his country's ideals to Arab Muslim intellectuals. Back in April, he traveled to Alexandria, Egypt and addressed the Cairo Center for Human Rights Studies on how Indonesian Muslims effectively reconcile Islam and democracy. A month later, he flew to Amman and urged a Jordanian policy conference to learn more about Jakarta's example of peaceable political Islam. His ideas had potential to win broad audiences in both countries; both Egypt and Jordan are still reeling from al Qaeda suicide bombings, which claimed scores of local civilian lives and provoked a popular backlash. But it's unclear whether Mr. Azra's hit-and-run lectures to policy circles trickled down to the clerical elite, let alone the Arab street.

Contrast Mr. Azra's brief visits with the long-term relations forged by Sheikh Ashaari, the Malaysian cleric and restaurateur. The jury is out on whether Sheikh Ashaari's brand of Islam represents the best of what Asia has to offer. His movement was banned by Kuala Lumpur in 1994 on allegations of "deviationist teachings." (He allegedly claimed to have held personal dialogues with the spirit of the prophet Muhammad, for example.) Still, mainstream Asian religious leaders could learn something from his outreach strategies.

Beginning in the 1980s, Sheikh Ashaari sent small delegations of young Malaysian followers into the Middle East to study Arabic, befriend the local population and build long-term spiritual bonds. The missions were largely self-sustaining, with the Sheikh's young emissaries staffing the restaurant chain and other businesses alongside their studies. Some of the brightest students returned to Malaysia and translated the Sheikh's writings into Arabic for dissemination.

Sheikh Ashaari's grass-roots Arab outreach has proven that, against tough odds, Asian Muslims can reach deep into Arab societies and win followers and friends. In the struggle to counter Saudi- and Iranian-backed extremist teachings, the Sheikh's model could be appropriated and customized, on a grand scale, by the largest Muslim movements in Asia: Spreading liberal Islam in the Middle East is a vital step toward countering the roots of Islamist militancy in the Far East and beyond.

Any concerted push for a westward flow of Muslim ideals from Asia will find natural allies not only in Asia but also in the U.S. and across the Arab world. Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, who advocates the quietist teachings of "Islam Hadhari," now serves as chairman of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, an umbrella group of 57 mostly Muslim nations. He could use his position to press for exchange programs that bring large numbers of Asian clerics to Arab Muslim seminaries -- and students from Arab countries to Islamic institutions in Asia. Such an approach would be consistent with the keen interest Mr. Abdullah expressed in a speech last year to export these principles to "Pakistan, India, the Middle East, Jeddah, Dubai, England, New Zealand and many other places I have spoken on Islam Hadhari."

Former Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid, a leader of his country's 30 million-strong spiritual movement, the Nahdatul Ulama, influences a vast network of progressive Islamic boarding schools, pesantren, in Java and beyond. This formidable base of education could have a profound mark on countries to its west -- if it's sufficiently focused on building the language, media and networking competencies necessary to reach out to Arab Muslims at the grass roots.

But the chances of success without widespread institutional support are slim. As an eccentric Malaysian sheikh has shown, Arab societies are as hungry for Asian Islam as they are for Asian fried dishes. For the sake of tolerance and pluralism, perhaps it's time more spiritual leaders from the East joined him in the Asian hospitality business.

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