Rami Khouri (the Middle East)

Charles Strohmer talks with journalist Rami Khouri
Middle East Religion and Politics: Insight for Americans
Rami Khouri, a Palestinian-Jordanian, has some wise words for Americans who are trying to come to grips with the Middle East. Khouri is a prominent Middle East journalist and internationally syndicated columnist, well-respected among his peers, academics, and the media. He was editor-in-chief of The Jordan Times and is now editor-at-large of the Beirut, Lebanon-based The Daily Star, the largest English language newspaper in the Middle East.

A U.S. citizen who received degrees from Syracuse University, Khouri spent the 2001-2002 academic year as a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University and is now director of the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut. His columns on Middle Eastern culture, religion, and politics have appeared in The Financial Times, The Boston Globe, and The Washington Post, and he has been a guest on the BBC, CNN, and NPR. Khouri also carries a long list of affiliations. Among them: Brookings Institution Task Force on U.S. Relations in the Islamic World; Fellow of the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs (Jerusalem); member of the leadership Council of the Harvard University Divinity School; senior associate at the Program on the Analysis and Resolution of Conflict at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs (Syracuse University); board member of the East-West Institute the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown University, and the Jordan National Museum.

He travels frequently from his home in Beirut to the States and has recently lectured in Tennessee, California, and New York. He will be at North Park University in Chicago, end of January 2007. After meeting Rami Khouri in Tennessee, I later caught up with him by phone (October 2006) as he was settling in to a month-long fellowship at Stanford University. We talked about Christian-Muslim relations, President Bush, Hezbollah, Hamas, and the region's understanding of religion and politics, a relationship that may surprise some readers. (A shorter and differently emphasized version of this interview, "The Christian Message in Lebanon," appeared in Christianity Today, August 2007.)

Charles Strohmer: Lebanon has the largest Christian population in the Middle East. What's your assessment of Muslim-Christian relations in Lebanon after the recent border war, so-called, between Hezbollah and Israel?
Rami Khouri: Lebanon is peculiar because it's the Arab country with the biggest percentage of Christians, around forty percent, and Christians were the majority thirty-forty years ago. Today, some villages are completely one religion, only Greek Orthodox or only Shiite, and so on, but others include different sects, such as Sunni Muslims and Christians. In the cities, years ago they used to be grouped by quarters, such as the Christian quarter, or the Armenian, or the Druze, or the Jewish quarter, and so on. Now it's more mixed, though since the civil war ended [1990], it tends to be a bit more polarized in these mixed neighborhoods. But they talk to each other, and they see themselves as citizens of the same country.

CS: From what I understand, the unique political structure also helps keep everyone talking.
RK: The political system is designed on the basis of eighteen different religious confessional groups, who are structurally factored into the system. Parliamentary seats, ministries, governments jobs, and so on are apportioned according to these different confessional groups. So the political process formally recognizes these religious groups, that each one should have a share in the pie.

CS: But Christian-Muslim relations there must be affected by political tensions.
RK: Yes, they reflect the political realities of the day. Religious identity tends to come to the forefront when the political or economic situation is bad, and so people find refuge in their religious identity. The recent war between Hezbollah and Israel created a certain polarization inside Lebanon. Political confrontations arose as people made accusations against each other, but now relations are getting back to normal.

CS: How are people coping after the border war? Winter is coming on, it's cold in the mountain villages.
RK: There was about 200,000 whose houses were completely destroyed, and they are in the most difficulty, but they have found temporary housing in various ways, while their houses are rebuilt or repaired. I don't think anyone is going to be starving or freezing to death, because people are taking care of each other. The real problem is the impact on the economy and creating new job

opportunities to get the economy growing, getting incomes to increase, dealing with the national debt. These economic stresses lead to political tensions in Lebanon, which are the most important thing now. This will take some time to play itself out.

CS: Are you thinking about how much stronger Hezbollah might now become politically in Lebanon? That one day it might become the majority in the government?
RK: I don't think I'd phrase it like that. I think the concern is how can the system find a new political balance. There has been a polarization in the country, and this has upset the traditional political balance, which wasn't working very well anyway and needed to be adjusted. But now there's a political tug-of-war going on, and Hezbollah and others want a reconfigured Lebanese political system with a new unity government, while others say, No the system is fine, we just need to deal with pressing issues like the national debt, the economy, and corruption. I think it's a question of renegotiating a political compact. This is happening now informally, unofficially. I think it has to go on more deliberately in the coming years. The problem is that you can't really address the domestic issues in Lebanon in isolation of regional and even global tensions. So Arab-Israeli issues, the Iranian nuclear issue, WMD proliferation, U.S. pressures on Syria ? these are all linked in one way or another and have impact on domestic affairs in Lebanon.

CS: I have a friend who sells oriental rugs made in the Middle East to America clients. For most Americans, the closest thing they could claim to a relationship with Islamic culture would be that rug on the floor. What can Americans learn from Muslim-Christian relations in Lebanon to improve those relations here? What are the best ways of contact? Would it be through the mosque, the church, the academy, over the dining room table? For instance, in the U.S., Christian-Muslim relations often follow a kind of "grouping" pattern. So it's Muslims over here, Christians over there, which makes it hard for individuals within one group to get to know people in the other, as persons. Even when they try, the other person's presence, or dress, or beliefs, or culture can be off-putting.
RK: It's a different situation in the States and can't really be compared to the Middle East. In the States you have a much smaller Muslim community, usually defined by different ethnic or national groups, the South Asians, the Arabs, African-American Black Muslims, and others. I think the best antidote to misunderstandings and racist misperception, on all sides, is for people to meet each other. It doesn't really matter what the context is, whether it's business, or education, or tourism, or sports, or political engagement. The thing is for people to physically meet each other. You can do educational programs and put stuff on TV and into textbooks, but there's nothing that has as much impact as people physically meeting each other, chatting, having a cup of coffee, going to someone's house.

CS: Create a safe space to talk, to learn, to get to know each other.
RK: Yes. It's the most powerful way to break down stereotypes and to understand realities. There are many ways to find means to that, many different ways it can be done. People just need to make the effort to find ways and to do it more regularly.

CS: How is President Bush perceived in the Middle East? Is he seen as promoting a modern-day crusade, or as promoting democracy and freedom? Is there a typical Middle Easterner's perspective on the President?
RK: Views vary because there isn't really a typical Middle Easterner. But across the board people in the region certainly react to the policies of George Bush, rather than only to his statements. His statements, of course, do get a reaction. But people across the Middle East generally react to the polices of the United States, and what they see is usually quite a large gap between the policies and the rhetoric. They hear the administration talking about democracy and freedom, but they see them practicing policies that don't seem to support that trajectory. They see policies that perpetuate the occupation of Palestine, that create conditions of chaos in Iraq, that allow the Israelis to wage war for a whole month in southern Lebanon. These policies elicit strong reactions across the region.

CS: After the February 2005 assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri, there were encouraging signs emerging toward more freedom and democracy in Lebanon. That seems to have changed since the border war. Now there seems to be a growing impression that the U.S. and Israel might not really want peace in the region. If that's the perception now, what can be done by the U.S., Israel, and the Arab states in the region to change that?
RK: I think the perception is that the U.S. and Israel want peace on their own terms, and these are different than how people in the Middle East would define it. There's not much that the people of the region can do against the military or diplomatic power of the United States or Israel, so what they do is resist politically. I think this is the significance of the Islamist movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, Hezbollah, and even the Iranian and Syrian governments defying and challenging the U.S. politically. In some

countries, they even see the U.S. as promoting the rise of armed militias. I think these are all manifestations of a single trend, which is to resist this American-Israeli posture as much as they can.

CS: That doesn't seem to be producing much change in policy from the U.S.
RK: But it creates a new political dynamic, where the U.S. and Israel cannot do whatever they want in the region, because they know that there will be resistance politically, and in some cases militarily, and in other cases you get terrorists.

CS: Any hope, then, currently?
RK: I think the general sentiment in the Middle East is that the people want to work with the U.S. in promoting democracy and freedom. They don't have a problem with the basic premise. But they don't see the U.S. and Israel doing this. So I think public opinion in the Arab world is saying that if the U.S. is serious about promoting democracy and freedom, it has to do it consistently across the region.

CS: I've often seen it as a worldview problem. Even though President Bush and the Palestinians are using the same words, they're talking past each other, so there's a huge disconnect in meanings. As Jesus pointed out, people will get into trouble when they are not really hearing each other. Do you think Washington needs to listen better?
RK: This is something I've been saying for years. The peoples of the Middle East would be happy to work with the U.S. to promote values of freedom, democracy, human rights, economic prosperity, trade liberalization, and so on. But they don't want to see these defined by the West, or applied through the use of military force, or seen as a consequence of Israeli driven policies. Instead, they want to work together with the U.S. and Europe to define a set of objectives that respond to the needs of all people. And the first need that you will hear Arab people saying is end the Israeli occupation, give the Palestinians their rights, treat Muslims like you treat Christians and Jews.

CS: But many Americans don't think there will ever be any hope of peaceable coexistence in the long term until groups like Hezbollah and Hamas accept the existence of Israel, even if those group become a majority political power, as Hamas has become in Palestine through elections.
RK: Well, the U.S. doesn't recognize the Cuban government, and it didn't accept the legitimacy of the Peoples Republic of China for many years, so I don't think recognizing or not recognizing a government is the real problem. I mean, Hezbollah has negotiated prisoner exchanges and done other deals with Israel, so I think there's a reality that Israel exists and that you have to deal with it. But they are not going to give it formal recognition until Israel comes to grips with recognizing Palestinian rights. And the strength of Hezbollah is generated not just from not recognizing Israel but from their domestic work, social services, their representational role, fighting corruption, and many other things.

CS: Are you saying that for Hamas and Hezbollah their rejection of the modern state of Israel is a sort of sub-issue for them and not the primary one?
RK: It's both. In Hamas, people say: "We'll never recognize Israel no matter what it does, but we will coexist with them. We'll have a long term truce with them. We'll set up a Palestinian state in the West Bank." This is a slightly nuanced position. It's unacceptable to the Israelis but it makes a lot of sense to many people in the Arab world: that you're prepared to coexist with Israel but you're not prepared to formally recognize Israel, at least not according to its present policies. Now this might change. U.S. policy toward Red China changed. South Africa and Northern Ireland changed. Nothing is set in concrete.

CS: There's also the occupation.
RK: That's right. The creation of Israel meant the dismemberment of Palestine. This is the central issue that people in the Arab world feel very strongly about. If Israel wants to be recognized it has to come to grips with the Palestinian reality. People have not found a way to do that yet, but hopefully they'll try harder.

CS: You're Palestinian-Jordanian, and also Greek Orthodox?
RK: Yes. There's a large Greek Orthodox community in Lebanon. It's been there for hundreds of years.

CS: Was your family burned by the Palestinian refugee crisis?

RK: Yes and no. Most of our family lives in Nazareth, which is part of Israel, so they are technically citizens of Israel, but they are Arab Palestinians. My father was outside of Israel in 1948, when Israel was created, so technically he was a refugee, but he wasn't living in a refugee camp like several million are. He got a job with the UN. Materially we're reasonably okay and we have jobs, but we are considered refugees because our rights in Palestine have not been granted.

CS: Much of what you've been saying ? and it comes through your lectures as well ? is quite a different view than the typical American one, where the focus is usually on the religious differences in the Middle East as being the main problem.
RK: In the Middle East, Christian, Muslims, and Jews have existed together for more than a thousand years, so pluralism and knowing each other's religion isn't that big a deal. In the U.S. it's something much more new, and so there's a lot of effort being made to understand each other's religion better. The important thing is for people to look at the Christian Palestinians or Christian Arabs as a potential window into the minds of millions of Muslim Arabs, because the vast majority of Arabs are Muslims. I think it's important for people in the West to look at Christian Arabs and find out their political views. You'd find that what Christian Arabs are feeling is very similar to what Muslim Arabs are feeling. So the real issues at play are not religious but political. If people call on their religious vocabulary, and metaphors, and iconography, we should look beyond the surface manifestations of those religious symbols and look at the political realities underneath because that's what really matters.

(Charles Strohmer is the author of several books and a Visiting Research Fellow of the Center for Public Justice. He is writing a book about wisdom, international relations, and US foreign policy in the Middle East (see: Wisdom Project Précis). A shortened and differently emphasized version of this interview, "The Christian Message in Lebanon," appeared in Christianity Today, August 2007.)

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