



*A Partnership of the USC Annenberg School for Communication and the
USC College of Letters, Arts & Sciences' School of International Relations*

Whither the Arab Street?

By Gordon Robison

**Senior Fellow
USC Annenberg School of Communication**

August, 2005

**A Project of the USC Center on Public Diplomacy
Middle East Media Project**

**USC Center on Public Diplomacy
3502 Watt Way, Suite 103
Los Angeles, CA 90089-0281
www.uscpublicdiplomacy.org**

Whither the Arab Street?

By Gordon R. Robison
Senior Fellow, USC Annenberg School of Communication

No place, perhaps, better illustrates the changing nature of the “Arab Street” than Egypt.

Four and five decades ago the country’s then-president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, was at the height of his power. His regime was brutally repressive, yet it also commanded a huge and sincere popular following both in Egypt and in the wider Middle East. It was at this time that the term “Arab Street” became synonymous with mass public opinion. The huge crowds Nasser could summon, seemingly at will, provided both a source of popular legitimacy and a convenient justification for policies that drew foreign criticism but which Nasser and other Arab leaders did not wish to change.

Talks with Israel? Backing away from a regional conflict? Restructuring a stagnant economy or reforming an atrophied political system? Lack of movement on these and other matters could always be blamed on the “Arab Street,” which, supposedly, would not tolerate any change in the regime’s policies.

Khalid Hroub, director of the Cambridge Arab Media Project at Cambridge University’s Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, says this use of the term Arab Street carries “the implicit connotation or assumption that we - as revolutionary regimes in most cases: Nasser and Syria and Iraq and Libya - we correspond to the opinions and the feelings and the sentiments of the Arab Street. We came to power because this Arab Street was revolting against the old regimes. So we and the Arab Street, basically, are two sides of the same coin.”

Speaking of the Arab Street in this way became a habit. It continued long after the region’s autocratic governments lost the popular legitimacy once bequeathed by their revolutionary credentials and began to resemble the corrupt regimes they had replaced. As a result the Arab Street, though still honored rhetorically, came to mean less and less in practice.

“If we can get a bit of distance, I would describe the whole term as just a new phrase, or alternative phrase, for public opinion as we know it everywhere,” Hroub said.

Indeed, in today’s Egypt the government not only relies on emergency law (in place almost constantly since 1967) to prevent anti-regime protests, it rarely stages pro-government rallies. It is difficult to avoid the observation that it appears to fear crowds - its own included.

If governments such as Egypt’s no longer seem to trust the masses, that may be in part because popular sentiments have shifted, and partly because in an age of mass communication the crowd’s views are no longer as reliably or easily controlled as they once were.

The Arab Street “started as a ‘street’ that was very ideological and pan-Arabist, then moved to become a street with Islamist sympathies,” said Shafeeq Ghabra, president of the American University of Kuwait and one of the region’s best-known political analysts. “Then it became a street that was pro-Iraq, rightly or wrongly, and now it has become a very fragmented street: rethinking its issues, not sure where it wants to go, looking at things in a way that questions the past.”

Where once a single issue - often the conflict between Israel and the broader Arab World - dominated popular debate and protest, Ghabra said, 2005 has seen a push for political change on a wide variety of issues in different parts of the region.

“So there is a street in Egypt that is saying ‘no more’ to Mubarak, the ‘kifeyah’ movement. In Lebanon it is the end of Syrian rule and an attempt to change the way Lebanon does its politics: the protests after (former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik) Hariri’s assassination. In a place like Syria it could be seeking an opening of the country, of its civil society. In Kuwait it meant women’s rights. So, there is fragmentation. Somehow the grand issues have changed and people are seeking connectivity with their local issues.”

This is not to say that some habits - such as using the supposed threat of the ‘street’ to excuse a regime’s own desire to avoid reform - do not die hard.

“If they want to avoid, let me say, any democratic change, any pressure coming from outside, they can play it very well,” Hroub notes. “They can say ‘our public opinion is against anything imposed on us from abroad.’ Which is true. But, at the same time, you can sense the exploitation in such a use. They will say, ‘we are working on the creation of an indigenous formula of democracy that fits with our Arab and Islamic traditions. And our public opinion, our people, would go for this kind of equation and any Western democracy is simply rejected or it won’t work.

“On its face, this kind of argument does have some kind of rationality. But, on the ground, it doesn’t really reflect what are the needs of the people. They can say ‘Yes, our public opinion is against any democratic change coming from abroad and they would favor anything from inside.’ But at the same time there is nothing happening on the inside.”

Others are even more pointed in their dismissal of the alleged power of the Arab Street.

“In general, Arab public opinion is mostly illiterate, or semi-literate. There is no one united Arab point of view. Even on the Palestinian issue, which is regarded as the core cause of the Arab world,” says Shamlan Essa, director of the Center for Strategic and Future Studies at the University of Kuwait. Even when one discusses Palestine with Arab intellectuals, he says, “mostly, they follow their own government’s stance.”

As for the governments themselves, “They use the term for their own objectives. ‘We cannot make peace because of the Arab masses.’ But who instigates the Arab masses?”

he said. “They create the problem, yet they complain about it. They use the masses as an excuse not to do political reform. In Egypt (the government says) ‘We cannot have real genuine political reform. Islamists will take over.’ Yet the question is why are Islamists going to take over? Because the government is corrupt and didn’t do anything to help the masses!”

+++

There is general agreement that the explosion of new technologies around the region has altered the dynamics of this debate, though less agreement what this new dynamic either means or will become.

Daoud Kuttab, a Palestinian journalist and activist who runs Ammannet, an Internet radio station and web site focused on local and national politics in Jordan, complains that the Arab world’s access to technology far outstrips its present ability to make use of it.

“You have today a hundred Arab satellite stations, all re-broadcasting old Egyptian and old American movies. So what?” he said. “Where is the content? We have to start working on content. We’ve got to start creating the creative environment for content to be developed that is competitive, that is local but has a progressive, open, liberal touch.”

Though decrying the lack of action, Kuttab says there is a realization across society that technology can be used to drive reform movements - whether from the bottom-up or from the top down. “That’s why you see an explosion of Internet cafes. You see a lot of people using all kinds of technology to advance themselves.”

Alongside this, the idea has taken hold that new media in general, and the satellite television news channels in particular, are the new bearers of public opinion – playing the role the actual streets of Cairo, Beirut, Damascus and Tripoli once did in channeling Arab public opinion toward national leaderships and the wider world.

It is a thesis that is widely discussed, though not universally accepted.

“Do (Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya) genuinely represent public opinion? No way,” Essa said, adding that this is not to say they are without influence. “Of course satellite stations like Jazeera have had an effect on public opinion,” he says. “I think that the media in the Arab World have made it possible for the first time for people in the Arab World to criticize their own governments. Which I think is a very good step. That’s thanks to President Bush and the Americans and the Europeans who insisted on reform in the Arab world.”

Hroub, however, sees a different effect, one in which greater media openness has to be balanced against what might be called the ‘couch potato effect,’ or as he puts it “the withdrawal of the Arab Street from the street.”

“Instead of going to the street to express their views or to take political action, now people go back home and stick to their living rooms in front of their TV sets. In the past, in Nasser’s days, or at least before this phenomenon, people would feel the same frustration, the same anger, then they would go to the street.”

“The satellite media in the Arab World have, of course, raised awareness, raised the ceiling of expression,” he said, but even this can be a mixed blessing. “You can just call up Al-Jazeera, or whatever TV channel, and vent your frustrations.¹ Then you are OK, and you think that you have done something. This is the fallacy.”

He calls it the psychological trap of “imagined political action. That you spoke loudly and you said whatever you want, and then you hung up the phone, and that’s it. ... People think they are practicing politics, whereas in reality they don’t.”

Some observers also note that the growth of new means of communication has not lessened (and may have exacerbated) the Middle East’s susceptibility to rumors. As the Jordanian author and activist Sa’eda Kilani writes, “rumors perpetually spread following the release of local news items. The rumor and not the news becomes the basis of information and analysis.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Kilani notes, for example that as the Iraq War began two Jordanian weeklies - one Islamist and the other generally considered liberal - both published as fact a rumor that U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney’s daughter Elizabeth, then a State Department official, was so distressed at her father’s Middle East policies that she had traveled through Jordan to Baghdad where she intended to act as a “human shield” against American military action. The initial story was followed-up with a report that the vice president himself had flown to Jordan in a futile attempt to dissuade his wayward daughter. The story was later picked up, Kilani wrote, by “several Turkish and Asian websites.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The U.S. government puts a fair amount of effort into trying to bat down stories like this, though with mixed results. The unit charged with this job is officially known as the “Counter-Misinformation Team,” though among department officials its (rather unfortunate) internal shorthand is “the disinformation unit.” A request for an interview with someone from this group was initially approved by the State Department and then abruptly cancelled without explanation.

Asked why rumors and conspiracy theories are still so easily believed across the region, Hroub points out that there have been a few major and genuine conspiracies (Suez and the Lavon Affair from decades past spring to mind) directed against the Arab World, and that the memory of these can always be used to legitimize stories that would otherwise seem too fantastic to believe.

“So, there are a number of proven conspiracies and people just extrapolate from these things and say, ‘Yes, if you have some part of the story this is only part of the iceberg and

the whole lot is under there. You can't see it, but people are conspiring against us,'" he says.

Most importantly, however, he says there is "this sense of huge failure on so many different fronts: socio-political, cultural, developmental, everything." In this context conspiracies, real or imagined, offer alibis for entire societies. "Some reason - some person, some thing, to hold at least partly responsible for whatever you are doing."

Essa, in Kuwait, agrees. "The Arab masses are disillusioned with everything: 'I cannot control anything.' So they assume that every small thing actually has the Americans behind it. It's a joke. It's unbelievable," he said. "We always blame others for our own problems."

The question this raises is whether informed - and relatively rumor-free - public opinion can ever flourish so long as the region is run by governments with little or no real accountability.

Hroub believes that Arab regimes still generally pay little attention to public opinion. It is true, he says, that they monitor popular sentiment, using their security services to "know for sure what is happening on the ground." This allows what he calls "mainstream opinion" to filter up to national leaderships, but in a way that treats such opinion as a security issue rather than as a political one.

Though entrenched regimes may fear reform, and through it the loss of their own power, Ghabra, at the American University of Kuwait, sees a vast untapped middle ground, one that is sympathetic neither to the radical change of the past nor the stagnation of the present.

If the Arab Street still exists, he believes, what it wants now is measured change and an end to corruption.

"It wants stability. It wants development. It wants jobs. It wants security for its kids. It wants good quality education. It wants a good health care system. It wants clean cities. It wants an evolving culture. It wants openness. It wants respect. It wants a decent society, but it equally wants to see entertainment and it wants to see its country flourish, be respected, like any other country in the world," he said.

"The mafia mentality is strong when it comes to small groups and their ability to work in the dark. The only way to confront this, given the Arab way and the Arab personality and the Arab culture, is by democracy and transparency."

To the American ear that sounds a bit like a revolution to establish middle-class suburbia. Then again, if Ghabra is right, middle-class suburbia may be what today's Arab Street is calling for, perhaps without quite realizing it.

ⁱ Both Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya devote several hours each day to programs that take live telephone calls from viewers.

ⁱⁱ “Freedom Fries, Fried Freedoms” by Sa’eda Kilani, Arab Archives Institute, Amman, 2004, p. 17.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 175. A footnote in Kilani’s text specifically cites the 29-31 March 2003 issue of Al-Sabeel.

* * *

Gordon Robison, Senior Fellow at the Annenberg School for Communication, is based in Amman, Jordan where he writes regularly for the USC Center on Public Diplomacy.

About the Middle East Media Project: The USC Center on Public Diplomacy Middle East Media Project is funded by a grant from the Schumann Center for Media and Democracy. The project examines core issues at the intersection of media and public diplomacy in the Middle East. It aims to answer the following questions: How do the Arab and western media interact and perceive each other? How are U.S. foreign policy goals promoted to and perceived by people in the Middle East? And most importantly, what sort of new initiatives could be effective in deepening mutual understanding between the Arab and western worlds?