

Voices of the New Arab Public





Voices of the New Arab Public

IRAQ, AL-JAZEERA, AND
MIDDLE EAST POLITICS TODAY

Marc Lynch



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for Sophia Faith and Lauren Elisabeth







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Acknowledgments

On September 11, 2001, I was more than halfway finished with a book about the sanctions on Iraq. As the world changed around me, I became increasingly fascinated by the role of the Arab media in the evolving political struggles. I was particularly affected by a research trip to Jordan, Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon in April to June of 2002. The dramatic increase in anti-Americanism in Jordan and Egypt, and the dramatic impact of al-Jazeera on political discussions, struck me as something genuinely new and important. An attention to the Arab media and public opinion was less a departure for me than an intellectual homecoming. My first book, *State Interests and Public Spheres*, had explored the impact on identity politics in Jordan of a media opening, and then slowly and steadily closing down. That book, written during the mid-1990s, had not paid great attention to television, since Jordanian TV remained tightly controlled by the government and satellite television had yet to make a significant political impact. By 2002, this situation had clearly changed.

What had originally been a single chapter about the role of Arab public opinion therefore took on a life of its own. I presented my first thoughts on the subject at the 2000 annual meeting of the Middle East Studies Association in Orlando, where I received useful feedback from Michael Hudson, Dalia Kassem Kaye, and Ibrahim Karawan, among many others. A version of that article was eventually published by *Politics and Society*, under the title "Beyond the Arab Street." Working

with that journal's editorial board was a real pleasure, and their comments definitely improved both that article and this book.

Writing this book has been a genuinely interactive process. I have been blessed by the support and advice of numerous exceptional editors along the way. Chris Toensing of the Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP) has been a constant intellectual companion over the last few years. He published my first writings about Iraq, and stayed with me as my focus shifted, publishing several articles on Jordan that helped me frame some of the arguments in this book. And last, but by no means least, Chris read this entire manuscript in a very early form, offering his typically insightful and constructive commentary along the way.

My shift into the realm of the Arab media was solidified by a timely invitation by Gideon Rose, managing editor of *Foreign Affairs*, to write an article for that august journal. Writing this piece, which became "Taking Arabs Seriously" (September 2003), forced me for the first time not only to put together a systematic critique of the American approach to Arab public opinion, but also to offer the beginnings of a constructive alternative. Gideon has continued to be a skeptical and immensely constructive reader of my work, and this book owes a lot to his interventions. Perhaps this book will convince even that most hardened of realists of the need to take the Arab media seriously!

The *Foreign Affairs* article propelled me into policy circles for the first time, as I became involved in some important debates swirling around Washington about the appropriate form and strategy for American public diplomacy. I first had the opportunity to present some thoughts on the topic at the United Nations, thanks to the Public Relations Society of America. I then had the good fortune to be invited to a forum at George Washington University organized by the Public Diplomacy Institute. At that forum I met Ambassador Bill Rugh, who has since become a trusted and valued colleague. I have benefited enormously from Bill's vast experience and deep insight into the Arab media and public diplomacy. Bill read this entire manuscript, and helped improve it dramatically.

Many other scholars and colleagues offered helpful suggestions along the way. Dale Eickelman read the entire manuscript and offered

exceptionally useful advice and suggestions. Shibley Telhami has been unfailingly supportive, generous both with his time and with his unparalleled data on Arab public opinion. Finally, I wrote two articles for the *Arab Reform Bulletin* that were enriched by Amy Hawthorne's keen editorial suggestions, which in turn helped to tighten and focus this book's arguments. Mustafa Hamarneh and the staff of the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan were gracious and generous in their help, as always. At the risk of forgetting someone, I would also like to thank Asaad AbuKhalil, Hawyard Alker, Michael Barnett, Neta Crawford, Gregory Gause, Charles Hirschkind, Peter Katzenstein, Robert Keohane, and Lisa Wedeen. I am also deeply grateful to dozens of Arab journalists, politicians, and activists who shared their thoughts and experiences with me; although some of them must remain anonymous, others are quoted freely in the text that follows. And last but not least, I owe a particular debt of gratitude to the infamous "Jordan mafia": Curtis Ryan and Jillian Schwedler. No part of my academic life, or my life in general, would be the same without their companionship and support over the years. I can only hope that Sean, Nick, and Jake will allow that to continue!

Williams College has offered a supportive environment since I started teaching here in 1998. I would like to thank the Oakley Center for hosting my assistant professor leave in 2000–2001, and the World Fellowship for funding several crucial research trips to the Middle East and London. The Political Science Department's faculty and students have been a constant source of intellectual stimulation and support. Sara Schwanke provided very helpful research assistance. By far my greatest debt at Williams College goes to James McAllister, my colleague in the subfield of international relations and my closest intellectual sparring partner over the years. James has been a tireless discussion partner over countless cups of coffee, an indefatigable critic, and a perennial one-man reality check. James read the entire manuscript, and his critical perspective significantly strengthened the book's arguments and conclusions.

Finally, I would like to thank my editor at Columbia University Press, Peter Dimock. It has been an enormous pleasure getting to know Peter over the course of developing this book. I have learned an incredible amount about publishing, editing, and the value of writing

from Peter, and hope to continue the dialogue for many years to come. Peter showed unwavering faith in this manuscript, and intervened at appropriate times to spur me to finish a book that might otherwise have continued its evolution for far longer.

Many of the ideas in this book were developed and initially presented on my pseudonymous blog, Abu Aardvark (<http://www.abuaardvark.com/>). I began blogging in late 2002, and quickly found the Aardvark's reputation and influence surpassing my own. I will never forget the first time that a colleague unknowingly quoted the Aardvark as evidence against me in an argument. I maintained my pseudonymity until May 2005, when I participated in a week-long on-line debate at the *Washington Monthly*. I have developed a great appreciation for the blogging format. It rewards clear writing and quick thinking, while inviting comments from a wide range of readers of astonishingly diverse intellectual and political backgrounds. Abu Aardvark allowed me to develop my ideas in real time, while also keeping a useful record of those thoughts and the supporting documents. It also gave me a kind of direct access to public debates that many scholars lack, especially as some intrepid journalists used the blog either directly or indirectly by getting in contact with me. Readers of this book are invited to check Abu Aardvark for ongoing commentary and discussion of these topics.

Which leaves me with my greatest and deepest thanks, which go to my wife, Lauren, my daughter, Sophia Faith, and my son, Alexander Reyes. They make life worth living.

Williamstown, MA
February 3, 2005