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The Structural Transformation of the Arab Public Sphere

> Arab satellites have done probably for the Arab world more than any organized critical movement could have done, in opening up the public space, in giving Arab citizens a newly found opportunity to assert themselves.
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> —*Saad Eddin Ibrahim (2004)*

What does it mean to claim that a new Arab public sphere has emerged? The concept of the public sphere carries with it such theoretical baggage that many doubt whether the concept should be applied at all. Such dismissal is unwarranted, however. Arabs themselves invoke it, or something like it, to make sense of an emerging transnational public opinion critical of states and not reducible to their interests. What is most new about Arab politics since the late 1990s is the rapid emergence of a weak international public sphere that became the central focus of sustained, public, political argument for a vast Arab audience. As Lisa Wedeen (1998) might put it, the crucial political fact is that Arab political actors, from the most powerful states to the humblest civil society activists, *act as if* this new public matters.

The new Arab public should be understood in terms of the public arguments enacted by self-defined Arabs within a widely accessible new media. The new public sphere is not limited to television. Technology has helped the Arab press develop into a major forum for discussion and debate. Prior to Internet distribution, sensitive regimes could easily stop such newspapers at the border, and at any rate the newspapers were often too expensive for most people to read regularly. Dissemination on the Internet gives these newspapers far greater reach than ever before. Furthermore, the satellite stations regularly program roundups of the news and opinion published in the major Arabist newspapers, extending the reach of the press to those who

lack the access or capabilities to read them on their own. Consumption of both press and television debate is often a communal affair, as cafes and salons pass around newspapers, compare the coverage of major events by al-Jazeera and CNN, and argue about what they see. Finally, the public for satellite stations and the pan-Arab press resides throughout Europe and the United States, in addition to the Middle East. Extensive diaspora networks can and do directly participate in the political debates of their homelands, a deterritorialization of the Arab public sphere the implications of which have yet to be fully appreciated (Roy 2004).

I begin this chapter by tracing the evolution of the Arab media, arguing that the emergence of a transnational public sphere was driven in part by domestic repression and in part by the existence of political entrepreneurs able to take advantage of the new media opportunities to invoke a shared identity. I then develop a public argument conception of the Arab public sphere. I draw on a large database of al-Jazeera talk shows to document what Arabs talked about in this new public sphere. Finally, I consider several key criticisms of the Arab public sphere, particularly concerns about its illiberal character and the ambivalent place occupied by Islamism.

Is There Really an Arab Public Sphere?

To the brilliant Lebanese journalist Hazem Saghiyeh, speaking of "Arab public opinion" makes no sense in the conventional meaning of the word.[1] Saghiyeh points out that "public opinion" usually refers to the opinion of citizens of a single country, which has tangible effects on that country's politics. In the Arab world, on the other hand, "the most important foundations in forming 'public opinion' in any Arab country continue to be foreign policy and religious identity and what most call national dignity." Public opinion expressed in the media tends to diverge quite sharply from real mass opinion: "most of society might take a hard and authoritarian position, but public opinion could take an extremely liberal and permissive position . . . because the dynamics of public opinion come from the city and from the most advanced and educated and professional and wealthiest sectors. . . . In

the Arab world these sectors remain very small and limited." Public opinion rarely affects Arab rulers, who repress and control societies with abandon. In contrast to a public opinion working to "reduce the hand of the state," mass opinion tends to "instead struggle to incite the state to act more forcefully on religious or national issues." And, finally, mass Arab opinion tends to be highly stable and fixed, resistant to new information or to external influences: "if it is true that the Arab satellites today practice some kind of influence, then this influence hasn't changed much in reshaping broad mass sentiments or for improving them."

Such skepticism about the Arab media is deeply embedded. The pall that fell over Arab public life in the 1970s and 1980s, as oppressive states established hegemony over domestic media and Saudi Arabia used its vast oil wealth to seize a wide swath of the transnational media, left Arab intellectuals largely paralyzed. Critics ranging from Fouad Ajami to Edward Said, from the poets Nizar Qabbani and Adonis to the philosopher Mohammed Abed al-Jabiri, agreed on the pallid presence of Arab public intellectuals, their subservience to power, and their acceptance of self-censorship. One school of thought suggests that Islam lacks the distinction between public and private essential to the very concept of the public sphere. Yet another maintains that Arab and Islamic cultures are themselves fundamentally illiberal, beset by neopatrimonialism, tribalism, backwardness, and the legacies of Islam.

Despite this skepticism, the public sphere has been increasingly central to the analysis of Arab and Islamic politics. As democratic transitions stalled and civil society struggled to gain purchase against still-dominant Arab states, scholars cast about for ways to make sense of a revitalized public opinion disembodied from formal political institutions. When I was writing *State Interests and Public Spheres* in the mid-1990s, there was only a handful of precedents for conceptualizing the changes in Arab politics in terms of "public spheres" (Salvatore 1997). Today, dozens of articles and books focus on this theme (Anderson and Eickelman 1999; Schulze 2000). Similarly, international public spheres have received increasing attention from political scientists, particularly after Thomas Risse's (2000) influential article on communicative action in world politics (Bohman 2001; Samhat and

Payne 2003). Since 9/11, the potential for international public spheres to overcome the deadly spiral toward a clash of civilizations between Islam and the West has become a matter of urgent theoretical and real world concern (Lynch 2000a, 2005; Buck-Morss 2003).

In contrast to public sphere conceptions that revolve around particular institutions (the coffeehouse, television, civil society) or public opinion (as measured by opinion surveys), I define the public sphere in terms of active arguments before an audience about issues of shared concern. These dialogues require media that can bring arguments before a relevant audience, but media alone do not a public sphere make. Indeed, the mobilizational media characteristic of authoritarian Arab states can be seen as the antithesis of a public sphere, with a single voice driving out all dissent, questioning, and critical reason. Nor does argument alone make for a public sphere. Private arguments, carried out behind closed doors, lack the critical dimension of publicity. What makes a public sphere is the existence of routine, ongoing, unscripted arguments before an audience about issues relevant to many. A wide range of evidence suggests that, for Arabs, the most "attractive features of the new media options are that they are interactive and participatory. . . . Participation is crucial: television and radio shows that give room for the audience to call in, ask questions, voice their concerns, and vote for their favorite singer are popular" (Katulis 2004).

This public argument conception of the public sphere leads me to focus on talk shows and opinion essays rather than on news coverage. What makes the new Arab public "new" is the omnipresent political talk shows, which transform the satellite television stations into a genuinely unprecedented carrier of public argument. What makes it "Arab" is a shared collective identity through which speakers and listeners conceive of themselves as participating in a single, common political project. What makes it a "public sphere" is the existence of contentious debates, carried out by and before this self-defined public, oriented toward defining these shared interests.

It is not only the news coverage on al-Jazeera that unsettles the United States—it is also precisely the public sphere qualities embodied on the station. In a revealing interview with the *Washington Post*, the State Department's gifted envoy to "the Arab street," Christopher Ross, admitted to being "uncomfortable with the panel discussions

and call-in talk shows that became a hallmark of al-Jazeera."[2] Ross preferred "situations in which he can remain 'in control.'" Ross described such situations as "short appearances in the context of news programs, where you are given the opportunity to present the U.S. point of view." Ross's discomfort perfectly captures the disjuncture between the American vision of public diplomacy and the ideal of a public sphere. What makes a public sphere a public sphere is precisely those aspects that dismay Ross: its unscripted character, its openness to multiple perspectives, its unpredictability . . . in short, that it is not possible to remain "in control."

Such a public sphere cannot be reduced simply to the more generic "public opinion," to the media, or to the infamous "Arab street" that might rise up in fury when sufficiently provoked. An arena of public argument outside the official channels of the state, the public sphere offers a zone of free and critical reason that might influence mass collective action but that cannot be reduced to it. The public sphere does not depend on the existence of democracy—and indeed the emergence of the Arab public sphere can be read as a direct response to the absence of democracy in almost every Arab country, which has led frustrated Arabs to seek out this new space for political argument and debate. Nor, finally, is the public sphere the same as "civil society," the more institutionalized network of social and civic organizations outside of the state.

While the new Arab public could not have emerged without the rise of new information and communications technologies, the new public sphere arose only because of what Arabs did with these new opportunities. The mere emergence of satellite television networks established the technical possibility of an Arab public sphere, simply by making it physically possible to create a space for direct and immediate communication and shared experience of the news. But it takes an orientation to public argument to make a public sphere. Only when al-Jazeera refocused the satellites away from entertainment and toward politics—more precisely, toward political argument about Arab issues defined by an Arab identity—did it become a public sphere. It is this emphasis on public argument about common issues, along with shared language and identity, that allows the new Arab public to transcend James Bohman's fear that transnational mass media are "unlikely to be

locations for social criticism" or to be the foundations for a genuine transnational public sphere (1998: 195).

The image of multiple, crosscutting patchworks better captures the nature of the new Arab public than any singular conception of a unified spatial or temporal location: "messages and images in face to face conversations, newspapers, books, magazines, anonymous leaflets, video and audiocassettes, and satellite and regular television criss-cross, overlap, and build on one another. . . . When censored in one medium, such messages recur in another" (Eickelman 2001: 194). Movies and television shows serve as political metaphors and offer "safe" avenues by which to approach difficult and contentious topics (Armbrust 2000; Abu Lughod 1993). The distinction between elite and tabloid media, commonly employed in media analysis, does not hold in the Arab case: the Arab satellite stations, which stand accused of pandering to the masses through sensationalism, are also the premiere venue for elite political discourse. In one survey of Palestinian audiences, for example, al-Jazeera was most popular among those with the highest income (74 percent named it their preferred station, compared with 49 percent from the lowest income brackets) and the highest educated (76 percent of university graduates against 42 percent of illiterates).[3]

At the level of face-to-face interaction, many Arab countries have protected spaces of political debate and discussion that straddle the divide between public and private. In the *diwaniya* of Kuwait, for example, prominent personalities and ordinary citizens alike gather by invitation to hear political arguments and to discuss. Yemeni *qat chews* fill a similar social function (Wedeen, forthcoming). In Jordan tribal gatherings bring men together to discuss political issues, while political salons in the homes of prominent personalities fill a similar function for the elite. Coffeehouses once served as a vital spot for political argument in Egypt, with famous cafes hosting major intellectuals and political figures and popular cafes serving as communal sites to watch and discuss the satellite television news. In 2004, however, Abdullah al-Sanawi remarked that in contrast to those vibrant days, "I think that most of the government ministers would not dare sit in a public coffeehouse, or probably in any public place, and I think that a large number of the official intellectuals would not dare to sit in a coffeehouse and mix directly with the simple people."[4] In almost

all Arab countries, mosques represent one of the most important of these protected spaces, while transnational Islamist networks offered a particularly important realm of information and argument. The new television stations create warm relationships among physically distant Arabs and greatly increase the emotional salience of political issues (Salvatore and Eickelman 2004: 20).

The near-universal exposure to this new public sphere is what gives it such a transformative impact. Throughout every Arab country, and extending through a widespread diaspora, Arab viewers consider themselves part of a single, common, ongoing political argument. A remarkable number of callers to al-Jazeera's talk shows live in Europe, as did nearly two-thirds of those who wrote letters to one Arab newspaper (Lynch 2003b). Because of its geographic and transnational expanse, this conversation highlights issues of shared rather than local concern. A collective narrative of the impotence and failure of the Arab regimes runs through and unites these core shared issues. Local issues are reframed—cast in terms of a wider grand narrative of Arab identity—so that a Jordanian clampdown on press freedoms, an Egyptian sweep against Muslim Brotherhood members, or a Syrian campaign to arrest political dissidents all cohere into a single narrative of the absence of Arab democracy. This core narrative insistently articulates the existence of an Arab people sharing a common story and a common identity.

Despite this common narrative, the Arab public sphere is deeply riven with intense disagreements, with discourse seemingly trending toward greater radicalism. Cass Sunstein's analysis (2003) of "enclave deliberation" offers a structural explanation for such polarization. Sunstein notes that in certain kinds of structural conditions, "members of a deliberating group predictably move toward a more extreme point in the direction indicated by the members' predeliberation tendencies." Sunstein argues that "it matters a great deal whether people consider themselves part of the same social group as the other members; a sense of shared identity will heighten the shift." Furthermore, polarization is more likely where there is a limited "argument pool," as well as when there are social and reputational pressures on speakers to present themselves as being in line with a shared consensus. And finally, "familiar and long-debated issues do not depolarize easily." Arab pub-

lic spheres display all of these characteristics. Social and reputational pressures are strong, and Arabism provides an overwhelmingly salient shared identity. The issues are long-standing and highly polarized, and "polarization entrepreneurs" ensure a steady supply of extreme views. Enthusiasm for consensus, and fears of strengthening hostile external forces by revealing internal division, lead the Arabist public sphere to avoid difficult and contentious questions. What made the nascent Arab public sphere an enclave, then, was the unusually powerful set of shared assumptions and shared identity binding participants within the group.

From Voice of the Arabs to al-Jazeera

Before theorizing the new public, it may be useful to describe its evolution. This section lays out the historical development of the Arab public sphere (Rugh 2004a). Voice of the Arabs and al-Jazeera, each the defining media outlet of its era, embody two very different visions of an international public sphere.

Voice of the Arabs, Egypt's radio service in the 1950s and 1960s, was an instrument of a powerful state, used purely for strategic reasons and aimed primarily at mobilizing pressure from below on rival regimes. Radio broadcasting transformed the potential for Arab political action by bringing Arabist political speech (if not rational discourse) directly to the increasingly mobilized masses. This allowed pan-Arab movements to fundamentally challenge the legitimacy of relatively new Arab states. These radio wars featured little rational argument, and much invective and fierce rhetoric. It is this model that lingers in the minds of analysts obsessed with the "Arab street"—a model of emotional, angry rhetoric aimed at energizing dangerous mobs. But such speeches lost their credibility with the 1967 War, and despite many efforts nobody—certainly not Saddam Hussein—has successfully recaptured Nasser's mantle.

Al-Jazeera, by contrast, was hosted by Qatar, a small state with no aspirations to Arab leadership. Where the Arab radio wars of the 1950s suggest an international public sphere dominated by states, power, and strategic action, the satellite television of the late 1990s more resem-

bled a public sphere of individuals engaged in open-ended arguments before an imagined (and real) audience of Arabs and Muslims spread across the globe. The new media of the 1990s involved two-way debate, as talk shows allowed viewers to call in questions and to vote in real-time opinion polls. The new media is commercial, driven more by market share than by ideology. The effect was to create a transnational media that defines issues as Arab ones which demand Arab solutions. Satellite stations such as al-Jazeera wield power very differently from Voice of the Arabs. Where the latter mobilized the masses through fiery speeches, al-Jazeera rose to prominence by giving voice to public opinion rather than directly attempting to mobilize or lead it.

The Dismal Years: The 1970s and 1980s

During the 1970s and 1980s, states struck back against the Nasserist radio wars by asserting near total state control over the media, to the point where little real public sphere remained, either within Arab states or at the transnational level. Arab states assumed overwhelming positions over individuals and society, with an overbearing state hand in the control of information. Censorship, both direct and indirect—via internalized "red lines" of self-censorship—closed down most public avenues of political debate. As for the press, as Faisal al-Qassem once asked, "are these newspapers . . . good for anything more than wrapping falafel sandwiches, with all due respect to the sandwiches?"[5] State-run television was a dreary affair, focusing on official business and completely closed to political opposition. The omnipresent secret police and intelligence services, along with the state's ability to control both freedom of movement abroad and employment, cast a chill over journalism: "a policeman on my chest, a scissor in my brain" (Anonymous 1987).

This repression led many intellectuals and media professionals to relocate to Europe, especially London. The Lebanese press, which had always been among the most free and most influential in the Arab world, similarly relocated in the 1980s because of the Israeli invasion and the subsequent horrors of civil war. But in this period newspapers published abroad could be easily stopped at the border, censored, or

simply banned, and were at any rate too expensive for most Arabs to afford. Out of desperation, many Arabs turned to whatever foreign sources might be available, whether the BBC Arabic service, Radio Monte Carlo, the Voice of America, or even (in Jordan) Israeli Arabic-language television broadcasting.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Saudi Arabia used its dramatically increased oil wealth to establish a dominant position over much of the Arab press and electronic media (Rugh 2004a; Boyd 2001). It did so partly to exercise power, partly to defend against what it saw as a threat from external media, and partly to prevent reporting of sensitive internal developments such as the 1979 seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca. Saudi control led to what Abd al-Wahhab al-Affendi (1993) described as "an eclipse of reason" in the Arab world.

By the end of the 1980s, the Arab media was something of a wasteland. When Iraq invaded Kuwait, the Saudi media was able to suppress the news in its domestic media for several days, while Arab elites drew on CNN and the BBC for information about the crisis. By the early 1990s, the Arab public sphere seemed to have been conclusively downgraded by the combined impact of the Gulf War and the seemingly inexorable concentration of state power.

Domestic Liberalization and Retreat: The Early 1990s

In the 1990s tentative liberalization processes in a number of Arab states allowed limited debates about domestic issues, which turned attention inward. While avoiding real democratization, many of these experiments did expand public freedoms and conditionally liberate the print media.

Jordan in the early 1990s witnessed an explosion of newspapers (Lynch 1999). The weekly press pushed the boundaries of the "red lines" that governed Jordanian public discussion, fomenting a new kind of frank public discourse on sensitive matters such as Jordanian-Palestinian relations, the peace process with Israel, economic reforms, and official corruption. For a brief span of a few years, this domestic press emerged as a uniquely Jordanian public sphere, one focused on questions of Jordanian rather than Arab identity and interests. As the

kingdom moved toward an unpopular peace treaty with Israel, however, the state began to crack down on the independent press. Through progressively more restrictive press laws, as well as prosecution and shutting down of numerous newspapers, the regime succeeded in choking off this nascent public sphere and reclaiming its dominant position in public life.

Similar stories can be told for other Arab countries. In Yemen, unification and liberalization in the early 1990s saw the publication of independent newspapers and the free circulation of information (Carapico 1998: chapter 6). Along with competing television stations and several daily newspapers, dozens of weekly tabloids sprung up that represented all political trends and focused a nationwide dialogue on political reform and change. As Sheila Carapico describes it, "the media constituted an arena for a 'war of declarations' and for competition to influence public opinion. Whereas in the past political rivalries were secretive, now they played out in front of television audiences more aware of political events than at any time in their history" (1998: 151–154). A national dialogue in the face of civil war attracted enormous public attention, with heavy media coverage and open political arguments before a highly attentive Yemeni public. With the civil war that broke out in 1994, and then the centralization of power under Ali Abdullah Saleh, this press—like its Jordanian counterpart—lost its energy and its centrality to political discourse. Since 2001 the Yemeni press has seen a steady encroachment by the state, with frequent crackdowns, harassment, and physical intimidation against journalists.[6]

Other countries saw similar, if less dramatic, openings. After the restoration of Kuwaiti sovereignty in 1991, the ruling family offered substantive concessions to public participation in politics. The combination of deep resentment of Arabs who supported Iraq in the Gulf War and a vibrant, contentious press drove a backlash against the Arab order as a whole, and even a real questioning of Kuwait's Arab identity. In Lebanon, the end of the civil war in 1989 and the return of electoral politics saw a rebirth of that country's proud press tradition, albeit one that remained in the shadow of the Syrian occupation and reflected widespread reluctance to touch sensitive communal issues which might respark civil war (Gonzalez-Quijano 2003). In Morocco, an independent press slowly emerged in the last years

of King Hassan's reign, but suffered a general crackdown after King Mohammed VI ascended the throne in 1999 (Jamai 2005). Even Syria enjoyed a very brief "Damascus spring," with tentative moves toward political reform after the death of Hafez al-Assad, concentrated in private salons and discussions on the condition that they not enter the public sphere via the Syrian press, which remained tightly controlled throughout the 1990s (Azm 2000). While Saudi Arabia retained its fierce internal control over information, offering few concessions to its beleaguered reformists, Saudis had increasing access to the Internet and satellite television (Yamani 2000: 15–19 Wright 2004b).

The rollback of liberalization and tighter control over most national media in the mid-1990s helped create the market for al-Jazeera by displacing political argument into the transnational arena. Denied the opportunity to debate matters of public concern at home, Arabs turned to the new media. For example, al-Jazeera caused a sensation in Jordan with a program pitting regime critic Layth Shubaylat against a staunch regime loyalist. In the early 1990s Jordanians would not have needed to tune in to a Qatari television station to see such a spectacle, since they could have seen it in the Jordanian media. States seeking to more tightly control domestic political debate created the conditions for the rise of the independent political transnational media that by the late 1990s had definitively shattered their own control over information.

The Late 1990s: Al-Jazeera and the New Media

As recently as the first Gulf War, there were no Arab satellite broadcasts. By 1994, however, at least twenty different regional satellites had been launched, although their entertainment focus limited their political impact (Sakr 2001b). By the late 1990s the emergence of the satellite television stations and the increased availability of the European-based Arab press created the foundations for a public sphere relatively independent of states. This market-driven transnational broadcasting has facilitated a much stronger and more clearly articulated transnational public opinion.

The new media radically transformed the sense of distance among Arabs and Muslims, bringing them together in real time and in a common language alongside intense images and a shared political discourse. It has decisively broken the state's monopoly over information, even in repressive states such as Saudi Arabia and Syria (Ghadbian 2001). Ratiba Hadj-Moussa (2003) offers a telling description of the process in Algeria: "The national television network is so lacking in credibility that the only reliable sources of information about Algeria come from outside. . . . The advent of satellite television has created a circuit which begins in Algiers, goes back to Paris or London and back again to Algiers."

The emergence of the satellite television networks was necessary, but not sufficient, to create an Arab public sphere. It was the political arguments within those media that made the difference, not the media themselves. Long before al-Jazeera, Arabs could tune in to satellite television stations replete with Lebanese belly dancing and Egyptian television serials. It was not new media alone that created a new public sphere—it was al-Jazeera's prioritization of politics and its remarkable success in initiating a regionwide public discourse that quickly reached an incredibly widespread and diverse audience. In 1996 the satellite news station Orbit—a Saudi joint venture with the BBC—was abruptly shut down by its Saudi patrons after it aired a documentary that Saudi authorities deemed offensive. Veterans of this experience, many with long professional experience at the BBC, were therefore available when al-Jazeera was created in Qatar that same year.

Speaking to an explicitly transnational audience addressed as fellow Muslims and fellow Arabs, al-Jazeera quickly moved to the center of an emerging Arab public sphere (Miles 2005). Al-Jazeera revolutionized the Arab and Muslim media environment not by offering a regional news service, but by adopting an overtly political focus and a dramatic new style. Al-Jazeera has been accused by Arab writers of being everything from a CIA operation to a Mossad one, from a bin Laden outlet to a Saddam apologist, from an agent of Islamism to an agent of secularism. Al-Jazeera infuriated much of Arab public opinion by inviting Israeli speakers onto its programs, leading it to be regularly accused of being in the pay of the Mossad or of being an agent of "normalization."

Market surveys confirm the universal impression of the rapid rise of al-Jazeera.[7] In Jordanian surveys, those naming al-Jazeera as the most reliable source for Arab news grew from 4 percent in 1998 to 12 percent in 1999 and to 17 percent in 2000 (among those who owned a satellite dish, the numbers are more striking: in 1998 25 percent saw Jordan TV as most credible for Arab news and 24 percent al-Jazeera; in 1999 the numbers were 17 percent and 44 percent, and in 2000 they were 25 percent to 49.4 percent). Al-Jazeera's audience increased from 2.5 percent in 1998 to 5 percent in 1999 and to 8.2 percent in 2000; over the same period, Syrian television saw its audience shrink from 3.8 percent to 2.9 percent, while Israeli television went from 1.3 percent to nothing. Among those who owned a satellite dish, al-Jazeera's audience jumped from 18.9 percent to 42 percent in the same period. In 2003 Jordan's Center for Strategic Studies found that about 35 percent of Jordanians viewed al-Jazeera as the most trusted source for Arab and international news—beating Jordan TV in both areas—and that al-Jazeera was the second-most trusted source even for domestic news.[8] Palestinian surveys show similar findings: in September 1999, 51 percent of Palestinians named al-Jazeera as the most-watched satellite television station; 47 percent said the same in February 2000; and 58 percent in June 2004.[9]

Al-Jazeera's coverage of the December 1998 Desert Fox bombing campaign established the station as mandatory Arab viewing. Its coverage of the second Palestinian Intifada in 2000 galvanized Arab politics even more, with the repeatedly broadcast image of the death of young Mohammed al-Dura defining the shared Arab experience of the crisis and directly contributing to a resurgence of protest activity.[10] During the furious month of April 2002, as massive Arab street protests against the Israeli reoccupation of the West Bank rocked every Arab capital, al-Jazeera covered both events on the ground and the protests with equal vigor, bringing vivid images of the conflict into Arab homes, a direct experience without precedent.[11]

Al-Jazeera's monopoly position could not last, and within a few years rivals emerged to produce an intensely competitive and increasingly fragmented market. LBC formed an unusual partnership with the newspaper *al-Hayat* and upgraded the news side of its offerings. Abu Dhabi TV set out to capture the "moderate alternative" ground.

Almost every Arab country offered official satellite news stations, with Egypt particularly active in pushing its local product. Even the United States launched its own Arabic language satellite television station, al-Hurra, in February 2004. As Ibrahim al-Aris puts it, "If al-Jazeera had the media market to itself for a period before and after the Afghanistan war, now there are many stations. . . . The satellite media map is constantly renewing and al-Jazeera no longer has a monopoly even though it continues to enjoy a leading position."[12]

Perhaps the most intriguing, and most successful, of these challengers has been the Dubai-based al-Arabiya. In February 2003, with $300 million in startup money from Saudi Arabia, technologically advanced facilities taken over from MBC, and a veteran team of broadcasters, al-Arabiya set out to offer a more moderate (and, of course, more deferential to Saudi sensitivities) alternative to al-Jazeera. As its first managing director Salah al-Qallab revealingly put it, "We are not going to make problems for Arab countries."[13] Al-Arabiya's vision of the Arab media explicitly excluded the kind of open, free dialogue that made al-Jazeera a genuine public sphere: "all of al-Arabiya's interviews will be pre-recorded. . . . It seems clear that the station has no intention of opening such a wide margin for discussion and debate."[14] In other words, al-Arabiya's mission statement suggested an attempt to strip the satellite television stations of their public sphere qualities and return them to a more conventional news media.

During the Iraq war, nevertheless, al-Arabiya imitated al-Jazeera and won some success with a similarly nationalistic approach to the news. After the war, Saudi Arabia reigned in al-Arabiya, and appointed the pro-American former editor of *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, Abd al-Rahman al-Rashed, as its managing director (Shapiro 2005).[15] Al-Arabiya very self-consciously presented itself as the "moderate" alternative to al-Jazeera, with Rashed dismissing the station's critics as "those with a political agenda who were furious to have lost a platform as powerful as al-Arabiya," and describing his station's niche in these terms: "We attract liberal-minded people. Jazeera attracts fanatics."[16] Al-Arabiya set out to avoid using terms such as "martyrdom" or "resistance," instead adopting the "neutral" vocabulary preferred by American critics of the Arab media. In comparison with al-Jazeera, al-Arabiya played down the Palestine issue, while devoting a lot of time to covering Iraq,

employing a more positive spin in line with American preferences. Given al-Jazeera's poor reputation with Iraqis, many of whom saw it as too sympathetic to Saddam's regime, al-Arabiya gained popularity inside Iraq relative to al-Jazeera. Al-Arabiya forged a close relationship with interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, who appeared frequently on the station for interviews and who ran a large number of campaign advertisements in January 2005. It ran into problems, even so: several of its correspondents were killed by American troops; the Iraqi Governing Council shut down its operations several times, just as it did al-Jazeera's; and in the fall of 2004 its Baghdad offices were decimated by a horrific car bomb.

Al-Arabiya talk shows tended to feature more Saudi and other Arab officials—foreign ministers, members of Parliament—and fewer independent and critical personalities than the al-Jazeera programs. Since al-Arabiya wanted to establish itself as the responsible alternative to al-Jazeera, it made sense to choose officials and pro-American voices over outspokenly critical figures. And Arab officials who feared and often loathed al-Jazeera as a threat made time for al-Arabiya to promote it as a safer version of satellite media. When President George W. Bush chose to grant interviews to the Arab media to contain the damage of the Abu Ghraib scandals, he chose al-Arabiya (along with the American station al-Hurra) as the outlet. The pressures of market competition can be vividly seen in the case of al-Arabiya, however. Over the summer of 2004, for example, despite an explicit commitment to avoid sensationalism, al-Arabiya broadcast numerous hostage videos, just as al-Jazeera had done; as managing director Abd al-Rahman al-Rashed explained, "there is only one condition for me to stop airing all these videotapes, which is that all TV stations in the region agree not to show them."[17]

Moving in the other direction, al-Manar Television offered a vision of Arab television as a fairly explicit propaganda machine. Run by Hezbollah in Lebanon, al-Manar relied on a steady diet of provocative, horrifying images layered in an impenetrable, univocal discourse of anti-American, anti-Israeli rhetoric (Jorisch 2004a). Al-Manar made no pretence either to objectivity or toward open dialogue, and indeed openly scorned the idea of objective journalism. In the summer of

2004 France moved to ban al-Manar for its anti-Semitic propaganda, while many accused it of inciting anti-Israeli violence. Al-Manar reached out to a niche audience, one looking for an explicitly anti-Israeli or anti-American perspective, rather than competing directly with mainstream satellite stations such as al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya. The Shia station did surprisingly well even in Sunni areas such as Jordan and Palestine, with its fiercely anti-Israel message, although this message did not seem to travel well beyond the Levant—a January 2005 market survey found al-Manar with less than 1 percent of the Greater Cairo audience. Its presence in the arena may have forced those stations toward a more radical position, however, for fear of losing market share.

A June 2004 survey by Zogby International found that despite new competition, al-Jazeera remained the most-watched Arab news source overall, with some regional and local variations: it ranked as the primary station for 62 percent of Jordanians, 54 percent of Moroccans, 44 percent of Lebanese, 44 percent of Saudis, and 46 percent in the UAE; and the secondary station for (on average) about 20 percent more in each country. Al-Arabiya was next, averaging about 7–8 percent in most countries (but 19 percent in the UAE), while LBC did well only in Lebanon (29 percent), and Abu Dhabi TV did well in Saudi Arabia (22 percent) and the UAE (17 percent). In other words, despite the repeated warnings of its impending loss of credibility or audience, al-Jazeera remained the market leader even as the market grew increasingly competitive. A September 2004 survey of Saudi television preferences found that 82 percent watched al-Jazeera regularly, followed by 75 percent who watched al-Arabiya, 33 percent the Saudi al-Ikhbariya, and then a number of stations clustered at the bottom with very small audiences.[18] In a late 2004 survey of the Greater Cairo area, 88.4 percent of households with satellite television watched al-Jazeera, followed by al-Arabiya (35.1 percent), Nile News (8.9 percent), CNN (6.6 percent), al-Hurra (4.6 percent), al-Ikhbariya (3.9 percent), BBC (3.1 percent), and al-Manar (each with 0.4 percent).[19] Also in late 2004, a survey in Jordan found 72 percent watched al-Jazeera and 54 percent al-Arabiya (only 1.5 percent watched the American station al-Hurra).[20] Al-Jazeera remained the standard-setter—and was the one station every Arab could assume

that other Arabs had seen that day—but other stations offered a serious challenge.

A key development here is that choice in news sources has quickly acclimated Arab audiences to the expectation of disagreement. While there are certain programs that command loyal audiences—Faisal al-Qassem's "The Opposite Direction," or the Lebanese reality show "Superstar"—for news Arab viewers tend to switch rapidly between stations. Arabs watching news in cafes generally surf the satellite television offerings, comparing al-Jazeera to CNN, or al-Arabiya to Egyptian state television. Well-versed in the arts of deciphering political codes in the authoritarian media, these audiences now excel in comparing coverage and analysis and triangulating.

In the aggregate, amid the diverse media of the new Arab public sphere, virtually all positions, information, and ideas could be found. The new media has not noticeably changed the Arab state's desire to control information, but it has clearly eroded its ability to do so. Two examples from Egypt demonstrate this powerfully. In the summer of 2004 Mohammed Hassanein Haykal, the Arab world's most famous journalist, began to appear on the fledgling Egyptian satellite station Dream, with transcripts of his programs widely disseminated in the press. Haykal quickly ran afoul of the authorities by discussing critically the prospects of Gamal Mubarak succeeding his father as president, and was summarily banned from the Egyptian media. In response, Haykal signed a blockbuster deal to host a program on al-Jazeera, where his views immediately reached more Egyptians than on the domestic station (Lynch 2004c).[21] Similarly, the contrasting media coverage by the Egyptian state media and the satellite television stations of the 2004 terrorist attack at Taba could hardly be more stark. While al-Arabiya and al-Jazeera covered the explosions heavily, on Egyptian television "all the channels had the regular stuff going on—a play here, a video clip there—it was like this thing wasn't happening in Egypt. . . . It wasn't just the horrific images emerging from Taba that astounded them, but the seeming oblivion to those events being demonstrated by their local channels. On channel 1, a play continued without interruption. On channel 2, a video clip. Channel 3 was airing an interview, as was channel 4, and so on."[22]

Al-Jazeera as the Arab Fox News?

> They're partisan in the same way that Fox TV are partisan and they portray themselves as a virtual Arab nation, always seeing things from the perspective of the suffering Arab people.
>
> —Abdallah Schleifer[23]

> It benefits al-Jazeera to play to Arab nationalism because that's their audience, just like Fox plays to American patriotism, for the exact same reason.
>
> —Lt. Col. Josh Rushing, *Control Room*[24]

In the spring of 2004 a University of Maryland team released a report demonstrating that viewers of Fox News were far more likely than others to believe three demonstrably false things about Iraq: that weapons of mass destruction had been found, that ties to al-Qaeda had been demonstrated, and that most of international opinion had backed the war (Kull 2003). The nakedly partisan Fox approach to the war misled its viewers, according to this study, by reinforcing their prejudices while shielding them from contradictory information. The word choices of Fox news anchors reinforced the discourse preferences of the Bush administration. Fox talk shows were dominated by partisan Republicans, with opposing views represented either by ineffectual token liberals or else by extreme-looking leftists, thereby effacing the existence of a moderate, centrist opposition to the war. And as this approach gained it market share, competitors such as CNN and MSNBC began imitating its style of coverage. In short, on first glance the profile of Fox News looks remarkably similar to that generally ascribed to al-Jazeera.

While useful as a starting point, the comparison of al-Jazeera to Fox News does not do justice to al-Jazeera, nor to the Arab public sphere as a whole. It does help to highlight some troubling but important developments, however. In news coverage, al-Jazeera and the rest of the Arab media resembled Fox not only in their patriotic rhetoric but also in their overwhelming focus on one side of the conflict to the exclusion of the other. Fox focused its coverage on the human experience of American soldiers—whether in combat or playing soccer with Iraqi children—while almost completely ignoring or demonizing the

Arab "terrorists." Al-Jazeera similarly focused on the human experience of Arabs and Iraqis during the war, while explicitly rejecting the American frame for the war. It is worth noting, as Yassir Abu Hilala points out, that "the correspondents of Fox News say that the army kills enemies and that the resistance is terrorists. . . . The Arab media do not call the occupiers in Iraq 'enemies' or 'terrorists.' "[25]

It is in the talk shows and in the conception of the public sphere where the comparison falls short but points to disturbing trends. Over the course of 2002–2003 it was possible to observe a "Fox-ification" of al-Jazeera, as an open, diverse, and free public sphere came to be increasingly dominated by hyperpartisan voices and emotional rhetoric. One hallmark of the Fox talk shows is that they tend to prefer extreme partisans rather than moderates, such that the far left is better represented than the mainstream of the Democratic Party. This creates a misleading sense of the actual distribution of opinions, and reinforces the belief of many of its viewers that the "other side" is more radical than it really is. The coarsening of rhetoric on al-Jazeera, as well as the growing trend toward entrenched positions and bitter accusations across partisan lines, follows this logic.

While American guests on al-Jazeera were plentiful, they more often came from the most conservative sectors of American politics—the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the American Enterprise Institute were far better represented on al-Jazeera than was the Brookings Institution or the leftist Institute for Policy Studies. On the September 11, 2004, program to discuss the possibility of a "Dialogue of Civilizations," for example, Yusuf al-Qaradawi was pitted against not an American Muslim or an advocate of such a dialogue, but rather against the extremely hawkish "terror expert" Steven Emerson. This can partly be explained by the reality of a Republican-dominated Washington, making conservative views arguably more important for Arab viewers to understand, but it still tended to push argument toward extremes at the expense of a rational center.

Still, there are important differences. Where Fox positioned itself against a "mainstream media" that was characterized by norms of journalistic objectivity, al-Jazeera stood against a media tightly controlled by repressive Arab states. Where Fox began as an underdog, building a partisan audience while chipping away at a centrist mainstream media

and at the same time closely cultivating ties with an ascendant Republican party, al-Jazeera established itself as a near-dominant market leader independent of the most powerful regimes and state forces and then faced competition from numerous new rivals.

Other New Media

Broadcasting and the Internet have revitalized the Arab press. Despite continuing high levels of illiteracy, the rapid expansion of mass education, combined with the traditionally high value placed on texts in Islamic culture, ensures that these globalizing processes encompass the print media as well (Eickelman 2000). As Abdallah Schleifer points out, "the first major impact of new satellite technologies upon Arab media was in the eighties, not the nineties, and it was the satellited daily newspaper, not television" (Schleifer 1998).

Newspapers such as *al-Hayat*, *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, and *al-Quds al-Arabi*, published in London and aimed at a pan-Arab audience, offered an early challenge to state control over information, and globalization has helped these newspapers to overcome their traditional difficulty in reaching an audience in the Middle East, which had resulted from their price and from the fact that governments could stop them at the border or censor their contents. These papers now circulate widely among elites, and most now post their content free online. What is more, satellite television news broadcasts routinely read from these newspapers, which allows them to reach a far wider audience. These papers therefore have a disproportionate impact among influential Arab elites, and "are a fundamental link between expatriate Arab communities . . . and the Arab world itself" (Alterman 2004: 230–231). In an earlier study, I found that 68 percent of the letters to the editor published in one newspaper in 2001 and 2002 came from Europe or the United States (Lynch 2003b: 65).

The circulation and influence of newspapers has declined in recent years, as satellite television has emerged as the crucial site of the public sphere. Abd al-Aziz al-Khamis, a Saudi editor, claims that the circulation of some papers and magazines has plummeted from hundreds of thousands to as low as 2,000, "not because they are forbidden or

censored but because nobody will buy them."[26] And, as Ahmed Mansour notes, "the Arab press is living through a constant crisis because of the narrowing margins of freedom and expression. . . . Not a day passes without news of an arrest or trial of a journalist or stopping of a newspaper. . . . At a time of a global widening of media freedoms, many Arab states are issuing new laws and rules limiting the freedom of the press."[27]

At the micro-level, mobile phones and text messaging have played an important role in changing communication patterns and dissemination of information. For example, Jordanian activists arranging a demonstration against the sanctions on Iraq managed to circumvent close scrutiny by state security agencies by "blasting" the location of the protest over instant messaging only at the last minute. By the time the police reacted, the protestors had already been filmed by al-Jazeera and their message broadcast to a wide audience.[28]

Even before the explosion of satellite television dish ownership, videotapes of the most exciting and controversial al-Jazeera programs circulated freely to be played on already-ubiquitous VCRs. These mid-tech communications technologies pose real difficulties for regime control, given their centrality to business and their widespread integration into daily life (Eickelman 2001a). Early challenges to the legitimacy of the Saudi regime by Islamist dissidents such as Mohammad al-Masa'ri, for example, deployed information collected from local sources or from Western media, and then used fax machines, and later the Internet and email, to distribute information damning to the Saudi regime into the kingdom. The Ayatollah Khomeini famously used cassette sermons taped abroad to rally and mobilize Islamic protests against the Shah of Iran (Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994). As discussed at the end of this chapter, cassette tapes of Islamist preachers circulate widely, creating a distinctive "a distinctive religious public" among a vast, transnational realm of pious Islamists (Hirschkind 2001).

The Internet has also emerged as an important site for the new public. While its impact is limited by state controls and by very low levels of access, it has still been increasingly relevant. Al-Jazeera's Web site, for example, has emerged as one of the single most popular sites on the Internet despite being in Arabic. Offering full transcripts of its talk shows, viewable news clips and audio, and a wide range of interactive

features such as opinion surveys and chat rooms, aljazeera.net plays a crucial role in that station's overall impact. After its 2003 launch, al-Arabiya similarly put together a state-of-the-art Web site to compete with al-Jazeera at that level. That the American-run station al-Hurra did not create such a Web site contributed to its general failure to attract significant Arab interest or attention. Blogs (personal weblogs) began to make a political impact in 2004–2005, especially in countries such as Egypt (the Kefaya movement), Lebanon, Iraq, and Bahrain, even if their influence remained limited by language barriers to a very small numbers of users. Finally, Internet chat rooms, especially those associated with radical Islamism, have attracted increasing attention as an important source for information about attitudes in the jihadist community, and have also played a role in recruitment for those organizations (Wright 2004a).

Contrary to widespread expectations about the revolutionary impact of the Internet, Arab states have proven quite adept at developing new mechanisms of surveillance and control (Kalathil and Boas 2003). Arab governments have used techniques ranging from sophisticated censorship regimes to state-controlled Internet service providers and proxy servers to highly publicized crackdowns on Internet users to intimidate or prevent political uses of the Internet (Kalathil and Boas 2003; Burkhardt and Older 2003). The Middle East remains one of the regions of the world least connected to the Internet—one commonly cited statistic indicated only 2 million total Internet users in the Middle East out of a total population of more than 220 million—although the distribution patterns range widely. One less appreciated route by which the Internet has had an impact is that Arab journalists—both print and broadcast—now have much greater access to information (Rugh 2004a: 12–14). During their programs Arab television presenters routinely refer to materials gathered from the Internet, such as opinion polls and Western newspaper articles, giving wide audiences indirect access.[29]

Thinking Through the Arab Public Sphere

It is not enough to say that an Arab public sphere exists. What kind of public sphere is it? What kind of impact is it likely to have? What kinds

of arguments dominate within it? Who are the participants? In chapter 1, I argued that the Arab public sphere represented a kind of enclave, a counterpublic largely hidden from the view of dominant publics until September 11 and the Iraq war brought it forcefully to the attention of Americans. While the Arab public sphere is unquestionably a *transnational* one, linking together Arabs across dozens of Arab and Muslim states as well as a vast international diaspora, it is not necessarily a *cosmopolitan* public sphere (Kohler 1998). Bounded by language and by the shared political concerns that defined its participants as Arab, this transnational public sphere encouraged a politics of identity and of resistance at odds with the normative expectations of the advocates of cosmopolitan democracy.

Claims for the radicalizing impact of this new media in the Arab context must be set aside conventional arguments that globalizing television has the reverse, depoliticizing effect, as a global, market driven corporate media induces passivity and consumerist values in its audiences (Bennett 2004). A long-standing critique of the mass media is that it tends to demobilize societies, to discourage political action in favor of the passive consumption of political information (Gamson 2001). The new Arab media, by contrast, takes an active role in attempting to mobilize mass publics to become politically involved. One key difference between the Arab transnational media and generically globalizing media is the preexisting collective identity and shared political interests across Arab state borders. Where a globalized media might "exclude much of local politics, citizen activism, public policy analysis, and deliberation," the new Arab satellite stations for the first time included exactly those things—with core Arab concerns such as Palestine and Iraq standing alongside demands for democratic reform as "local issues" (Bennett 2004: 126).

The impact of this new media within the Arab world has arguably been unique because of a conjunction of factors. In particular, the preexisting transnational political community made it conceivable that a politically oriented transnational new media would find a ready audience. This audience was particularly primed by the relative closure and stagnation of domestic publics, and the near absence of meaningful domestic democratic politics. Arab audiences have become rapidly acclimated to having a genuine choice of engaging, independent me-

dia and have little to no interest in stodgy, politically controlled state broadcasting.

What the new media actually amounts to remains deeply contested. For example, al-Jazeera host Ghassan bin Jadu argues that "the satellites feel the pulse of public opinion, and . . . are able to contradict what has been asserted in the Arab media for decades."[30] But Kawther al-Bashrawi retorts that "this platform for free expression doesn't express the truth of what happens on the Arab street or what happens in the heart of our society. . . . The masses are beginning to tire of media slogans."[31] Shaker Nabulsi, by contrast, accepts that the Arab media does roughly convey the sense of the Arab street, but takes this as grounds to fiercely denounce both. In this section, I attempt to get a handle on these violent political debates by laying out some of the core theoretical issues raised by an international public sphere.

A "Weak" International Public Sphere

> We are talking here about a news station, not about a political party or a national liberation movement. Why do we burden al-Jazeera with the functions of the failed movements and failed political parties?
>
> —Mahmoud Shimam, July 2004[32]

While the new Arab public sphere has had strong effects at the level of mass attitudes and elite opinion, its structural position is weak. It has succeeded at harnessing the attention and participation of a striking portion of the Arab world, but it remains detached from legitimate policy avenues and unable to translate its consensus into political outcomes. Drawing on the wider literature on international public spheres, I would describe the Arab situation as a *weak international public sphere*.

International public spheres are generically problematic because they are severed from the state (Bohman 2001). In Habermas's ideal type (1996), the public sphere acts as a conduit to the democratic state, which in turn can act effectively on the ideas arrived at through free public reason. But the international public sphere has no such direct target, no means for translating opinion into policy, rendering it what

Nancy Fraser (1992) has called a "weak public" (Nanz and Steffek 2004). But "weak" should not be taken to mean that its political significance is minimal—only that it lacks these institutionalized mechanisms for affecting policy: a weak public "has moral influence but no legally regulated access to political or administrative power. . . . [But] the communicative power of a weak public can have profound political impact" (Brunkhorst 2002: 677).

The Arab public sphere can mobilize public outrage, pressure leaders to act through ridicule or exposure, shape the strategic incentives for rational politicians, and even incite street protests. But it cannot, in and of itself, act. It cannot pass laws, declare war, call elections, sever diplomatic relations, or lower trade barriers. This structural weakness, combined with its manifest power to shape public opinion, defines the realm of its political possibility. As Khaled Haroub argues, the new public gives Arabs a chance to talk about the reality of the problems of the Arab world, but no opportunity to offer any solutions.[33] Hence, the Arab media can be seen as a catalyst for change, but it would probably be an exaggeration to cast them in the lead role as the primary driving force for reform. Even the most open and frank and vigorous discussions on the satellite television talk shows, he concludes, can too easily remain just remain words in the air.

Put bluntly, if Arabs cannot act on their opinions, then do those opinions matter? Will the new public sphere create, as Yusuf Nur Awadh fears, "a culture of talk instead of a culture of action"?[34] or perhaps even reduce the prospects of effective political action, by allowing people a "safe" outlet for their frustrations and diverting their energies away from concrete political mobilization? For Arabs, the absence of democratic states makes even more urgent the question of who is listening to these public arguments. In crucial ways, the Arab public sphere is self-referential, constituting a new Arab identity explicitly independent of and often critical of Arab states and the official Arab order. To what extent can a satellite television station actually claim to represent Arab public opinion? Munir Shafiq argues that "the power of al-Jazeera comes from its programs and some of its participants, who give the people the chance to speak their minds freely on the air. . . . It is public opinion that shapes al-Jazeera and not the opposite."[35] Rather than directly producing outcomes, the new media has become the pri-

mary location for Arabs to work out their identity and their interests through public argument and debate. As it has risen to prominence and it has become a core ingredient of the shared social knowledge of all politically aware Arabs—it is not the fact that everyone watches al-Jazeera, but rather that everyone knows that everyone else watches it, that shapes its strategic centrality.

Self-Conception as a Public

A certain narcissism defines the new Arab public, which is relentlessly obsessed with "Arab" issues and with its own importance. This self-obsession, ironically, may be one of the things that most identifies it as a public. Michael Warner writes that publics "exist by virtue of being addressed" (2003: 67). For Jim Bohman, "a public sphere requires not only a social space for communication to an indefinite audience but also that diverse members of a society interact in distinctive ways and thereby come to regard themselves as a public" (Bohman 1999: 186). By that standard, the question of the existence of an Arab public sphere answers itself. There is simply no doubt about the abundance of voices that address an Arab public *as* an Arab public, creating the public sphere through this act of address. When Arabs appear on al-Jazeera, they understand themselves to be speaking as Arabs, to Arabs, and about Arab issues. What makes the Arab public a "public," then, is that self-identified Arabs routinely and frequently address and invoke it as such, via media that reach the prospective members of the public, about matters collectively defined as of common interest.

There is a remarkable amount of reflexive, self-conscious discussion within the Arab public sphere about itself. Al-Jazeera regularly airs programs devoted to questioning its own importance, its own behavior, its own mistakes. On April 20, 1999, for example, Faisal al-Qassem devoted his program to the Moroccan government's decision to ban his program. On May 23, 2000, Qassem's program considered "Questions about al-Jazeera," and on October 31, 2000, he inquired into "The Arab media and its role in the Intifada" (a question taken up again by Ghassan bin Jadu on April 27, 2002). In January 2002, a two-part special explored "the future of the Arab media." On June 30, 2001,

Ghassan bin Jadu's program focused on "freedom of expression in the Arab media." Bin Jadu, in a December 2, 2003, program about the political impact of the satellite television stations, modestly concluded that "the satellites play a large and influential role in the arena of Arab society."[36] An April 2005 program explored "the Arab media and the question of Iraq."[37]A February 2004 episode of *The Opposite Direction* even took on the politically loaded allegations of Iraqi "oil coupons" being used to buy support in the Arab media, including al-Jazeera.[38] And the explosive question of the Arab media's relationship to al-Qaeda, as well as criticism of its coverage of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, received the attention of multiple programs.

Counterpublics and Hidden Transcripts

> A counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public but a dominant one. And the conflict extends not just to ideas or policy questions but to the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public.
>
> —Michael Warner (2003: 119)

The Arab public sphere has long identified itself as a subordinate, dominated counterpublic, struggling against Western hegemony and tenaciously resisting pressure to conform from all sides. It has embraced this subordinated self-concept even more firmly in the face of the increasing attacks by the United States and Arab governments after 9/11. This drives a stubborn assertion of a distinctive Arab identity and discourse, and a refusal to "toe the line." Frustration and resentment at the political and economic stagnation of the region, at Western domination, and at Israeli treatment of the Palestinians permeates the public arena. Arabs define their identity in part against this sense of subordination and exclusion from a globalizing and universalizing Western public.

American policymakers generally failed to appreciate the significance of Arab public opinion or to engage with it seriously, and when they did take it into account it was only out of fear of overly provoking

the so-called Arab street. This meant that from 1998 to 2001, the new Arab public sphere—for all of its dramatic internal publicity—produced what James Scott (1986) has called a "hidden transcript." The Arabs arguing about sanctions on Iraq or about the Palestinian Intifada did so knowing that Americans—the powerful—would largely not be listening, nor would they be participating.

The Arab public emerged as a counterpublic, self-consciously and intentionally challenging the dominant narrative and terms of discourse within American and global media. The Arab media consciously rejected a Western standpoint, and took upon itself the mandate of building Arab identity and political consciousness. More than one Arab journalist explained that they proudly took their Arab identity as a starting point, but that this in no way compromised their professionalism. And, they pointed out, American journalists who wore American flags on their lapels while reporting the war in Iraq were hardly in a position to criticize. Al-Jazeera prided itself on breaking the Western monopoly on news coverage, as well as on breaking the hegemony of state-dominated media in the region. Its reporting did begin from an Arab and Islamic worldview, covering the issues that mattered to Arabs and Muslims in a language that spoke to—and over time shaped and reinforced—their norms and beliefs. The impact of the new media has arguably been most deeply felt in the areas of identity, a phenomenon of some concern to those hopeful that it might instead promote liberal notions of democracy.

The relationship between a subordinate Arab public sphere and an American-dominated international public sphere suggests an analysis in terms of domination and resistance rather than dialogue. The conflicting demands of these multiple publics—the need to appear pro-American on CNN and Arabist on al-Jazeera—contributes greatly to the profound hypocrisy that has been so devastating to public discourse and legitimacy in Arab politics. Dependence on American power did not eliminate the Arabist discourse, but rather drove it underground and separated it forcefully from political practice. This generated a rich Arabist hidden transcript, an alternative, coherent, widely shared interpretation of political structures and relations that could not be openly aired or translated into practice because of the realities of weakness and subordination.

While the public transcript defines the mainstream of acceptable political debate among the elite, among themselves the subordinated talk about issues in very different ways. These hidden transcripts constitute entirely different understandings of power relations, moral values, and political interests. Much of what are seen as "conspiracy theories" fit within this general type of hidden transcript, thriving within a perspective of powerlessness combined with radical mistrust of official voices. It should not be surprising when Arab speakers aim for precisely the areas most likely to outrage the powerful—whether anti-Semitic slanders, assaults on Western ideals of democracy, or dramatic accusations about murdered Iraqi babies.

The transcript was not hidden from Arabs, obviously—indeed, the remarkable impact of the new Arab public sphere rested upon its bringing previously private political debates into the glaring light of publicity. What kept it hidden was that the dominant power, the United States, largely ignored this transcript prior to September 11, which allowed Arabs to carry on their public arguments largely without concern for American views or objections. One consequence of September 11 has been an end to this insulation. Hearing does not mean comprehension, however. When Americans heard Osama bin Laden for the first time, most found his rhetoric literally incomprehensible—laden with symbolism, history, assumptions, and references that resonated within Islamic public spheres but were totally alien to the American public. Those first Western sightings of the Arab public sphere produced breathless reports on "anti-Americanism," seemingly irrational "conspiracy theories," and "cultural hostility." Statements and political rhetoric that made perfect sense in one public sphere, tapping into well-established motifs and languages, seemed literally incomprehensible in others. Arabs could not comprehend how Americans could see themselves as innocents in the Middle East; Americans could not fathom why some Arabs considered the United States a legitimate target.

When Arabs heard American arguments for invading Iraq, they could not help but interpret them through a powerful narrative of Iraqi suffering. As competing narratives about Iraq consolidated, this problem of unintended exposure tended to exacerbate misunderstanding and conflict. Incompatible frames of reference render action within one discourse literally incomprehensible to the other. Words

that resonated with an American public conditioned to hate and fear Saddam Hussein grated upon an Arab public that had for half a decade been more focused on Iraqi suffering and American unilateralism. The atrocities of September 11 can be seen as the violent eruption of this hidden transcript: not in the sense that al-Qaeda spoke for mainstream public opinion, but that bin Laden's self-presentation deliberately invoked the core themes of that public opinion in a bid to win Arab and Muslim popular support.

The October 2000 "airplanes challenge" to the Iraq sanctions offers another, less traumatic, example of an eruption of the Arab hidden transcript into the public realm. Since 1991 there had been almost universal adherence to a ban on civilian air travel to Baghdad. After an initial Russian and French probe had revealed the lack of international support for enforcing the flight ban, Jordan became the first Arab state to send in a flight. In the euphoric atmosphere that followed, virtually all Arabs celebrated, in a raw outpouring of joy, this open defiance of the sanctions regime. This emotion should not conceal the strategic dynamics of this episode, the cascade it set in effect, or its relation to the high politics of the Security Council. Still, it was *both* the act and the highly public celebration of the act that established its political importance. The airplanes challenge represented a "public refusal, in the teeth of power, to produce the words, gestures, and other signs of normative compliance. . . . When a practical failure to comply is joined with a pointed, public refusal it constitutes a throwing down of the gauntlet, a symbolic declaration of war" (Scott 1986: 203). Sending a civilian flight to Baghdad in open defiance of the United States, and escaping punishment, offered a rare sense of power, of liberation, of joy. One of the key dynamics this book sets out to capture is this symbolic battle, the interaction between strategy and rhetoric, between legitimacy and power. And it is in the hidden transcript, the coherent, vivid worldview constructed in these subordinate public spheres, where this alternative legitimacy is publicly constructed and measured.

Greater attention to the subordinate public by the powerful, as with the American discovery of the Arab media after 9/11, could be positive or negative. Following Habermas, I would argue that such a direct engagement and mutual awareness is absolutely necessary to reconcile Arab and American worldviews, and thus to make rational dialogue

possible (Lynch 2002a, 2005). Greater interaction could also drive greater clash and conflict, of course, particularly when the powerful shows little interest in understanding the arguments of the weak. Either way, there is no question that from September 11, 2001, to the present the two public spheres have intersected and interacted in ways which they never had before. Surveillance, engagement, monitoring, pressure, and some tentative steps to dialogue directly challenged the Arab public sphere's enclosed nature. This generated even greater resistance among Arabs accustomed to arguing among themselves—anger, resentment at the intrusion on this enclave of Arabist argument. But it also empowered voices who had been either disenchanted with the conformities of the Arabist public sphere—the pro-American liberals, the secularists—as well as the losers in the Arabist debate, such as Kuwaitis and the Iraqi opposition.

Civility and the Quality of Public Discourse

Even those who admit the political significance of the new Arab media often object that the content and quality of Arab political discourse fall far short of Habermas's ideal of rational discourse. Arab critics have relentlessly attacked the rhetorical style of Arab political discourse. Mohammed Abed al-Jabiri's *Arab Political Discourse* and *The Formation of Arab Reason*, like Burhan Ghalyoun's *Assassination of the Mind* and other critical works, suggest the evolution over centuries of a deeply constitutive mentality that prejudices Arabs against rational-critical discourse. Arab thinkers, particularly those in exile through the 1980s, were brutal in their own dissection of Arab political discourse. Fouad Ajami's *The Arab Predicament* (1991) and *Dream Palace of the Arabs* (1999) dissected the pathologies of Arab political discourse, while Kanan Makiya's *Cruelty and Silence* (1995) bitterly traced the failures of Arab intellectuals to respond to Iraqi tyranny. Edward Said, from the opposite side of the political spectrum, routinely denounced the cowardice and opportunism of Arab intellectuals and the poverty of Arab discourse. And Asad Abu Khalil witheringly observes that "opinion in my country is bought and sold . . . [or] is for rent. . . . There is a sickness which ravages the body of the Arab press and Arab media."[39]

Such Arab critics, no less than their Western counterparts, bemoan the deficiencies of Arab political discourse, with its confrontational clashes of rigid ideologies and avoidance of self-criticism. The corrosive impact of decades of state pressures, censorship, and self-censorship should not be dismissed, but such caution should not deny to new generations the potential to fight against and transcend these legacies.

Americans most often object to the content and political orientations of Arab public discourse, along with the graphic and allegedly biased presentation of news. A particularly potent criticism focuses on the anti-Semitic content of the media, a concern amply supported by examples of hateful and stereotypically anti-Semitic images and arguments.[40] That such offensive imagery and rhetoric can be found throughout the Arab media is undeniable. But it is quite striking that such anti-Semitic discourse appeared far more frequently within the government-controlled media of Saudi Arabia and Egypt and in the tabloid press than in the elite Arab public sphere, however. Of the 976 al-Jazeera talk shows in my primary database, for example, there are only a handful that sound explicitly anti-Semitic themes: a February 3, 1999, *No Limits* episode on "World Zionism"; a September 13, 2000, *No Limits* program discussing David Irving's views on the truth of the Holocaust; an October 10, 2000, episode of *The Opposite Direction* devoted to similarities between Nazis and Zionists; a March 19, 2002, *No Limits* focused on the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. These were the exception rather than the rule, however. In the fall of 2002, Western and Israeli charges of anti-Semitism in the Arab media over the airing of a television serial based on the Protocols of the Elders of Zion on Egyptian television sparked serious discussion on al-Jazeera.[41]

In the quest for authenticity and identity, argue some Arab critics, the Arab public sphere valorizes authoritarian modes of discourse, celebrating the power of the state or the glories of the past. Progressive Arab critics fear that unleashing the Arab public will actually push, then, to more conservative political outcomes under the pressures of the tyrannies of the mob. Barry Rubin's dismissal of al-Jazeera as "critical of the incumbent dictators, but [wanting] to replace them with even more extreme dictatorial regimes" is unfair and simplistic, but does capture some of these fears (Rubin 2002: 259). The affinity between right-wing neopopulism and the mass media has been frequently not-

ed (Calhoun 1988). By appealing directly to the masses in the name of a shared identity, and by attacking existing political systems as corrupt and useless, the new Arab media might structurally empower these populist forces rather than more liberal ones. Hazem Saghiyeh (2004) fears that "whereas newspapers were born, a century ago, as part of a wider project to modernise the Arabs, satellite television stations fundamentally seek to defend them, reinforce their prejudices, and tell them that they are right whatever they do."

The quality of debate on the talk shows reinforces these concerns (Fandy 2000: 387–389). The Kuwaiti critic Ahmed al-Rubai argues that "the rivalry between the Arab satellites leads to extremism. . . . Whether in the issue of sex or in the issue of pop songs, or in dialogues, there is no meaning to it and no goal other than sensationalism."[42] Al-Jazeera host Mohammed Krishan admits that "the long absence of dialogue makes it more conflictual at first. . . . Over time I think that we will be able to raise the traditions of dialogue."[43] Some Arabs attacked the new media for intensifying Arab conflicts. As the Egyptian analyst Mohammed Bakri argued in response to al-Jazeera's coverage of the Palestinian uprising, "al-Jazeera is playing a role with Arab contradictions that is not in the interest of a common Arab goal. . . . To the contrary, the station has raised doubts about Egyptian nationalism, accuses some of treason. . . . It allows Israelis into our house. . . . This serves Israel's goals. Israel wants to break the psychological wall."[44] Naif Karim, chair of the governing council of al-Manar, says: "There are very few stations that really deal with the issues of the Arab citizen and the Arab street and try to exert a positive influence far from intensifying the internal predicament of the Arab world and inflaming [its] internal problems."[45] Even al-Jazeera's defenders have worried of a development away from what might be called the CNN effect—immediate, objective news coverage of regional and world events—into something more like a "Fox effect"—politically partisan coverage, loud voices, and a preference for opinion over news—the spread of which may prove detrimental to critical public reason (see chapter 6).

Jon Alterman suggests that as the years moved on, the tone of the al-Jazeera arguments grew coarser, angrier, and more confrontational and began to reinforce rather than to break down old ways of thinking: "Instead of a voice for change and political courage, the TV stations and

newspapers too often play to the galleries, legitimizing harebrained ideas and coarsening public debate."[46] Discourse became more defensive, more about resistance than about hopes for progressive change. While the same topics often reappeared—human rights, reform demands, democracy—the tone of the arguments was more bitter, more frustrated, and uglier. The United States increasingly became a central topic of debate, with programs such as "American plans for hegemony over the world" (*No Limits*, February 13, 2002), "America: What for it and what against it?" (*Opposite Direction,* July 15, 2003), "possibilities for resisting America" (*Opposite Direction*, September 2, 2003), and—most bluntly—"The American enemy" (*Opposite Direction*, June 12, 2001). At the same time, al-Jazeera covered American politics extensively, especially during the 2004 election campaign, and aired large numbers of speeches and press conferences by American officials.

Arab states often leveled accusations of a lack of professionalism on the part of al-Jazeera. This accusation must be read in the context of the norms of Arab journalism, and within the context of the determination of Arab states to maintain control over the public realm. Precisely because the satellite stations insisted on pushing the boundaries of debate, they inevitably violated the "red lines" that typically governed public discourse in Arab countries. Professionalism too often was a code word for political compliance. The Arab Broadcasting Union, for example, refused al-Jazeera's application while happily accrediting television stations that broadcast little but near pornography. Thus there did exist both true unprofessionalism and attempts by states to dismiss as unprofessionalism real attempts to push the boundaries of acceptable public discourse. As Wahid Abd al-Majid put it, many of al-Jazeera's problems came not from its free-spirited arguments but simply from sloppy or biased journalism—a charge al-Jazeera's journalists themselves fiercely reject (Miles 2005).[47] Mohammed al-Rumayhi, a fierce Kuwaiti critic of Saddam Hussein, dismissed Arab coverage of the 2003 Iraq war as being "closer to 'desire' than to 'reality.'"[48]

The Arab states have often viewed this new media as a threat. Almost every state has harassed or shut down the bureaus of independent satellite stations, banned circulation of independent newspapers, or arrested independent journalists. Even relatively liberal Lebanon in January 1997 introduced laws featuring prior censorship of news

programmes and authorizing the blocking of "the transmission of any news or political item affecting state security," while Jordan issued a series of ever more restrictive media laws in the late 1990s (Sreberny 2001; Lucas 2003). When pro-Iraqi advocates managed to organize a rally outside the Iraqi embassy in Jordan, for example, the al-Jazeera cameraman was the first target of Jordanian security forces—the Jordanian government did not want to project an image of instability—or a pro-Iraqi image—or to attract undue attention to its repression of the rally (Schwedler 2003). In October 2002 the Gulf Cooperation Council passed a resolution boycotting al-Jazeera for "insulting" the Gulf. As Abd al-Aziz al-Khamis, a Saudi journalist, explained, "they are really afraid of [the satellites] . . . [because] they do not want real dialogue in Gulf societies. . . . Some of them want to stop free media in the Arab world from broadcasting controversy and dialogue. . . . They want no controversy and no dialogue and no discussion of events."[49]

Material Foundations

> The greater scandal will be in the oil coupons program and the names of those who benefited from it. . . . Iraqi and Arab citizens must know the motivations of those party leaders who went on satellite television defending the tyrant, and of those delegations that went to Baghdad in the name of solidarity with the Iraqi people and against the blockade.
>
> —Ahmed al-Rubai[50]

For many observers, the Arab media's biases in the Iraqi issue can be explained simply: "Scores of journalists throughout the Arab world and Europe were on Saddam Hussein's payroll" (Hayes 2004). This position was reinforced when Ahmed Chalabi's INC produced documents that allegedly showed vast payments from Saddam Hussein to Arab politicians and journalists over the past decade (Miles 2005). One attack against al-Jazeera involved documents alleging that station director Mohammed Jassem al-Ali had been on the Iraqi payroll and lead to his removal from his position in May 2003 (without admission of guilt).[51] An Iraqi newspaper, *al-Mada*, ran documents claiming proof that billions of dollars in lucrative oil vouchers had been distributed to a wide

range of people across the Arab world, including journalists and politicians, with the Saudi-owned newspaper *al-Sharq al-Awsat* taking a particularly hard line against the Qatar-based station. Others attempted to prove, rather less convincingly, that the popular talk show host Faisal al-Qassem had relations with the Iraqi regime. In December 2004 the American satellite station al-Hurra broadcast a videotape allegedly showing al-Jazeera officials meeting with Uday Hussein.[52] But even those tapes were inconclusive at best: an obsequious meeting between al-Ali and Uday Hussein, which proved only that al-Jazeera hoped for access to cover events inside of Iraq; a similarly fawning encounter with a Syrian journalist who had no association with al-Jazeera; and an oblique reference to Iraqi approval of the hiring of Ahmed Mansour, a very popular and effective interviewer who would have been a desirable hire for almost any television station.[53] But the transparently political motivations behind these revelations made them difficult to evaluate. For the Iraqi opposition, in particular, these allegations—and the INC search for incriminating documents in the Iraqi archives after the war—were a crucial part of an ongoing campaign against the Arab media that will be described in detail in later chapters.[54]

There is little doubt Saddam's regime used financial inducements to influence Arab media coverage over the years, such as in alleged vast payments to Jordanian journalists.[55] At the same time, the influence of material foundations on the Arab public sphere go well beyond alleged Iraqi payments. By far the largest owner and financier of Arab print and broadcast media has always been Saudi Arabia, while other wealthy Gulf states such as Kuwait and Qatar have been widely active. Saudi ownership of the print and broadcast media (including al-Arabiya and MBC) is overwhelming, while the centrality of the Saudi market for most Arab advertisers gives it even greater indirect influence over media content. The Saudi owners of al-Arabiya replaced its management in early 2004 despite its success in competing with al-Jazeera, putting in a more pro-American editorial team even at the risk of losing market share. *Al-Hayat* and *al-Sharq al-Awsat* are owned by Saudi princes, while most Arab satellite television stations are owned by governments. Prominent independent commentators were often offered lucrative columns in Saudi-owned publications as a way of influencing their positions. In January 2005 a London court heard evidence that

al-Zaman, a major Iraqi opposition newspaper published by Saad Bazzaz, had begun with major Saudi financial support.[56]

Patronage clearly affected the content of particular media outlets. While their editorial lines and approaches differed dramatically from the traditional Arab media, none of the major stations was completely independent of state support. Al-Jazeera remains dependent on Qatari finances, as major advertisers steer clear for fear of offending Saudi or other Gulf markets. Saudi-owned publications and media consistently avoided touching on sensitive domestic topics in Saudi Arabia, just as al-Jazeera avoided dealing with internal Qatari politics. Even the few "independent" outlets, such as London's Arabist *al-Quds al-Arabi*, raise other suspicions.[57] Still, the diversity of the emerging media market mitigated against this problem. By watching and reading a variety of sources, as many participants did in the new Arab public, a generally rounded picture could be found.

Public Opinion Polls?

After the launch of the American Arabic-language satellite station al-Hurra, station director Muwafac Harb said that the reaction of Arab audiences would not be known until systematic opinion surveys had been conducted: "We go for scientific research. If [Egyptian commentator] Mustafa Bakri writes a piece, that is not a reaction."[58] This preference for public opinion surveys over public rhetoric is a common, and powerful, alternative conception of public opinion.

For many analysts, the absence of public opinion polls makes it pointless even to discuss Arab public opinion. From this perspective, the media—controlled by states and dominated by a compromised, unrepresentative intelligentsia—offers a distorted and controlled image of Arab opinion. State censorship and omnipresent security services intimidate independent voices. Where public opinion polling does exist, real questions arise as to the reliability and significance of its findings. Do questions posed to Iraqis in the aftermath of Saddam's regime and the American war genuinely capture authentic preferences? Are respondents offering "authentic" views or those they want their American interviewers to hear?

Public opinion polling has become far more common in recent years, however. Highly publicized cross-national polls in the Arab world by Zogby International, the Pew Foundation, and the Gallup Organization have shattered this conventional wisdom and have offered invaluable snapshots of mass attitudes (Tessler 2003). The Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan established a public opinion unit in the early 1990s that runs both topical polls and an annual "Democracy in Jordan" survey. Jordanian governments had begun using private opinion surveys as early as 1989, when then–Prime Minister Sharif Zayd bin Shakir wanted to know how the kingdom's first elections would turn out. According to Mustafa Hamarneh, Abd al-Karim Kabariti's government (1996–1997) extensively polled Jordanian opinion, using private polls to help shape foreign policy, economic policy, electoral maps, and even local initiatives.[59] The al-Ahram Center in Cairo began public opinion polling in Egypt in 1998.[60] Iraq, under American administration, has been heavily surveyed, with polls carried out by the CPA, international agencies, and local Iraqi research centers. In the spring of 2004 the Saudi regime released a poll conducted the previous fall that demonstrated the growing popular appeal of al-Qaeda in the kingdom along with wide support for a change in policy. The poll was far more striking for the admission that the Saudi government carried out such surveys than for its findings.[61]

When published, these polls have often set off important public debates about sensitive issues, such as when a joint Jordanian-Palestinian poll explored the question of relations between the two groups. Mustafa Hamarneh, director of Jordan's Center for Strategic Studies, for example, was dismissed from his position after a survey found dramatically higher levels of unemployment than claimed by the government.[62] Another poll by the center showing that hardly anyone read many prominent columnists infuriated the humiliated pundits. Khalil Shikaki, director of the Palestinian Center for Research and Studies in Nablus, was harassed by an angry mob after publishing a poll that showed wider willingness to accept a compromise on the right of return than most had asserted (Umansky 2004). Tharya al-Shahri argues that many Arab journalists dislike public opinion surveys in the Arab context because they see them as easily manipulated and lacking objectivity, while states fear that they will undermine their legitimacy.

But, al-Shahri notes, opinion surveys do have the virtue of "empowering those who fear to speak out . . . [and thus] breaking the ability of extremists to claim that they represent the majority."[63]

Even in more propitious conditions, critics have identified systematic distortions introduced by public opinion polling (Bourdieu 1979; Herbst 1993; Lewis 2001). Such polls privilege the relatively uninformed—and often lightly held—opinions of a mass of people, while downplaying the opinions of motivated and better-informed activists. From this perspective, the absence of public opinion surveys might carry the unintended but real benefit of empowering the more engaged and politically motivated members of society over their more apathetic counterparts. I make a somewhat different argument in this book. To a remarkable extent, public opinion polls in the Arab world have tracked the public discourse in the new media. Rather than undermining the public sphere, or undermining its representative claims, public opinion surveys have powerfully reinforced the public sphere's influence. The findings of the Pew Global Attitudes survey of 2003 offered nothing new with respect to the fundamental trajectory of growing public hostility to the United States reported by area specialists. But only when the Pew survey put numbers on these trends was it taken seriously by the mainstream media, foreign policy think tanks, and the American government.

As I argue below, the convergence of the new media and mass attitudes is partly explained by the impact of news coverage and the widely viewed talk shows. But on a deeper level, the new public sphere has had an enormous effect in shaping the underlying narrative structuring how the Arab public understands events: the context, the stakes, the storyline, and their own identity.

Public Spheres and Political Strategies

Debates over Iraq or the war on terror often invoked a fear of—mixed with a contemptuous but wary dismissal of—the so-called Arab street (Lynch 2003b; Bayat 2003). In crude forms, these arguments revolved around whether the Arab masses would rise up in furious anger over a particular action and threaten friendly regimes; in more sophisticated forms, they asked whether rising anger and frustration would increase

receptivity to radical appeals such as bin Laden's, which might provoke future terrorism. In both cases, the only "value" of Arab opinion lay in its potential for violence. Because Arab leaders can generally ignore or repress public dissent, many assume that Arab public opinion does not matter. But, as Shibley Telhami has pointed out, "Arab leaders act as though Arab public opinion matters" (1993: 439).

Realists remain justifiably skeptical: Arab states remain dominant and no regimes have been overthrown, and Arab governments have resisted popular pressure to act against Israel or to oppose the American invasion of Iraq. While the new public might have some relevance for domestic political struggles, the impact on major foreign policy issues seems more dubious. Burhan Ghalyoun argues that "there are no regimes today which pay attention to public opinion"; today's regimes, he argues, are "willing to engage in dialogues with the United States, with Europe, even with Israel—with anyone except with their own people."[64]

How, then, does public opinion matter? I suggest three ways in which the new Arab public sphere affects international politics: by changing the strategic calculations of rational politicians, by shaping worldviews, and by transforming identities. The bottom line is that while no Arab regime was forced to change its position toward Iraq by a mobilized public, every Arab regime formulated its policies within a set of assumptions, ideas, and beliefs that were conclusively shaped by the new public sphere. Even those who doubt the direct influence of Arab opinion on state policies tacitly admit its longer-term constitutive power. Concern over anti-Semitic and anti-American rhetoric in the Egyptian media, for example, only makes sense given the belief that such language poisons the background beliefs held by Egyptians, and that ultimately this matters. The Bush administration has argued with escalating regularity that anti-American Arab television has spurred violence, terrorism, and anti-Americanism in the region. But if it can matter in this pernicious way, then it must also potentially matter in other, more positive ways.

The emergence of the new Arab public sphere empowered a new kind of Arabism, one far more concrete and grounded in directly felt shared identity and interests than in the past. The new Arab public set the agenda for public debate across Arab countries, an agenda

dominated by issues defined as core shared Arab concerns: Palestine, Iraq, and political reform. All Arabs—leaders and ordinary citizens alike—were forced to adapt to this agenda. The limitations of state responsiveness to the public sphere continued to frustrate critics such as Ragheda Dergham: "Most Arab leaders have picked up elements of this consensus and started playing with them to serve ulterior objectives. . . . The initiatives they come up with should not be designed merely to contain public feelings but to reflect them."[65] Still, it seems accurate to say that "Arabs have increasingly engaged in . . . discussions throughout the region that have served to shape government opinion instead of merely being shaped by it."[66]

My argument assumes that Arab regimes are strategic, rational, and not particularly motivated by Arabist convictions or ideals. They do, however, wish to win in a game whose stakes, rules, and meanings are increasingly driven by the new public sphere. As the transnational media gained prominence in the ways described above, these public debates increasingly established the background, "taken-for-granted" conventional wisdom of politics. Even the most self-interested, power-seeking Arab leader must engage with these broadly defined Arab interests in order to generate power. Arab states typically attempt to assert Arab leadership through demonstrations of effective support for popular causes. Opposition figures also often attempt to compensate for their lack of conventional political opportunities by leveraging this consensus. Seeking power therefore requires careful attention to trends in Arab opinion. When the perceived Arab public consensus shifts, rational leaders who wish to be politically successful must respond. If it were true that Arab states alone shape the content of this public consensus, then Arab public spheres might be dismissed as irrelevant, but the Iraq case demonstrates clearly that the Arab consensus develops independently of the preferences of states.

States competed to position themselves relative to this consensus, regardless of their "real" preferences, for both principled and pragmatic reasons. They did so not only because of a fear of an explosion of "the street"—they did so because this was the best way to "win" in Arab politics: by successfully defining self-interest in terms of Arab identity and collective interests. Their rhetoric, in turn, shaped the expected political payoffs of different concrete policy choices.

The public sphere therefore established expectations about the normative payoffs within which strategic actors maneuvered. In the case of Iraq, this meant adapting to a powerful public consensus on the need to alleviate the suffering of the Iraqi people. As documented in chapters 3 and 4, a flood of newspaper articles, television broadcasts, consciousness-raising campaigns, documentary films, and personal encounters with Iraqis shaped the perceptions of most Arabs. Beginning in January 1999, for example, the United States and United Kingdom maintained a steady bombing campaign against Iraq, to put pressure on the Iraqi military while remaining below the threshold of media attention. In the Western media, this strategy almost completely succeeded, as even attentive followers of the American media had little idea of the extent of this ongoing military action. In the Arab public sphere, however, this bombing campaign was a daily front page story, highlighted on al-Jazeera newscasts and featured in daily political discourse, generating the inescapable sense of ongoing American aggression against Iraq.

It is not the impact of a single story or a single event, but rather the impact of a constant stream of converging information from multiple sources that builds the conventional wisdom of society. Televised images of starving Iraqi children influenced Arab audiences, just as images of Kosovar refugees or starving Ethiopians galvanized Americans. Once the humanitarian crisis was introduced into the public sphere, the politics of the Iraq sanctions became a framing contest, a public argument to establish the conventional wisdom about the reality of the humanitarian problem in Iraq, the attribution of blame for that problem, and the appropriate response.

The key point here is that these public arguments have a constitutive impact *even if* leaders engage with them only strategically. The public consensus shaped expectations about what kinds of arguments would be positively received, and about what other actors were likely to do. This argument rests on a theoretical proposition drawn from social psychology literature: actors at least in part form their preferences and their expectations by surveying the cues in the discursive environment about how many others support a position, the costs of supporting that position, and the identity of those supporting each position (Schuessler 2000). Rhetoric serves as an indicator of how actors *expect*

to be rewarded (or punished) for particular positions. The response of other actors provides information about how accurately actors have judged this background consensus, providing crucial information for all actors in evaluating this social environment. By speaking out against the sanctions the UAE, for example, came to be viewed as brave and authentically Arab, while the Arabist public increasingly vilified Kuwait as selfish and vindictive; all others learned from this experience. These cues about the social environment—the perception of consensus—then shapes the subsequent strategies of all actors, creating an ongoing recursive process of self-fulfilling dynamics. Siding with the perceived consensus offers "an enhanced public image in the eyes of others, who will be led to think better of them because of their publicly declared affiliation" (Mutz 1998: 209). In other words, Arabs in part came to oppose the sanctions because the signals in the media suggested that this is what *all* "good Arabs" believed.

Confusion about the strategic logic of public rhetoric abounds. For example, American leaders consistently argued that Arab leaders oppose their policies towards Iraq in public but are much more accommodating in private. Arab states faced with strong public pressure to support Iraq and strong private American pressure to support containment used "two voices," as they were "forced to resort to misrepresenting their private and public views."[67] The assumption that the privately expressed preference is more authentic than the public, and therefore will serve as a more reliable guide to behavior, is almost certainly wrong. If actors formulate their policies with an eye toward their beliefs about the beliefs of others, then they are more likely to follow their public than their private preferences absent some change in the public consensus. When Gerhard Schroeder rescued his 2002 reelection campaign by taking a strong position against war with Iraq, it told us little about Schroeder's private preferences, but quite a bit about how he perceives German public opinion on the subject. Given their consistent need to read public opinion to seek political advantage, then, what leaders say in public may be a more reliable guide to how they will act than what they say in private. This is the mistake made by U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney in March 2002, when he expected that Arab leaders would live up to the private opinions against Iraq rather than their public statements. Instead, he was met with a universal public

rejection of the American position, as each Arab leader asserted in the clearest possible terms that they did in fact mean what they said.

The Arab Street?

> The Arab street is dead. . . . It raised the banner of every lost or failed cause. It supported the dictatorship at home. . . . It was run by the authority's remote control. . . . It called for freedom but did not stand up for it when it was slaughtered right before its eyes. . . . We heard much talk but no action. . . . One million Americans, a million Britons, and other millions demonstrated against the war on Iraq. The Arab street still slept. How would it move when it is dead?
>
> —Jihad al-Khazen, *al-Hayat*, December 27, 2004

Faced with the refusal of Arab states to take more than symbolic measures in support of the Palestinians even in the face of unprecedented popular mobilization in the spring of 2002, many Arab pundits joined American conservatives in declaring—yet again—the "death of the Arab street." On the other hand, the massive rallies that swept through the Arab world in April 2002 unleashed an outburst of exuberance about its revival that raised unrealistic expectations. Neither the dismissal nor the exuberance captures the complex role played by the "Arab street" in the politics of Arab public opinion. Protests played an important role in forcing the new Arab public onto the agenda of Arab states and of the West—whether massive protests at Cairo University against the invasion of Iraq, quietly intense protests against Hosni Mubarak's standing for a fifth term as president, marches of hundreds of thousands of Moroccans to protest the sanctions, tense standoffs between police and marchers intent on reaching the Israeli embassy in Amman, or wildcat protests against the sanctions in front of the Iraqi embassy in downtown Amman.

As with popular politics throughout the world, the Arab street needs to be placed within a wider conception of the Arab public's political role (Nabulsi 2003; Chatterjee 2004). The "street" is often invoked by actors on all sides: by regimes looking for an excuse not to act, and by opposition figures looking for a credible source of influence. Arab leaders thus invoked their fear of the street instrumentally:

"In private discussions with US government officials in late 1997 and early 1998, regional leaders frequently cited public opinion concerns to explain their reluctance publicly to support the use of force against Iraq, regardless of their distaste for Saddam Husayn" (Alterman 1999). Opposition politicians with a credible reputation for representing the street similarly can influence leaders by threatening popular uprisings. For example, Layth Shubaylat, a popular Islamist opposition figure in Jordan, warned that "anyone who contemplates Jordan taking part in a military offensive against Iraq should take into account the Jordanian peoples' reaction"—again, a warning of a threshold that will provoke violent popular reaction.[68] This is not so much a public sphere as an attempt to leverage the public sphere against state power.

Purposive, strategic protest behavior cannot be reduced to mindless rage or crude responses to state provocations. The new Arab public has dramatically changed the strategies and the potency of action on the "Arab street," shifting the target of protests and their reach, while allowing each protest—no matter how small or swiftly contained at the local level—to fit in to a wider Arab narrative of contentious politics (Tarrow, Tilly, and McAdam 2002).

Most invocations of the "Arab street" have a Nasserist model in mind, one in which mass riots can be summoned through incendiary political rhetoric. Arab public discourse has internalized the idea of the "Arab street," using it within its own argumentation as frequently as do Western observers. Enthusiasm for the Arab street dates both to the anticolonial struggles of the first half of the century and, even more, to the rowdy street politics of the Nasser era. Mustafa al-Fiqi claims grandly that "the street is in every country the true expression of public opinion."[69] Despite all its setbacks and shortcomings, he argues, the Arab street remains strong and influential—the force behind the (first) Intifada and the expression of anger over the sanctions on Iraq and the real power that expelled Israel from south Lebanon—and, empowered by technological changes sweeping the world, the "street" is growing even stronger despite constant affirmations of its death.

Baghat Korany similarly defends the use of the "street" concept for making sense of what people really think: "Subway conversations, letters to the editor, popular radio and television programs, repeated discussions with the oft-cited taxi driver. . . . [The street] is a rough

barometer of spontaneous mass reaction in both democracies and non-democracies, especially in times of crisis."[70] Ibrahim Hamidi, by contrast, despairs that "there is no Arab street that is capable of expressing itself freely and able to influence government policy in any meaningful way."[71] But these should be analytically distinct: the failure of the "street" to affect policy says nothing of the actual existence of a "street" as an important location for public opinion (Bayat 2003).

The dominant model of the Arab street is as a threshold constraint, in which certain acts that violate public opinion on the Arab street can trigger violence. Arab leaders need to take into account the likely reaction of an inarticulate mass public when formulating their otherwise rational or strategic policies. The street rarely acts, but when it does the resulting riots can be devastating and can undermine regime legitimacy for a long time. This threshold model is adopted even by those who sympathize with Arab public opinion: "The massive waves of protests on the streets of the Arab world shows how wrong the Americans were to treat Arab public opinion with such contempt and disdain. The Arab public has served notice that there are indeed 'red lines' which the US mediators thought did not exist, or that they could ignore."[72] When the *New York Times* took notice of Arab public opinion in the context of war in Afghanistan, it naturally fell back on the threshold model: "The street, once all but powerless, has become a real force, exposed to more sources of information that repressive governments do not control, harder to rein in once inflamed, and more susceptible to radical Islam."[73] When analysts posit that "Arab public opinion . . . serves as a real constraint on Arab cooperation in schemes for the violent removal of Saddam Hussein," this model can be seen: though these leaders allegedly want Saddam gone, they see public support for his removal as a threshold likely to trigger the street and therefore forgo this policy.[74]

Regardless of the reality of such a threshold, it becomes politically real when Arab leaders adjust their behavior based on their anticipation of such a reaction. During times of crisis, Arab governments demonstrated their own conception of public opinion as a street that needed to be contained. Some even complained about the absence of demonstrators at times when they hoped to persuade the United States to ease its demands for public endorsements of its policies.

I argue in chapter 4 that the "Arab street" returned to life in 1998 with the protests against an American attack on Iraq in February and then against Operation Desert Fox in December. When those protests broke out, news coverage emphasized violence, and mobs—all indicative of this conception of a mindless, reactive, violent, irrational public opinion. Crucially, the Iraq protests did not come out of the blue, as an unpredictable reaction to a direct stimulus. They came after years of intense public arguments and a series of highly tense crises covered heavily by the emerging new Arab media. Within that public sphere, there was much discussion of the role the Arab street should and could play, as well as of the fecklessness of Arab leaders. As the crises came to a head, a sizable portion of the Arab public had already been closely following these public debates and the escalating events. When Arabs poured out into the streets they did so not spontaneously or irrationally, but with a consciousness of playing their role in the political drama playing out on television screens in unprecedented ways.

What Arabs Talk About

In October 2002 Kanan Makiya complained that "the spectrum unfortunately of what it is possible to talk about in Arab politics these days runs from Palestine at one end to Palestine at the other with no room for the plight of the people of Iraq."[75] Nothing could have been further from the truth. In this section I offer an overview of the contents of al-Jazeera talk shows as a useful proxy for "Arab political conversation." Al-Jazeera is far from the sole component of the new Arab public sphere, but it has been the most influential and the most widely viewed. Its talk shows often set the agenda for local arguments and debates, as well as reflecting the issues considered important among the Arab intellectual elite. And its talk shows have been far more free, controversial, live, and uncensored than those of most of its competitors.

The analysis draws on a set of 976 episodes of the five most important general interest talk shows appearing on al-Jazeera between January 1999 and June 2004.[76] In later chapters I present more textured descriptions of many of these programs, to get beyond the numbers,

including chapter 5's discussion of the live call-in shows on al-Jazeera after the fall of Baghdad, an open and uncensored public discussion arguably representing the purest public sphere in Arab history.

Before content is examined, the names of the talk shows themselves offer interesting insights into the varied meanings and aspirations of the new public. Al-Jazeera's tagline—played between segments and repeated endlessly—is, famously, "The opinion . . . and the other opinion" (*Al-Rai . . . Wa al-Rai al-Akhr*). This slogan is less progressive than it might at first glance appear. "The Opinion and the Other Opinion" suggests the existence only of two competing, oppositional opinions, while also—crucially—suggesting that al-Jazeera's oppositional "other opinion" represents the voice of the people against that of power. Six major al-Jazeera talk shows suggest alternative metaphors for what al-Jazeera does—or might—stand for.

The first discussed here, Sami Haddad's *More Than One Opinion* [Akthar Min Rai], resembles the station's tagline, but with one crucial difference: rather than indicating an opposition between two discreet views, the phrase "more than one opinion" suggests a multiplicity of overlapping, contradictory, and potentially reconcilable opinions. But although it suggests an Arab public defined by pluralism of views, it says nothing about how those views might be reconciled. One might be imposed by force, another might be shunned, a third might be shouted down, a fourth might be excluded from the debate. Nothing about rational critical debate can be inferred from the existence of more than one opinion.

The second major program, *No Limits* [Bila Hadud], conveys the determination of the new media to push red lines and shatter taboos. During the period under study Ahmed Mansour's program focused more intensely on Palestine than did the other programs, and was far more open to anti-Zionist or even anti-Semitic guests and discussions. Such a transgressive mission can push in different directions, however. In the early days of the new Arab public, stultifying government control ensured a plethora of red lines preventing discussion of vital issues facing the Arab world: democracy, human rights, accountability, corruption, women's rights, and so forth. But as those taboos were broken and political dialogue normalized, the transgressive mandate of *No Limits* could easily tip over into sensationalism. The pursuit of

graphic war footage, for example—what Mamoun Fandy has called a "political pornography"—reflects this transgressive urge.

The third major talk show is Faisal al-Qassem's *The Opposite Direction* [Al-Itijah al-Mu'aks], whose title suggests an orientation toward contrarianism, toward controversy for its own sake.[77] *The Opposite Direction* sought out polarized views, reveling in pitting opponents against one another and urging them toward confrontation with little effort to seek reconciliation or common ground. Qassem's style generated enormous controversy and resentment among those with whom he disagreed, or who felt mistreated in the course of the arguments. Tellingly, this program is far and away the most popular—and controversial—political program, not only for al-Jazeera but for the entire new Arab public (matched only by the Lebanese reality show Superstar). That contrarianism, rather than open dialogue, might mark the spirit of the new Arab public hints at the priority of political controversy over a commitment to democratic process.

Two other major talk shows, *Open Dialogue* [Hiwar Maftuh] and *al-Jazeera's Platform* [Minbar al-Jazeera], go beyond the existence of multiple opinions to define a process for their interaction. The phrase "open dialogue" suggests a Habermasian commitment to the public sphere, to open and free debate among all these multiple positions. The format of *Open Dialogue*, interestingly, differs from that of the other four major programs: Ghassan bin Jadu brings a panel of a dozen ordinary Arabs into the studio along with his guests, and gives them the chance to pose questions and participate in the conversations. Jumana al-Namour introduced the first episode of her program *Minbar al-Jazeera* on June 27, 2002, as "an open arena for dialogue," which "we hope will offer a window to all who hope to hear the interventions and opinions of all the followers of al-Jazeera, including the Arab elite, which loves to express its positions on Arab issues."[78] These programs offer a vision more closely aligned with that of the public sphere. Each began broadcasting in mid-2002, suggesting a shift in that direction. And they also tended to focus disproportionately on Iraq: during the month of April 2003, at the height of the war, virtually all of the other talk shows stopped broadcasting, while *Minbar al-Jazeera* went out nightly to discuss the most recent developments in the war—usually focusing on viewer calls rather than on in-studio experts.

Another major al-Jazeera talk show is very different from the first five: *Sharia and Life* [Sharia wa Hayat]. Where the first five programs explicitly address a universal Arab public defined by their shared identity and shared commitment to a set of common political issues, *Sharia and Life* explicitly addresses those Muslims who wish to make Islam central to their lives. While *Sharia and Life* often touches on political issues, it also spends considerable time dealing with social and religious aspects of Islam—religious interpretation, gender, education. The dominant figure on the program, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, has long represented a moderate strand of Islamism from within the Muslim Brotherhood tradition (see below). Qaradawi's immense popularity again suggests conflicting interpretations: on the one hand, it reinforces the creeping intrusion of Islamism into all aspects of Arab life; on the other, Qaradawi has for decades stood strongly against extremism and intolerance such as bin Laden's.

What Gets Discussed?

What gets discussed on these talk shows? They focus overwhelmingly on Arab concerns, and if extended to "Arab-Islamic" this focus becomes almost universal. Out of the 976 talk shows, only a tiny number deal with non-Arab/Islamic issues, and even those issues are often approached from an Arab perspective. Many of that small set deal with scientific or medical developments such as cloning (surprisingly topical, with at least four programs)—but the debates often invoke Islamic views or concerns about Western imperialism. Some attention is given to American or European elections, although even there the conversation often turns quickly to how the outcome will affect Arab concerns. As Egyptian analyst Magdi Khalil noted, "the Arab street is cut off from the international street in its concerns and its goals—globalization, the environment, human rights, unemployment, women's rights, freedom of religion, right to development."[79]

Of the "Arab" issues, three dominate. The first two are unsurprising: Palestine and Iraq. Palestine is central to Arab conceptions of identity and interests, and Palestinian issues have always been primary to Arab public discourse. This only increased after the outbreak of the Pales-

tinian uprising in September 2000. As table 2.1 below shows, Palestinian issues went from 24.6 percent of programming in 1999 to over a third of all programming in 2001 and 2002. Iraq was the second most prevalent issue. From 1999 to 2001, this was a distant second—but clearly stood above any other conflict or single issue. In line with the American mobilization and then invasion of Iraq, it shot to the top of the list of Arab issues of conversation (44 percent in 2003)—but was not, even then, the single or exclusive topic of debate.

The third primary axis of argument in these talk shows is the question of reform. Almost every election in the Arab or Muslim received considerable attention. The intense focus on Iraq in 2003 crowded out discussion of a number of elections, however, cutting against the idea that the invasion would trigger more democratic discussion in the region. Among the elections ignored in 2003 were Syria's March Parliamentary elections, Yemen's in April, Jordan's in July, and Oman's in October. Referenda, the Charter Movement in Bahrain, the closing of the Egyptian Labour Party and the Turkish Fadila Party—all were deemed worthy of public discussion on one of the five major talk shows. Qatar's decision to postpone Parliamentary elections in 2001 did not receive coverage, however, strengthening the argument of those critics who saw al-Jazeera as a tool of Qatari foreign policy. Beyond specific elections, broad questions about "democracy and the Arab world," "the Islamist movement and democracy" (*Open Dialogue*, July 28, 2001), and "the accountability of rulers" (*The Opposite Direction*, July 3, 2001)

Table 2.1. Number of al-Jazeera Talk Shows Devoted to Palestine and Iraq, 1999–2003

	Palestine		*Iraq*	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
1999	33	24.6	13	9.7
2000	39	27.6	14	9.9
2001	56	34.4	14	8.6
2002	66	34.6	33	17.3
2003	31	13.1	104	44.1
Total	225	26	178	20.6

were routinely posed before and after the American invasion of Iraq. As early as August 2001 *No Limits* was debating the implications of "Western support for democratic reform in Syria."

Talk shows routinely took on the most basic foundations of the Arab status quo, challenging audiences to question even the most sensitive red lines. As Bashir al-Nafii put it, the focus was "not only the issue of war or peace with Israel, but how that confrontation reveals the wider deficiencies of the existing Arab order."[80] The March 5, 1999, *The Opposite Direction* asked whether this generation of Arabs might succeed at democracy where their fathers had failed. The May 10, 1999, *More Than One Opinion* looked frankly at the Israeli elections. The August 31, 1999, *The Opposite Direction* asked how the perennial states of emergency in the Arab states could possibly be justified. The June 27, 2000, *The Opposite Direction* asked about the

Table 2.2. Elections Discussed on al-Jazeera Talk Shows, 1999–2004

Israel	January 1999
Algeria	January 1999
Israel	May 1999
Kuwait	June 1999
Tunisia	October 1999
Iran	November 1999
Iran	February 2000
Egypt	July 2000
Lebanon	August 2000
United States	November 2000
Lebanon	November 2000
Israel	February 2001
Iran	May 2001
France	May 2002
Algeria	May 2002
Morocco	October 2002
Bahrain	October 2002
Israel	January 2003
Kuwait	July 2003
Mauritania	November 2003
Iran	February 2004

commitments of the "new Arab wealthy." The July 19, 2000, *No Limits* asked about the state of women's rights in the Arab world. The January 1, 2001, *The Opposite Direction* asked whether the Palestinian Intifada was "a waste of time." The March 27, 2001, *The Opposite Direction* looked critically at the Taliban's destruction of the great Buddha statues. The June 11, 2002, *The Opposite Direction* mocked the 99.99 percent electoral victories of Arab presidents. The July 11, 2002, *Minbar al-Jazeera* took on the spread of AIDS in the Arab world. And, most cruelly, the March 7, 2003, *The Opposite Direction* asked, "why have Arabs become the joke of the world?"

Few countries escaped the scrutiny of al-Jazeera's talk shows, although some were covered more heavily than others. Many responded with considerable hostility to these unusually frank and open discussions, considering their airing to be an aggressive act. Morocco received considerable attention, in part because of interest in the ongoing Western Sahara conflict—and responded as early as April 1999 by shutting down al-Jazeera's operations in the country. Egypt deported Faisal al-Qassem's brother, a popular singer. Algeria—with its elections, mass violence, and Berber conflict—was the topic of no less than twenty shows; in July 2004 President Bouteflika finally responded to attention deemed unwelcome by shutting down al-Jazeera's Algerian offices, and in one remarkable instance cutting power to the city of Algiers to prevent citizens from watching a particularly inflammatory program. Jordan shut down al-Jazeera after a guest talked about King Hussein's long-standing ties to the United States and made several uncomplimentary remarks about the late monarch.[81] Lebanon and the Sudan received a surprising amount of attention, again likely because of their turbulent political situations. Qatar received little attention, as al-Jazeera's critics often noted, but other small Gulf states such as the UAE and Bahrain received little more. Kuwait banned the station for a month in 1999 for comments critical of the emir by a caller, and closed the al-Jazeera offices in November 2002 for being "not objective."[82] Israel attacked al-Jazeera in June 2002 for "spreading hatred." Bahrain criticized al-Jazeera in May 2002 for "insulting Bahrain and the Bahraini people." The Palestinian Authority closed al-Jazeera's offices in March 2001 in protest over its coverage. As one witty person suggested at one point, al-

Jazeera risked becoming the first Arab station to not have offices in any Arab country!

Islamist Publics

Contrary to reckless allegations about al-Jazeera's being some kind of "Jihad TV" or "on-line madrassa," the new Arab public sphere, given its ever-greater centrality to Arab public life, actually under-represents Islamism. The beautiful, unveiled anchorwomen of al-Jazeera—to say nothing of the steamy music video clips of Nancy Ajram, Haifa Wehbe, and others that dominated the popular entertainment satellite channels—profoundly challenged Islamist notions of gender and correct behavior (Mernissi 2004). While a thorough examination of Islamist public spheres is outside the scope of this book, it is important to recognize the parallel existence of Islamist publics that are often quite distinct from—even insulated from—the mainstream. These Islamist publics had their own publications, including mass circulation pamphlets, magazines, and newspapers. As Jon Anderson puts it, "ideas and issues circulated in intellectuals' books a generation ago are now found in popular chapbooks and on street corner newsstands" (Anderson 2003). They also relied on the dissemination of cassette sermons, by which popular preachers could reach large audiences. Islamists have not generally focused on television, with the recent exception of Hezbollah's al-Manar, preferring to cultivate their own alternative media zones. But Islamism has developed its own counterpublic, an increasingly pervasive parallel sector with its own language, its own terms of reference, and its own priorities.

As Charles Hirschkind (2001) argues, this Islamist counterpublic has pioneered its own media forms, including very cheap pamphlet books and cassette sermons. This Islamist public sphere has shifted from a national to a transnational focus over the last two decades, with matters of shared concern to Islamists—from Palestine to Chechnya—becoming central to local political discourses. At another level, information technology has scaled up the Islamic *umma* (community), facilitating mediated dialogues over the Internet on issues ranging from correct Islamic practice to the validity of Osama bin Laden's invoca-

tion of jihad (Mandaville 2001; Bunt 2003). These electronic networks, as with cassette sermons, have transformed the relationship between diasporas and homelands, giving substance to the abstract concept of an Islamic community (Roy 2004). This new media "opened up new spaces of religious contestation where traditional sources of authority could be challenged by a wider public," while at the same time driving a kind of "media Islam" or "soundbite Islam" open to political mobilization (Mandaville 2001: 70).

Iraq—or more specifically, the suffering of the Iraqi people under sanctions—was a key part of this new Islamist counterpublic. This did not derive from any sympathy for Saddam Hussein's regime. Islamists always had a tense and confrontational relationship with his Baathist regime because it was explicitly hostile to Islam, especially as Iraqi rhetoric cast its war with Iraq as one of defending secular Arabism from the threat of Iranian Islamic fundamentalism. The Muslim Brotherhood, which thrived in almost every Arab state, was ruthlessly repressed in Iraq. But Iraq nevertheless played a pivotal role in the parallel development of Islamist movements in this time period. The ongoing sanctions on Iraq provided a crucial unifying theme, as Islamists and Arabists could agree on condemnation of the unjustified misery of the Iraqi people.

After the Gulf War, Islamist movements focused their attention on the misery of the Iraqi people, without strongly supporting the government of Saddam Hussein. Reports on the suffering of Iraqi children and civilians became a regular feature of the Islamist newspapers, Web sites, and sermon cassettes circulated throughout the Arab world. As demonstrated by Osama bin Laden's inclusion of the Iraq sanctions on his list of major complaints against the United States, Islamist parties raised the suffering of the Iraqi people into a touchstone issue for demonstrating Islamic credibility, using transnational and domestic networks to spread information and to mobilize in support of the Iraqi people. Iraq became a staple in the Islamist mosques, with innumerable collections of charitable contributions, books, and clothes for the suffering fellow-Muslim people. A more perfect vehicle could scarcely be devised: the suffering of an Arab-Muslim people inflicted with the cooperation of repressive Arab rulers in the interests of the United States and Israel. While this took place outside the mainstream Arab

public sphere, it intersected at key points and in ways of clear importance to the wider questions at hand.

Even as Islamist movements have been thwarted in their bids for political power—either through violent means or through electoral participation—they have gained increasing influence over the content and style of public discourse throughout the Middle East. On the one hand, Islamists have developed their own virtually autonomous counterpublics, based in mosques and cassette sermons and an astonishing amount of cheaply priced and widely disseminated pamphlet literature. On the other hand, Islamists have assumed an increasingly hegemonic role over permissible public argument and speech.

The Egyptian case offers perhaps the most striking—and widely noted—example of this Islamist war of position. The Egyptian government ceded a great deal of control over media content to the Islamic conservatives at al-Azhar University. Over the course of the 1990s, a conservative Islamic discourse permeated the official Egyptian media, casting something of a pall over cinema and television productions. The assassination of the secular critic Farag Fuda in 1992 seemed to show an even darker threat behind the Islamist intolerance of critical discourse. The Egyptian state's antiterrorist offensive in the 1990s placed even tighter boundaries on acceptable public discourse, ostensibly in response to the Islamists but often simply to protect an increasingly intolerant and unpopular regime. Islamists launched cultural offensives against novels by, among others, feminist Nawal al-Saadawi (*Fall of the Idol*), Naguib Mahfouz (*Geblawi's Children*), Haydar Haydar (*A Banquet for Seaweed*), and Ahmed al-Shahawi (*Wasaya fi Ashiq al-Nisa*). In 2004 the Egyptian government greatly expanded al-Azhar's power to censor and ban publications.

The problems were not limited to Egypt. In Jordan, which prides itself on being pro-Western and tolerant, three journalists from a weekly newspaper were arrested in January 2003 for an article deemed insulting to Islam.[83] Muslim Brotherhood campaigns against poets Ibrahim Nasrallah and Musa al-Hawamdeh for demeaning Islam led to the latter's conviction. Yemeni Islamists campaigned against Muhammad Abd al-Mawla's novel *Sanaa: An Open City*, with Shaykh Abd al-Majid al-Zindani of the Islah party denouncing journalists and defenders of the novel as "apostates."[84] Kuwaiti Islamists forced some 300 books to

be banned from the November 2000 annual book fair, as well as the cancellation of a concert by a popular Lebanese singer, and in 2004 forced an already conservative minister of information to resign over "scandalous" appearances by popular Arab singers. Bahraini Islamists sparked a political crisis over the filming of an Arabic version of "Big Brother" for the LBC satellite television station.

Too many Islamists have turned their project into a means to close down public debate and discourse. Arab and Islamic public spheres have witnessed a powerful wave of Islamist efforts to impose censorship of the media, to tightly control the bounds of legitimate public discourse, and to threaten, prosecute, or even kill those found to have "offended Islam."

While Islamist discourse has become increasingly dominant in national publics, it has been suprisingly less central to the new Arab public. Islamist voices are regularly heard, but outside their own media outlets they do not occupy a hegemonic position. Yusuf al-Qaradawi's hugely popular program on al-Jazeera advances an Islamist understanding of all aspects of life, but it occupies a singularly anti-bin Laden position within the realm of intra-Islamist argument. Al-Arabiya promotes a range of "moderate" Muslim voices and routinely criticizes radical Islam. The same can be said of the major pan-Arab newspapers. Al-Sharq al-Awsat features a number of fierce critics of radical Islamism, while al-Quds al-Arabi's most prominent Islamist writer, Abd al-Wahhab al-Affendi, is a moderate Islamist who has also been fiercely critical of bin Laden.

While sometimes serving al-Qaeda's media strategy, al-Jazeera and the new Arab public sphere are in fact a powerful rival to the radical Islamist project. Al-Qaeda and other radical Islamists use the media effectively to transmit propaganda, and benefit from the rising anger and outrage generated by televised wars and images of Arab suffering. Al-Qaeda sent tapes to al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya because they provided access to a wide audience, and those stations generally aired them, for their news value and as a way of attracting audiences. But few radical Islamists participate in the talk shows on these stations, and few of the hosts sympathized with their agenda. Al-Jazeera and the new Arab public exemplified a commitment to public dialogue and reason, an insistence on opening all issues to contentious debate

that was deeply at odds with the radical Islamist agenda of propagating a single, unquestionable truth. For example, when al-Jazeera broadcast an exclusive video from al-Qaeda second in command Ayman al-Zawahiri in May 2005, it presented it in the form of a dialogue, with liberals and moderate Islamists invited to respond point by point to Zawahiri's arguments.

Qaradawi, the most prominent Islamist face of al-Jazeera, was an avowed moderate committed to public dialogue and openly antagonistic toward bin Laden (Baker 2003; Lynch 2005). Qaradawi drew on a powerful but often neglected critical strand of Islamist thought that takes dialogue as a foundational point for its social theory and practice. These "New Islamist" thinkers hold up a counterfactual ideal of *hiwar*—dialogue—as a preliminary move toward overcoming these pervasive failings of Arab public reason. Many of the problems of the Islamic world, according to Abd al-Wahhab al-Affendi (2002), can be explained by the fact that Islam's normative commitment to public reason has too often been subordinated to politics and the imperatives of power. Indeed, the distinctions drawn by New Islamists such as Tariq al-Bishri between *hiwar* and other forms of exchange such as *jadal* [argument] and *sira'a fikri* [intellectual combat] echo Habermas's distinction between communicative and strategic action (Baker 2003: 43). These Islamists have criticized the closed, intolerant neofundamentalist Islamism associated with bin Laden's network.

Qaradawi has long been an outspoken advocate of dialogue: "Islam is a religion of dialogue, and the Quran is at its base a book of dialogue."[85] He asserts that "all Muslims believe in dialogue, because we are commanded to do so by the Shari'a, and the Quran is full of dialogues between the prophets of God and their communities, and between God and his slaves, and even between God and the Devil."[86] He takes to task those "extremists [who] pretend that there are no points of agreement between us and the Jews and Christians." Indeed for Qaradawi, the first indication of extremism is "bigotry and intolerance, which make a person obstinately devoted to his own opinions and prejudices. . . . Such a person does not allow any opportunity for dialogue with others. . . . [This] attitude contradicts the consensus of the Islamic community, that what every person says can be totally or partly accepted or rejected" (Qaradawi 1981/2002: 199).

But for all his commitment to dialogue, Qaradawi remains intensely focused on the ways in which Islamic openness might be exploited by a West that "seeks to destroy Arab and Islamic civilization" and to keep the Islamic world living in fear of its power.[87] Qaradawi may be a democrat but he is not a liberal. His fundamental orientations are to the social Islam of the Muslim Brotherhood and toward spreading a conservative Islamic way of life and way of thinking. While his orientation toward dialogue makes him a powerful proponent of a public sphere, this should not be misread as a commitment to liberal outcomes. For many critics, his pervasive influence on al-Jazeera suggests a wrong turn taken by the new Arab public: a turn away from liberalism and to something more populist, more conservative, more consumed by questions of authenticity and identity.[88]