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THE ARAB "STREET" AND THE MIDDLE EAST'S DEMOCRACY DEFICIT

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Even before the events of 11 September 2001, it was already becoming clear that rapidly increasing levels of education, greater ease of travel, and the rise of new communications media were developing a public sphere in Muslim-majority societies in which large numbers of people—not just an educated, political, and economic elite—expect a say in religion, governance, and public issues. State authorities continue in many ways to be arbitrary and restrict what is said in the press, the broadcast media, and in public, but the methods of avoiding such censorship and control have rapidly proliferated. Today, silence in public no longer implies ignorance.

Silence, or apparent acquiescence, is often a weapon of the weak. In some countries of the Arabian Peninsula, a "politics of silence," in which audiences applaud tepidly rather than with enthusiasm, is one of the few forms of public protest available, despite the simulacra of democratic forms offered by repressive and authoritarian governments.[1] For instance, Tunisia's President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali was reelected with 99 percent of cast ballots in 1994, but few Tunisians would take at face value his response to a French journalist's question that such results, far from being "a bit too good," merely reflected "the profound realities of the Arab-Muslim world" and that the vote was "a massive adhesion to a project of national

salvation."[2] Public silence in Tunisia in the face of such claims does not equal agreement with them.

Washington policy makers recognized the implications of this new sense of the public in the Arab world well before the 11 September terrorist attacks. Among them, it is called the "Arab street,"

> a new phenomenon of public accountability, which we have seldom had to factor into our projections of Arab behavior in the past. The information revolution, and particularly the daily dose of uncensored television coming out of local TV stations like al-Jazira and international coverage by CNN and others, is shaping public opinion, which, in turn, is pushing Arab governments to respond. We do not know, and the leaders themselves do not know, how that pressure will impact on Arab policy in the future.[3]

The use of the term "street," rather than "public sphere" or "public," imputes passivity, or a propensity to easy manipulation, and implies a lack of formal or informal leadership. Nonetheless, its use indicates that policy makers at least acknowledge that even regional authoritarian and single-party states now have "publics" to take into account.

BEING MUSLIM AND MODERN

The spread of higher education, greater mobility, and proliferating and accessible means of communication have contributed significantly to the fragmentation of religious and political authority, challenging authoritarianism in many domains.[4] This process could lead to more open societies, just as globalization has been accompanied by such developments as Vatican II and secular human rights movements. Many movements show the positive side of globalization, in which small but determined transnational groups work toward goals that improve the human condition. The leaders of such movements in the Arab and the Muslim-majority worlds, including interpreters of religious matters, often lack theological and philosophical sophistication. Some can, however, motivate minorities and at least persuade wider publics of the justice of their causes, changing implicit, practical understandings of ethical issues in the process.

There is also a darker side to globalization. The fragmentation of authority and the growing ability of large numbers of people to participate in wider spheres of religious and political debate and practical action can also have highly negative outcomes. This darker side is epitomized by Osama Bin Laden and the al-Qaʿida terrorist movement. This organization is not noted primarily for its theological sophistication. In quality of thought, Bin Laden and his associates, such as the Egyptian physician Ayman al-Zawahiri, are no match for Thomas Hobbes, Martin Heidegger, Egypt's (and Qatar's) Yusuf al-Qaradawi, or Syria's Muhammad Shahrur. Al-Qaʿida has, nonetheless, demonstrated a public

relations genius that—combined with massive and dramatic terrorist acts—caught the world by surprise and reinforced its public declarations of anti-Western sentiments.

The Bin Laden/al-Qaʻida view of world politics gains its power and timelessness by appealing to unity and faith regardless of the balance of power against them, and by attributing the evils of this world to Christians and Jews, as well as to Muslims who associate with them (and thus subvert the goals of the *umma*, the worldwide community of true believers). Does not the Qur'an say that polytheists should be fought until they cease to exist (Q. 9:5) and that those who do not rule by God's law are unbelievers who, by implication, should be resisted (Q. 5:44)?[5]

> *Al-Qaʻida takes for granted rising levels of education.*

These interpretations of scripture are highly contestable and should not be taken as harbingers of a coming "clash of civilizations" or as, in Gilles Kepel's (more ecumenical) phrase, the "revenge of God."[6] This "theology" does not go back to ancient roots or to the Qur'an, although some extremists make such claims, but is thoroughly modern; it is basically an update of the beliefs of Islamic Jihad, an Egyptian group best known for its assassination of Anwar al-Sadat in 1981. Only a tiny minority has been inspired to lethal action by such interpretations. However, that minority builds on a hybrid social base that can bring together the totally different worlds of "uneducated Pashtun villagers and rich Arab city dwellers."[7] Some elements of the al-Qaʻida message—especially accounts of injustices perpetrated against Muslims in Palestine, Chechnya, Kashmir, and elsewhere—capture the imagination of broad circles, although their agreement does not translate into action.

Many voices and practices in the Muslim world call for or tend toward more open societies and diverse religious interpretations.[8] Even if ignored because they are not heard in English or the major European languages, they are becoming more significant. However, cautious autocracies are hesitant to contest directly the advocates of fanaticism and intolerance. There will always be ideas at hand to justify intolerance and violence, and there will also always be ways for terrorists to manipulate open societies for their nefarious ends; countering radical ideologies and theologies of violence is not easy. Yet the proliferation of voices openly debating the role of Islam in contemporary society contributes significantly to weakening the appeal of terrorists.

One Islamic thinker in the Gulf region, for example, argues that the principle of equality as a foundational idea was firmly established in the U.S. Declaration of Independence in 1776 but that the implementation of the principle took nearly two centuries to achieve. The right for free men to vote on an equal basis

was granted only in 1850, and African-American males got the right to vote in 1870. Women got the right to vote in 1920, and the poll tax was eliminated only in 1964. He sees the Islamic principle of *shura*, or consultation, as identical to democracy and as an idea that can only be achieved incrementally and never fully realized, as in the American case.[9] In a similar manner, Syria's Muhammad Shahrur, in his many books and on satellite television, calls for a rethinking of the Islamic tradition to break the hold of the *'ulama* ("the body of learned men"—that is, canonical religious authorities) and popular preachers on Qur'anic interpretation.[10]

Thinkers and religious leaders like Turkey's Fethullah Gülen and Indonesia's Nurcholish Madjid hold that democracy and Islam are fully compatible and that Islam prescribes no particular form of governance, certainly not arbitrary rule. They argue that the central Qur'anic message is that Muslims must take responsibility for their own society. Even the headscarf is not essential, Gülen argues—taking up a theme as politically explosive in Turkey as it is in France—only the requirement of modest dress and comportment. The views of such thinkers (and there are many) are less well known outside the Arab and Muslim-majority world than, for instance, once were the views of Solidarity activists in Poland or the advocates of liberation theology. The courage of those in the Islamic world who advocate toleration, even those who practice it in private without articulating their views, is remarkable. These thinkers recognize that there are many religious differences between Islam and the West, but they also acknowledge many important points in common.

MODERN TRANSNATIONAL VIDEOS

In the years ahead, open communication and public diplomacy will be increasingly significant in countering the image that the likes of the al-Qa'ida terrorist network and Osama Bin Laden assert for themselves as "guardians of Islamic values." Al-Qa'ida itself may fade from prominence, but the views it advocates resonate within the Muslim-majority world and have parallels outside it. In the fight against terrorism, of which Bin Laden is the photogenic icon, the first step is to recognize that he is as thoroughly a part of the modern world as was Cambodia's French-educated Pol Pot. Bin Laden presents himself as a traditional Islamic warrior brought up to date (though the "tradition" is an invented one). The language and content of his videotaped appeals assert his modernity even more strongly, although less obviously, than do his camouflage jacket, Kalashnikov, and Timex watch.

Consider a two-hour al-Qa'ida recruitment videotape in Arabic that has made its way since May 2000 to many Middle Eastern video shops and Western news media.[11] It is a skillful production, as fast-paced and gripping as any Hindu

fundamentalist video justifying the destruction in 1992 of the Ayodhya mosque in India, or the political "attack videos" used in American presidential campaigning.[12] The 1988 "Willie Horton" campaign video—which showed a mug shot of a convicted rapist who had committed a second rape during a weekend furlough from a Massachusetts prison, while a voice-over portrayed Democratic presidential candidate Michael Dukakis as "soft" on crime—was a marketing masterpiece that combined a conventional, if explicit, message with another menacing, underlying one intended to galvanize undecided voters. The al-Qa'ida video, although it was directed at a different audience—presumably Arab youth who are alienated, unemployed, and often living in desperate conditions—shows an equal mastery of modern propaganda.

The recruitment video begins with the attack on the USS *Cole* (DDG 67) in Yemen, then cuts to a montage implying coordinated worldwide aggression against Muslims in Palestine, Jerusalem, Lebanon, Chechnya, Kashmir, and Indonesia. Images follow of U.S. generals being received by Saudi princes, intimating collusion with the infidel West by leaders of oppressive Muslim regimes, thereby undermining their legitimacy. The tape continues by attributing the sufferings of the Iraqi people to American brutality against Muslims. Many of the images are taken from daily Western video news; the BBC and CNN logos add to their authenticity, just as the rebroadcast by CNN and the BBC of Qatar's al-Jazeera satellite television logo has added authenticity to Western coverage of Bin Laden.

Alternating with these scenes of devastation and oppression are images of Osama Bin Laden—posing in front of bookshelves or seated on the ground like an Islamic religious scholar, holding in his hand the Qur'an. Radiating charismatic authority, he recounts the Prophet Muhammad's flight from Mecca to Medina when the early Islamic movement was threatened by idolaters, and his triumphant return; the analogy is repeatedly drawn. Bin Laden also stresses the need for a *jihad,* or struggle, for the cause of Islam against the "crusaders" and "Zionists." Later images show military training in Afghanistan (including target practice at a video of Bill Clinton projected against a wall). A final sequence portrays—as the word "solution" flashes across the screen and a voice-over recites from the Qur'an—an Israeli soldier in full riot gear retreating from a Palestinian boy throwing stones.

A THOROUGHLY MODERN FANATIC

Osama Bin Laden, like many of his associates, is imbued with not only the techniques but the values of the modern world, even if only to reject them. A 1971 photograph shows him at age fourteen on a family holiday in Oxford, in the United Kingdom, posing with two half-brothers and some Spanish girls their

own age. English would have been their common language. Bin Laden had studied English at a private school in Jidda, and English was later useful for his civil engineering courses at King Abdul Aziz University. Unlike many of his now-estranged half-brothers, who were educated in Europe and the United States as well as in Saudi Arabia, Osama studied only in Saudi Arabia; nonetheless, he was familiar with European society.

Organizational skills he learned in the university came into play when he joined the *mujahidin* ("strugglers," or holy warriors) against the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Whether or not he actually met American intelligence officers in the field, they, like their Saudi and Pakistani counterparts, were pleased at his participation and his willingness to recruit fighters from throughout the Arab world. Likewise, Bin Laden's many business enterprises flourished, even under highly adverse conditions. In both settings, he skillfully sustained a flexible multinational organization in the face of opposition, moving cash, people, and supplies almost undetected across international frontiers.

If Western policy makers and intelligence professionals never underestimated the organizational effectiveness of Bin Laden and his associates, neither should they underestimate their ability to convey a message that appeals to at least some Muslims. One need not have credentials as an established Islamic scholar in order to have one's ideas taken seriously. As Sudan's former attorney general and speaker of the parliament, the Sorbonne-educated Hasan al-Turabi (also leader of his country's Muslim Brotherhood), asserted two decades ago, "Because all knowledge is divine and religious, a chemist, an engineer, an economist, or a jurist" are all men of learning.[13] Bin Laden, a civil engineer, exemplifies Turabi's point. Some in his audience do not look for ability to cite authoritative texts; instead, they respond to his apparent skill in applying generally accepted religious tenets to current political and social issues.

THE MESSAGE ON THE ARAB STREET

Bin Laden's lectures circulate in book form in the Arab world, but video is the main vehicle of communication. Mass education and new communications technologies enable large numbers of Arabs to hear—and see—al-Qaʻida's message directly. The use of CNN-like "zippers"—the ribbons of words streamed beneath images—shows that al-Qaʻida takes for granted rising levels of education. Increasingly, its audience has access to both conventional and new media, such as the Internet.[14] The entry of the Middle East into an era of mass communication has established standard Arabic (as opposed to its widely differing and often mutually incomprehensible regional dialects) as a lingua franca. In Morocco in the early 1970s, for instance, rural people might ask speakers of

standard Arabic to "translate" newscasts in the transnational speech of the state radio into local, colloquial Arabic. Today this is no longer required.

Bin Laden's message does not depend on religious themes alone. Like that of the Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini, his message contains many secular elements. Khomeini often alluded to the "wretched of the earth" and drew on images appealing to third-world militants in general. At least for a time, his language appealed equally to Iran's religiously minded sector and its secular Left. For Bin Laden, the equivalent themes are the oppression and corruption of many Arab governments, for which he lays the blame—as he does for violence and oppression in Palestine, Kashmir, Chechnya, and elsewhere—on the West. One need not be religious to rally to such themes. A poll taken in Morocco in late September 2001 showed that, though a majority of Moroccans condemned the 11 September bombings, 41 percent sympathized with Bin Laden's message.[15] An early November 2001 poll of 11,500 Muslims in Britain showed that only 21 percent thought that the United States was justified in blaming al-Qaʻida for the attacks in America on 11 September and that 57 percent disagreed with Prime Minister Tony Blair when he claimed that the U.S. and British military action in Afghanistan was not an attack on Islam.[16]

Osama Bin Laden and the al-Qaʻida terrorist movement are thus reaching at least part of the Arab "street." The U.S. director of central intelligence, George J. Tenet, testified before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in February 2001 that "the right catalyst—such as the outbreak of Israeli-Palestinian violence—can move people to act. Through access to the Internet and other means of communication, a restive [Arab] public is increasingly capable of taking action without any identifiable leadership or organizational structure."[17]

COUNTERING THE DEMOCRACY DEFICIT

The Middle East in general has a democracy deficit, in which "unauthorized" leaders or critics such as Saad Eddin Ibrahim—founder and director of Cairo's Ibn Khaldoun Center for Development Studies, a nongovernmental organization that promotes democracy in Egypt—suffer harassment or prison terms. It is because many governments in the Middle East are deeply suspicious of an open press, nongovernmental organizations, and unrestricted expression that the "restive" public, increasingly educated and influenced by hard-to-censor new media, can take action. By "without any identifiable leadership or organizational structure" George Tenet meant an absence not of leadership altogether but of leadership detectable by governments that have lost the confidence of social elements. An emerging Palestinian leader, say, would be foolhardy to allow him or herself to become identifiable to Israeli or other intelligence services.

One consequence of this democracy deficit is to magnify the power of the "street" in the Arab world. Bin Laden, speaking in the vivid language of popular Islamic preachers, builds on a deep and widespread resentment of the West and the local ruling elites associated with it. The lack of formal outlets for opinion on public concerns makes it easier for zealots, claiming the authority of religion, to hijack the Arab street.

One immediate response possible for the West is to acknowledge the existence of the Arab street and to learn to speak directly to it. This task has already begun, and an available point of access is al-Jazeera, which was obscure to all except specialists until 11 September 2001. This Qatari satellite television network is a premier source in the Arab world of uncensored news and opinion. It is more, however, than the Arab equivalent of CNN. Uncensored news and opinions increasingly shape public opinion even in places like Damascus and Algiers. Public opinion, in turn, pushes Arab governments to be more responsive to their citizens, or at least to say that they are.

Far from seeking to censor al-Jazeera, limit al-Qaʻida's access to the Western media, or create a de facto Office of Disinformation within the Pentagon—an unfortunate early proposal of the U.S. government after the September terror attacks—the United States should specifically avoid censorship. Al-Qaʻida statements should be treated with the same caution as those of any other news source.

Ironically, at almost the same moment that national security adviser Condoleezza Rice asked the American television networks not to air al-Qaʻida videos unedited, a former senior CIA officer, Graham Fuller, was explaining in Arabic on al-Jazeera how American policy making works. His appearance on al-Jazeera made a significant impact, as did Secretary of State Colin Powell's presence on a later program and that of former U.S. ambassador Christopher Ross, who speaks fluent Arabic. Likewise, the timing and content of the response of Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain to an earlier Bin Laden tape suggests how to take the emerging Arab public seriously. The day after al-Jazeera broadcast the Bin Laden tape, Blair asked for and received an opportunity to respond. In his reply, Blair—in a first for a Western leader—directly addressed the Arab public through the Arab media, explaining coalition goals in attacking al-Qaʻida and the Taliban, and challenging Bin Laden's claim to speak in the name of Islam.

Such appearances enhance the West's ability to communicate its primary message—that the war against terrorism is a struggle not of one civilization against another but against terrorism and fanaticism in all societies. Western policies and actions are subject to public scrutiny and are quite likely to be misunderstood, especially by people living under closed regimes or faced with apparent contradictory emphases in foreign policy and actions. U.S. government statements about

the evil of the Iraqi regime are hard to explain to the Arab street when the American leadership appears unable or even unwilling to restrain Israeli incursions into the West Bank and Gaza. Public diplomacy can significantly diminish some misapprehensions, but it may also require some uncomfortable policy decisions. For instance, America may be forced to exert more diplomatic pressure on Israel to alter its methods of dealing with Palestinians.

Western public diplomacy in the Middle East also entails great care in uncharted waters. As an Oxford University social linguist, Clive Holes, has pointed out, the linguistic genius who thought up the original name for the campaign to oust the Taliban, "Operation INFINITE JUSTICE," did a major disservice to the Western goal. The expression was literally and accurately translated into Arabic as '*adala ghayr mutanahiya*, connoting an earthly power arrogating to itself the task of divine retribution. Likewise, President George W. Bush's inadvertent and unscripted use of the word "crusade" gave al-Qa'ida spokesmen—and many others—an opportunity to attack the intentions of Bush and the West.

Mistakes will be made, but information and arguments that reach the Arab public sphere, including on al-Jazeera, will eventually have an impact for good or for ill. Some Westerners might condemn al-Jazeera as biased, and it may well be, in terms of the assumptions it makes about its audience. However, al-Jazeera has already broken a taboo by regularly inviting official Israeli spokespersons to comment live on current issues. Muslim religious scholars, both in the Middle East and in the West, have already spoken out on the network against al-Qa'ida's claim to act in the name of Islam. Other courageous voices, such as Egyptian playwright Ali Salem, have even employed humor for that purpose.[18]

The United States must recognize that the best way to mitigate the continuing threat of terrorism is to encourage Middle Eastern states to be much more responsive to longings for real participation in governance and to aid local nongovernmental organizations working toward this goal. As occurred in Egypt in the case of Saad Eddin Ibrahim, some countries may see such activities as subversive. Nonetheless, and whether Arab ruling elites like it or not, the Arab street is turning into a public sphere that will expect to be heard on public issues and matters of governance.

NOTES

1. Brigitte Waterdrinker, "Genèse et construction d'un état moderne: Le cas du Sultanate d'Oman," *Mémoire de DEA Études Politiques* (Paris: Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris, 1993).

2. Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, " 'Le intégrisme, c'est maintenant votre problème': Interview with Jacques Jacquet-Françillon," *Figaro*, 2 August 1994, p. 5. Author's translation.

3. Edward S. Walker, "The New U.S. Administration's Middle East Policy Speech," *Middle*

East Economic Survey, 25 June 2001, available on the World Wide Web at http://www.mees.com/news/a44n26d01.htm.

4. See Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, "Redefining Muslim Publics," in *New Media in the Muslim World*: *The Emerging Public Sphere,* ed. Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1999), pp. 1–18; and see Dale F. Eickelman, "Mass Higher Education and the Religious Imagination in Contemporary Arab Societies," *American Ethnologist*, November 1992, pp. 643–55.

5. I am grateful to James Piscatori for generously sharing with me an unpublished paper in progress concerning the Bin Laden/al-Qa'ida view of world politics. Qur'anic citations (such as 9:5) refer to chapter *(sura)* and verse.

6. Gilles Kepel, *The Revenge of God*: *The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism in the Modern World*, trans. Alan Braley (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1994).

7. Navid Kermani, "A Dynamite of the Spirit: Why Nietzsche, Not the Koran, is the Key to Understanding the Suicide Bombers," *Times Literary Supplement* (London), 29 March 2002, p. 15.

8. See Dale F. Eickelman, "Inside the Islamic Reformation," *Wilson Quarterly*, Winter 1998, pp. 80–9.

9. Sadek J. Sulaiman, "Democracy and *Shura*," in *Liberal Islam*: *A Sourcebook*, ed. Charles Kurzman (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), p. 97.

10. For an introduction to the thinking of Muhammad Shahrur, see Dale F. Eickelman, "Islamic Liberalism Strikes Back," *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*, December 1993, pp. 163–8. See also Muhammad Shahrur, *Proposal for an Islamic Covenant*, trans. Dale F. Eickelman and Ismail S. Abu-Shehadeh (Damascus: al-Ahali, 2000), also available online, at http://www.islam21.net/pages/charter/may-1.htm, or http://www.isim.nl/newsletter/7/.

11. It is now available online with explanatory notes in English. See http://www.ciaonet.org/cbr/cbr00/video/excerpts/excerpts_index.html.

12. See, for example, the Hindi-language film *Pranh jha hu vachnu na jaye* (We can give up our lives, but we cannot break our vow), fifty-five minutes, Delhi, Jain Studios, 1992. I am grateful to Dr. Christiane Brosius for providing me with a translation and annotated storyboard of the video. See also Christiane Brosius, "Is This the Real Thing? Packaging Cultural Nationalism," in *Image Journeys: Audio-Visual Media and Cultural Change in India,* ed. Christiane Brosius and Melissa Butcher (New Delhi: Sage, 1999), pp. 99–136.

13. Hasan al-Turabi, "The Islamic State," in *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983), p. 245.

14. On the importance of rising levels of education and the new media, see Dale F. Eickelman, "The Coming Transformation in the Muslim World," *Current History*, January 2000, pp. 16–20.

15. Cited in *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* (Casablanca), 13–19 October 2001, p. 6.

16. Poll conducted by ICM Research for BBC 4, 2–11 November 2001. On the World Wide Web at http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/today/reports/features/muslimpoll.html.

17. George J. Tenet, "Worldwide Threat 2001: National Security in a Changing World," testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 7 February 2001, available on the World Wide Web at http://www.cia.gov/cia/public_affairs/speeches/archives/2001/UNCLASWWT_02072001.html.

18. Ali Salem, "I Want to Start a Kindergarten for Extremism," *al-Hayat* (London), 5 November 2001. This was translated into English by the Middle East Media Research Institute as "Special Dispatch 298," *Jihad and Terrorism Studies*, 8 November 2001, available online at https://www.memri.org.