

What Next for the “Arab Street”?

How could the supposedly quiescent and cowed people who live in Arab dictatorships, like Egypt and Tunisia, rise up spontaneously and topple their regimes? The West has been blindsided by the current uprisings in the Arab world – in large part, we suggest, because the West has underestimated the power of Arab public opinion.

What is the “Arab Street”?

An important element of this underestimation is the Western concept of the “Arab street”, an expression used to refer to Arab public opinion. We recently studied the use of this expression in both English-language and Arabic-language media.¹ They differ. The image of the “Arab street” in Western media is often that of a volatile mob, a rabble that reacts violently and irrationally. In this image, while the “Arab street” may wish to topple Arab governments, it is seen as lacking the focus, intelligence, organization, and discipline to actually accomplish this. It is not conceived as the voice of engaged people with a legitimate stake in the future of the Arab world. Instead, it is seen as an unruly and irresponsible force that must be carefully restrained.

In recent years, the term “Arab street” has become by far the most common way to refer to Arab public opinion in English-language media, accounting for some 86% of references to Arab public opinion in the LexisNexis database between 2002 and 2007. By contrast, the

neutral expression “Arab public opinion” is rarely used by foreign correspondents and other commentators on events in the Middle East.

What is the “Arab street”, then? Above all, it is a monolith. It does not denote a diverse group of people with a varied collection of opinions, but a single organism that acts as one. For example: “The crowds are large, their chants fiery, but the Arab street remains a force controlled and choreographed by the region’s autocratic governments” (Associated Press, April 2002). Or: “Hizbollah is riding a wave of popularity on the Arab street” (BBC News, July 2006).

The phrase “Arab street” also has decidedly negative connotations. It is far more likely to be associated with volatility and irrationality than is the neutral expression “Arab public opinion”. For instance, the “Arab street” is often paired

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with adjectives like “angry” and “furious”: “Of course, the Arab street has always been angry at America for backing Israel, and now for events in Iraq, too” (BBC, April 2004). It “seethes”, “erupts”, and “explodes”, as opposed to objecting in a calm and deliberative manner to the policies of its leaders or to the actions of foreign powers. We found that the term “Arab street” was almost four times less likely than “Arab public opinion” to be associated with rationality and deliberation.

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of this



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¹ Terry Regier and Muhammad Ali Khalidi (2009), The Arab street: Tracking a political metaphor. *Middle East Journal*, 63, 11-29. http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/the_middle_east_journal/v063/63.1.regier.html

prevalent and pejorative metaphor is that it is reserved almost exclusively for Arab societies. There is no similar mention of the “European street”, “Indian street”, or “Latin American street” in the English-speaking media. If the street metaphor were more widely applied to other societies in other parts of the world, and indeed to Western societies themselves, its application to the Arab world might not be quite so problematic. As it is, the phrase

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tends to segregate the Arab public from other publics, suggesting that it is one of a kind, fundamentally different from its counterparts elsewhere. One does find such expressions as “the man on the street”, “Main Street”, and “street credibility” used with reference to western societies. However the “Arab street” is the only English-language metaphor we know of that casts the opinion of an entire ethnic group as a monolithic entity with a distinctly irrational and volatile demeanor.

The “Arab Street” in Arabic

The Arab media share this unflattering image to some extent: in Arabic, the term “Arab street” often betrays a patronizing attitude by pundits and politicians towards their own societies. However, unlike in English, in Arabic the term also carries clearly positive associations of legitimacy, centrality, and normalcy – comparable to “Main Street USA” in English. Moreover, whereas in English it is almost exclusively Arabs who are cast as “the street”, in Arabic the term is used more broadly, with common reference to the “American street”, the “British street”, and so on. An interesting example comes from the leader of Hizbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, who has used the expression “the Israeli street” in 2007 with positive overtones, claiming that “it is worthy of respect” that “political power and

the Israeli street move quickly” to defend former Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert.

The Arab press refers admiringly not just to the “Arab street” but more specifically also to the “Egyptian street”, the “Palestinian street”, and others. In the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ayyam* in 1997, we read about “the great Egyptian street, which has always been the heart and conscience of the Arabs.” Similarly, a Hamas leader is quoted in 2006 as saying that “[Hamas] won [the Palestinian elections] because it is a movement with a broad popular base in the Palestinian street.” Such statements bring out another side to the “street” metaphor as it is sometimes used in Arabic, which contrasts with many Western uses of the expression “Arab street”. Some Arabic uses of the expression carry a connotation of people power; they suggest a democratic process whereby leaders are held accountable by ordinary citizens.

The concept of democracy is hardly a novelty in the Arab context, stereotypes to the contrary notwithstanding. Some three hundred years prior to the Magna Carta and a full millennium before universal suffrage in the United States, the Islamic philosopher Al-Farabi, writing in Baghdad in the early tenth century, discussed the pros and cons of a democratic polity. In a democratic society, according to Farabi: “Those who rule do so by the will of the ruled, and the rulers follow the wishes of the ruled.” The people in a democracy, he went on to say, “praise and honor those who lead the citizens of the city to freedom... and who safeguard the citizens’ freedom.” In a significant break with Plato, Farabi reasoned that the democratic system was the second best of all forms of government, surpassed only by the “virtuous society,” a utopian system ruled by perfectly moral rulers. In his view, democracy, with its emphasis on freedom of expression and egalitarianism, would be most suited to the emergence of a group of virtuous individuals who would then go on to establish a perfectly ideal state.



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The “Arab Street” and the Current Uprisings

Though street demonstrations have been the dominant form of political expression in the Arab world over the past few weeks, they are not the only way in which Arab publics express their opinions and they do not tell the whole story about political expression in Arab societies. Moreover, the recent wave of such street protests belies the prevalent stereotype about Arab public opinion.

The mob characterization of the “Arab street”, especially evident in Western usage, simply does not fit the current uprisings in the Arab world. Demonstrations have been

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largely peaceful, disciplined, organized – and in Tunisia and Egypt, ultimately successful. Those violent confrontations that have occurred appear to have been instigated by the regimes rather than by protesters – witness recent events in Bahrain and Libya.

The mismatch between mob image and more complex reality is also highlighted by the composition of the crowds in recent protests. They represent a broad cross-section of society, male and female, secular and religious, and include young, web-savvy professionals, along with many others.

Rather than continue to misconstrue the nature of Arab public opinion, political elites in the West would do well to acknowledge that the public in the Arab world is motivated by the same concerns as any other public the world over. In 2009, in the same Cairo that has just witnessed a popular struggle for decent government, US president Barack Obama stated: “All people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice;

government that is transparent and doesn't steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose.” These words clash with the history of lavish US support for the Egyptian regime that denied its people exactly those things, but his words are nonetheless correct. Freedom and democracy are just what the Egyptian public has struggled for, and now has a hope of attaining.

The US government is likely scrambling to ensure that Mubarak's resignation in Egypt does not harm its interests in the region. Egypt is second only to Israel as a recipient of US military aid, and its peace treaty with Israel is central to US strategy in the region, but is viewed askance by many Egyptians. The US will no doubt try to protect its investment in Egypt, but the administration should think twice about attempting to ensure that whatever regime replaces Mubarak's privileges US foreign policy goals over the wishes of its own people. The “Arab street” is more rational and less likely to be hoodwinked than many would have us think.

Meanwhile, the spectacle of a whole host of Arab leaders, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Persian Gulf, attempting to bribe citizens into acquiescence with government handouts or trying to bludgeon them into submission with brute force is frankly obscene. Unfortunately, there is nothing to guarantee that such measures won't work, at least in some places and for a limited period of time. But bribes and violence are not likely to postpone the inevitable forever.

The Way Forward

It remains to be seen whether the uprisings in Egypt and elsewhere will be hijacked by internal or external forces. It's one thing to initiate a movement like those that are sweeping the Arab states and it's quite another to go on to establish a just and free society with a government that is answerable to its people. To quote the words of Larbi Ben M'Hidi, one of the heroes of Gilles Pontecorvo's film, the *Battle of Algiers*, about the Algerian anti-colonial struggle: “It's hard enough to start a revolution, even harder to

sustain it, and hardest of all to win it. But it's only afterwards, once we've won, that the real difficulties begin."

At the moment, there are plenty of forces that would like to "win" this revolution, or to take it in a direction that serves their interests. They are up against a remarkably energized and

liberated "Arab street". As one pro-democracy campaigner delightedly told Al-Jazeera after Mubarak's resignation, "I have worked all my adult life to see the power of the people come to the fore and show itself. I am speechless." It is unlikely they will let that sense of empowerment pass.