

# The Public Sphere, the Arab “Street” and the Middle East’s Democracy Deficit

Dale F. Eickelman

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WASHINGTON POLICY MAKERS acknowledged a new sense of public in the Muslim-majority and Arab worlds even before the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. For 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 don’t know, and the leaders themselves don’t know, how that pressure will impact on Arab policy in the future.<sup>1</sup>

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, this use of “street” shows how policy makers now acknowledge that authoritarian and single-party states also have “publics” to take into account.

## Being Muslim and Modern

Prior to the events of September 11, 2001, the main theme of this essay would have been that rapidly increasing levels of education, greater ease of travel, and the rise of new communications media are rapidly developing a public sphere in Muslim-majority societies in which large numbers of people—and not just an educated, political, and economic elite—want a say in religion, governance, and public issues. The consequent fragmentation of religious and political authority challenges authoritarianism. It can lead to more open societies, just as globalization has been accompanied by such developments as Vatican II and secular transnational human rights movements. These 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, including religious interpreters, often lack theological and philosophical sophistication. They can, however, motivate a minority and persuade a wider public of the justice of their cause, changing implicit, practical understandings of ethical issues in the process. There is, however, 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 debates and practical action can also have highly negative outcomes. This darker side is epitomized by Osama bin Laden and the al-Qa’ida terrorist movement. The movement is not noted for its theoretical 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, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, or Muhammad Shahrur. They have, however, demonstrated a public relations genius that, combined with massive and dramatic terrorist acts, have caught the world by surprise and built on anti-Western sentiments.

The Bin Laden/al-Qa'ida view of world politics is powerfully timeless—appealing to unity and faith regardless of a balance of power against them, attributing the evils of this world to Christians and Jews, and to Muslims who associate with them and thus pervert 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 and, by implication, should be resisted (Q. 5:44)?<sup>2</sup>

These interpretations of scripture are highly contestable and should not be taken as harbingers of a coming Clash of Civilizations or, in Gilles Kepel's (more ecumenical phrase, the "revenge of God."<sup>3</sup> Only a tiny but lethal minority has been inspired to action by such interpretations. The al-Qa'ida "theology" is basically an update of that of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, best known for its assassination of Anwar al-Sadat in 1981. Some elements of the al-Qa'ida message, including that of injustices perpetrated against the worldwide Islamic community—in Palestine, Chechnya, Kashmir, and elsewhere—capture the imagination of wider numbers of people, although their accord with some elements of the al-Qa'ida view of world politics and repression by state authorities does not get translated into action.

Several years ago I entitled an article "Inside the Islamic Reformation."<sup>4</sup> It emphasized the circumstances and potential of voices and practices in the Muslim world that contribute to more open societies and religious interpretations. We must accept that there will always be ideas available to justify intolerance and violence, and there will also always be ways for terrorists to manipulate open societies for their own nefarious ends. Countering radical ideologies and theologies of violence is not easy. Yet the proliferation of voices arguing in open debate about the role of Islam in the modern world and in contemporary society contributes significantly to defusing terrorist appeals. Because the advocates of tolerance and mutual understanding in the Muslim world are already present for those prepared to read and listen to what they say. One Islamic thinker in the Arab Gulf, for example, argues that the incremental growth of democracy in America is the most appropriate model for Muslims to follow, and the Syrian Muhammad Shahrur argues in his many books and on satellite television in the Arab world for a rethinking of the Islamic tradition that breaks with the hold of the 'ulama and of preachers on Qur'anic interpretation.<sup>5</sup> Thinkers and religious leaders, such as Turkey's Fethullah Gülen and Indonesia's Nurcholish Madjid, concur that democracy and Islam are fully compatible and that Islam prescribes no particular form of governance—and 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, only the requirement of modest dress and comportment. The view of such thinkers—and there are many—are less well known outside of the Arab world than, for instance, the views of Solidarity activists in Poland or the advocates of liberation theology. Even if challenged by much less tolerant views from what is sometimes called the "street," the courage of those who advocate toleration, or who practice it without articulating their views in public, merits more attention than it has received to date. These thinkers recognize that there are many religious-based differences between Islam and the West, but they also recognize many powerful points in common.

## Modern Transnational Videos

In the years ahead, open communications and public diplomacy will play an increasingly significant role in countering the image that the al-Qa'ida terrorist network and Osama bin Laden assert for themselves as guardians of Islamic values. In the fight against terrorism for 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's videotaped presentation of self intends to convey a traditional Islamic warrior brought up-to-date, but this sense of the past is an invented one. The language and content of his videotaped appeals convey more of his participation in the modern world than his camouflage jacket, Kalashnikov, and Timex watch.

Take the two-hour al-Qa'ida recruitment videotape in Arabic that has made its way to many Middle Eastern video shops and Western news media.<sup>6</sup> 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,<sup>7</sup> or the political attack videos so heavily used in American presidential campaigning. The 1988 "Willie Horton" campaign video of Republican presidential candidate George H. W. Bush—in which an off-screen announcer portrayed Democratic presidential candidate Michael Dukakis as "soft" on crime while showing a mug shot of a convicted African-American rapist who had committed a second rape during a weekend furlough from a Massachusetts prison—was a propaganda masterpiece that combined an explicit although conventional message with a menacing underlying one intended to motivate undecided voters. The al-Qa'ida video, directed at a different audience—presumably alienated Arab youth, unemployed and often living in desperate conditions—shows an equal mastery of modern propaganda.

The al-Qa'ida producers could have graduated from one of the best film schools in the United States or Europe. The fast-moving recruitment video begins with the sinking of the USS *Cole* in Yemen, but then shows a montage implying a seemingly coordinated worldwide aggression against Muslims in Palestine, Jerusalem, Lebanon, Chechnya, Kashmir, and Indonesia (but not Muslim violence against Christians and Chinese in the last). It also shows United States generals received by Saudi princes, intimating the collusion of local regimes with the West and challenging the legitimacy of many regimes, including Saudi Arabia. The sufferings of the Iraqi people are attributed to American brutality against Muslims, and Saddam Hussein is assimilated to the category of infidel ruler.

Many of the images are taken from the daily staple of Western video news—the BBC and CNN logos add to the videos' authenticity, just as Qatar's al-Jazeera Satellite Television logo rebroadcast by CNN and the BBC has added authenticity to Western coverage of Osama bin Laden.

Alternating with these scenes of devastation and oppression of Muslims are images of Osama bin Laden: posing in front of bookshelves or seated on the ground like a religious scholar, holding the Qur'an in his hand. Bin Laden radiates charismatic authority and control as he narrates the Prophet Muhammad's flight from Mecca to Medina, when the early Islamic movement was threatened by the idolaters, but returned to conquer them. This allusion is repeatedly invoked in the video. 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), and a

final sequence—the word “solution” flashes across the screen—portrays an Israeli soldier in full riot gear retreating from a Palestinian boy throwing stones, and a Qur’anic recitation.

## **A Thoroughly Modern Fanatic**

Osama bin Laden, like many of his associates, is thoroughly imbued with the values of the modern world, even if only to reject them. A 1971 photograph shows him on family holiday in Oxford at the age of 14, posing with two of his half-brothers and Spanish girls their own age. English was their common language of communication. Bin Laden studied English at a private school in Jidda, and English was also useful for his civil engineering courses at Jidda’s King Abdul Aziz University. Unlike many of his estranged half-brothers, educated both in Saudi Arabia and in Europe and the United States, Osama’s education was only in Saudi Arabia, but he was also familiar with Arab and European society.

The organizational skills he learned in Saudi Arabia came in to play when he joined the *mujahidin* (striver, or holy war) struggle against the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. He may not have directly met United States intelligence officers in the field, but they, like their Saudi and Pakistani counterparts, were delighted to have him participate in their fight against Soviet troops and recruit willing fighters from throughout the Arab world. Likewise, his many business enterprises flourished under highly adverse conditions. Bin Laden skillfully sustained a flexible multinational organization in the face of enemies, especially state authorities, moving cash, people, and supplies almost undetected across international frontiers. His skills were far superior to those of Colombia’s narco-traffickers.

Western policy makers and intelligence professionals have never underestimated the organizational skills of bin Laden and his associates. Neither should be their skills in conveying a message that appeals to some Muslims. Bin Laden lacks the credentials of an established Islamic scholar, but this does not diminish his appeal. As Sudan’s Sorbonne-educated Hasan al-Turabi, leader of his country’s Muslim Brotherhood and its former attorney-general and speaker of the parliament, explained two decades ago, “Because all knowledge is divine and religious, a chemist, an engineer, an economist, or a jurist” are all men of learning.<sup>8</sup> Civil engineer bin Laden exemplifies Turabi’s point. His audience judges him not by his ability to cite authoritative texts, but by 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. The use of CNN-like “zippers”—the ribbons of words that stream beneath the images in many newscasts and documentaries—shows that al-Qa’ida takes the Arab world’s rising levels of education for granted. Increasingly, this audience is also saturated with both conventional media and new media, such as the Internet.<sup>9</sup> The Middle East has entered an era of mass education and this also implies an Arabic lingua franca. In Morocco in the early 1970s, rural people sometimes asked me to “translate” newscasts the standard transnational Arabic of the state radio into colloquial Arabic. Today this is no longer required. Mass education and new communications technologies enables large numbers of Arabs to hear—and see—al-Qa’ida’s message directly.

Bin Laden's message does not depend on religious themes alone. Like the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, his message contains many secular elements. Khomeini often alluded to the "wretched of the earth." At least for a time, his language appealed equally to Iran's religiously minded and to the secular left. For bin Laden, the equivalent themes are the oppression and corruption of many Arab governments, and he lays the blame for the violence and oppression in Palestine, Kashmir, Chechnya, and elsewhere at the door of the West. One need not be religious to rally to some of these themes. A poll taken in Morocco in late September 2001 showed that a majority of Moroccans condemned the September 11 bombings, but 41 percent sympathized with bin Laden's message.<sup>10</sup> An early October 2001 poll of Muslims in Britain showed similar results.

Osama bin Laden and the al-Qa'ida terrorist movement are thus reaching at least part of the Arab "street." Without advocating any specific policy initiatives, 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 public is increasingly capable of taking action without any identifiable leadership or organizational structure."<sup>11</sup>

Because many governments in the Middle East are deeply suspicious of an open press, nongovernmental organizations, and open expression, it is no surprise that the "restive" public, increasingly educated and influenced by hard-to-censor new media, can take action "without any identifiable leadership or organized structure." This does not mean an absence of leadership, but of leadership identifiable to governments that have often lost the confidence of many social elements. The Middle East in general has a democracy deficit, in which "unauthorized" leaders or critics, such as Egyptian academic 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.

One consequence of this democracy deficit is to magnify the power of the street in the Arab world. Bin Laden speaks in the vivid language of popular Islamic preachers, and builds on a deep and widespread resentment against the West and local ruling elites identified with it. The lack of formal outlets to express opinion on public concerns has created the democracy deficit in much of the Arab world, and this makes it easier for terrorists such as bin Laden, asserting that they act in the name of religion, to hijack the Arab street.

The immediate response is to learn to speak directly to the Arab street. This task has already begun. Obscure to all except specialists until September 11, Qatar's al-Jazeera satellite television is a premier source in the Arab world for uncensored news and opinion. It is more, however, than the Arab equivalent of CNN. Uncensored news and opinions increasingly shape "public opinion"—a term without the pejorative overtones of "the street"—even in places like Damascus and Algiers. This public opinion in turn pushes Arab governments to be more responsive to their citizens, or at least to say that they are.

Rather than seek to censor al-Jazeera, limit al-Qa'ida's access to the Western media, or create a de facto Office of Disinformation within the Pentagon—an unfortunate first response of the United States government after the September terror attacks—we should avoid censorship. Al-Qa'ida statements should be treated with the same caution as any other news source. Replacing Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams' voice and image in the British media in the

1980s with an Irish-accented actor appearing in silhouette only highlighted what he had to say, and it is unlikely that the British public would tolerate the same restrictions on the media today.

Ironically, at almost the same time that national security adviser Condoleezza Rice asked the American television networks not to air al-Qa'ida videos unedited, a former senior CIA officer, Graham Fuller, was explaining in Arabic on al-Jazeera how United States policymaking works. His appearance on al-Jazeera made a significant impact, as did Secretary of State Colin Powell's presence on a later al-Jazeera program and former United States Ambassador Christopher Ross, who speaks fluent Arabic. Likewise, the timing and content of British Prime Minister Tony Blair's response 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-Qa'ida and the Taliban and challenging bin Laden's claim to speak in the name of Islam.

## Putting Public Diplomacy to Work

Such appearances enhance the West's ability to communicate the primary message: that the war against terrorism is not that of one civilization against another, but against terrorism and fanaticism in all societies. Western policies and actions are subject to public scrutiny and will often be misunderstood. Public diplomacy can significantly diminish this misapprehension. It may, however, involve 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 involves uncharted waters. As an Oxford University social linguist, Clive Holes, has pointed out, the linguistic genius who thought up the first 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*, implying that an earthly power arrogated 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 Bush and Western intentions.

Mistakes will be made, but information and arguments that reach the Arab public sphere, including on al-Jazeera, will eventually have an impact. Some Westerners might condemn al-Jazeera as biased, and it may well be in terms of making assumptions about its audience. However, it has 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 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 the same purpose.<sup>12</sup>

We must recognize that the best way to mitigate the continuing threat of terrorism is to encourage Middle Eastern states to be more responsive to participatory demands, and to aid local nongovernmental organizations working toward this goal. As with the case of Egypt's Saad Eddin Ibrahim, some countries may see such activities as subversive. Whether Arab states like it or not, increasing levels of education, greater ease of travel, and the rise of new communications media are turning the Arab street into a public sphere in which greater numbers

of people, and not just a political and economic elite, will have a say in governance and public issues.

## Notes

Parts of this essay appeared in an earlier form in Dale F. Eickelman, "Bin Laden, the Arab 'Street,' and the Middle East's Democracy Deficit," *Current History* 101, no. 651 (January 2002), pp. 36-39, and are used here with permission.

<sup>1</sup> Edward S. Walker, "The New US Administration's Middle East Policy Speech," *Middle East Economic Survey*, vol. 44, no. 26 (June 25, 2001). Available at <http://www.mees.com/news/a44n26d01.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Gilles Kepel, *La Revanche de dieu: Chrétiens, juifs et musulmans à la reconquête du monde* (Paris: Seuil, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Dale F. Eickelman, "Inside the Islamic Reformation," *Wilson Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (Winter 1998), 80-89.

<sup>5</sup> Sadek J. Sulaiman, "Democracy and *Shura*," in *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, ed. Charles Kurzman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 96-98. For a brief introduction to the thinking of Muhammad Shahrur, see Dale F. Eickelman, "Islamic Liberalism Strikes Back," *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 27, no. 2 (December 1993), 163-68. See also Muhammad Shahrur, *Proposal for an Islamic Covenant*, translated by Dale F. Eickelman and Ismail S. Abu-Shehadeh (Damascus, Syria: al-Ahali Printing and Distribution, 2000), also available at <http://www.islam21.net/pages/charter/may-1.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> It is now available on-line with explanatory notes in English. See [http://www.ciaonet.org/cbr/cbr00/video/excerpts/excerpts\\_index.html](http://www.ciaonet.org/cbr/cbr00/video/excerpts/excerpts_index.html).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, the Hindi-language film, "Pranh jha hu vachnu na jaye" (We can give up our lives, but we can't break our vow), 55 minutes, Delhi, Jain Studios, 1992. I am grateful to Dr. Christiane Brosnius, European University Viadrina, Frankfurt/Oder, for providing me with a translation and annotated story board for the video.

<sup>8</sup> Hasan al-Turabi, "The Islamic State," in *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 245.

<sup>9</sup> 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* 99, no. 633 (January 2000), pp. 16-20.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* (Casablanca), October 13-19, 2001, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> George J. Tenet, "Worldwide Threat 2001: National security in a changing World," testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, February 7, 2001. See [http://www.cia.gov/cia/public\\_affairs/speeches/archives/2001/UNCLASWWT\\_02072001.html](http://www.cia.gov/cia/public_affairs/speeches/archives/2001/UNCLASWWT_02072001.html).

<sup>12</sup> Ali Salem, "I Want to Start a Kindergarten for Extremism," *al-Hayat* (London), November 5, 2001. This is translated into English by the Middle East Media Research Institute as Special Dispatch no. 298, *Jihad and Terrorism Studies*, November 8, 2001, at <https://www.memri.org>.