

# Beyond the Arab Street: Iraq and the Arab Public Sphere

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*The common view of the “Arab street” fails to capture essential dimensions of the role of public opinion and public discourse in the politics of Arab states. The rising importance of transnational Arab television and print media has created a public arena outside the control of states. Arguments about issues of shared concern in this Arabist public sphere have had important implications for political identity, beliefs, expectations, and behavior. Arab responses to the ongoing crisis in Iraq demonstrate the political significance of these debates.*

**Keywords:** Arab; public sphere; Iraq; public opinion; deliberation

Since the events of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent war against terror, Arab and Muslim public opinion has become an issue of urgent theoretical and practical concern. Attempts to engage with it have been hindered by the shortcomings of the major theoretical approaches to Arab public opinion, however. Most discussions of public opinion in the Arab world revolve around the concept of “the Arab street,” which might or might not rise up to challenge and even overthrow governments that defy the convictions of an enraged public. This reductionist approach led many influential commentators to interpret the absence of widespread Arab riots in response to the American war in Afghanistan as evidence that the United States need not take Arab public opinion into account in its Middle

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East strategy. Some went even further, attributing to Arabs a deeply held and immutable hostility to the West, encouraged by a virulently anti-American media rather than to any specific American policies. Such hostile, emotional, and irrational publics respond only to force, not reason, by this argument and should be subdued through overwhelming demonstrations of power rather than by reasoned argument.<sup>1</sup> Even among more sympathetic analysts, the theoretical reduction of Arab public opinion to the Arab street systematically distorts accurate understanding of its dynamics. For example, warnings that Osama bin Laden would inflame Arab passions or emotions, which seem to show respect for Arab opinion, actually deflect attention from the specific interests and political grievances actually articulated by Arab publics.<sup>2</sup> These conceptions of Arab public opinion are deeply flawed, both theoretically and empirically. They are also dangerous. Many Arab writers, aware of the dominance of these kinds of analysis, warn that the perception of American contempt for Arab public opinion, which leads it to refuse to engage with it in a reasoned fashion, directly contributes to the escalating conflict and mistrust between Arabs and the United States.<sup>3</sup> This article offers an alternative theoretical approach to understanding Arab public opinion, moving beyond the Arab street to explore the strategic and constitutive dynamics of discourse within an emerging transnational Arabist public sphere. It uses the case of Iraq to explore three important questions: what is Arab public opinion, how has it changed, and how does it matter?

While Arab polities remain largely undemocratic, structural shifts in the means of public communication and opinion formation have contributed to the emergence of a transnational Arab public sphere that increasingly shapes politics throughout the region. New media, including satellite television stations such as *al-Jazeera*, Arabist and Islamist newspapers distributed free of charge on the Internet, and rapid distribution of news via e-mail, listservs, and instant messaging, have given citizens in states such as Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, and throughout North Africa and the Gulf the means to undermine state censorship and control. This public sphere does not substitute for democracy; it has few institutional channels by which to translate its preferences into outcomes, and it has met with substantial state counter-pressures. However, it also has dramatically reshaped the dynamics of Arab politics and conceptions of Arab political identity. Michael Hudson is not alone in arguing that new media forms are “beginning to exert a revolutionary force across the Arab world . . . transforming Arab political culture.”<sup>4</sup> In response to the considerable skepticism about the sometimes exaggerated transformative claims for this new media, I present here a more nuanced theoretical account of the mechanisms by which this transnational public sphere affects political outcomes.

Empirically, I use Arab attitudes, public discourse, and policies toward Iraq since 1991 to illustrate how the changing structure of the public sphere has affected Arab politics. This case offers a useful counterpoint to the more com-

monly studied issue of Arab opinions toward Israel, in part because it is possible to observe rapid changes in public attitudes and state positions toward Iraq over the course of the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> At the time of the Gulf war, the entire Gulf Cooperation Council (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates [UAE], Qatar, Oman) took strong positions against Iraq, as did Egypt, Syria, Morocco, and Lebanon, in spite of often pro-Iraqi public opinion. By the mid-1990s, only Saudi Arabia and Kuwait remained strongly supportive of American policy toward Iraq in public, even if many Arab leaders privately continued to support the containment of Iraq.<sup>6</sup> By the end of the 1990s, most Arab leaders opposed the sanctions in private as well as in public. In March 2002, an Arab summit in Beirut finally brought about a public Arab consensus on restoring Iraq to the Arab order, while a succession of Arab leaders pointedly rejected American Vice President Dick Cheney's suggestion that they privately supported the American agenda of war against Iraq.

These shifts in official policy followed the emergence of a public consensus against the sanctions—but not in favor of Saddam Hussein's regime—across the Arab world. Public opinion surveys, where they exist, tell part of this story. An early study of elite public opinion in the Gulf found a dramatic shift, from 86 percent agreeing in January 1991 that Saddam Hussein bore primary responsibility for the crisis to 76 percent in September 1991 blaming external actors.<sup>7</sup> One Arab writer, observing the widespread mobilization against the American-British bombing of Iraq in December 1998, wrote that “as the night does not resemble the morning, the winter of 1998 can not resemble the summer of 1991 . . . where the Gulf crisis divided the Arabs, these attacks united us.”<sup>8</sup> In an April 2002 opinion survey, only 3 percent of Egyptians favored an American attack against Iraq, and 84 percent were against; 7 percent of Lebanese for and 84 percent against; 11 percent of Saudis for and 80 percent against; and 13 percent of Kuwaitis for and 61 percent against.<sup>9</sup> On American policy toward Iraq, 4 percent of Egyptians found it excellent or good, while 83 percent found it so-so or poor; 4 percent and 90 percent in Lebanon; 17 percent and 55 percent in Kuwait; 9 percent and 83 percent in Saudi Arabia. What is more, a Zogby poll found that changes in policy could lead to dramatic changes in public opinion: 80 percent of Egyptians said that their opinion of the United States would improve if it lifted the sanctions on Iraq, as did 77 percent of Saudis and 75 percent of Lebanese. Similarly, in an opinion poll in Saudi Arabia in the summer of 2001, 86 percent of Saudis said that their attitudes toward the United States were mostly based on its policies, not its values.<sup>10</sup> While such opinion polls are suggestive, they do not in themselves capture the richness and the dynamism of Arab public opinion formation or the centrality of public discourse rather than largely unmeasured mass attitudes to its political expression. To that end, the article draws on a collection of more than thirteen hundred opinion essays about Iraq in the Arabic language press, as well as almost one hundred

interviews in Jordan, Egypt, the West Bank, Syria, and Lebanon, to reconstruct the development of public opinion toward and arguments over Iraq.<sup>11</sup>

#### THEORIZING THE ARAB PUBLIC SPHERE

As a historical trauma and an ongoing issue about which endless argument seemed possible, Iraq served as the focal point for the emergence of an issue-specific transnational Arab public sphere. It is not obvious that Iraq should have been such a vehicle. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait shattered Arab norms against inter-Arab warfare, the dissension at the Cairo Summit of 1990 decimated the official Arab order, resentments and hatreds were generated by the Kuwaiti expulsion of Palestinians and Jordanians, and the intense divisions between popular support for Iraq and official support for the coalition in many Arab states exacerbated political and social cleavages. The Gulf war suggested Arab disunity and division rather than a resurgent Arab identity. The collective trauma of the war, and the failure of the Arab order to deal with it, opened up the terrain for public argument. As Kanan Makiya, generally a fierce critic of Arab political discourse, noted in 1995, "Individuals are stepping into the resulting vacuum . . . to write, question, and think as they never have before."<sup>12</sup>

The public sphere refers to those sites of communication within a society in which members of an identifiable public discuss matters of collective concern before an imagined audience.<sup>13</sup> In contrast to the more generic concept of public opinion, which could mean anything from the distribution of views through society to the outcome of opinion surveys, the public sphere should be understood more specifically in terms of public arguments and debates. Rather than positing the existence of a single public sphere, it makes more sense to conceive of multiple public spheres that emerge around particular issues and in various settings. This public sphere concept, originally developed in Jurgen Habermas's interpretation of bourgeois European society, offers uniquely useful ways to think about non-Western and even nondemocratic societies. Separating the specific dimension of public argument before an imagined common audience about issues of shared concern, from the more general concept of public opinion and from specific democratic institutions, allows us to analyze the complex formation and articulation of public opinion even under the conditions of state repression common in the Arab world. Transnational public spheres lack direct mechanisms by which to translate even a strong public consensus into policy outcomes, as envisioned in Habermas's two-track conception of modern democratic systems, but the weakness of these transmission mechanisms does not imply the absence of a public sphere itself.<sup>14</sup> The argument presented below demonstrates a range of more indirect, more tentative, and yet very real pathways by which the public sphere can affect political behavior and political outcomes.

Still, many would dispute the existence of a public sphere within Arab societies because of the authoritarian nature of Arab governments and their rigid control

over the media and public discourse. The assumption that Arab and Islamic societies, by their nature, lack any public sphere within which to publicly debate and discuss political issues seriously misrepresents these societies. The relatively unique transnational dimension of Arab public spheres has long and deep roots. In contrast to the wider international system, where the networks of non-state actors, global dialogues, and globalized media associated with globalization represent a novel development, the Arab world has decades of experience with political argumentation at the transnational level.<sup>15</sup> Precisely because of the relative closure of domestic public spheres, along with the sense of collective identity born out of the Ottoman and Islamic experience, Arabs have long turned to the transnational level for political debate. Since at least the 1950s, it has been a given of Arab politics that all states must justify and explain their behavior before an actively engaged public sphere made of states, political parties, movements, and intellectuals claiming a shared Arab identity and hence the right to an opinion on matters of collective Arab concern.<sup>16</sup> The combination of tightly controlled domestic public spheres and a less constrained transnational public sphere, along with a strongly held political identity transcending state borders, gave particular resonance to Arabist public arguments. In line with Bohman's conception of a cosmopolitan public, this Arabist public sphere produces opinion that is "made known and recognized in such a way that even the supreme political authorities of the state cannot avoid acknowledging them."<sup>17</sup> What defines the existence of an Arab public sphere is precisely the fact that self-identified Arabs do in fact address and invoke an Arab public, via media that reach the prospective members of the public, about matters collectively defined as of common interest. As James Bohman puts it, "this concern of the public for the existence of the public sphere defines a public *qua* public."<sup>18</sup>

A second common objection is that the absence of public opinion data means that public opinion cannot be known other than through its violent expression in the streets. As John Zaller asks, "if the public had an opinion and there was no pollster around to measure it, would public opinion exist?"<sup>19</sup> This is a problem, but not as significant as many believe. Indeed, critical theorists point to the distorting effect of public opinion polls, which privilege the less engaged over the more engaged and which can be readily manipulated through sampling bias, word choice, and other methodologies.<sup>20</sup> Rather than an obviously fatal weakness, the limited use of public opinion polling in the Arab world empowers the public sphere by prioritizing discourse over measures of mass attitudes. Public opinion research in the United States has consistently shown the importance of elite discourse for shaping mass attitudes.<sup>21</sup> Elite public opinion can clearly be seen in the spirited, engaged political discourse in a transnational Arab public sphere. Indeed, the absence of regular public opinion polls gives more power to this public sphere, as it becomes the primary, if not the only, source of information for Arabs about the beliefs of other Arabs.

A third objection to the application of the concept of the public sphere lies in the quality of political discourse. Major Arab intellectuals such as Burhan Ghalyoun and Mohammed Abed al-Jabiri, no less than Western critics, detail the deficiencies of Arab political discourse, particularly the subversion of rational-critical discourse by confrontational clashes of rigid ideologies and an avoidance of self-criticism.<sup>22</sup> Inherent in these internal critiques, however, is the assumption of the potential to transcend the deficient practice of dialogue through developing the conditions for rational-critical discourse. Furthermore, the distinctiveness of the corruption of Arab discourse should not be overdrawn. After all, Habermas's critical analysis of the public sphere precisely emphasized the deterioration of public discourse in Western societies. While Arab states and actors engage in more than their share of name-calling, propaganda, deceptive claims, and blatant lies, few honest observers of American politics would find this exceptional. With a healthy cynicism bred by long experience of official propaganda, Arabs regularly draw sophisticated inferences from even tightly controlled official media. As Robert Fisk cynically notes, "Arabs have long realized that the action taken by their governments is in exactly inverse proportion to their words."<sup>23</sup> 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.

Finally, many object to the content of Arab discourse, specifically its anti-American and anti-Semitic rhetoric and frequent resort to conspiracy theories. It is crucial for an understanding of the Arab public sphere to recognize that in its self-conception it is a subordinate, dominated counterpublic.<sup>24</sup> 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. Arab publics define a collective identity in part against this sense of subordination and exclusion from a globalizing and universalizing Western public. Following James Scott's subtle analysis of the rhetorical practices of the dominated, it should not be surprising when Arab speakers aim for precisely the areas most likely to outrage the powerful—whether outrageously anti-Semitic rhetoric, rhetorical assaults on Western ideals of democracy, or emotional rhetoric about murdered Iraqi babies.<sup>25</sup>

The important question is therefore not whether Arab public opinion exists or whether it can be expressed but rather *how it matters*. Arab leaders do pay close attention to public opinion: recent Jordanian governments have relied on regular, private public opinion polling; Egypt's Hosni Mubarak keeps a vigilant eye on public opinion in shaping his foreign policy; Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia has pointedly aligned himself with public opinion; even Hafez al-Asad made a point of maintaining close contact with trends in Syrian public opinion.<sup>26</sup> In the next section, I detail the development of the Arab public sphere; in the following three sections, I demonstrate that Arab states interact with this public

sphere in complex ways that go far beyond any conception of the Arab street as something to be feared, controlled, manipulated, or ignored.

#### STRUCTURAL CHANGE IN THE ARAB PUBLIC SPHERE

Successive transformations of public spheres have shaped the context of Arab politics, from the radical pan-Arabist radio broadcasting of the 1950s, to the Saudi-dominated conservative television and newspaper public sphere of the 1980s, to the new media of the late 1990s. During the 1950s, the political radio broadcasting begun by Egypt's Gamal Abd al-Nasser and imitated by his rivals allowed pan-Arab movements to fundamentally challenge the legitimacy of relatively new Arab states. As these states became more institutionalized, the locus of power shifted to national capitals, and borders became less penetrable. This coincided with the decline of Arabism brought on by the catastrophic defeat of the key Arab states by Israel in the 1967 war. In the 1970s, Saudi Arabia used its dramatically increased oil wealth to establish a dominant position over much of the Arab press and electronic media. Prior to the satellite revolution, television broadcasting, which required greater capital expenditure and proved far less suitable to political mobilization, helped concentrate media power in states. In the 1990s, in the course of tentative liberalization processes in a number of Arab states, national public spheres of varying openness emerged, which promoted debates about domestic issues and encouraged national identities, diminishing the appeal of the transnational public sphere.

By the 1990s, then, the Arabist public sphere seemed to have been conclusively downgraded by the combined impact of the Gulf war, the peace process, and the seemingly inexorable concentration of state power.<sup>27</sup> As recently as the 1990-91 Gulf war, Arab audiences primarily turned to foreign radio broadcasts, especially the BBC and Radio Monte Carlo, for information rather than to any domestic or pan-Arab sources, while only high-ranking elites and wealthy businessmen in luxury hotels had access to CNN.<sup>28</sup> The reversal of this trend in the past five years has facilitated a return to transnational politics in the Arab world, with mobilized Arab opinion fiercely debating the Iraq sanctions, the Palestinian cause, economic reform and democratization, and Islamism.<sup>29</sup>

Just as radio broadcasting transformed the potential for Arab political action in the 1950s by bringing Arabist political speech directly to the increasingly mobilized masses, new technologies have recast the repertoire of political action in the 1990s by restoring the capacity for regional debate.<sup>30</sup> Crucially, where Voice of the Arabs, the revolutionary Egyptian radio service of the 1950s, directly served the interests of a powerful state, the key new media tend to be only indirectly linked to states (*al-Hayat* is owned by a Saudi prince but run by Lebanese newspaper veterans; *al-Jazeera* was established by the ruler of Qatar but run by BBC-trained professionals). While these media are commercial, driven more by market

share than by ideology, the structural effect is to create a transnational media with a common discourse defining issues as shared Arab issues that demand shared Arab solutions.<sup>31</sup> While many observers have been excited by the democratizing prospects of the new media in the Arab world, others worry that

the new Arab media helps coalesce feelings of resentment against Israel. . . . Broadcasters are seeking to build as broad a regional audience for their programming as they can, and outrage over the way Palestinians are treated is a consensus builder in a region which is split over the treatment of Iraq.<sup>32</sup>

Technology also helped the Arabist press develop into a major forum for inter-Arab discussion and debate.<sup>33</sup> 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. As Jon Anderson and Dale Eickelman note, these online Arab newspapers “collectively constitute a new community of communication that is transnational, open to more participants, and interactive in a way that traditional broadcasting has not been.”<sup>34</sup> 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.

These new Arab media have created a rich information environment that directly challenges the state-controlled domestic media. For example, while most Jordanians continue to buy the state-owned *al-Rai* for its wedding and death announcements, most prefer satellite television for political news and debates, particularly since the application of the restrictive 1997 Press and Publications Law crippled what had for a short time been a vibrant domestic public sphere.<sup>35</sup> Those newspapers and stations that were perceived as independent of state control and that adopted an Arabist perspective tended to stand out the most. Thus, the Palestinian-owned *al-Quds al-Arabi* stood out from the Saudi-owned *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, and *Al-Jazeera* stood out from MBC and Orbit, its larger and better-financed competitors. *Al-Quds al-Arabi* and *al-Jazeera*, each free of Saudi control, attained prominence by concentrating on the issues of central concern to the Arabist discourse—Palestine; Arab unity; the demand for and absence of democracy in the Arab world; and the sanctions on Iraq—and by their focus sharpened the Arab response to these common concerns. It is quite striking that Arabist debates have coalesced around a position contrary to that of Saudi Arabia, despite the latter’s enormous investment in owning and controlling Arab news outlets.

Contrary to widespread perceptions and criticisms, no single, monolithic discourse has dominated this Arabist media. The editorial content of *al-Quds al-Arabi* and *al-Hayat*, the two most important pan-Arab newspapers, both covered Iraq heavily but offered sharply different approaches. Between January 1999 and June 2002, *Al-Quds al-Arabi* ran no fewer than 391 editorials primarily about

Iraq, while *al-Hayat* published at least 265.<sup>36</sup> This is an average of more than 15 essays a month in the two papers and more than 7 percent of all editorial content, and it suggests the intensity of focus on the Iraq issue—only the Palestinian situation received slightly more coverage. Where attention to Iraq in the American media tended to directly follow political crises, these two papers published some 227 editorials on Iraq in 1999, a year with very few significant crises. A total of 158 different writers from eighteen different countries (as well as Kurds and self-described “Arabs”) contributed essays to the two papers in this period. A wide range of leading Iraqi intellectuals and opposition figures contributed, but writers of all nationalities dealt with Iraq as an Arab rather than as a narrowly Iraqi issue.

*Al-Quds al-Arabi* adopted a position highly critical of the sanctions and American policy in the region, with more than 90 unsigned editorials from 1999 to 2001 presenting a coherent vision of an urgent Arab problem in Iraq. It published numerous Iraqi opposition figures, however; regularly debated possible post-Saddam futures; and rarely hesitated to criticize Saddam Hussein. The paper’s strongest supporters of Iraq included Palestinians, Sudanese, Syrians, and self-identified Arabs, who always discussed Iraq within a wider Arab context, conveying the impression of a popular Arabist consensus. *Al-Hayat*, by contrast, approached the Iraqi issue from a more international perspective, conveying the impression of a divided Arab public by publishing essays that ranged from strong critics to strong supporters of the sanctions. The editors were far more ambivalent about the Iraqi situation, despised Saddam Hussein (the chief editor once wrote that Saddam was personally responsible for every problem in the Arab world for the past twenty years<sup>37</sup>), and were less reflexively suspicious of the United States. Over time, however, the editorial line grew increasingly skeptical about American policy and concerned about Iraqi suffering. The commentary by its single most prolific writer on Iraq, the New York–based UN correspondent Ragheda Dergham, balanced a tough-minded disgust with the Iraqi regime with sharp criticism of the inaction of Arab states and of American manipulation of the Security Council. Its most prolific Iraqi writer, Ghassan Attiyeh, wrote incisively but critically about the Iraqi opposition. As the most prestigious Arabist newspaper, *al-Hayat* sought the center of the Arab political spectrum while attracting many leading political and intellectual figures. *Al-Hayat* regularly published the fiercely anti-Saddam Kuwaiti Mohammed al-Rumayhi, alongside Iraqi opposition figures, Madeleine Albright alongside Edward Said, and prominent Egyptian, Lebanese, and Palestinian intellectuals of all persuasions.

Major national newspapers also contributed to this print public sphere, especially well-established newspapers such as Egypt’s *al-Ahram*. Arab newspapers typically reprinted essays by important figures originally published in national newspapers so that an essay by Mohammed Sid Ahmed or Gamil Mattar originally published in *al-Ahram* or *al-Sharq al-Awsat* received wide distribution in national and transnational newspapers throughout the Arab world. *Al-Zaman*, run

by Iraqi dissident Saad al-Bazzaz out of Paris, focused even more intensely on Iraqi issues, publishing wide-ranging arguments among opposition intellectuals alongside columns by major Arab intellectuals such as Hassan Hanafi. Various factions of the Iraqi opposition published a bewildering variety of newspapers, including *al-Mutamar*, published by the Iraqi National Congress, but for the most part these papers reached a very limited audience.<sup>38</sup>

This print public must be put in perspective, however, alongside the enormous impact of the emergence of Arab satellite television broadcasting, especially the Qatari station *al-Jazeera*. Qusai Darwish contends that the establishment of *al-Jazeera* in 1996 represents a definitive event in Arab history.<sup>39</sup> *Al-Jazeera* self-consciously sought to create an Arabist forum where a regional audience could see programs “challenging officials from around the region to explain their policies to the public and defend them against criticism.”<sup>40</sup> These open debates on controversial topics led virtually every Arab government—as well as the United States—to lodge complaints: *Al-Jazeera* angered Arabists by allowing prominent Israelis onto its programs, Jordanians by allowing criticism of the Hashemite monarchy, Egyptians by allowing interviews with dissident Islamists, Islamists by allowing feminists to question interpretations of the Quran, Saudis and Kuwaitis by allowing criticism of their behavior toward Iraq, Iraq by allowing criticism of its refusal to comply with the UN resolutions, and so on.<sup>41</sup> *Al-Jazeera* worked within, while reshaping, the dominant Arab narrative frames both by reporting events from an Arab perspective and by ensuring that voices from all parts of the Arab world could engage in direct dialogues.<sup>42</sup>

*Al-Jazeera* covered Iraq extremely heavily, defining it as a core Arab issue by paying regular attention to the human suffering in the country as well as to the various crises and allowing a regular voice to Iraqi officials, which the official television in many Arab states denied. Its openly outraged coverage of the December 1998 Desert Fox bombing campaign was the key event that launched it as the most important Arab television station, and its coverage, in turn, helped to drive Arab protests through imitation effects.<sup>43</sup> Its coverage of the second Palestinian Intifada in 2000 galvanized Arab politics even more, with the repeatedly broadcast image of the young Mohammed al-Dura being shot by Israeli troops defining the shared Arab experience of the crisis. An October 1999 survey in the Palestinian Authority found that 32.8 percent of Palestinians “watched and trusted” *al-Jazeera*—the most of any media outlet—compared to only 1.4 percent who said the same about CNN.<sup>44</sup> After September 11, 2001, *al-Jazeera* became even more central to Arab politics with its exclusive access to al-Qaeda leaders and its refusal to adopt the American perspective on events. The public pressure placed on *al-Jazeera* by the Bush administration only increased its popularity and reputation for importance and independence.

While communications technology played an obvious role in facilitating the reemergence of an Arab public sphere, it is important not to confuse the political

public sphere with the technology that makes it possible. Public spheres are created by political action, in which actors argue before an audience about issues of collective concern. The rollback of liberalization, state repression, and tighter control over national media in the mid-1990s helped create the market for *al-Jazeera* by displacing public argument into the transnational arena. Denied the opportunity to debate matters of public concern at home, Arabs turned to the new media. For example, the sensation in Jordan in early 2000 over a vitriolic debate on *al-Jazeera* between opposition figure Layth Shubaylat and regime defender Abd al-Raouf al-Rawabdeh was a testament to the dramatic decline of the Jordanian public sphere; only a few years earlier, in more liberal times, Shubaylat and Rawabdeh could have easily been heard publicly arguing in Amman.

New satellite technology made *al-Jazeera* possible, but it neither guaranteed an audience nor explained the prominence of political commentary, talk shows, and pan-Arab news on the station. Where other Arab satellite stations concentrated on belly dancing, music videos, and soap operas, *Al-Jazeera* insisted on the centrality of politics. Television coverage played an important role in establishing the suffering of Iraqis as a dominant mental image for most Arabs. According to Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who famously admitted to watching *al-Jazeera* more often than Yemeni television, “it is very sad that scenes of misery and suffering of Iraqi children, elderly persons and women which were caused by sanctions are shown on television . . . which makes it very hard to keep quiet.”<sup>45</sup> Faisal al-Kasim, host of a popular program on *al-Jazeera*, notes, “It is said that *Al-Jazeera* is exerting political pressure on the decision-makers of the Arab world. This is true, but only indirectly. . . . We reported on the situation, with free and provocative reports on the issue.”<sup>46</sup> The talk-show format of *al-Jazeera*’s political coverage complicates the common argument that television creates a passive and easily manipulated audience. While this was true of the state broadcasting monopolies, with their endless parade of regime officials greeting foreign visitors at the airport, the political talk shows spark energetic arguments among viewers and seem to be encouraging critical argument.

#### *Deterritorializing the Arab Public Sphere*

The public for satellite stations and the pan-Arab press resides throughout Europe and the United States, in addition to the Middle East. Arabs outside the Middle East now actively participate in Arabist debates. For instance, a random sample of letters to *al-Quds al-Arabi* (242 letters published on fifty-eight different days from 2001 to 2002) reveals that 68 percent were sent from European countries and the United States. Writers for these newspapers live in almost every European country and the United States, as well as almost every Arab country. *Al-Jazeera* broadcasts reach a large Arab audience in Europe and the United States as well as in the Middle East. This deterritorialization of the Arab public sphere sug-

gests a genuinely new dimension, as extensive diaspora networks can and do directly participate in the political debates of their homelands. Political opposition groups in exile, for their part, have made dramatic use of the new media possibilities in their struggles against closed societies, as with Mohammed al-Mas'ari's Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights use of fax transmissions from his base in London into Saudi Arabia.<sup>47</sup> The Iraqi opposition in exile in Europe and the United States is unquestionably better represented in this new Arab media than it is inside Iraq.

The parallel development of transnational Islamist public spheres in the 1990s deeply shaped this new Arab public sphere. Despite the historic conflicts between Arabist and Islamist groups over political goals, normative ideals, and even the terms of rhetorical argument, in the 1990s the two movements increasingly intertwined in a common opposition discourse: domestically, they protested repression and called for increased public freedoms, while drawing attention to corruption and economic mismanagement; in foreign policy, they attacked the peace process with Israel, subservience to the United States, and the ineffectiveness of official Arab institutions such as the Arab League. Iraq played a pivotal role in the articulation of this working alliance, as the Gulf war represented one of the first moments of true mass mobilization for Islamist movements around the world.<sup>48</sup> 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. A more perfect vehicle for Arabist-Islamist opposition agreement 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.

The construction of Iraq as an Islamist issue merits some attention since little prior sympathy existed between Baathi Iraq and Islamist movements, given Saddam Hussein's aggressively secular regime and his war against Khomeini's Islamic revolution. Prior to 1990, the Saudi regime enjoyed a near-monopoly position among Sunni Islamist movements due to its heavy patronage and financial support, and it expected to translate that dominant position into Islamic support for its defense against Iraq. Islamist groups initially split on the appropriate response to the invasion of Kuwait; the Palestinian Hamas, which depended heavily on Saudi support, initially took a relatively moderate position. However, after the United States deployed in Saudi Arabia in preparation for the war against Iraq in 1990, many Islamists, including most famously Osama bin Laden, openly criticized the Saudi decision to allow foreign troops to be based near the holy sites of Mecca and Medina.<sup>49</sup> This criticism tapped into a latent resentment of the Wahabi peculiarities of Saudi Islamism and the Kingdom's conservative, pro-Western foreign policies. To the shock and horror of a Saudi regime that had invested heavily in creating transnational Islamist networks, the Islamist political organizations took leading roles in opposing the coalition war against Iraq.<sup>50</sup>

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 Charles Hirschkind notes, the Islamist public of sermons and underground cassettes “reveals a more marked supranational focus, evident . . . in the considerable attention given within sermons to the plight of Muslims worldwide.”<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, it rarely mattered in this commentary that a majority of Iraq’s Muslims were Shiite rather than Sunni. For Islamists, Iraqi suffering fit well into its master narrative of American hegemonic aspirations; double standards; hostility to Arabs and Islam; support of Israel; hostility toward Iran, the Sudan, and Libya; and failure to defend Bosnian Muslims or Chechens.<sup>52</sup> 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. Major Islamist political and intellectual figures routinely spoke out against the sanctions and criticized American policy toward Iraq, as when Hizbollah’s leading intellectual, Mohammed Fadlallah, declared it an Islamic responsibility to not cooperate with an American attack on Iraq.<sup>53</sup> Speaking out on behalf of Iraq, visiting Baghdad, or sending caravans of humanitarian assistance became a very good way for a leader to enhance his or her Islamist credentials.

#### THE ARAB STREET

It is against this complex and rich public sphere that the conception of the “Arab street” as a violent, impassioned, unpredictable force must be judged. Satellite television, editorial pages, and salon discussions are rather less familiar than are scenes of enraged Arab masses shouting anti-Israel slogans, clashing with riot police, and burning American flags. The priority given to public discourse contrasts sharply with the dominant image of enraged masses. The conventional understanding of the Arab street poses Arab public opinion as little more than a threshold constraint on otherwise wholly self-interested Arab regimes. The rising of the Arab street seems like a natural, random occurrence, divorced from political rationality. The content of political speech is important only as a barometer of the likelihood of a mass public explosion. Arab leaders in this model need to take into account the risk of violent reaction of an otherwise inarticulate mass public if they cross this threshold. When mobs fail to rampage, most analysts feel safe in concluding that Arab public opinion has accepted something, no matter the outpouring of critical commentary in the press.<sup>54</sup> Conversely, mass demonstrations, such as the response to the Israeli-Palestinian crisis of October 2000, indicate that the

threshold has been crossed and leaders must adjust their policies, at least temporarily.<sup>55</sup> This model can be seen in action when analysts posit that Arab public opinion constrains Arab cooperation on regime change; though these leaders want Saddam gone, they see public support for his removal as a threshold likely to trigger the street, and hence they forego this policy.<sup>56</sup> As long as Arab regimes can keep popular discontent below the threshold of an explosion, then, they enjoy near-complete freedom of action. This gives them great incentive to control the street in their own self-interest. Reflecting such fears, the Jordanian government violently suppressed pro-Iraqi demonstrations in the summer of 1996 and banned all public rallies during the crises of 1998. The Palestinian Authority prevented expressions of sympathy with Iraq in November 1998, after demonstrations in February 1998 caused Arafat's government political trouble. It is this conception of the Arab street that allows observers to dismiss the value of engaging in a dialogue. Why talk to an unreasoning mob that only respects force and should be controlled with overwhelming displays of power rather than by reason?<sup>57</sup>

Arab opposition leaders, recognizing the limited scope allowed them for influencing policy, do themselves use the language of the street: "life is gradually beginning to return to the Arab street. . . . The mass movement forms great pressure on Arab governments which would prefer to shirk their ethical and national responsibilities."<sup>58</sup> Opposition politicians attempt to influence leaders by threatening popular uprisings. For example, in January 1998, the popular Jordanian Islamist figure Layth Shubaylat warned that "anyone who contemplates Jordan taking part in a military offensive against Iraq should take into account the Jordanian peoples' reaction."<sup>59</sup> With few other resources with which to put pressure on authoritarian leaders, opposition forces tend to place their hopes in the Arab street, just as leaders locate their fears in it.<sup>60</sup> Arabists routinely celebrate outbursts by the street as evidence of widespread public support for their views, even though they do not reduce the public sphere to these outbursts. As Bilal al-Hassan describes the linkages, "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."<sup>61</sup> Regardless of the reality of such a threshold, it becomes politically real when leaders adjust their behavior based on their anticipation of such a reaction.

This model of the street is not wrong so much as it is radically incomplete. Extending analysis beyond the Arab street is not meant to downplay the significance of the millions of Arabs who have marched in support of Iraq. While these mass mobilizations mattered, they are not the only, or even necessarily the best, indicator of Arab public opinion. The model rests on an assumption of the essential irrationality, and resistance to change, of Arab opinion that is indefensible in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. The prominence of the Arab street model derives in part from the experience of the 1950s and 1960s, when large-scale mass mobilization driven by transnational radio broadcasting domi-

nated political life, and the Arab street more closely approximated this conception. Memories of this revolutionary period still inform Arab discourse about an Arab nation unified in thoughts and concerns but artificially divided by state borders. Indeed, as one critic complained, Arabists often “pretend that there is just one Arab street . . . the same street in Baghdad as in Cairo . . . and that the street is necessarily with them, and they . . . speak for it.”<sup>62</sup>

But Arab analysts generally view this conception of the Arab street as inadequate and the days of Nasserism long past. They conceive of the Arab street more broadly, encompassing the informal sites of political discussion as well as the new media.<sup>63</sup> For Mustafa al-Faqi, the street “is the true expression of public opinion because it presents a real view of the thoughts of the average man.”<sup>64</sup> Traditionally, these informal sites inhabit a place between the public and the private: coffeeshouses in popular quarters, tribal *diwaniyat* (salons), mosques, and other places where groups of (primarily) men gather. These tend to be sites of unrestrained argument and discussion of public issues, through which information and interpretive frames are spread through society. Such a rich anthropological reading of the micro-processes by which public opinion forms at the local level belies the idea of Arab public opinion as either inarticulate or as a single, unitary force. In the following two sections, I present a complex synthesis of strategic and constitutive models to explain the role of public spheres in inter-Arab politics.

#### STRATEGIC POLITICIANS AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Arabist critics of Arab regimes, like non-Arab critics, generally do not consider them to be especially responsive to public opinion.<sup>65</sup> Given the absence of direct mechanisms by which the public sphere might influence policy that was noted above, how does the public sphere matter? To demonstrate that Arab public opinion is more than “the street,” it is necessary to lay out alternative pathways of influence and to show that they have produced outcomes different than would be expected in the absence of such a public sphere. To anticipate the argument, the Arab public sphere matters because public rhetoric, in an arena to which all expect others to be attentive, shapes the expectations and norms with which strategic actors operate. Arab states typically attempt to assert Arab leadership through demonstrations of effective support for popular causes. Even the most self-interested, power-seeking Arab leader must engage with Arabist discourse to generate power. Seeking power, therefore, requires careful attention to trends in Arab opinion. When the Arab public consensus shifts, rational leaders who wish to be politically successful must respond. If it were the case 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 public sphere develops independently of the preferences of states.

Competing attempts to establish leadership within a shared legitimation framework often led to *outbidding* since each leader hopes to be seen as the most

supportive of the Palestinians or the Iraqi people, in order to reap the benefits. The competitive pressures to demonstrate support for Arabist causes create powerful tendencies toward bandwagons and cascades, as I discuss in more detail below.

Direct cross-border rhetoric challenging the Arabist credentials of other leaders, putting pressure on rivals from below by accusing them before their own publics of being insufficiently Arabist, often accompanied these outbidding processes. During the 1950s, Egypt's Gamal Abd al-Nasser proved himself a master in using radio broadcasting to generate political support around the Arab world. Saddam Hussein repeatedly attempted to duplicate Nasser's success, with remarkably little effectiveness. For example, in January 1999, Iraq called for the Arab street to rise up against rulers that continued to support the sanctions. The chief editor of Egypt's news service responded,

Don't labor under the illusion that unleashing your media apparatus . . . would get you off the hook. . . . The sympathy and outrage felt by the Arab street in the wake of the US-British bombings were motivated by support for the Iraqi people. . . . Neither this anger or sympathy was meant to support you.<sup>66</sup>

In October 2000, Iraq again called for the masses to rise up against the Arab regimes:

Some Arab rulers have again submitted to the will of the enemies of the Arab nation and disregarded the Arab masses. . . . We urge the masses of our nation . . . to undertake the responsibility of exposing those who betrayed the nation . . . to stage a revolution and punish the traitorous rulers.<sup>67</sup>

While it is admittedly hard to imagine how such an argument could fail to persuade said traitorous rulers, most remained curiously unmoved. Such competitive outbidding has become far less common in recent decades, and Iraq's violent rhetorical attacks on other Arab state have been generally counterproductive. The limited success of such appeals to the Arab street, compared to the greater impact of less direct engagement with Arab public spheres, is quite suggestive of the diminishing relevance of "street" conceptions of public opinion.

Arab leaders have often used a strategy of "tied hands," claiming to be constrained by a powerful domestic audience in order to generate otherwise limited international power.<sup>68</sup> Arab leaders would argue that they could not adopt certain policies (normalization with Israel, regime change in Iraq) because of their fear of domestic political reaction. An Arab government in a weak position might be able to resist American pressure more effectively by warning of the likely Islamist alternative to their own regime if the street erupted. Jon Alterman claims, for example, that "in private discussions with US government officials . . . regional leaders frequently cited public opinion concerns to explain their reluctance publicly to support the use of force against Iraq."<sup>69</sup> Frequent use of this strategy has led

to diminishing returns, however, and has had the perverse consequence of undermining the power of Arab arguments. Other actors felt justified in discounting Arab argumentation as cheap talk, strictly for local consumption. As the prominent journalist Salama Nimaat sardonically put it, “there is no need for Washington to address an Arab public opinion which is already totally under control.”<sup>70</sup> The belief that Arab talk was cheap meant that only particularly costly signals could demonstrate credibility. Because sufficiently costly signals would be too risky for most Arab leaders to contemplate (signals such as ending normalization with Israel or allowing military action against it, openly rejecting the sanctions on Iraq) and outside actors dismiss the content of their speech as mere rhetoric, there is almost no way for Arab states to be taken seriously. Raising the fear of the Arab street therefore became the only way for Arab leaders to generate any leverage in international bargaining.

The combination of a vocal but institutionally weak public sphere and tight strategic constraints on state action created ideal conditions for leaders to engage in what I call *rhetorical free riding*: adopting rhetoric in line with a public consensus without taking action in line with the rhetoric. Arab leaders, most of whom privately preferred to keep Iraq weak and even to see Saddam Hussein removed, faced a public consensus strongly hostile to an American-backed regime change. This clear and highly salient public consensus forced even those regimes that longed to be rid of Saddam “to use two voices, one in public and one in private.”<sup>71</sup> Egypt’s policy illustrates this rhetorical free riding with regard to the Arab consensus. Because of its belief that talk was cheap, the United States did not object to what Arabs *said*, as long as they did not violate the sanctions in *practice*.<sup>72</sup> Hoping to claim Arab leadership but bound by strategic dependence on the United States, Egypt adopted increasingly critical public rhetoric about Iraqi suffering to capture Arab public opinion but avoided taking any substantive action favoring Iraq to avoid antagonizing the United States. For example, in one editorial, the semi-official newspaper *al-Ahram* simultaneously called for the Arab League to help the suffering Iraqi people while also urging Iraq to cooperate with UNSCOM.<sup>73</sup> Despite its rhetorical posture, Egypt did virtually nothing on behalf of Iraq during its tenure on the Security Council.<sup>74</sup> Confident that the United States would not actually allow the sanctions to be lifted, they had every incentive to express sympathy for the plight of the Iraqi people and demand that the sanctions be lifted in order to win political points with this public opinion, regardless of their true preferences. Such behavior was widespread. Even as Qatar took the lead as a critic of sanctions, for example, it hosted the largest American naval base in the Middle East. Arab leaders shed tears in public for the Iraqi people and warned the United States against attempting regime change, while in private they told American officials that they supported the sanctions and wanted to see Saddam Hussein removed from power. Such rhetoric seemed costless, but—as I discuss in detail in the next section—it had enormous constitutive power. The rhetoric reinforced the

popular consensus in a recursive, and unintended, fashion, establishing sympathy for the Iraqi people and opposition to the sanctions as a defining Arabist issue. But at the same time, it made it increasingly difficult to explain to a mobilized public why Arab governments continued to enforce sanctions that they ostensibly opposed.

The “embarrassed whisper of protest from Cairo and deafening silence in most other Arab countries” in response to an American cruise missile attack on Iraq in 1996 offers an instructive twist on this logic.<sup>75</sup> Most writers explained this silence in terms of American pressure, but more seemed to be going on. Since Arab leaders had been engaging in rhetorical free riding, winning points with public opinion while publicly falsifying their preferences, the prospects of actual Iraqi victory were far less appealing to these leaders than their public profiles would suggest. The surging Iraqi initiative worried Arab states as much as it emboldened Arab public opinion, leading many Arab regimes to tone down the rhetorical free riding when it seemed to carry real costs.

#### *Constitutive Effects: Shaping Public Expectations*

In sum, strategic interests pushed Arab states to adopt rhetoric in line with the perceived Arab consensus, despite the absence of any institutionalized mechanisms—either domestic or international—to translate this public discourse into concrete political outcomes. States competed to position themselves relative to this consensus, regardless of their “real” preferences about outcomes in Iraq. Their rhetoric, in turn, consolidated that consensus in recursive fashion. This consensus then established the strategic and normative terrain that shaped the expected political payoffs of different concrete policy choices. 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.”<sup>76</sup> Given the changes in the Arab public sphere described above, 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.”<sup>77</sup> This section therefore considers the constitutive potential of this increasing public component of politics. Ironically, the same observers who readily dismiss the Arab street on strategic grounds tend to be the most concerned with the ways in which hostile Arab media impart anti-American and anti-Israeli worldviews.

The public sphere had a constitutive impact by establishing the base expectations and normative positions 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. 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, the 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 a 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 emerging public consensus reshaped the expectations held by leaders about what kinds of arguments would be positively received and about what other states were likely to do.

This argument rests on a theoretical proposition drawn from the social psychology literature and developed by Timur Kuran: 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 it, and the identity of those supporting each position.<sup>78</sup> 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 the social environment. The UAE, for example, came to be viewed as brave and authentically Arab, while the Arabist public increasingly vilified Kuwait as selfish and vindictive. These cues about the social environment—the perception of consensus—then shape 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.”<sup>79</sup> 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.

The public consensus can affect the behavior of Arab states, therefore, by shaping their expectations about what positions will prove politically popular. Timur Kuran hypothesizes that the greater the portion of other actors that one believes

share a particular preference, the more likely one is to publicly falsify and pretend to share that preference, if not actually adopt it. Once the perceived public consensus shifts, large numbers of actors may dramatically and quickly change their behavior as it becomes acceptable for them to reveal their true preferences, setting in motion a cascade.<sup>80</sup> This gives particular importance to early movers, whose public actions can reveal the existence of alternative viewpoints and, even more important, can reveal the perceived distribution of opinion by drawing public responses.<sup>81</sup> If the early mover receives acclaim or political benefits, and escapes serious punishment, this could then signal to others that it is safe—or even profitable—to voice these views; to capture the gains, however, they need to move quickly in order to stand out from the expected herd. The cascade effect that follows could then lead not only those who genuinely hold those views to reveal them publicly but also those who do not hold that belief to adopt it in public in order to join the new perceived consensus.

This suggests a strategic logic of manipulating the *perception* of beliefs as an integral part of affecting international outcomes. By generating the perception that all Arabs oppose the sanctions, the Iraqi regime aimed to spark a self-fulfilling cascade, “through which expressed perceptions trigger chains of individual responses that make these perceptions appear increasingly plausible through their rising availability in public discourse.”<sup>82</sup> Iraq hosted countless “popular conferences” for foreign activists and scholars and trade shows for products that it could not yet legally buy and heavily publicized every visit by a foreign businessman or politician, every statement of support by a foreign government, every demonstration against the sanctions in a foreign or Arab country, and every criticism of the sanctions in the UN. Because it is virtually impossible to anticipate a tipping point in a complex environment, the strategic imperative is toward excess—to attempt to swamp the system with information in order to generate the impression of significant changes.

A good example of this tipping phenomenon can be seen in the airplanes challenge of autumn 2000. Several attempts throughout the 1990s to challenge the ban on civilian flights to Baghdad had gone nowhere, but by 2000 the normative environment had changed dramatically. On 17 August, Iraq announced the reopening of its airport for the first time since the Gulf war, and two days later a Russian flight carrying humanitarian supplies landed in Baghdad. After a furious but inconclusive debate in the Security Council about whether such flights violated the sanctions, France became the second state to challenge the flight ban on 22 September. On 27 September, Jordan became the first Arab state to send a humanitarian (to the extent that sending politicians and journalists is a humanitarian contribution!) flight to Baghdad. As soon as it had done so, to tremendous popular acclaim and without any evident American punishment, other Arab states rushed to follow suit. Sending airplanes of humanitarian supplies to Baghdad could win popular acclaim and deflect widespread public fury over the perceived failure of

the Arab order to act in Palestine or against the sanctions. The strategic imperative was to act quickly, before the flights became routine, and if that failed, to do something unique in order to stand out. The next day, Yemen sent a flight, followed by Morocco (4 October, “the first North African flight”), the UAE (“the first Gulf flight”), Algeria and Tunisia (6 October), Syria (8 October), Egypt (10 October), Sudan and Lebanon (13 October), and Bahrain (16 October). Exemplifying the second strategy of standing out through novelty, Syria on 11 October became the first Arab state to send a second flight and on 17 October became the first to send a large jet (a Boeing 727). By 2002, flights to Baghdad had become completely normal and routine, where only two years before they had been completely banned.

Sympathetic Arab commentators picked up on any signal they could find of the imminent lifting of sanctions, pushing for ways to shape expectations in such a way as to generate a self-fulfilling prophecy. Opponents of the Iraqi regime recognized this strategy and attempted to deflate such expectations by asserting that the United States would not allow sanctions to be lifted under any circumstances. Because most Arabs were convinced of the American commitment to inflict harm on Iraq, few questioned that the United States would do anything it could to maintain the sanctions. Iraqi officials openly explained that their strategy was to erode the sanctions from below by encouraging Arabs to stop honoring them since they could never hope to have the sanctions officially lifted by an American-dominated Security Council. At the same time, Arab leaders did not believe that the United States was serious about regime change, especially after it failed to support the 1991 uprisings and allowed its collaborators in a 1996 coup attempt based in the Kurdish areas to be slaughtered by Iraqi forces.<sup>83</sup> This combination—the relative certainty that Saddam would remain in power and that the sanctions would remain no matter what, together with popular unhappiness with the humanitarian and political impact of the sanctions—constituted the ideal environment for leaders to engage in rhetorical free riding.

Finally, under certain conditions, the “boomerang effect,” familiar from studies of human rights and other international norms, took hold. Where a public sphere existed within which actors could effectively pose challenges to political leaders, they could demand that states live up to their own rhetorical positions.<sup>84</sup> Faced with such public challenges, officials find it difficult to back down or deviate from their avowed beliefs. Over time, consistently articulated rhetoric can be internalized. A thriving body of international relations literature considers the conditions under which actors internalize the norms and ideas that they initially adopt for strategic reasons.<sup>85</sup>

These constitutive effects could still be frustrated by actors strong enough and willing to stand against the perceived bandwagon. The veto exercised by Kuwait and Saudi Arabia (and indirectly by the United States) over any Arab gathering that might include Iraq endlessly frustrated Arab public opinion, even among states that had stood against Iraq in the Gulf war. An Iraqi official points out, “we

appreciate the feelings and sympathies we hear expressed . . . by the Arab peoples . . . but the governments are the ones that actually possess the intentions and the ability to do something.”<sup>86</sup>

A brief and non-exhaustive review of efforts at official Arab reconciliation over Iraq illustrates the blockages in the transmission of the public consensus to political outcomes. As early as June 1993, some Gulf newspapers began to call on the GCC “to abandon its obsession with the 1990-91 Gulf crisis and the regime of . . . Saddam Hussein, and to throw its lot with efforts to reunite the Arab world and reconcile with Iraq.”<sup>87</sup> In August 1994, Egypt, the UAE, and Morocco each unsuccessfully sought Saudi and Kuwaiti agreement on reconciliation with Iraq. In December 1994, Bahrain called on Kuwait to be more open to dialogue in the expectation that the Security Council would be easing the sanctions relatively soon.<sup>88</sup> In January 1995, Egypt, stating that it “was very annoyed by the suffering of the Iraqi people resulting from the blockade” and that “there is a common feeling that we must do something,” generated considerable popular excitement by floating the idea of an Arab summit to discuss Iraq’s return to the Arab fold.<sup>89</sup> In October 1995, another UAE initiative for reconciliation with Iraq—“whether the West wants it or not”—met with strong resistance from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait but support from the secretary general of the Arab League, Yemen, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, and Egypt.<sup>90</sup> The UAE’s November 1996 more specific proposal for a route to normalizing Iraqi-Arab relations erupted into yet another major public debate.<sup>91</sup> When the GCC secretariat rejected this call, one Bahraini commentator called its position “damaging to GCC interests and contemptuous of public opinion.”<sup>92</sup> Egypt pointedly refused to invite Iraq to the 1996 summit meeting held to discuss the Israeli elections, and Iraq’s invitation to participate in the Arab summit of October 2000 was contingent on an explicit promise not to raise the divisive issues of the sanctions or its disagreements with Kuwait,<sup>93</sup> and so on. Arab public opinion outside of Kuwait became increasingly unanimous against the sanctions, while Arab states remained sharply divided. Only in the Beirut summit of March 2002, in the context of escalating Palestinian-Israeli violence and aggressive war rhetoric from Washington, did the official Arab order rehabilitate Iraq through Kuwait’s acceptance of an Iraqi nonaggression pledge and a public Saudi embrace.

#### PUBLIC DELIBERATION

Finally, beyond the constitutive effects of strategic politics among states operating within an Arabist consensus, international public deliberation reveals and shapes the development of Arab ideas about the nature of the Iraqi problem and the appropriate response. Arguments about the sanctions allowed Arabs to rebuild the sense of sharing a community of fate, as Iraqi suffering became a potent symbol of the suffering of all Arabs.<sup>94</sup> The influential Sudanese Islamist Abd al-

Wahhab al-Affendi evocatively described the Iraqi issue as “a crisis of the Arab soul [about which] silence is not an option.”<sup>95</sup> The construction of a consensus Arab position involved contentious public political dialogues, however, and in no way existed as some kind of “natural” pre-rational sentiment. There was no single, obvious Arab position about Iraq. The 1990 invasion of Kuwait remained a potent memory, and Iraq continued to potentially threaten neighboring states. On the other hand, the seemingly endless sanctions regime caused massive suffering among the Iraqi people. UN demands that Iraq comply with Security Council resolutions concerning weapons of mass destruction seemed reasonable, except that the Security Council conspicuously failed to put similar pressure on Israel to withdraw from illegally occupied territory or give up its nuclear arsenal. Arabs weighed fear of Iraqi power and anger at the invasion of Kuwait against resentment over double standards, concern for the Iraqi people, and a desire to reconstitute an effective Arab order. For many Arabs, whatever the faults of Saddam Hussein, the sanctions demonstrated the corruption and failure of the existing Arab order and the illegitimacy of most existing Arab regimes—hardly the arguments one would expect if the media were simply controlled by governments.

Arabs were deeply divided over both the nature of the problem in Iraq and the appropriate response but shared a consensus that it was a matter of deep Arab concern about which a collective Arab position *should* exist. These arguments, while bitterly divisive, constituted a public sphere in which Arabs defined themselves as Arabs by the act of participating in the debate.<sup>96</sup> Indeed, by virtue of the ongoing debates in an Arabist public sphere, Iraq stands as one of the few issues about which it can legitimately be said that an Arab public opinion exists. The debates within and across Arab states tapped into and helped to mobilize an Arabist predisposition, a package of political opinions woven together into a coherent collective narrative.<sup>97</sup> Arabists used the sanctions on Iraq as a wedge issue, which seemed to fully embody their juxtaposition of an embattled, divided Arab people, struggling against the United States, Israel, and complicit Arab regimes. This elite-level political struggle drew on, and reinforced, mass beliefs about the suffering of the Iraqi people to which the official Arab order seemed to have no response. The Iraq issue exacerbated the political differences among Arab states while simultaneously helping to reconstitute and mobilize an Arab public critical of the failure of the Arab order to deal with the problem.

Arabs experienced the collapse of Iraqi society under the sanctions both directly and vicariously, through the media as well as through stories from migrant workers (in Egypt and North Africa) and the increasing presence of impoverished Iraqi expatriates in the streets (in Jordan). As the sanctions took hold, Arab travelers and journalists began to report on the drastically declining standard of living in Iraq. Stories of impoverished families selling their possessions, babies dying for lack of medicine or infant formula, and untreated water carrying disease began to appear in the Arab press.

The Iraqi regime encouraged these reports, providing access and information to reporters who spread the news, but this did not minimize the reality of the humanitarian crisis. Particularly vivid images, endlessly repeated, had a defining impact. For example, a televised procession through Baghdad of thousands of taxis with small, baby-sized coffins tied to their roofs, on their way to a symbolic mass burial, is an image that few who saw it could ever forget. This reporting framed the issue around the suffering of the Iraqi people—who were a fellow Arab people, whatever the faults of their leadership—and pushed political differences as well as the memories of the invasion of Kuwait aside. Most Arabs simply could not fathom that anyone could fail to act once they knew about the effect of the sanctions—a widely diffused UNICEF report indicated that some six thousand Iraqi children younger than the age of five died every month due to the sanctions.<sup>98</sup> As awareness of Iraqi suffering increased, to the point that no Arab could convincingly claim to not be aware of it, Arabs became increasingly resistant to any argument that failed to take this suffering as a starting point.

In stark contrast to the “street” conception of a fixed and irrational set of Arab convictions, Arab public opinion toward the Iraq sanctions neither appeared in a natural, unreflective fashion nor remained constant over the decade. It evolved through strategic mobilization, real argumentation under uncertainty, and a potent construction of identity. Genuine concern for the unprecedented humanitarian crisis in an Arab state due to sanctions enforced by other Arab states transcended all other political concerns.

Consensus about the tragedy did not lead to a consensus on the appropriate response, however. The hawkish position, advanced by Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and parts of the Iraqi opposition, initially denied the reality of the humanitarian crisis and subsequently blamed it on Saddam Hussein. The pro-Iraqi position blamed the sanctions and especially the American manipulation of the Security Council, demanding their immediate and unconditional lifting. Most Arabists occupied a middle ground of distaste for Saddam Hussein and his regime, coupled with the conviction that the sanctions were morally indefensible and bereft of any international legitimacy. They opposed American-imposed regime change but were ambivalent about the existing regime. They appealed to the legitimacy of the UN Security Council but were outraged that American manipulations of the council and of the UNSCOM weapons inspections process gave Iraq little hope of ever escaping the sanctions.

This Arab public sphere established the suffering of the Iraqi people as a core component of the shared meaning of Arab identity. Where the dominant form of critique of the sanctions in the West was that “we should not use a policy instrument against them which is both ineffective and immoral,” the dominant form of Arab argumentation was that “we should not support an immoral and self-interested imposition of a policy by them against us.” Arabs constructed the Iraqi sanctions as an Arab problem, which all members of the Arab collective identity

have an interest in solving. Those states or actors that supported the sanctions—especially Kuwait—risked being defined out of the Arab identity. When Egypt or Saudi Arabia failed to criticize the sanctions, it was not just that they had taken an unpopular political position—it was a *non-Arab* position. Political cartoons, which often provide a clear window into the taken-for-granted political assumptions in a public sphere, routinely portrayed pro-sanctions Arab leaders as “America’s Arabs,” or as profiteering hypocrites.

Arabists relentlessly sought to expose state behavior as beholden to financial interests, regime survival interests, or an alliance with the United States. In the typical words of one Arabist critic, “the main concern of Arab regimes is how to best submit to America’s demands.”<sup>99</sup> Such arguments cut to the heart of regime legitimacy by challenging Arab leaders to adopt an authentic Arab position, as defined by the popular public discourse. The latter defined the Arab interest in terms of a particular set of political positions on the basis of which all other positions could be cast as inauthentic and hence illegitimate. If *all Arabs* wanted to end the sanctions, then how could states that enforced them be considered Arab?<sup>100</sup> As Tariq Aziz put it, “all the people of the Arab nation call for lifting the siege. Most Arab governments—with the exception of two governments whom you know—are calling for lifting the siege.”<sup>101</sup> By the mid-1990s, it had become commonplace to assert that the embargo was first and foremost an Arab embargo and that Arab states had the power to end it if they so decided. Abdelaziz al-Saadoun, for example, accused Saudi Arabia of blocking any easing of the sanctions on Iraq because of its interest in keeping oil prices high.<sup>102</sup> Comparing criticisms of the sanctions by non-Arab states to Arab inaction put Arab states to shame. Why did Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez visit Baghdad when Arab heads of state did not, while Italian, French, and Russian planes challenged the sanctions when Arab planes did not? How could Arab governments remain silent when the Arab public sphere was dominated by vocal criticism?<sup>103</sup>

Many Arabs came to believe that the United States would always find a reason to maintain the sanctions, making it irrational for Iraq to cooperate with UNSCOM. This argument was strengthened by American domestic politics, in which hawkish critics of Clinton’s policy forced the administration to publicly argue that sanctions would never be lifted as long as Saddam remained in power. Revelations in January 1999 that the United States and Israel had in fact used UNSCOM to spy on Iraq—just as Iraq had complained—vindicated this narrative. The politicization of the inspections process, therefore, relieved the Arab world of any moral obligation to comply with the sanctions since few believed that Iraqi compliance would be rewarded. If the United States would not allow the Security Council to take yes for an answer and used the UN inspectors to acquire intelligence with which it then could attack Iraq, then why should Iraq cooperate? If the only point of the sanctions was American interests, then why should Arabs honor them?

Iraq actively attempted to mobilize Arab public opinion through the release of dramatic footage of suffering Iraqis, no less than through direct appeals to the Arab masses to rise up against unsympathetic—and hence *non-Arab*—governments. American military attacks against Iraq generally served Iraq's interests by mobilizing a sense of Arab outrage and putting pressure on Arab governments to distance themselves from American policy.<sup>104</sup> Iraq appealed to Arab brotherhood to work to end Iraqi suffering, pointing out the United States' dual standards with regard to Israel, challenging the integrity of UN operations, and calling to rally Arab forces against the West. Iraq argued that its rehabilitation served Arab interests and that the states that insisted on hostility were now keeping Arab ranks divided in the face of pressing external threats. A strong Iraq, they argued, would benefit Arab security against Iran, a perceived threat that weighed heavily in the Gulf, against Israel, and against the United States.<sup>105</sup> Tariq Aziz argued that despite the remaining differences between Arab states, "many say, mostly in secrecy and sometimes in the open: Iraq's absence has humiliated and weakened us; we need Iraq to return and play an effective role in Arab life and affairs."<sup>106</sup>

Kuwait, and to a lesser extent Saudi Arabia, worked diligently to focus attention on Iraq's perfidy rather than on its suffering. With a relatively strong domestic public sphere—including a free-wheeling press, a contentious elected National Assembly, and well-institutionalized *diwaniyya* (salons), along with an understandably deep disagreement with the dominant Arab narrative about Iraq—Kuwait was the Arab state (and society) least affected by the emerging Arab consensus. While the memory of 1990-91 was doubtless sufficient to ensure Kuwaiti hostility toward Iraq, Kuwaitis nonetheless recognized the shifting terrain of the Arab consensus. Aware of the Arab trend, Kuwait lobbied tirelessly on the issue of its prisoners of war, to the extent that the Security Council's 1999 comprehensive review of the Iraq file treated the POW issue as equivalent to the sanctions and weapons of mass destruction. Kuwait's insistence on formal Iraqi recognition and renunciation of any territorial ambitions stymied inter-Arab reconciliation efforts for half a decade. After Iraq did recognize Kuwait, the latter then demanded an official apology and admission of wrongdoing from Saddam Hussein's regime. Kuwaiti writers emphasized the Iraqi threat and rejected efforts to move past the Gulf war and look to the future. Along with the Iraqi opposition, the Kuwaiti writers and journalists were the most vigorous advocates in the Arab public sphere of overthrowing Saddam Hussein and blamed his regime for all the suffering of the Iraqi people. Kuwait aggressively policed public discourse to keep the focus on Saddam's evil. For example, when Qatari TV broadcast a documentary on the effects of the sanctions, Kuwait responded angrily by severing diplomatic ties with its GCC partner. Similarly, Kuwait objected strenuously to an Egyptian documentary on the Gulf war that seemed to suggest some Kuwaiti responsibility for the Iraqi invasion. By the late 1990s, unyielding Kuwaiti rhetoric and policy, which seemed immune to any reasoned argument, had become counterproduc-

tive, isolating Kuwait more than Iraq. Even in Kuwait, however, there were signs of growing unease with the extent of the suffering of the Iraqi people and frustration with the seemingly endless sanctions regime.

The shifting public consensus affected the style of public argument as well. Immediately after the Gulf war, advocates of a hard line toward Iraq had assumed the rightness of their cause and saw little need to justify it. The survival of Saddam Hussein's regime, and the messiness of the end of the war, left them in a difficult position, however. The emerging public sphere consensus forced them to acknowledge the suffering of the Iraqi people. Iraqi opposition groups that publicly supported the sanctions lost credibility and popular support—how could any real Iraqi nationalist support the genocide of his own people? They shifted, therefore, to a line expressing sympathy for what the Iraqi people were suffering *because* of Saddam Hussein. In this argument, well-captured by the Iraqi National Congress slogan “regime change is the pro-Iraqi position,” the sanctions were in the best long-term interest of the Iraqi people because they would eventually remove Saddam. Even Kuwaitis recognized their failure to win this argument and conceded that few Arabs agreed with their diagnosis.<sup>107</sup>

This public sphere should not be described simply as pro-Iraqi, however. Hundreds of articles appeared in the major Arab dailies, written by Iraqi opposition figures and regime sympathizers as well as non-Iraqi Arabs, discussing the possibilities of change in Iraq and proposals for post-Saddam structures. In a poll in the Palestinian areas in February 1998, 94.1 percent supported and sympathized with Iraq in its confrontation with the United States, 72.4 percent because of their sympathy with the Iraqi people and only 28.9 percent because of their support for Saddam Hussein's regime.<sup>108</sup> Yet the Arab public dismissed the Iraqi National Congress because of its American backing; even those Arabs who agreed that Saddam should be removed insisted that this be done by internal Iraqi nationalist forces. Virtually all Arab writers condemned any opposition group that spoke out in favor of American military action against Iraq or in favor of the sanctions. Given the American track record of supporting friendly dictators and opposing popular movements as potentially destabilizing, few Arab liberals felt confident about American promises to create a post-Saddam democracy in Iraq. Active debates with a wide range of opinion about political alternatives such as federalism, democracy, and minority rights regularly appeared, only rarely dominated by a single opinion.

While Arab publics vigorously debated the issue of Iraq, they often avoided sensitive aspects, to the frustration of some critical observers. Embattled Arab liberals, for example, resisted supporting a regime that they considered to be brutally nondemocratic and found the uncritical support for the Iraqi people to be disingenuous. As one prominent Egyptian intellectual argued, the Arab public sphere did the suffering Iraqi people no favors by helping Saddam Hussein stay in power. Rather than confronting this problem, the Arab public sphere simply ignored it,

declining to comment or condemn news reports of atrocities perpetrated by the Iraqi regime. What he called the “dangerous . . . and complete silence of the Arab cultural elite” was maintained in order to avoid breaking up the newly won public consensus or supporting the American case against Iraq.<sup>109</sup> Observing this tendency toward band-wagoning and consensus seeking over critical debates, some liberals dismissed the new media as “spread[ing] more of the same vapid talk.”<sup>110</sup> Thus, enthusiasm for Arab consensus, and fears of strengthening hostile external forces by revealing internal division, sometimes led the Arabist public sphere to avoid difficult and contentious questions.

#### DOMESTIC AND TRANSNATIONAL PUBLIC MOBILIZATION

In this final section, I examine more closely how these public opinions translated into collective action, both within and across Arab states, to demonstrate briefly that the talk was more than just talk. Even large public demonstrations had limited impact on official policies, but they gave Arabs a sense of the possibility of collective action, as well as a sense of renewed membership in a larger Arab identity. Civil society organizations in many Arab countries worked to raise consciousness about Iraqi issues, raising money and goods for humanitarian relief and lobbying to change official policy. Civil society groups generally organized in a national context but expressly reached out to a transnational Arab identity. Arabs around the world experienced rallies in Amman or in Cairo televised on *al-Jazeera* in real time, inspiring similar rallies, petitions, or argumentation in other Arab states. During one successful peaceful demonstration against the Iraq sanctions in Amman in early 2002, the first target of the police arriving on the scene was the *al-Jazeera* cameraman.<sup>111</sup> Iraq also became a staple in the Islamist mosques, with innumerable collections of charitable contributions, books, and clothes for the suffering fellow-Muslims.

Jordan was the epicenter of mobilization on behalf of Iraq. After the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, popular committees formed throughout the kingdom to support Iraq and to prepare to defend the country in the case of an Israeli incursion into Jordan en route to Iraq. The Committee to Defend the Nation, comprising activists at the popular level (political parties at that time were illegal), linked the defense of Iraq to the defense of Jordan, articulating this as a single national issue. The leftist party *Hashd* published a weekly newspaper, *al-Lajna al-Shaabiya*, which publicized the activities of the popular committees and issued some directives.<sup>112</sup> In May 1991, the Higher Committee to Defend Iraq brought together some three dozen popular figures and national personalities, establishing branches in all of the kingdom’s governorates and collecting funds to distribute charitable contributions to Iraq. These activities trailed off in 1996, after the Iraqi government became reluctant to accept charity because of the beginning of the oil for food program and its preference for forcing the lifting of the sanctions. In December 1998, in the face of the U.S.-U.K. bombing of Iraq, Jordanian activists

formed the National Mobilization Committee for the Defence of Iraq (NMCDI), with a more political than humanitarian mission. The NMCDI included representatives of political parties, professional associations, unions, popular organizations, as well as independent personalities, and it established branches in every governorate in the kingdom. Sulayman Arar, the first head of the NMCDI, and Hakem al-Fayez, who replaced Arar after his death, were senior Arab nationalist figures who lent stature to the efforts.<sup>113</sup> The NMCDI, in coordination with anti-sanctions groups in other Arab countries, pushed for Arabs to unilaterally cease honoring the embargo. Outside of the NMCDI framework, popular committees in support of Iraq also formed in a less coordinated grassroots fashion, among activists frustrated with the shortcomings of the political parties.<sup>114</sup> The Jordanian government responded defensively to popular mobilization, periodically banning proposed rallies and pro-Iraq activities and blaming Iraq for riots in the summer of 1996, which virtually everyone else attributed to economic and domestic political complaints.

The professional associations, the primary civil society organizations representing the politically frustrated middle classes most exposed to the new media, were extremely active on the Iraq issue. In addition to regular political rallies and statements, the associations collected charitable donations and offered functional expertise on behalf of the Iraqi people.<sup>115</sup> The NMCDI was one of their most active political committees. In December 1998, the Jordanian associations called for a meeting of professional associations from across the Arab world to coordinate action. In October 1999, these groups launched a coordinated campaign against the sanctions, the most prominent aspect of which was a large-scale pencil drive, which ultimately collected 3.5 million pencils and generated great excitement among schoolchildren and ordinary people, and a petition drive (171,000 signatures): “the goal of the campaign is to unite public opinion against the sanctions and encourage the conscious defiance of the embargo.”<sup>116</sup> In September 2000, the committee began the Iraqi Book Campaign, collecting scientific and academic books to highlight the intellectual effects of the embargo and to help rebuild Iraqi academic life.<sup>117</sup> The NMCDI also sponsored peaceful protests, conferences, visiting speakers, and art showings, while also issuing a regular stream of press statements and declarations. The coalition of eleven Jordanian opposition parties regularly included the Iraqi sanctions in their joint declarations, calling for “a strong popular movement to end the Arab countries’ sanctions on Iraq and to open their borders to supply its people.”<sup>118</sup> In September 1998, forty-seven members (out of eighty) of parliament signed a nonbinding resolution calling on Jordan to stop honoring the sanctions, and in December fifty-three representatives backed a similar resolution.<sup>119</sup> Jordanian politics was often dominated by disagreements over policy toward Iraq; the governments of Abd al-Karim al-Kabariti and Ali Abu Ragheb rose and fell upon the former’s anti-Iraq profile and the latter’s closer relations with Baghdad.<sup>120</sup>

Similar activities could be seen across the Arab world. Palestinian activists formed The Palestinian Committee for Solidarity with the Iraqi People in January 1998.<sup>121</sup> In February 1998, huge Palestinian rallies marched in support of Iraq during its confrontation with the United Nations. In Morocco, the National Committee for Supporting Iraq called for noncompliance with the sanctions in January 2000, and the speaker of the House of Representatives led a delegation of Arab parliamentarians to urge the European Parliament to challenge the sanctions. Syrian intellectuals formed their own Arab Committee for Lifting the Siege Imposed on Iraq at the Arab Writers Union in November 2000, concurrent with Syria's own dramatic increase in economic relations with Iraq.<sup>122</sup> Egyptian opposition party leaders, like their counterparts in Jordan, regularly issued joint statements and held large rallies calling for a lifting of sanctions.<sup>123</sup> Women's groups played an important role, focusing on the impact of sanctions on families, children, and the most vulnerable in society. The Arab Women Solidarity Society, headed by the well-known writer Nawal al-Sadawi, led an effort by the Egyptian syndicates to collect a million signatures against the sanctions, holding a massive popular rally in January 1998 at the Cairo football stadium to draw attention; one organizer claimed that the campaign had collected 18 million signatures across the Arab world.<sup>124</sup>

Cultural activists also brought the Iraqi issue into the public sphere. *Nur*, a journal focused on women's issues, published a special issue in the fall of 2001, focusing on the concerns of Iraqi women facing the embargo.<sup>125</sup> Numerous popular films and documentaries focused attention on the suffering of the Iraqi people. For example, the Lebanese director Sayid Kaado's film *Taqasim min Baghdad* used graphic footage from hospitals to illustrate health problems among mothers and children in embargoed Iraq, while the Egyptian director Hossam Ali made several films about the lives of women and children under the embargo.<sup>126</sup> Art galleries and cultural centers hosted numerous shows of Iraqi artists and writers to raise consciousness about the Iraqi situation.

Functional inter-Arab organizations provided another venue for discussions and the issuing of Arabist documents. Particular associations coordinated in their realm of expertise, such as doctors associations from various Arab states, cooperated on campaigns to send medicine to Iraq.<sup>127</sup> In January 1999, representatives of Arab professional associations met in Baghdad to coordinate efforts against the embargo and created an executive committee based in Amman.<sup>128</sup> In 1998, the Arab Parliamentary Union held an emergency session in Amman, producing a consensus document calling for a lifting of sanctions and for determined Arab action to assist the people of Iraq. At the level of political parties, several conferences of Arab Popular Forces met in Baghdad to express solidarity with Iraq. All of this demonstrates how actual mobilization crossed state lines, contributing to the manifestation of the public Arab consensus.

## CONCLUSION

The evolution of Arab public opinion toward Iraq offers very little support for the widely accepted conception of the “Arab street.” Sympathy for Iraq did not exist naturally or automatically in the Arab world. It was not expressed exclusively through violent protest, and it permitted considerable nuance. While it could not directly force Arab states to adopt specific policies, it shaped the conditions under which they formulated their strategies. The public arguments in the Arabist media established the common expectations about the anticipated positive and negative social sanctions, around which actions would be judged. Arab public opinion evolved through exposure to information about the humanitarian crisis in Iraq, framed in a distinctively Arabist discursive package. Elites used the heightened awareness of Iraqi suffering to advance coherent critiques of Arab states and of the United States. While Iraq certainly encouraged such mobilization, it would be wrong to see it as particularly “pro-Iraqi.” Instead, this Arabist discourse used Iraq as a symbolic issue toward the greater end of attempting to reshape Arab politics and forcing leaders to take public opinion into account. The strategic approach to this public sphere by Arab leaders, engaging in rhetorical free riding but refusing to act, drove the public consensus increasingly toward a structural critique of the Arab order itself.

Those analysts who argue that the Arab street can be safely ignored, or cowed into submission by the exercise of power, dramatically and dangerously misread the real significance of these transformations in the Arab public sphere. The Arab response to the American moves to war with Iraq highlights the importance of a more nuanced understanding of an Arab public opinion located beyond the streets. The United States saw a clear Iraqi threat and assumed that its private communications with Arab allies would secure their public cooperation despite their public opposition. Overthrowing Saddam Hussein could potentially serve the interests of many Arab states, and the benefits of alliance with Washington could hardly be overstated. But war against Iraq has come to be defined as definitively contrary to Arab identity and Arab interests. The assumptions consolidated in the debates of the preceding decade determined the reception of the new arguments for war. Arab leaders are sharply aware of the growing power and confidence of this public opinion, which has increasingly shaped their own conceptions of the stakes and interests at play. The surprisingly strong and vocal opposition to the war plans from even the closest Arab allies of the United States demonstrates the power of this evolving public sphere and its transformative impact. It does not, of course, rule out the possibility that Arab states will in the end cooperate under American pressure. But such cooperation, if not justified before this public sphere, will have devastating effects on regime legitimacy, the prospects for liberalization, and for the future of relations between the Arab public and the United States.

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