

# The Arab Street: Tracking a Political Metaphor

Terry Regier and Muhammad Ali Khalidi

*Understanding Arab public opinion is central to the search for sustainable political solutions in the Middle East. The way Westerners think about Arab public opinion may be affected by how it is referred to in their news media. Here, we show that Arab public opinion is rarely referred to as such in the US media. Instead, it is usually referred to as the Arab street, a metaphor that casts Arab public opinion as irrational and volatile. We trace the origins of this metaphor to similar expressions in both English and Arabic, and note similarities and important differences between the English and Arabic usages. Ultimately, we argue that the Arab street metaphor misrepresents the Arab public, and invites dismissal of rather than engagement with Arab public opinion.*

Arab public opinion helps shape the modern Middle East, whether through the ballot box, support for armed resistance, or otherwise. Regardless of one's political stance, Arab public opinion is inescapably important, and one would be unwise to dismiss or mischaracterize it. Yet current usage in the US media invites readers to do just that by regularly referring to Arab public opinion metaphorically as the *Arab street*. We will argue that this metaphor constructs Arab public opinion in a stereotypical, inaccurate, and pejorative fashion. Thus, the widespread use of this metaphor has the potential to obscure the actual nature of public opinion in the Arab world,<sup>1</sup> and to impede engagement with it.

This metaphor has received some analytical attention,<sup>2</sup> but despite its centrality in the US media, to our knowledge no comprehensive study of its use and origins has yet been conducted. Here, we present the results of such a study, based primarily on the archives of English and Arabic newspapers over the past several decades. We sought to answer three questions:

1. Is the *Arab street* an innocuous metaphor for Arab public opinion, or does it invite a negatively framed and inaccurate stance toward that public?
2. Is this metaphor used frequently enough that it might have an appreciable effect

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Terry Regier is associate professor of psychology at the University of Chicago. Muhammad Ali Khalidi is associate professor of philosophy at York University, Toronto. They would like to thank Susanne Gahl, Paul Kay, Rashid Khalidi, Tarif Khalidi, Diane Riskedahl, and Salim Yaqub for helpful comments on an earlier version of this article. The authors also would like to acknowledge research support for one of the authors (Khalidi) in the form of a grant from the Center for American Studies and Research (CASAR) at the American University of Beirut. Address correspondence to regier@uchicago.edu or khalidi@yorku.ca.

1. Marc Lynch, "Beyond the Arab street: Iraq and the Arab public sphere," *Politics & Society*, Vol. 31 (2003), pp. 55-91.

2. Asef Bayat, "The 'street' and the politics of dissent in the Arab world," *Middle East Report*, Vol. 226 (2003); William Safire, "On language: The Arab street," *The New York Times*, November 25, 2001; Ari Melber, "'Arab street': An expression whose time has come and gone," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, August 30, 2003; Tawfiq Al-Madani, "Maqulat 'al-shari' al-'Arabi' bayn al-wahm wal-haqiqa" ["The 'Arab street' Category between Delusion and Reality"], *Al-Akhbar*, December 6, 2006, p. 14; "'Al-shari' al-'Arabi' mustalah 'ilmi!'" ["'The Arab Street' Is a Scholarly Term!"], *Al-Akhbar*, November 17, 2006, p. 13.

on the way Americans think about Arab public opinion?

3. Where did this expression originate?

To summarize our results, we found that the term *Arab street* is associated with volatility and irrationality, as revealed by the contexts of its use in the US written news media. We also found that the term *Arab street* is the overwhelmingly predominant means of referring to Arab public opinion in the US media; by contrast, the literal and less freighted term *Arab public opinion* is surprisingly rare. Thus, the *street* metaphor carries negative connotations and is extremely widespread.

The origins of the expression are less clear. The term *street* has been associated with the public and with public opinion in English since at least the 1930s, and this English usage may have contributed to the adoption of the *Arab street* metaphor. At the same time, it is likely that the metaphor is derived at least in part from the Arabic usage of *al-shari'* (the street) as a metaphor for the public. This Arabic metaphor carries some of the same negative overtones as its English counterpart, although it also sometimes carries positive ones. Another major difference is that the *street* metaphor in English is applied nearly exclusively to Arab public opinion, while in Arabic it is applied broadly (e.g. *al-shari' al-britani* — the British street).

In sum, whatever the origins of the metaphor, the US media regularly use *Arab street* with a distinctly negative cast, and deploy it near-canonically as the means of referring to Arab public opinion, while very rarely using the *street* metaphor for referring to other publics — inviting readers to consider Arab public opinion in a negatively framed and *sui generis* fashion. In what follows, we present these findings, and then discuss their implications. Taken broadly, our investigation of this phrase and its uses is an inquiry into the significance of political metaphor; more specifically, it consists of an analysis of the way in which a certain linguistic expression contributes to perceptions of the Arab world in the English-speaking West.

### WHAT DOES ARAB STREET MEAN?

The term *Arab street* is often used in the US and other Anglophone media:

- Playing to the Arab street, propaganda broadcasts from Iraq shifted last week from military boasts to cries of victimization. The longer the bombing goes on, Arab members of the coalition fear, the more Hussein will be seen as a hero and Iraq as the victim of Western imperialism.<sup>3</sup>
- ‘This will be the test of whether the Arab “street” really is with Saddam,’ says Martin Indyk, director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Widespread popular support for Saddam could shake pro-U.S. governments.<sup>4</sup>
- That Saudi Arabia, rich, powerful and armed to the teeth, could not manage its own defense ... is an admission of impotence the Arab street will not quickly forget.<sup>5</sup>

Yet intriguingly, despite its wide use, the meaning of the term *Arab street* is not

3. “The real target?,” *U.S. News & World Report*, February 18, 1991.

4. “Has Israel played into Saddam’s hands?,” *Business Week*, October 22, 1990.

5. “The Arab rift,” *Jerusalem Post*, August 14, 1990.

always entirely clear. Consider this statement, made by a senior US administration official in 2002: “President Musharraf did cite the possibility of trouble in the Arab street, *whatever that is* [emphasis added].”<sup>6</sup> This official claims to not fully understand the expression *Arab street* despite the fact that — as we show below — this phrase was used very frequently in the US media at that time, and had become a standard trope in US commentary on the Middle East. Why the uncertainty, then?

The uncertainty may be well-founded. The expression *Arab street* is used in at least two distinct ways. On the one hand, the phrase is often explicitly glossed with the straightforward meaning of “Arab public opinion:”

- The effect on the Arab street, on Arab public opinion, cannot be accurately gauged right away.<sup>7</sup>
- ... the Arab ‘street,’ or public opinion, ...<sup>8</sup>
- ... Arab public opinion — colorfully styled as the ‘Arab street’ ...<sup>9</sup>
- The ‘Arab Street’? Public Opinion in the Arab World<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, the same phrase is also used in ways that suggest something more specific and more threatening than Arab public opinion: namely, a presumed seething underclass within Arab society, one that is viewed primarily as a source of political trouble. Asef Bayat captures this notion:

the ‘Arab street’ has become a minor household word in the West, bandied about in the media as both a subject of profound anxiety and an object of withering condescension. The ‘Arab street,’ and by extension, the ‘Muslim street,’ have become code words that immediately invoke a reified and essentially ‘abnormal’ mindset, as well as a strange place filled with angry people who, whether because they hate us or just don’t understand us, must shout imprecations against us.<sup>11</sup>

Similar explications are occasionally provided by the US media themselves. The following is drawn from a front-page article in *The New York Times*:

The Arab street: the well-worn phrase evokes men clustered around dusty coffee-house tables, discussing the events of the day with well-earned cynicism between puffs on a hookah — *yet suddenly able to turn into a mob, powerful enough to sweep away governments* [emphasis added].<sup>12</sup>

We propose that a central association of the *Arab street* is indeed that of a volatile potential mob, dangerous to the established order of Arab states, and thus to any agree-

6. “US State Department transcript: Bush meets with leaders of Japan and Pakistan (Background briefing on issues raised in Sept. 12 consultations),” September 13, 2002, <http://usinfo.org/wf-archiv/2002/020913/epf507.htm>, accessed July 19, 2008.

7. “Cease-fire in Lebanon,” *Christian Science Monitor*, August 2, 1993.

8. “Arab ‘street’ unmoved by news,” *Washington Post*, November 30, 2001.

9. “Forcing the choice,” *Washington Post*, October 10, 2001.

10. Title of a monograph by David Pollock, published by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy in 1993.

11. Bayat, “The ‘street’ and the politics of dissent in the Arab world.”

12. “Street brawl; the new power of Arab public opinion,” *The New York Times*, November 11, 2001.

ments Western powers may have with those states. This “dangerous mob” notion is highlighted in the following uses:

- The U.S. ... could ... bludgeon the momentarily crazed mobs on the ‘Arab street’ back into sullen impotence.<sup>13</sup>
- Could this roiling Arab street actually topple a regime?<sup>14</sup>
- Television pictures of dead Iraqi civilians ... might prompt the storied ‘Arab street’ to rise and threaten moderate regimes throughout the region.<sup>15</sup>

It is questionable whether there exists such a distinct volatile underclass within Arab society, an identifiable group of people who are angry, given to street demonstrations, and who constitute a threat to Arab regimes. At the very least, this use of *Arab street* reifies a phenomenon that is more fluid and amorphous than the phrase might suggest. Still, it seems that, whether real or imagined, this is the intended referent in many cases.

What then, on balance, does *Arab street* mean? The term is used inconsistently. Sometimes it is presented as simply denoting Arab public opinion. At other times it appears to denote the views of an angry potential mob, a posited subset of Arab society. This inconsistent pattern of usage blurs the distinction between the whole and the part and thereby invites readers to view Arab public opinion in terms of a supposed radicalized and disaffected subclass. Moreover, as we shall show, the *Arab street* has become the primary expression used to refer to Arab public opinion, thereby inviting a sweeping view of the Arab public that highlights this derogatory connotation.

In contrast, the literal expression *Arab public opinion* conveys a very different construal of the opinion and sentiments of the Arab public. As judged by its contexts of use, *Arab public opinion* does not carry overtones of volatility, but is instead often cast as rational and dispassionate. Consider for example:

- ... Arab public opinion would accept nothing less, on ethical grounds ...<sup>16</sup>
- ... Arab public opinion would not abide such an overture ...<sup>17</sup>
- New military assaults against Iraq are totally unacceptable to Arab public opinion ...<sup>18</sup>

Here, *Arab public opinion* is presented much as other public opinions would be: as the locus of a public’s considered stances on political issues — e.g. acceptance, rejection, opposition, sympathy — framed in a dispassionate, almost executive fashion, as a legitimate arbiter to be courted or convinced, rather than feared.

The examples we have reviewed above suggest support for our claim that the *Arab street* is cast as volatile and irrational, while *Arab public opinion* is cast as comparatively non-volatile and rational. To test this claim more comprehensively, we examined all usages of the expressions *Arab street* and *Arab public opinion* in *The New York Times* from 1980 through May 2007, obtained from the Factiva database.<sup>19</sup>

13. “Steel your hearts to the assault,” *New York Daily News*, October 24, 2001.

14. “The hidden victims,” *The New York Times*, May 1, 2002.

15. “Democracy delayed,” *Washington Post*, April 1, 2003.

16. “The mistaken Arab experience,” *The New York Times*, December 5, 2003.

17. “Summit collapse leaves Arab leaders in disarray,” *The New York Times*, March 29, 2004.

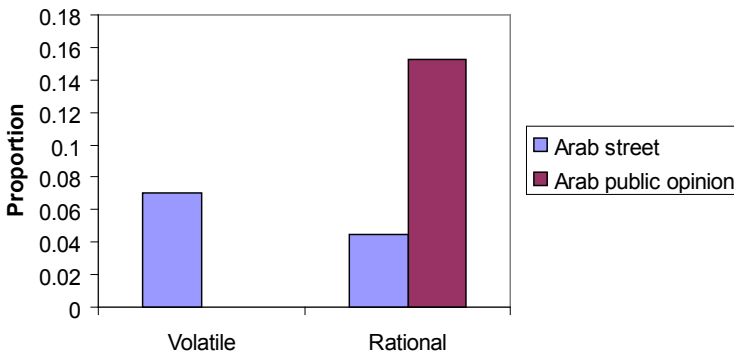
18. “Among the Arabs, little enthusiasm,” *The New York Times*, August 17, 1992.

19. We selected *The New York Times* in order to focus on elite, high-profile US media. In follow-  
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We coded each usage as either “volatile,” “rational,” or “other.” A usage was coded as “volatile” if and only if the other words in the sentence explicitly ascribed volatility to Arab public opinion, e.g. if it “erupted,” or “will explode,” or will “suddenly turn into a mob;” in contrast, mere potential for sudden explosive action (e.g. “inflamed,” “was very angry”) was not coded as volatile. Since this is a rather conservative criterion, it bears stressing that there were also many examples of the “angry” or “inflamed” *Arab street* that were not captured as “volatile” by this coding. A usage was coded as “rational” if and only if the other words in the sentence explicitly ascribed a dispassionate executive rationality to *Arab public opinion*, e.g. if it “accepted,” “rejected,” “opposed,” “condemned,” etc.; in contrast, merely having “views,” or “perceptions,” or “talking” — without any executive judgment — was not coded as rational.

We found that 7% (11/156) of the uses of *Arab street* ascribed volatility to that entity, while none (0/72) of the uses of *Arab public opinion* did. This difference in proportions is significant, as determined by a standard statistical test.<sup>20</sup> We also found that 4% (7/156) of the uses of *Arab street* ascribed rationality to that entity, while 15% (11/72) of the uses of *Arab public opinion* did. This difference is also significant.<sup>21</sup> These results are shown in Figure 1. Thus, it does appear that the *Arab street* is cast as more volatile, and less rational, than *Arab public opinion*, as judged by the contexts of use of these two expressions. While this difference is a matter of degree, it is a significant degree.

**Figure 1: Volatility and Rationality**



Each bar shows, for either *Arab street* or *Arab public opinion*, the proportion of uses of that term that expressed either volatility or rationality. The missing “Volatile” bar for *Arab public opinion* indicates that that proportion is zero. Source: The New York Times, 1980-2007.

Why is this so? The word *street* has a number of general associations which probably contribute to the connotations of *Arab street*. One common association of the

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up studies reported below we also examine the LexisNexis database so as to sample the US media more comprehensively. In these searches, we restricted our attention to *Arab street* in its political sense, disregarding such literal uses as “wandering down an Arab street,” “Arab street vendor,” or occasional references to a street in Singapore named “Arab Street,” which is sometimes highlighted as a tourist destination. Such literal uses were quite rare.

20. Fisher’s exact test, 2-tailed, Bonferroni-corrected  $p < 0.05$ .

21. Fisher’s exact test, 2-tailed, Bonferroni-corrected  $p < 0.02$ .

word *street* is familiarity with the ways of ordinary people rather than the elite, as in the expressions “street smart,” “street-wise,” “the man in the street,” and “the word on the street.” Another is that of illicit commerce or backdoor dealings, as when one refers to the “street value” of illegal drugs. These two associations may help to explain the oppositional, outside-normal-channels connotation of *Arab street*.<sup>22</sup> Third, the *street* is associated with loitering, indigence, unemployment, crime, and homelessness (“street person,” “street walker”). An interesting example of this association is the expression *street Arab*, which historically was used to denote young beggars or homeless children, toughened by years of fending for themselves. Although this reference may be explicitly called to mind for only a small minority of contemporary readers, it is not entirely absent in common parlance and still exists in the “cultural imaginary,” thereby forging a loose conceptual connection between the *Arab street* and *street Arab*.<sup>23</sup> Finally — and probably most significantly for our purposes — a salient association of the word *street* is that of demonstrations, of crowds of people waving banners and flags and chanting slogans (“street protest,” “street politics”). Such protests in the Arab world, as in other parts of the world, are often dominated by activist males, and these scenes are often amplified and highlighted in the audiovisual media, which tends to stereotype political protests in the Arab world. Hence, images of an angry crowd protesting by shaking their fists and shouting belligerent slogans are likely to be called up in the mind of a reader or listener who encounters the expression *the Arab street*, consecrating its association with volatility and irrationality.

The reductive and pejorative character of these connotations as applied to Arab public opinion as a whole should be clear. So should their inaccuracy. Arabs have a wide variety of means of political self-expression at their disposal, ranging from public opinion polls, to political discussion on pan-Arab television stations, to — in limited cases — the ballot box. This inaccuracy of the “mob” characterization is sometimes explicitly noted in the US media: “pundits always have it [the Arab “street”] about to explode, and it rarely does.”<sup>24</sup> Yet even when the *Arab street* fails to explode, that very failure is sometimes held against it, as noted by Bayat:

In the narratives of the Western media, the ‘Arab street’ is damned if it does and damned if it doesn’t — it is either ‘irrational’ and ‘aggressive’ or it is ‘apathetic’ and ‘dead.’ There is little chance of its salvation as something Western societies might recognize as familiar.<sup>25</sup>

22. One scholar, Larbi Choueikha, has attempted to define the Arab street as: “Public opinion that is constituted outside official frames or outside the mechanisms of authority.” “‘Al-shari’ al-‘Arabi’ *mustalah* ‘ilmi!’,” p. 13.

23. This connection has also been made by Edward Said: “There’s a kind of unconscious identification between the word ‘street’ in connection with the Arabs, and the late nineteenth and early twentieth century usage of the term ‘street Arab’. Street Arabs are vagrants ... So I think referring to the ‘Arab street’ in this way suggests that these are riff-raff, the kind of unimportant flotsam and jetsam of a society which is basically made up of barbarians and subhuman people. I think it’s not an accident that this term is always used to talk about Arab public opinion.” David Barsamian and Edward W. Said, *Culture and Resistance: Conversations with Edward W. Said* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2003), p. 170.

24. “Saddam, the U.S. agent,” *The New York Times*, October 15, 2002.

25. Bayat, “The ‘street’ and the politics of dissent in the Arab world.”



This unrecognizability is perhaps the most serious problem with the *street* metaphor. The *Arab street* is often contrasted with the Arab governing elite. While this is a natural and useful distinction to make, the construct it suggests — of a volatile populace opposed to an often despotic government — obscures a large and important segment of Arab public opinion, which is neither irrational nor violent, but is comparable to large swathes of public opinion in other parts of the world. The Arab public, like publics elsewhere, does not hold political power, but it sometimes actively critiques and challenges those who do, and in so doing, helps determine the political agenda for its society as a whole. Marc Lynch argues:

But what now matters more than the street, and sometimes even more than the rulers, is the consensus of elite and middle-class public opinion throughout the Arab world. Articulate and assertive, combative and argumentative, the nascent public sphere increasingly sets the course for the street and the palace alike.<sup>26</sup>

In obscuring this reality, the *Arab street* metaphor effectively invites a view of the Arab public as, in effect, a potential mob — something quite unlike Westerners' conception of their own publics.

We emphasize that in ascribing such associations to the use of the expression *Arab street*, we are not committing the intentional fallacy. Our aim is not to argue that every user of this phrase intends to evoke such associations, whether consciously or unconsciously. But we do maintain that the phrase itself carries the associations that we have outlined here, as determined by general patterns of usage, and that these associations ultimately have the effect of reducing, demeaning, and mischaracterizing Arab public opinion. We suspect that while some speakers do not intentionally spread these associations, they may instead slip into the dangerous habit identified by George Orwell, in which a speaker or writer does not choose words carefully to express his or her intended meaning, but instead simply produces “strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else”<sup>27</sup> and which exist in the speaker's mind as a salient unified phrase. In this way, a speaker can propagate an expression such as the *Arab street* without really intending the meaning it conveys.

The broader implication of this argument is that the *Arab street* metaphor has the potential to contribute to an ongoing misreading of the Arab public among US readers. Indeed, on similar grounds, some have called for the term to be dropped from the US lexicon altogether.<sup>28</sup>

### *IS ARAB STREET WIDELY USED?*

The more frequently a particular framing appears in the media, the more likely it is to affect readers' perceptions. Thus, if the phrase *Arab street* appears frequently in the US media, its unflattering connotations are more likely to affect Americans' views of the Arab public than if the metaphor appears rarely. Several usages of *Arab street* sug-

26. Marc Lynch, “Taking Arabs Seriously,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 82, No. 5 (2003), pp. 81-94.

27. George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” *Horizon* (1946), [http://mla.stanford.edu/Politics\\_&\\_English\\_language.pdf](http://mla.stanford.edu/Politics_&_English_language.pdf), accessed July 19, 2008.

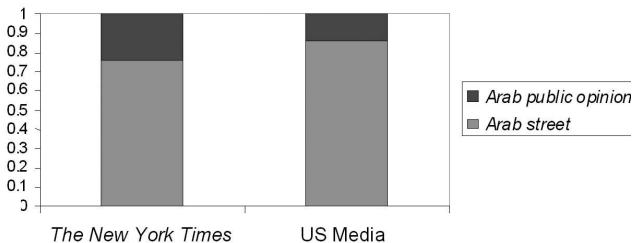
28. Melber, “‘Arab street’: An expression whose time has come and gone.”

gest that by 2002-2003 it was thought of as occurring frequently: “the much-cited ‘Arab street’;”<sup>29</sup> “the storied ‘Arab street’;”<sup>30</sup> and “the fabled ‘Arab street’.”<sup>31</sup> Is this impression correct? How often does this metaphor actually occur — and critically, how often relative to more neutral expressions such as *Arab public opinion*?

To determine this, we counted the number of occurrences of *Arab street* in its political sense and of *Arab public opinion* in *The New York Times* data we examined above, focusing on recent usage, specifically the years 2002-2007. In this time period, we found 92 uses of *Arab street* in its political sense, as opposed to 29 uses of *Arab public opinion*. Thus, on the assumption that these are the primary two means of referring to Arab public opinion in this dataset, 76% of such references in *The New York Times* data used the phrase *Arab street* — a rather high proportion.

We were interested in determining whether this pattern held true across the US media more generally. To that end, we searched the LexisNexis database, under “News,” “U.S. Newspapers and Wires,” for the same two phrases and over the same range of dates. We found 1,686 political uses of *Arab street* and 264 of *Arab public opinion*, meaning that in this database, 86% of references to Arab public opinion used the phrase *Arab street* — again under the assumption that it is referred to using one of the two phrases for which we searched. These search results are summarized in Figure 2. *The New York Times* appears to use the phrase somewhat less frequently than the US media generally, since we obtain a somewhat lower *Arab street* proportion from it than we do from LexisNexis more broadly. However, we see the same general trend in *The New York Times* and LexisNexis.

**Figure 2: Relative Frequency of Arab Street and Arab Public Opinion**



Each bar shows the proportion of references that used the phrase *Arab public opinion* vs. *Arab street*, in *The New York Times*, and the US media generally. The dominant expression is *Arab street* in both cases. Source: *The New York Times*, LexisNexis, 2002-2007.

Thus, *Arab street* appears very frequently, frequently enough that it may be considered the standard or canonical means of referring to Arab public opinion in the US media. This means that the negative connotations of the expression are presented to the US reader very often, and could conceivably color his or her conception of the Arab public. In contrast, *Arab public opinion* is surprisingly rarely mentioned in the US media. Thus, at a time of intense engagement with the Arab world, the rational, dispass-

29. “The other Mideast crisis,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, January 25, 2003.

30. “Democracy delayed,” *Washington Post*, April 1, 2003.

31. “Iraq and the thief of Baghdad,” *The New York Times*, May 19, 2002.



sionate overtones of that phrase are only rarely presented to US readers.

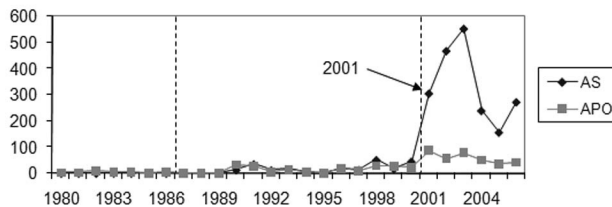
It is worth pointing out by way of comparison that there is almost no incidence of the expressions *American street*, *French street*, *Israeli street*, and the like in the US media. These expressions in their political sense either do not show up in a LexisNexis search, or do so very rarely. The metaphorical use of *street* to denote public opinion is almost exclusively reserved for the Arab context. The fact that Arab public opinion should be referred to in this manner, but not public opinions in other parts of the world, is itself problematic, since it constructs the Arab public and its opinions in a *sui generis* fashion and leaves the impression that public opinion in this part of the world is of a different kind than public opinion elsewhere.

### WHAT IS THE ORIGIN OF THE ARAB STREET?

Having established that the *Arab street* metaphor carries pejorative overtones, and that it appears very frequently in recent media, we wished to ascertain its origins. How and why did the US media come to use this somewhat peculiar expression?

To pursue this question, we conducted LexisNexis searches for *Arab street* and *Arab public opinion* in the US media, analogous to the searches reported above, for each year from 1966-2006.<sup>32</sup> We found three general phases of usage. Between 1966 and 1986, *Arab street* does not appear at all, while *Arab public opinion* appears regularly although infrequently. The modern political metaphor *Arab street* makes its first appearance in this dataset in 1987,<sup>33</sup> and from then through 2000, it appears roughly as often as *Arab public opinion*. Starting in 2001, the expression *Arab street* experiences a dramatic rise in incidence, far surpassing *Arab public opinion*. This development over time is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Frequency over Time



Each dot indicates the number of occurrences we found in a given year of either Arab street (AS) in its political sense, or Arab public opinion (APO), in the US media. The vertical lines demarcate the three general phases of usage that we found. Source: LexisNexis, 1980-2006.

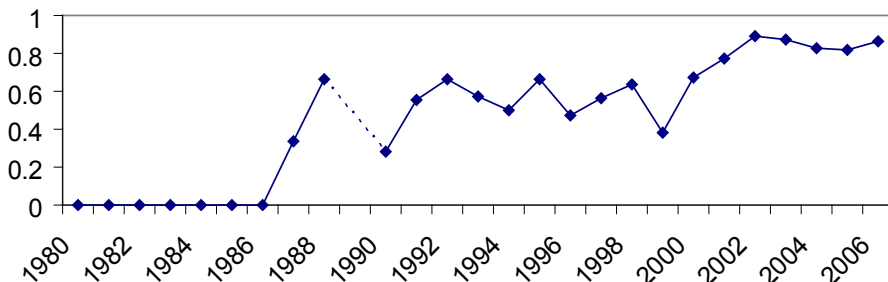
The number of uses in a given year may be driven by several factors, including the degree of US interest in the Arab world at that time, as well as the number of publications and their frequency of publication in the LexisNexis database for that year.

32. We wished to obtain a complete record for each year we considered. Since we conducted our search partway through the year 2007, we did not consider that year. Here and henceforth, we restrict our attention to *Arab street* in its political sense; our search revealed few literal uses.

33. One earlier instance has been brought to our attention from outside the LexisNexis database, from the *Los Angeles Times*, April 27, 1986, p. F3.

More illuminating perhaps is the percentage of uses in a given year that use the *Arab street* metaphor rather than *Arab public opinion*: this percentage rises from 0% in the early to mid-1980s, to around 50% in the 1990s, to around 85% by the 2000s, as shown in Figure 4.

**Figure 4: Proportion over Time**



Each dot indicates the proportion of references to Arab public opinion in the US media for that year that used the phrase *Arab street* rather than *Arab public opinion*. The dotted line from 1988 to 1990 indicates that in 1989 there were no uses of either *Arab street* or *Arab public opinion* in our data. Source: LexisNexis, 1980-2006.

Why these changes in usage? The causes are difficult to determine with certainty, but the onset of the phrase *Arab street* does correlate with increased US interest in the sentiments and actions of the Arab public, rather than just the Arab elites, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This interest is likely due in part to the first Palestinian Intifada (1987-1993), an uprising initiated by the people rather than their leaders, and is probably more substantially due to the first Gulf War (1990–1991), which some feared might touch off uprisings similar to the Intifada in various Arab countries. Thus, well before the attacks of September 11, 2001, there were already reasons for Americans to view the Arab public through the lens provided by the *street* metaphor. However, the September 11 attacks, and their ongoing aftermath, appear to have tremendously amplified that pre-existing tendency. While *Arab street* is not strictly speaking a post-9/11 phenomenon, the expression did become especially prominent after the attacks. It appears to be a metaphor “whose time had come:” the attacks caused the American media to be intensely interested in the Arab public, and to frame that public in quite negative terms, often in terms of volatility and irrationality. The *Arab street* metaphor coheres naturally with this viewpoint.

This may explain how the metaphor became widely adopted within the US media once introduced — but how was it introduced in the first place? The first instance of *Arab street* in its modern political sense that we can find in the LexisNexis database<sup>34</sup> appears in 1987, a few months before the first Palestinian uprising, in a quote from an Israeli attorney: “Never has Israel tried to root out the PLO in the Arab street.”<sup>35</sup> We also searched for earlier uses outside the media. The earliest appearance of the *Arab street* metaphor in English language sources that we have been able to identify occurred in

34. This is the second instance overall of which we are aware, the first being the *Los Angeles Times* usage from 1986 that we mention earlier.

35. “Palestinian press walks a tightrope,” *Christian Science Monitor*, August 27, 1987.

1970, in an article published in an academic journal by a political scientist specializing in the Middle East, Robert R. Sullivan: “the major means of pursuing victory [in the conflict between Egypt and Iraq] was subversion, primarily through radio propaganda aimed at mobilizing the Arab ‘street’.”<sup>36</sup>

The next use we find also derives from a political science journal article, this one by Steven J. Rosen in 1977:

The existence of nuclear weapons in the region [in Israel] will induce moderation and a revolution of declining expectations in the Arab ‘street’, as the end-of-the-world character of atomic war is understood by both mass and elite elements within the Arab world.<sup>37</sup>

Rosen later became the policy director of AIPAC, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, which styles itself as “America’s Pro-Israel Lobby.” He is currently under indictment in the Larry Franklin affair, concerning the leaking of sensitive US policy information to Israel. One might imagine that Rosen’s Israel connection, together with the Israeli source of one of the first US media usages we find, point to an Israeli origin for the metaphor overall. Informal searches suggest that the *street* metaphor is common in Hebrew and has been for some time; thus it is possible that the Israeli use of the metaphor played some role in its eventual adoption by the US media. However, we suspect there is more to the story than this. The earlier use of the same metaphor by Sullivan, who to our knowledge is not connected to Israel or its lobby, together with other data we consider below, suggest that the introduction of the English expression *Arab street* may have been encouraged by the use of the *street* metaphor in Arabic. If so, it remains an interesting open question to what extent the transmission to English was facilitated by Israeli usage.

It is potentially significant that both Sullivan and Rosen are academics studying the Arab world, and are presumably familiar with political discourse in Arabic, making a borrowing from Arabic plausible. It is also potentially significant that in both of these early uses, the phrase appears as the *Arab “street,”* that is, with quotation marks around the word *street*.<sup>38</sup> The scare quotes suggest that this is an idiom somewhat foreign to the writer, perhaps drawn from the language of the culture under study, namely Arabic, or possibly from elsewhere, such as a more colloquial register of English. In particular, this form suggests that only the word *street* has been imported, to then be tagged with the adjective *Arab*.

What then are the origins of the political metaphor *the street*? This is difficult to pin down precisely. We have found several uses of *the street* used metaphorically and in reference to the Arab world in the 1950s (though not qualified directly by the adjective *Arab*). Most of these uses make reference to the popularity of Egyptian President Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasser. These uses also often have scare quotes around *the street*, sug-

36. Robert R. Sullivan, “Saudi Arabia in International Politics,” *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 32 (1970), p. 437.

37. Steven J. Rosen, “A Stable System of Mutual Nuclear Deterrence in the Arab-Israeli Conflict,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 71 (1977), p. 1373.

38. Later uses are inconsistent in the placement of quotation marks: *Arab “street,”* “*Arab street*,” and the unadorned form *Arab street* are all found.

gesting that this is a non-standard usage, and possibly a borrowing:

- President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, an obscure army officer only four years ago, has attained a peak of prestige, especially in his appeal to ‘the street’, which carries great political power in the Arab world.<sup>39</sup>
- The Egyptian President’s hold upon ‘the street’ in Iraq is strong and seems to be increasing, and even some Iraqi Army officers are influenced by his views.<sup>40</sup>

Nasser’s supporters are sometimes characterized in overtly disparaging terms that explicitly link the street with a mob:

The prestige of Gamal Abdel Nasser, President of Egypt, is probably at a new high with the Arab street mobs, by which Arab governments are so often made or broken.<sup>41</sup>

Here, the literal phrase *Arab street mobs* depicts volatile unruly crowds that are viewed as potentially dangerous to the established order of Arab states, a notion that we have argued is central to the modern political metaphor the *Arab street*. Similarly, a *New York Times* article from 1959 titled “Power of ‘the street’ in the Arab world” purports to present: “an analysis of that frightening phenomenon, the mob.”<sup>42</sup> This article thus again makes explicit the street/mob connection that is merely implicit in more recent usage — and again places *the street* in scare quotes, possibly suggesting a borrowing from the local language, Arabic. An interesting undercurrent in these examples from the late 1950s is the denigration of the anti-imperialist appeal that Nasser held for many Arabs, by casting his supporters as *Arab street mobs*:

Nuri as-Said, the strong man of Iraqi politics, is pictured in most Arab countries as the imperialist-backed enemy of Gamal Abdel Nasser, President of Egypt and hero of the Arab street mobs.<sup>43</sup>

In general, these examples appear to be precursors of *Arab street* in its more recent sense, and while they are consistent with the hypothesis that the *street* metaphor originates in Arabic, they do not compel that conclusion. In fact, there is good evidence that *street* was used in its political sense in English well before this period, in references having nothing to do with the Arab world. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) lists as one of the meanings of *street* in English: “the streets regarded *loosely* as the realm of the common people, and esp. as the source of popular political support.” The earliest usage of *street* in this political sense cited by the OED dates from 1931, in an early

39. Hanson W. Baldwin, “The Mideast Crisis — I, Review of factors underlying region’s ferment after the recent invasions,” *The New York Times*, Jan 2, 1957.

40. Baldwin, “The Mideast Crisis — I, Review of factors underlying region’s ferment after the recent invasions.”

41. Baldwin, “The Mideast Crisis — I, Review of factors underlying region’s ferment after the recent invasions.”

42. James Morris, “Power of ‘the street’ in the Arab world,” *The New York Times*, October 18, 1959.

43. Hanson W. Baldwin, “Baghdad Pact now weak prop for the West,” *The New York Times*, February 24, 1957.

description of the ascendance of the Nazi Party in Germany: “The Democrats ... have not been able to deal with the Nazi because of his Mastery of the Street.”<sup>44</sup>

Thus, if the English *street* metaphor was borrowed from Arabic starting in the 1950s — which seems at least plausible given the evidence we have reviewed — that borrowing was probably facilitated by the pre-existing political meaning of *street* in English. We turn next to examine evidence from Arabic, to provide a point of comparison for the English use of the metaphor and to further probe its origins.

### THE ARAB STREET IN ARABIC

In contemporary Arabic political discourse, the expressions *al-shari'* (*the street*) and *al-shari' al-'arabi* (*the Arab street*) are often used in ways that are similar to those of their English-language counterparts, such as: “Are you urging the Arab street to rise too?,”<sup>45</sup> “The anger in the Arab street is justified;”<sup>46</sup> “Saddam had been wagering on the Arab street;”<sup>47</sup> and “Hizballah is popular in the Arab street.”<sup>48</sup> As in English, the *Arab street* is here conceived both as the locus of popular political sentiment and as potentially volatile. The same overtones of volatility are present in the *street* metaphor when it is modified by more specific adjectives than *Arab*: “The Palestinian street exploded yesterday as a result of the repercussions of the political and financial crisis.”<sup>49</sup>

However, there are also some interesting differences between the term’s English and Arabic usage. Perhaps the most salient difference is that in Arabic, unlike English, the *street* metaphor is applied to many publics, not just Arab ones:

- ... the Israeli street ... is currently saturated with rightwing ideologies.<sup>50</sup>
- ... feelings of anger and shock are running very high in the American street [after the September 11 attacks]...<sup>51</sup>
- The movement also caused much controversy in the British street when it organized a conference on the first anniversary of the September [11] attacks.<sup>52</sup>

We wished to determine whether these examples were representative. To that end, we searched for the terms *British street*, *American street*, *Israeli street*, and *Arab street*, in their political sense, and the corresponding terms *British public opinion*, *American public opinion*, *Israeli public opinion*, and *Arab public opinion*, in both the US<sup>53</sup> and Arab<sup>54</sup>

44. Wyndham Lewis, *Hitler* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1931), p. 57.

45. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, February 28, 2001, p. 3.

46. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, May 2, 2002, p. 4.

47. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, December 22, 2003, p. 8.

48. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, August 13, 2004, p. 7.

49. *Al-Nahar*, April 23, 2006, p.1.

50. *Al-Quds*, October 8, 2004, p. 13.

51. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, September 13, 2001, p. 9.

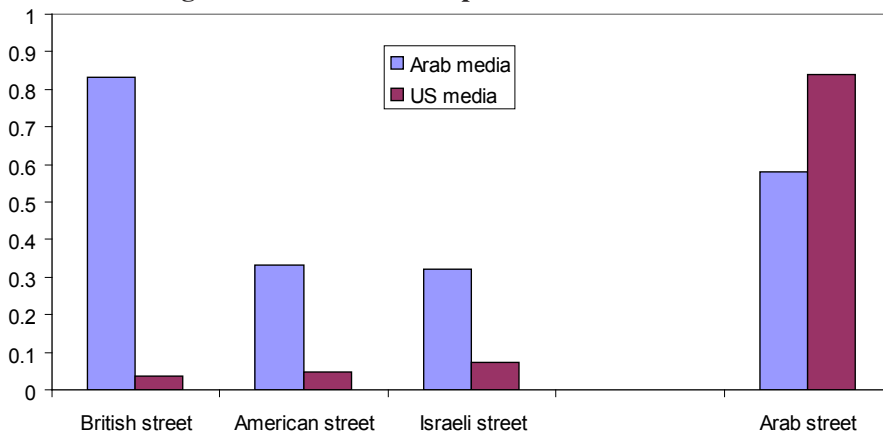
52. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, October 8, 2004, p. 8.

53. LexisNexis database, using options: “News,” “U.S. Newspapers and Wires.”

54. World News Connection (WNC) database, containing FBIS translations into English of articles from non-US newspapers. We searched the following Arabic-language newspapers in this database: *Al-Nahar*, *Al-Safir*, *Al-Quds*, *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, *Al-Ayyam*, and *Al-Hayah al-Jadidah*. These transliterations of the newspaper names are the ones used in the WNC database.

media for the years 2004-2006. In Figure 5, we present the proportion of all references to each national public opinion that took the form *street* rather than *public opinion*.

**Figure 5: The *Street* Metaphor for Various Publics**



Each bar denotes the proportion of references to a national public opinion that used the street metaphor, in Arab and US media. Sources: World News Connection, LexisNexis, 2004-2006.

These data indicate that the *street* metaphor is indeed more widely applied in Arabic than in English. While the *street* metaphor is used almost exclusively for Arabs in English, in Arabic it appears to be part of a larger system of reference, such that the expressions *British street*, *American street*, and *Israeli street* are fairly common in Arabic. The metaphor is in this sense “better integrated” into Arabic than English. This is consistent with the proposal that it originated in Arabic and was borrowed into English.

There are also some apparent differences in connotation. While the *street* does sometimes “explode” or “rise” in Arabic usage, as in English, at other times it has positive overtones of a sort not commonly found in contemporary US usage, including connotations of centrality and legitimacy: “the great Egyptian street, which has always been the heart and conscience of the Arabs,”<sup>55</sup> and “[ Hamas ] won [ the Palestinian elections ] because it is a movement with a broad popular base in the Palestinian street.”<sup>56</sup> A striking example of such positive associations comes from Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hizbullah, who uses the term *Israeli street* in a laudatory context: “And it is worthy of respect that political power and the Israeli street move quickly to save his [ Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert’s ] country [ in reference to the Winograd report assessing Israeli political and military decisions in the 2006 Lebanon War ].”<sup>57</sup>

We have not encountered any English usage of *Arab street* that is as positively

55. “The statement of the million signatures,” *Al-Ayyam*, November 18, 1997.

56. “Interview with Isma’il Haniyah by Nasir Mahmud al-Suwayr,” *Al-Quds*, February 5, 2006.

57. Cited on [www.wa3ad.org](http://www.wa3ad.org), a Hizbullah-aligned website, in an article from their section “*Akhabar/al-Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah*” [“News/Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah”] from May 2, 2007 entitled: “*Al-Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah: Hadaf Amrika wa Isra’il huwa tadmir al-Iraq*” [“Al-Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah: The Goal of America and Israel Is the Destruction of Iraq”], <http://www.wa3ad.org/index.php?show=news&action=article&id=7431>, accessed July 19, 2008.



valenced. Instead, as we have seen, many English language uses of the street metaphor have a dismissive cast. Interestingly, this dismissive overtone is often preserved on the rare occasions when the street metaphor is extended to non-Arab publics in English. Consider the following excerpt from *Reason* magazine, concerning the many US conservatives who were unhappy with the idea of US military intervention in Bosnia in the 1990s: “Congressional Republicans listened to the rabble, drawing this rebuke from *Weekly Standard* opinion editor David Tell in 1995: ‘When the “conservative street” is wrong, it should be corrected — or ignored.’”<sup>58</sup>

In sum, while there are similarities in the ways Arabic and English deploy the *street* metaphor, there are also important differences, both in the breadth of its application and in its associations, namely that the metaphor is used more exclusively for Arabs, and more negatively, in English than in Arabic.

Given that the metaphor occurs in both English and Arabic, was it in fact borrowed from Arabic into English? Or was it the other way around? The evidence we have found suggests a rather more complicated picture than either of these natural hypotheses. The earliest Arabic use of the *street* (*al-shari*) in its political sense that we have found, based on a non-comprehensive search, is from 1950, by the *an-Nahar* editorialist identified by his pseudonym “Tammuz” (Fu’ad Sulayman). The *street* is here conceived as an aggrieved everyman, manipulated and exploited by the political class, which is consistent with the “street vs. elite” construct that we have alluded to above:

This poor street, or rather the poor sons of the street, or rather poor me and you, sons of the street!! ... The government pulls us to and fro ... and the opposition also pulls this way and that. All of them make grand claims on our behalf, on behalf of the street, on behalf of the children of the street ... By God, leave this street to its own problems, for it is dizzy, dizzy from the opium of politics and politicians, and the hashish of merchants and extortionists. Leave it, may God have mercy on you.<sup>59</sup>

There are similar uses of the *street* in its political sense in 1952, in editorials by Kamil Muruwah (Kamel Mroue) in *al-Hayat*.<sup>60</sup> These early Arabic uses of *street* are later than the earliest use of *street* in English that we have found to refer to popular political support (1931)<sup>61</sup> but earlier than the first instance we have found of *street* in English applied to the Arab world (1957, see footnotes 39-41). Thus, this Arabic usage may have helped give rise to the English *street* metaphor as applied to the Arab public in the late 1950s, building on similar prior uses in English in contexts not pertaining to the Arab world.

There is a further interesting wrinkle. Whatever the origin of the *street* metaphor in English, it seems likely that the Arab context of its use precipitated its eventual modification by the adjective *Arab* in English, yielding the now-common expression *Arab street*. But in an interesting inversion, this full expression, *Arab street*, seems to have in turn been borrowed back into Arabic from English. We searched for *Arab street* in its

58. “Thunder on the center-right: The Weekly Standard turns 10,” *Reason*, April 2006, <http://www.reason.com/news/show/33299.html>.

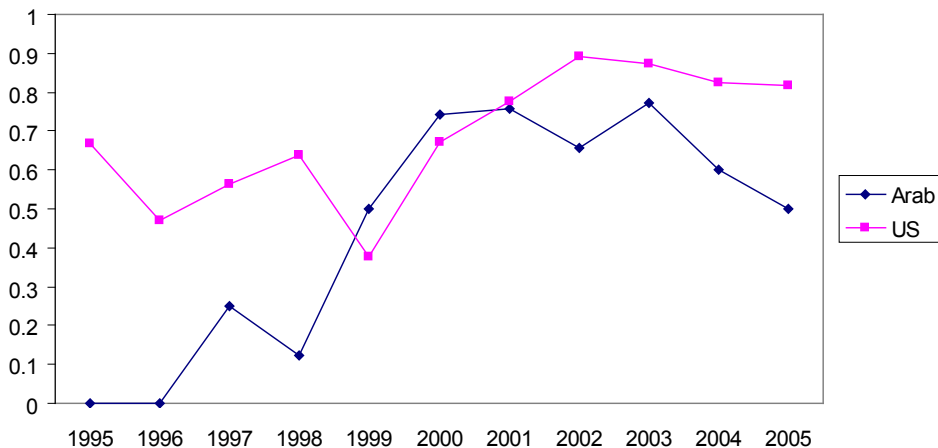
59. *An-Nahar*, January 11, 1950, front-page editorial.

60. *Al-Hayat*, February 12 and 13, 1952, front-page editorials.

61. Lewis, *Hitler*, p. 57.

political sense, and *Arab public opinion*, in the Arab media (World News Connection database, as before) for the years 1995-2005. Figure 6 shows the proportion of all references in a given year that took the form *Arab street* rather than *Arab public opinion*, and also shows the analogous quantity from the US media for comparison (copied from Figure 4).

**Figure 6: Arab Street over Time in Arab and US Media**



*The proportion of references to Arab public opinion that took the form Arab street rather than Arab public opinion, in Arab and US media. Sources: World News Connection, LexisNexis, 1995-2005.*

The expression *Arab street* appears to have been well-established in the US media prior to the first appearance of the corresponding Arabic expression (*al-shari' al-'arabi*) in the Arab media in 1997. We cannot be certain that 1997 is indeed the first use of *Arab street* in the Arab media, since the World News Connection database extends back only to 1995. However, if this is indeed the first occurrence, these data do suggest a borrowing from English to Arabic. After 1997, the expression *Arab street* gains currency in Arabic, and it is by now quite common.

Thus, one possible overall trajectory is circular: although *street* was in use in its political sense in English at least as early as the 1930s, this English usage came to be applied widely to the Arab world in the 1950s partly as a result of the Arabic use of the metaphor. This gradually gave rise to the English expression *Arab street* in the 1970s, which was re-imported into Arabic in the 1990s. At every stage of this process, the associations of the metaphor may have altered somewhat, resulting in a different contemporary valence for the expression in Arabic and in English.

## CONCLUSION

Having surveyed the use and origins of the *Arab street* metaphor, we can distinguish those claims that we are fairly certain of from those that we merely suspect to be true. We merely suspect a circular pattern of borrowing, from Arabic (*al-shari'*) to English (*Arab "street"*) and back again (*al-shari' al-'arabi*). In contrast, we are reasonably certain of a number of important points that fit together into a broader argument.

We have seen that the *Arab street* metaphor captures a denigrating, pejorative construal of Arab public opinion in the US media, associating that public with volatility and irrationality. We also have seen that the phrase *Arab street* has become the standard or canonical means of referring to Arab public opinion in the US media. This widespread use of the *Arab street* metaphor regularly invites the reader to discount or dismiss Arab public opinion and to regard it as being unreasonable and extreme. Moreover, by focusing attention on the opposition between the *street* and the rulers, this construct obscures large segments of Arab public opinion that fall at neither pole of the dichotomy, that are neither irrational nor volatile, and that share many characteristics with public opinion in other parts of the world. Finally, in English (unlike Arabic) the *street* metaphor is applied almost exclusively to Arabs, inviting the inference that the Arab public is fundamentally unlike others.<sup>62</sup> Thus, the metaphor does seem to present the Arab public to the US reader as dangerous, profoundly foreign, and not worthy or capable of engagement — a serious mischaracterization with potentially serious consequences.

We anticipate a number of possible objections to the argument we have sketched here. One such objection is that if the *Arab street* stereotype has any negative impact on American perceptions of the Arab public, that effect is surely exceedingly weak. It might be acknowledged that negative associations are evoked in the minds of some readers and listeners, but it might then be claimed that these associations are probably negligible and do not influence prevailing attitudes toward the Arab world in the ways we have suggested. Indeed, it might be alleged that these negative associations are relatively mild when compared with the more blatant stereotyping of Arabs that is commonly encountered in popular culture and the media. It is difficult to address this argument definitively without gathering empirical data on the effects of this phrase on readers and listeners, and without comparing it to other forms of stereotyping, something we have not done. However, even if we were to accept for the sake of argument that the immediate effect of any given exposure is relatively weak, we would contend that the frequency, indeed pervasiveness, of the metaphor magnifies the effects that it generates. Moreover, the very subtlety of the metaphor might make it all the more effective in influencing attitudes. Unlike more blatant negative portrayals of the Arab world, the metaphor is less likely to be blocked out and dismissed as unfairly disparaging by sophisticated consumers of news and analysis on the Middle East precisely because it is relatively subtle. And since *Arab street* is by now the standard means of referring to Arab public opinion in the US media, most linguistic references to the Arab public will be filtered through this problematic metaphor, yielding a potentially large cumulative effect. This idea, of the cumulative power of subtle linguistic framings echoes a proposal by Victor Klemperer, who studied the political distortion of the German language by the Nazis, and the effects that language had on its speakers. He was interested in whether — and how — something as simple as a word choice could gradually come to affect an entire society's political outlook. He proposed that: "Words can be like tiny doses of arsenic: they are swallowed unnoticed, appear to have no effect, and then after a little time the toxic reaction sets

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62. A possibly related phenomenon is the regular use of the term *intifada* in English, despite the availability of the term *uprising* — suggesting that the Palestinian uprising is qualitatively different from other uprisings.

in after all.”<sup>63</sup> While we cannot be certain without direct probing, it is possible that repeated exposure to the *Arab street* metaphor works in a similar manner.

Another response to our line of argument might be that the English use of *Arab street* cannot possibly stereotype or caricature Arab public opinion, if the metaphor was at least partly borrowed from Arabic in the first place. How much of a misrepresentation can it be to use an Arabic metaphor when referring to Arab public opinion? Two things can be said in reply to this objection. First, there is nothing to prevent a community from misrepresenting itself, or indeed the media and the elite of a community from misrepresenting other elements of that community. We contend that this is what often takes place with the *street* metaphor when used in Arabic. At the same time, it is worth reiterating that the English usage of the *street* metaphor seems to be more negatively charged than its Arabic counterpart, and that the metaphor in English is applied nearly exclusively to Arabs, whereas in Arabic it is applied more broadly. For these reasons, the metaphor cannot be seen as identical in the two languages — and the English version appears to be the more discriminatory.

Finally, there is a possible objection to our argument which raises larger social and political questions. It may be claimed that the use of the *Arab street* to refer to Arab public opinion is not a distortion for the simple reason that there is no public opinion in the modern Arab world in the same sense that there is in the modern West. Since Arab publics can only give vent to their views in demonstrations, it may be claimed that it is not a mistake to equate their voice with the views expressed in street protests. Two main reasons might be given to justify this objection. First, some commentators have recently alleged that the Arab world has not established a public sphere of the type generally associated with modernity and with “mature” societies endowed with a vibrant political culture.<sup>64</sup> Second, it might be held that the authoritarian regimes that quash vocal opposition in many Arab states leave citizens almost no genuine means of expressing their political opinions other than spontaneous street demonstrations; such street protests are one of the very few outlets available to them. Although we cannot address this objection and its justifications fully in this article, two points can be made in response. The first is to note that in many Arab regimes, free and spontaneous street protests are actively suppressed. Indeed, in the most repressive of these regimes, the street protests which do occur are officially sanctioned and actually represent the views of the regime. In these contexts, it is even more of a distortion to associate public opinion with street protests than it would be in other contexts. The second point is that the flat denial of the existence of Arab public opinion in the generally accepted Western sense, on the grounds of lack of “political maturity” or the absence of a public sphere, is largely mistaken. Arabs have at their disposal a wide range of means of expressing their political views.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, it is striking, and ironic, that the *Arab street* metaphor took

63. Victor Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich: LTI – Lingua Tertii Imperii: A Philologist’s Notebook* (London and New Brunswick, NJ: The Athlone Press, 2000), pp. 15-16.

64. For some claims to this effect, see Shakir al-Nabulsi, *Al-Shari’ al-‘Arabi [The Arab Street]* (Beirut: al-Mu’assasah al-‘Arabiyyah lil-Dirasat wal-Nashr, 2003); Hazim Saghiyyah, *Wad’ al-‘Urubah [The Condition of Arabism]* (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 1999); Hazim Saghiyyah, *Tasaddu’ al-Mashriq al-‘Arabi [The Collapse of the Arab Levant]* (Beirut: Riad El-Rayyes Books, 2004).

65. See, for example, Marc Lynch, *Voices of the New Arab Public: Iraq, al-Jazeera, and Middle East Politics Today* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

hold in English in the mid-1990s at around the time that Al-Jazeera satellite television was launched — an Arab media outlet which helped provide a much more open public sphere for Arabs than the staid state media that preceded it. Thus, the reality of an assertive, informed, and open pan-Arab public opinion was being implicitly denied linguistically in the US media at exactly the time when it was being formed in actuality.

All societies contain political opinions that challenge prevailing power structures, whether they are expressed in overt demonstrations, television call-in shows, blogs, or otherwise. On any given issue at any given time, the opinions of some members of the public may be held passionately and may be perceived to threaten the *status quo*. There should be nothing wrong with referring to or discussing this aspect of public opinion. But attempting to refer to it using the *street* metaphor is problematic for the reasons we have outlined. Moreover, intimating that this aspect of public opinion is identical with the entirety of public opinion is generally inaccurate. Above all, what is most troublesome about this metaphor is not its mere existence, but its near-universal application. As the standard means of referring to Arab public opinion, and only Arab public opinion, it has the potential to cloud rather than clarify Americans' view of a very important force in the modern Middle East.