From the Arab Street to Arab Public Opinion. A Quiet Revolution

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Whenever dramatic events occur in the Middle East and North Africa - and the region does indeed have more than its fair share of such occurrences, western journalists, media pundits and politicians have naturally tried to guess the reaction on the «Arab streets». In the absence of reliable public opinion polls and of a free press, such a response is understandable. The results however only ever offered a coarse yardstick of what ordinary people really thought, and were inevitably ridden with stereotypes: western journalists very often worked without the unmatchable skill of mastering the language spoken in the countries they were covering, whether Arabic or Berber. Many journalists in Mediterranean countries on the southern shore and beyond lived a frustrating life due to the heavy censorship imposed upon them on their reports of domestic affairs, let alone if they tried to cover the events unfolding in a «brother country», and they were forced to watch as their western peers were courted by their Arab leaders. These leaders often feared well-known journalists, and regularly invited them to all-expenses-paid interviews and quoted them back to the people they ruled as the masters of their trade.

As always, there were a few notable exceptions: the Egyptian newspaper *Al Ahram*, when it was edited in the 1950s and 1960s by Mohammed Heikal, was not simply the mouthpiece of President Nasser, it was a source of well-informed and intelligent analysis of Arab politics and public opinion; the press in Beyrouth was freer than elsewhere in most of the Arab world. By the mid-1980s, the weekly Algerian paper *Algérie Actualités* was beginning to stir itself into action, while in Morocco and elsewhere in the Middle East, some journalists were fighting hard to gain a measure of freedom. At the same time, London took over from Paris as the centre of newspapers, which were either broadsheets opposing one or other of the Arab regimes or more serious publications. Such newspapers were however only available to a privileged few and easily confiscated at the borders of Arab countries. Television in all these countries was constantly stultified and became a past master, well before the phrase was coined to criticise western television, at dumbing down its emissions. It is interesting to note that the lowest common denominator was deemed the best way of serving the interests of people whose standard of literacy, over the very same period of time and across the region, was increasing fast.

In the 1980s and in order to escape the millstone around their necks, more and more North Africans and Middle Eastern inhabitants turned to satellite broadcasts: Tunisians chose Italian, then French television stations; Algerians watched French stations; and others increasingly tuned into CNN. It was only a matter of time before an Arab television station offering decent news coverage was set up. This happened when Al Jazeera went on the air in the late 1996s. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 had seen the triumph of CNN, a triumph which was short lived. By 2001, the events of 11th September and the subsequent overthrowing of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan presented Al Jazeera with its coming-out party: the Qatar based station has not looked back since, and has sown at least three other stations: LBC is based in Lebanon and financed by Saudi and Lebanese money; Al Arabiyya is based in Dubai and financed by Kuwaiti and Saudi resources and we also have Abu Dhabi TV. For the first time ever, we can speak of an Arab public opinion, Arab opinion shapers and Arab television pundits. The fundamental point is that the birth of Pan-Arab media means that Arab governments no longer have the monopoly on the distribution of information.

Equally as important, these new international Arab television channels are exporting information to the West. This phenomenon is completely new: exporting opinion not only to Western journalists but also to Western public and governments. The interview with Osama Ben Laden in November 2001 is a case in point or what is taking place in Iraq every day.

The impact of these stations has been felt both in Arab countries and in the West. In the former nations, many leaders have done everything in their power to prevent their people from watching programs that they deemed unfit or dangerous. After all, freedom of speech, polemics, debates, analysis, and sometimes insults may often lead to disorder; they can result in a questioning the *status quo*, and can even be revolutionary, something which Ayatollah Khomeini´s use of cassettes in the late 1970s proved even before the advent of Arab television stations. These television stations, however, offered what had hitherto only been a virtual medium: a mirror in which the average

Arab, or for that matter the average Berber, can look at and recognise him or herself.

Other developments have speeded up the advent of what can now really be called an Arab public opinion. In some countries, not least in North Africa, serious publications have emerged, each with its own agenda, specialist approach, or manner of looking at the world, which is taken seriously and carries weight. *Le Quotidien* d´Algérie is recognised as a serious daily publication, indeed as the most serious daily paper in Algiers; *L´Economiste* in Casablanca is the undisputed reference when it comes to economic affairs; and in the same city, *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* is more controversial, but its contribution to the Moroccan political debate is by no means negligible. I myself do not read Arabic, but publications in Arabic carry much weight. At the same time the coverage by the western press of North African events in particular has declined: neither in Spain nor in France nor in the United Kingdom can readers find the opinions and intimate knowledge displayed by some of the great names that graced the columns of such daily newspapers as *Le Monde* until a decade ago.

Western journalists are loath to admit this state of affairs. Some, I suspect, are not even aware of how far matters have developed in only a few years. Some, despite their specialisation in the Middle East region, remain somewhat condescending of «the Arabs»; others love to preach at the Arabs very much as their colonial forebears did, though admittedly not on the same subjects. Quite apart from their lack of the Arabic language, few have any real knowledge of economic affairs. Though many exceptions exist, the standard of reporting in the West has fallen victim to a general «dumbing down» of information, and not simply where views of the Arab world are concerned. *Le Monde* today is constantly on the attack where before it sought to explain, more often than not denouncing rather than offering an analysis of the growing complexity of the affairs of the world, and discarding any serious scrutiny and discussion of economic affairs that lie at the heart of many of today's problems. Europeans like to pride themselves in their sophisticated methods when compared to their American brethren, but how many European journalists represent a truly European view, or seek out sources further afield than the domestic capital where they work, and can read and write fluently in two or three languages?

The emergence of a truly Pan-Arab public opinion may well be a much longer lasting phenomenon that the Pan-Arab political nationalism whose beacon took the form of Nasser. Indeed, its emergence is the result of a revolution in techniques which has wrought a revolution in methods of communication. Though strictly speaking I am no longer a journalist, I chose to write in three North African publications on the eve of the campaign to topple Saddam Hussein. I have in the past written in all manner of European and American publications, from the *Financial Times*, where I worked from 1977 to 1995, to the *Wall Street Journal*, *Le Monde* and *El País*. Earlier this year, many reasons prodded me to write on the coming war in the publications *L'Économiste*, *Le Quotidien d'Oran* and *Réalités* in Tunis. The very existence of this newly emerging public opinion across North Africa and the Middle East was undoubtedly one of the principle motives. The changes that this opinion will forge are difficult to anticipate. We can only hope that the more serious journalists, people who understand the complexities of the world, and who are unwilling to treat *The Protocols of Zion* as a serious text or to write that Princess Diana was assassinated on instructions from the British royal family because she had an Arab lover, will emerge and write about the growing complexity of the world; and that such people will help reveal the bogus theory of the so-called «clash of civilisations» that is so beloved of some pundits as the lie it is. If Arab public opinion is better informed, maybe it will be able to react in ways that the west will consider less «emotional». Whatever the end result may be, the Arab street has changed: it is becoming the Arab public opinion, and is a mutation of which journalists and politicians in Europe and America will have to take greater heed in the future than they have until now.