

The 'Arab Street' and the War: Are Regimes in Control?

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Brief Analysis

An apparently spontaneous protest stopped traffic in Cairo's Tahrir Square Thursday. Protesting the allied attack on Iraq, some of the participants turned violent, overturning police blockades. In Damascus, riot police fired tear gas on hundreds of protesters who threw rocks and tried to rush the U.S. embassy. Several smaller demonstrations were also reported in Lebanon, Jordan, and the Gaza Strip. Today, more protests occurred in Cairo, Jerusalem, Beirut, Damascus, Amman, and Manama. In Yemen, a shootout was reported between police and antiwar protesters marching on the U.S. embassy in Sanaa. These incidents support the idea of a dangerous "Arab street," reflecting a disaffected Arab public incensed at U.S. policy. What is the impact of Arab antiwar opinion on regional stability?

Recent Warnings and Protests

Last summer, Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak warned that "disorder and chaos may prevail in the region" should America attack Iraq. A host of Arab and Muslim countries cautioned the United Nations last month that the "extent of destabilization in the region and uncertainty in Iraq in the case of a war go far beyond our imagination." A Jordanian diplomat predicted "serious repercussions." Despite these warnings, demonstrations in the months leading to war were relatively moderate, both in size and tone. This suggests that regional regimes took the necessary measures to maintain control.

In early January, a mere 200 antiwar demonstrators protested at the U.S. embassy in Lebanon. In Yemen, a slightly larger crowd chanted, "No to regime change by force." In Bahrain, some 100 youths carried banners proclaiming "No to war in Iraq" and "Death to America." In Cairo, an estimated 50 Egyptians held a silent protest, brandishing posters that denounced U.S. president George W. Bush as a "Neo-Nazi." Turnout was a little more impressive in Cairo on January 18, when a march drew 1,000. These numbers, however, have paled next to concurrent mass protests in Washington, Paris, and London.

The fizzling of the Arab street prompted one Egyptian columnist to complain that the protests "were embarrassing," asking, "Where did all the anger go?" One explanation is that Arab demonstrators must often obtain a plethora of permits ahead of time, and, even when permission is granted, protests may only be carried out in ways approved by the government. In Jordan, for example, Islamists held a prewar demonstration that brought out 5,000, but promised that continued demonstrations would be "in full respect of the law." Another explanation for the absence of

mass protests in the Arab world is that most demonstrations are heavily policed; protestors lament that demonstrations often result in "a rally of 300 people cordoned by some 3,000 antirally policemen using tear gas and batons to disperse the crowd."

Co-opting the Street

As war approached, demonstrations did appear to increase in number and intensity. But rather than reflecting an emerging confrontation with regimes, the "street" acted in a decidedly nonthreatening manner, suggesting that Arab regimes were still in control. In February, some 140,000 gathered in Cairo International Stadium for a demonstration organized by labor unions and opposition parties. In March, about 160,000 reportedly marched in Casablanca, Morocco. These demonstrations were ordered, well regulated and, with few exceptions, disturbance-free.

Taking a cue from the popular stadium rally, Mubarak's National Democratic Party itself organized the region's largest protest rally, with 600,000 reported participants. One news account stated, "the heavy presence of employees from state companies -- mainly oil firms like Petrobel, Petrojet and Misr -- cast doubt on whether the turnout was altogether spontaneous." Indeed, Mubarak appears in this case to have manipulated the Arab street for political gain. Similarly, Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Salleh has called for several large protests in recent months, drawing up to 200,000 at one. Earlier this month, he took the opportunity to make several antiwar statements to appease his public ahead of the forthcoming April 27 Yemeni elections, and allowed Yemen's public to vent through nonviolent demonstrations. Other Arab regimes -- Syria, Lebanon, Sudan -- have also followed this model, with up to 200,000 marching in Damascus before the war. Because demonstrations do not occur in these countries without the written consent or, at times, the prodding of the authorities, it is clear that Arab governments have found a way to exploit antiwar sentiment, rather than suppress it, for fear it will ultimately turn against them.

The Street in Context

Despite exaggerated claims, the Arab street has had only limited success in affecting Arab politics. As David Pollock noted in a 1992 study, "There has not been a successful popular uprising . . . for at least the past thirty-five years, if ever." Echoing this theme, Egyptian scholar Saad Eddin Ibrahim recently recalled "a time when the Arab street could make or break policies. But over the past quarter of a century, Arab regimes have succeeded in emasculating this street." Analyst Daniel Pipes notes that the Arab street has consistently failed to erupt when expected, particularly after polarizing incidents such as the 1982 killings in Sabra and Shatila or after the 1989 fatwa against author Salman Rushdie. Similarly, during the 1991 Gulf War, major demonstrations were few and tame; most of the "Arab street" watched the war on television. Perhaps most stunningly, the Palestinian uprising of 1988-1991 failed to trigger sustained mass protests anywhere in the Arab world.

There are, of course, exceptions; popular demonstrations do occasionally have important political effects. The coups in Egypt (1952), Iraq (1958), and Sudan (1969) had some popular participation. And in the 1980s and 1990s, local regimes in Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Sudan, Tunisia, and Jordan felt the impact of "bread riots" -- protests against economic deterioration, domestic mismanagement, and the apparent high-handedness of international financial institutions. Indeed, when Arab demonstrators have come out in force, it has generally been to protest the actions of their own governments. In 2000, for instance, as many as a million people took to the streets of Morocco to protest their government's plans to enhance women's rights.

But another important exception is the recent Arab street reaction to Arab-Israeli violence. When the second intifada erupted in late September 2000, thousands took to the streets on numerous occasions. Participation reached a peak in April 2002, with Israel's Operation Defensive Shield and related Jenin events.

Implications

While disconcerting, the demonstrations to date appear to have posed little threat to regional security and Arab regimes. In their present form, they have served as a vent for anger against both local regimes and the allied invasion of Iraq. None reflect a surge in popular support for Saddam Husayn. An important "street" to watch, however, is Jordan, home to hundreds of thousands of Iraqi expatriates as well as millions of Palestinians. Currently, Amman downplays the prospects of street violence, but has warned that "maintaining calm and order will become more difficult the longer the duration of the war."

Unauthorized protests are likely to continue in Arab capitals, while regimes take steps to maintain control. The situation will be an important one to monitor. The speed, pace, and severity of events in Iraq could alter the pattern of demonstrations in the days and weeks to come.

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