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WHO CARES WHAT THE TAXI DRIVER THINKS?
PUBLIC OPINION AND DOMESTIC POLICY IN JORDAN & SYRIA

KATHARINE PAZOLES
JENNIFER MIKHAIL
KATHERINE EPP

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U.S. interaction with the Middle East builds upon the assumption that the Arab public sphere and Arab public opinion have no role in the realm of politics within authoritarian states. In a democratic society, the public sphere should serve as a middleman between the state and society; ideas presented in the public sphere and arrived at through reason can be effectively acted upon by the state.¹ In the absence of a democratic system, such as in many countries throughout the Arab world, it is not only assumed that interactions between state and society function differently, but rather that there is a complete lack of public space for Arab publics to express their opinions. Authoritarian states, the logic goes, do not rely on the public as a source of political power and legitimacy, therefore they have no reason to listen to public opinion. However, evidence suggests that public opinion not only exists but matters even in non-democratic societies. Shibley Telhami and Alexa Hoyne have both shown that public opinion has played a key role in Arab regimes' decision making regarding foreign policies.^{2,3} During the Persian Gulf War, the official stances of various Arab countries correlated with what their respective publics believed.⁴ Particularly in light of the recent events of the "Arab Spring" uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and other Arab countries, it is clear that public opinion ultimately serves as the basis of legitimacy even for regimes in non-democratic states. This explains why authoritarian regimes invest so many resources in controlling media outlets, disseminating official propaganda, restricting forums for open debate about public issues, and assessing public sentiment.

¹ Lynch, Marc. *Voices of the New Arab Public: Iraq, Al-Jazeera, and Middle East Politics Today*. New York: Columbia UP, 2006.

² Telhami, Shibley. "Arab Public Opinion and the Gulf War." *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 108, No. 3, The Academy of Political Science; Autumn, 1993, pp. 437-452.

³ Hoyne, Alexa. "Negotiating Identity: Prospect for Jordanian and Syrian Peace with Israel in the 1990s." College of William and Mary

⁴ Pollock, David. *The "Arab Street?": Public Opinion in the Arab World*. Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1992.

In recent years the role of the public sphere in the Middle East has received increasing attention by international observers as political openings within public spaces are seen as crucial for democratic development. In order to properly assess prospects for democratic change, however, an accurate picture of the role of public opinion is necessary. U.S. policymakers promoting the spread of democracy in the Middle East must understand the connection between regimes and their people if they hope to foster political participation and government transparency. In addition, political engagement with non-democratic regimes requires an understanding of the main drivers behind their choices and actions. Public opinion can be seen to affect the political calculations of rational actors in non-democratic systems by using the threshold constraint model: if certain actions are contrary to public opinion to an extent which would trigger a particularly violent reaction on the street, rational leaders will take these reactions into account when formulating policies.⁵ Even when politicians express one sentiment in private and another in public, they are more likely to act on their publicly expressed sentiments. This is persuasive evidence that policymakers heed public opinion –when their personal opinion conflicts with the “public approved” position, they err on the side of appeasing the public. This strongly contradicts the idea that authoritarian rulers are instituting policies they favor at the expense of the public, and suggests that understanding Arab public opinion and the role it plays is crucial to correctly analyze authoritarian regimes’ decision making. Given the United States’ continued military and economic involvement in the region, it is essential that policymakers apply the correct framework to predict non-democratic regimes’ actions and effectively engage with them.

Our research supports the theory that there is indeed a strong link between non-democratic regimes and their people, even in the realm of domestic policy. Although it may

⁵ Lynch, 2006.

function in a murkier way than in more transparent systems, political influence tends to move between the state and society in both directions. We found that despite having different political systems, both the Syrian and Jordanian governments carefully monitor public opinion towards domestic policy issues before introducing new initiatives. At the same time, both governments also utilize their channels of influence, particularly the media, to disseminate official rhetoric and shape support for certain policies. The government may even take advantage of certain fears and concerns circulating in the public sphere to put forth new policies or escape blame for failed initiatives. We found that the direction and strength of the influence of opinion on policymaking varies depending on several factors including scale and complexity of the issue (local, national or international) and the stability of the regime at the time. A more nuanced understanding of this relationship is essential to understanding calculations behind regime policymaking both in the foreign and domestic arenas. In addition, a clearer picture of the connections between governments and their people can assist in democracy promotion and the development of civil society in the Arab world.

Research Design

Given the diversity of political structures and public spheres within the region defined as the Middle East, we decided to use a comparative study of two countries in order to effectively conceptualize the role that public opinion plays in government policymaking. We wanted to use two countries whose political structure was stable yet implemented different modes of authoritarian rule, which would give us two ends of the spectrum of authoritarian governments in the region as a whole. In formulating our research design, we chose Jordan and Syria as the two comparative case studies for several reasons. First, we hoped the differences between Jordan's

constitutional monarchy and Syria's authoritarian regime would be sufficient to demonstrate a range of sensitivity towards public opinion along the spectrum of highly authoritarian to semi-democratic governance. Jordan is often thought of as one of the more politically open especially in terms of media and permissible public discourse. The Syrian regime, on the other hand, exemplifies authoritarian rule in its brutal suppression of free speech and government criticism. We hypothesized that the different styles of governance would show different levels of receptiveness to public opinion, and by placing them at opposite ends of a spectrum it would be possible to theorize how governmental systems in between these two extremes might behave.

Second, we felt relatively confident that people in these two countries would be willing to speak with us regarding certain domestic policy issues. Especially as three women traveling alone in the region, we knew that we would have to be sensitive to certain restrictions on our research. We would not have been able to do research as effectively in Saudi Arabia, for example.

It is important to note that at the time of our research neither of these countries had yet experienced the widespread popular unrest that had swept through Tunisia and Egypt, and so were relatively stable. The protests currently raging in Syria seem poised to permanently alter the dynamic of the relationship between the government and its people in a way that none of our sources foresaw. Although this clearly changes our classification of Syria as a rather stable authoritarian society, for the purposes of this paper, the impact of the uprisings will not be addressed.

In order to further narrow our research, we decided to look at specific domestic policies within both Jordan and Syria. To more effectively compare Jordanian and Syrian domestic policy, we needed to choose an issue that was common to both countries, yet was not too

sensitive for our interviewees to speak with us about. With these restrictions in mind, the issue of Iraqi refugees in both countries presented an ideal opportunity to examine both public opinions about the issue in relation to the actual policies the governments implemented. We narrowed our focus even further to the period from 2006 through 2008, when the influx of refugees was at its peak and when both Jordan and Syria initiated changes in their policies towards the refugees.

Our research included a survey of the literature surrounding the role of the Arab public sphere. After a comprehensive review of the Jordanian and Syrian media and research studies pertaining to the issue of Iraqi refugees, we began our interview process. In February 2011, we conducted three preliminary interviews – two academic scholars and a think tank researcher. The purpose of these interviews was to determine how to frame our research within the existing body of knowledge, as well as to gather in-country contacts for our research trip. Then in March, we spent a week in Jordan and Syria conducting interviews. We spent three days in Amman and conducted four interviews – a journalist, an employee of the Jordanian Royal Court, and two researchers from the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan. In Damascus, Syria,⁶ we conducted three interviews with a journalist, an economist, and an employee of UNHCR. Upon returning to the U.S., we continued our research with follow up interviews via Skype. In these three additional interviews, we were able to speak with a Jordanian blogger, a think tank researcher and employee of the Royal Court working with public polling.

The diversity of our interviewees and their backgrounds gave us insight into a wide range of perspectives on the relationship between public opinion, the public sphere and policy formulation. There were those directly involved in the relationship - such as the Royal Court employees and the blogger - as well as those who observed the relationship from afar -- such as

⁶ Note: Only two of us were able to travel to Syria to conduct interviews. All three of us were present in Jordan.

the researchers and academics. We heard the views of pro-government individuals (in the case of Jordan) as well as government critics. The fact that we were unable to arrange interviews with representatives of the Syrian government unfortunately limited our research. At the same time, it highlighted the secretive nature of Syrian officialdom, in contrast with the greater transparency in government affairs in Jordan.

Government and the Public Sphere in Jordan and Syria

In 1989, Jordan was faced with a troubled economy and accusations of political corruption. After an unpopular economic policy raised the price of bread,⁷ riots broke out across the country particularly in the south. The government of King Hussein was forced to respond through a series of political reforms and promises of parliamentary elections, which would be held that year. Over the course of the next few years, parliamentary elections were held regularly, martial law was lifted, and the ban on political parties was removed.⁸ It is worthwhile to mention that before the 1989 uprising, a leading opinion pollster had warned the regime not to increase bread prices, predicting it would lead to unrest.⁹ Since then, the Jordanian government and the Royal Court have conducted regular opinion polling and focus groups to keep track of public opinion regarding key issues.

The progress made by Jordan towards political liberalization and democratization would forever change how citizens and the government, as well as outside observers, would perceive Jordanian politics. Over the course of the next two decades, Jordan was recognized as one of the

⁷ Khoury, Mu'in, interview by Katie Epp, Jennifer Mikhail, and Kate Pazoles (April 17, 2011).

⁸ Ryan, Curtis R. "Political Liberalization and Monarchical Succession in Jordan." *Israel Affairs*, Spring 2003, Vol. 9 Issue 3, p129-140

⁹ Khoury, Mu'in, interview by Katie Epp, Jennifer Mikhail, and Kate Pazoles (April 17, 2011).

more liberal and open countries in the region. This is not to say that Jordanian politics operate in a genuinely democratic system. Quitan Wiktorowicz argues that the Jordanian government has used liberalization as a tool to counter the threat posed by economic crises and political instability. He states that the “Jordanian regime, in an attempt to maintain its power, utilizes the growth of civil society institutions through non-governmental organizations to enhance state social control using order and visibility.”¹⁰ Thus, these hallmarks of civil society allow the government direct access to social organizations and allow it to better monitor the public and their actions.

The Syrian government, on the other hand, is known for its strict authoritarian rule and its crackdowns against freedom and political dissent. When Bashar Assad ascended to power in 2000, there was hope among both the Syrian people and the international community that the younger Assad could implement reforms and make progress towards a more open political environment. During his first year in power, Bashar implemented several reforms geared towards the development and opening of civil society for political debate. However, the old powerbrokers of his father’s government were determined to maintain the status quo. The reforms were soon backtracked and the crackdown on the public sphere and political debate was reestablished. By mid-2001, Syria had returned to its former closed nature.¹¹ Political discourse in the public sphere remains minimal, and the Syrian intelligence forces, or *mukhabarat*, continue to closely monitor government critics.

Despite the Syrian government’s reversal of policy, Bassam Haddad claimed that in 2001, Syrians were “becoming more aware of their rights, less fearful and more visibly frustrated and

¹⁰ Wiktorowicz, Quitan. “Civil Society as Social Control: State Power in Jordan.” *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 33, No. 1: October 2000, p 57.

¹¹ Haddad, Bassam. “Business as Usual in Syria?” *Middle East Research and Information Project*. 7 September, 2001; <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero090701> and Zisser, Eyal. “Does Bashar al-Assad Rule Syria?” *Middle East Quarterly*. Winter 2003, pp. 15-23

outspoken”¹² despite the Syrian government’s return to crackdown. It is also important to note that our sources and our research indicated that Bashar Assad himself was somewhat popular among the Syrian people; due to the circumstances around his ascent to the presidency – the fact that he had not been groomed for the position – he enjoyed a public appeal that the old guard lacked.¹³ His western education and his 2001 introduction of Internet technologies to the country have given him a reputation of being open-minded and reform oriented.^{14, 15}

As shown above, these two governments are on opposite ends of the non-democratic scale. Jordanians often praise Jordan’s development of civil society as a hallmark of democratic processes and are quick to distance themselves from being identified with strict autocratic regimes such as Syria, despite the many obstacles to free and open political debate and an open public sphere that still exist in Jordan. The Jordanian parliament provides citizens with political representation in some respects through participation in legal political parties and opportunity for debate; however, at the end of the day the monarch has the final say and decisions are heavily influenced by institutions not accountable to the public such as the Royal Court and the intelligence service.¹⁶ Syria is more strictly authoritarian in terms of freedom of the public sphere – public opinions and debate are suppressed and people are often fearful of the *mukhabarat* knocking on their door.

Our research seeks to determine how these two very different governments incorporated public opinion into their decision-making. Would one regime be more willing (or able) to risk stability for the sake of unpopular policies? What are the lines the government cannot cross

¹² Haddad, Bassam. “Business as Usual in Syria?” *Middle East Research and Information Project*. 7 September, 2001; <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero090701>

¹³ Zisser, Eyal. “The Succession Struggle in Damascus.” *Middle East Quarterly*. September 1995, pp. 57-64

¹⁴ Zisser, Eyal. “Does Bashar al-Assad Rule Syria?” *Middle East Quarterly*. Winter 2003, pp. 15-23

¹⁵ This has probably changed since his bloody crackdown on protesters in March and April 2011, although some still feel the brutality is the work of the old guard and their legacy from Hafez and not Bashar himself.

¹⁶ Choucair, Julia. “Illusive Reform: Jordan’s Stubborn Stability.” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Carnegie Papers*: Middle East Series, No. 76, December 2006.

without inciting mass public outcry, and are these lines different for more democratic Jordan than for authoritarian Syria? How much effort does each government put into determining these thresholds of public approval? We will now explore this relationship in the context of a case study on domestic policy towards Iraqi Refugees in both Jordan and Syria.

Iraqi Refugees in Jordan and Syria

The U.S. invasion in 2003 followed by the political unrest and sectarian strife in Iraq was the driving factor in what would later be deemed the ‘new refugee crisis.’ Iraqis began to flee their homes en masse and seek safe haven in neighboring countries particularly Jordan and Syria. For the purposes of our research, we will focus on the period of 2006 through 2008 during which the largest waves of Iraqis migrated across the borders. Looking at this period allowed us to examine specific policies of Jordan and Syria regarding Iraqi refugees. As previously mentioned we felt the issue of Iraqi refugees would serve as an appropriate case study for several reasons: it is a common issue affecting both Jordan and Syria, both countries shifted their policy towards Iraqi refugees over time allowing us to examine the drivers behind policy change, and although the domestic impact of the issue meant that citizens held strong opinions regarding the refugees’ presence, the issue was not too sensitive for us to conduct interviews.

The majority of Iraqis fled after the February 2006 bombing of the al-Askari shrine in Samarra, which intensified the insurgency and civil war within Iraq.¹⁷ Amnesty International warned that “the Middle East is on the verge of a new humanitarian crisis.”¹⁸ In 2007, it was estimated that there were 1.5 million internally displaced Iraqis and around two million Iraqi

¹⁷ “Failed Responsibility: Iraqi Refugees in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon” *Crisis Group Middle East Report N77*, 10 July 2008 p 4

¹⁸ “Humanitarian Crisis Looms in Iraq.” *Amnesty International*: April 16, 2007 pub. Assyrian International News Agency

refugees in neighboring countries.¹⁹ Although the exact number of refugees in Jordan and Syria has been disputed, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has estimated that between 500,000 and 750,000 sought refuge in each country.²⁰ For various reasons, an accurate count of Iraqi refugees was difficult to obtain. As the refugee crisis dragged on, both the Syrian and Jordanian governments had to find a balance between offering higher numbers to attract more international aid and providing lower numbers to abate domestic dissent.²¹ While the Jordanian government claimed to be hosting between 700,000 to 800,000 Iraqis, outside reports indicated the numbers were much lower; a May 2007 report issued by Norway's Institute for Labor and Social Research (FAFO) stated that there were between 450,000 and 500,000 Iraqis in Jordan, a number which had been determined by the Jordanian government's tactical team after initial FAFO estimates put the true number closer to 161,000.²² Estimates by the Syrian government and UNHCR put the total of Iraqi refugees in Syria at 1.5 to 1.6 million.²³ Outside organizations claim the true number may be closer to 300,000, but the Syrian government has refused access for independent studies to be conducted.

In both cases, Iraqi refugees have tended to congregate around the major urban hubs of Amman and Damascus. Because of their larger numbers and urban concentration, their presence in the host countries became more noticeable and their impact on the daily lives of Jordanian and Syrian citizens was more likely to be felt. Also during this period, both governments shifted some of their policies towards Iraqi refugees. Our goal was to gauge public opinion toward Iraqi

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ "UN warns of Iraq refugee disaster" *BBC News*, February 7, 2007.

²¹ "Failed Responsibility: Iraqi Refugees in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon" p 4

²² Ibid

²³ Leenders, Reinoud. "Iraqi Refugees in Syria: causing a spillover of the Iraqi conflict?" *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 8, 2008, Routledge pp 1563-1584

refugees at this time and determine whether or not there was a correlation between these opinions and the policy changes.

Domestic Policy towards Iraqi Refugees

When Iraqis began fleeing to Jordan and Syria, the governments and the people remained true to the long-standing tradition of “Arab Brotherhood.” This tradition recognized the political and moral responsibility of Arab states to provide refuge to other Arabs who were in need. In practice, this meant that a citizen of one Arab state did not need a visa to enter another Arab state for any reason – a policy of open borders. However, neither government was interested in a long-term integration of the refugees into their own population.²⁴ The Iraqis were considered “guests” in their host countries, and their presence was viewed as temporary.

Other than maintaining the same open border policy, refugees were dealt with differently within each country. Familiar with the plight of refugees after the waves of Palestinian refugees in both 1948 and 1967, the Jordanians were not surprised when Iraqis chose to come to Jordan to seek refuge from the violence in Iraq. Despite the ongoing domestic issue of the Palestinians’ status within Jordan, our source at the Royal Court told us that there was no general ill will towards Iraqis simply because they were refugees. Although the people of Jordan tend to feel like they bear most of the burden for the conflicts in the region, they are proud that they can be of service to their Arab brothers.²⁵ While the Jordanian government has often reaffirmed its commitment to *non-refoulement*,^{26, 27} it did not make obtaining *iqama* (residency

²⁴ Fagen, Patricia Weiss “Iraqi Refugees: Seeking Stability in Syria and Jordan” *Institute for the Study of International Migration and Center for International and Regional Studies*: Georgetown University and Georgetown University School of Foreign Service. 2007

²⁵ Anonymous Jordanian Royal Court employee, interview by Katie Epp, Jennifer Mikhail, and Kate Pazoles (March 14, 2011).

²⁶ Fagen, Patricia Weiss, p 9

permits) easy. Unregistered refugees had limited access to government services, such as public schools.²⁸ As “guests”, the Iraqis were also not permitted to work in Jordan, forcing many into poverty after their savings had run out.

In Syria, the commitment to pan-Arabism runs deeper; any Arab living in Syria was provided the same access to public healthcare and education as a Syrian citizen.²⁹ As “guests,” however, Iraqis were not allowed to work in Syria. Carole Laleve at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Damascus explained to us that the Syrian government felt granting work permits to refugees would be a “pull factor” attracting more refugees to come to Syria and put further strain on an already overburdened public system.³⁰

Another key aspect of the Iraqi refugee issue was international aid. In April 2007, UNHCR hosted an international donor conference in Geneva to discuss the rapidly increasing Iraqi refugee crisis and the needs of the host countries to provide assistance.³¹ Representatives from Jordan, Syria, Iraq, the European Union, and the United States were all present. Both the Syrian and Jordanian governments claimed that the refugees were costing them over \$1 Billion USD per year in services and resources.³² Emphasizing the strain on their economies and the role of the U.S. and the international community in precipitating the crisis, both countries postured for as much financial assistance as possible.³³

²⁷ The concept of *non-refoulement* was identified in the United Nations “Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The concept of *non-refoulement* requires that “No State Party shall expel, return (“refouler”) or extradite a person to another State where there are substantial grounds for believing that he would be in danger of being subjected to torture.” Jordan is among several countries that have ratified this convention. For more information, see “Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.” *Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: Adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 39/46 of 10 December 1984.* <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/cat.htm>

²⁸ Fagen, Patricia Weiss, p 9

²⁹ Fagen, Patricia Weiss, p 15

³⁰ Laleve, Carole, interview by Katie Epp and Kate Pazoles (March 18, 2011).

³¹ “Humanitarian Crisis Looms in Iraq.” *Amnesty International*

³² *Al-sharq al-awsat*, August 31, 2007. and Fagen, Patricia Weiss, p 18

³³ Seeley, Nick. “The Politics of Aid to Iraqi Refugees in Jordan”, *Middle East Report* 256, Fall 2010.

Meanwhile, to those on the ground, the visibility of the refugees meant they were an easy scapegoat on which to blame everything from rising prices to increases in crime and degeneration of morality. For example, the increase in rent prices in neighborhoods where large numbers of Iraqis chose to reside was seen as the result of the sudden influx of demand; ordinary Jordanians and Syrians either forgot or were not aware that the housing supply in their countries was already low to begin with.³⁴ Likewise, pre-existing factors such as government policies to subsidize commodities, which contributed to other economic woes, were ignored, as most citizens assumed the newcomers were the ones to blame. A Center for Strategic Studies (University of Jordan) report revealed that displaced Iraqis in Jordan actually had a much lower impact on Jordanian economic problems than was publicly believed.

Policy Changes

The first noticeable shift in policy towards Iraqi refugees could be seen at the borders. In November of 2005, an Iraqi branch of Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for the bombings of three hotels in Amman, which killed 60 people.³⁵ Following the incident, Jordan began to impose restrictions on border crossings, barring the entry of single Iraqi men between the ages of 17 to 35. In November of 2006, Jordan began requiring that Iraqis present a G-series passport for entry into Jordan, a type of passport that was costly and difficult to acquire.³⁶ Similarly, in 2007, the Syrian government began to require Iraqis to obtain visas prior to arriving at the border. The new visas also required proof that Iraqis would be able to support themselves upon entering Syria. Although these visas were renewable, they were only valid for a period of one month.³⁷

³⁴Agence France Presse, "Property Prices in Damascus go through the Roof," *The Daily Star* 26 March 2007.

³⁵"Failed Responsibility: Iraqi Refugees in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon" p 10 & Fagen, Patricia Weiss. p 8

³⁶"Failed Responsibility: Iraqi Refugees in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon" p 9

³⁷Leenders, Reinoud. pp 1563-1584

The second change was in regards to the access of public services. In August 2007, Jordan announced that Iraqis would have access to health services equivalent to those offered to Jordanian citizens. Then in September 2007, shortly after the UNHCR donor conference, Jordan announced that Iraqi children would be allowed to attend public schools regardless of their residency status.³⁸ Around the same time, the Syrian government began charging a nominal fee for Iraqis to access public health care services.

In examining these two areas of policy change, our research revealed five main factors that influenced the policy towards Iraqi refugees in both countries: international politics, foreign aid, economic issues, national security, and public perceptions of refugees.

Many of our interviewees mentioned that the international framing of the Iraqi refugee situation as a “crisis” changed the way both the Syrian and Jordanian governments depicted the issue when forming domestic policies. The 2006 Human Rights Watch report on Iraqi refugees was the beginning of this new framing, and began to push both governments to address the number of refugees pouring across their borders. In addition, the relationship between the Jordanian and Syrian governments and the Iraqi government has also been important in determining policy towards the refugees. Nick Seeley, a journalist in Jordan, described how relations between the Jordanian and Iraqi governments deteriorated – in addition to attempted bombings of the Jordanian embassy in Iraq, several Jordanian truckers were murdered en route to trade with Iraq. There was also a bombing in Iraq that had allegedly been perpetrated by a Jordanian.³⁹ These events led to ambassadors being recalled between the two countries.

Another related factor was the foreign aid allocated to the refugee issue, particularly in Jordan. Seeley explained that although at first the Jordanian government was trying to keep their

³⁸ “Jordan: Government Pledges to Grant Iraqis Education, Health Rights.” *Human Rights Watch* Report, 15 August 2007. <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2007/08/15/jordan-government-pledges-grant-iraqis-education-health-rights>

³⁹ Seeley, Nick, interview by Katie Epp, Jennifer Mikhail, and Kate Pazoles (March 13, 2011).

official estimate of the number of refugees low, after the international donor conference in Geneva, they embraced the larger numbers reported by Human Rights Watch as a lobbying tool for more foreign aid. While these funds were intended to provide better access to services for refugees, about 50% of the beneficiaries from these programs were Jordanians.

On the other hand, claiming these larger numbers of refugees within the country meant that the governments also had to demonstrate that they were making an effort to stem the flow of additional refugees. In Syria, a journalist with *Al-Hayat* newspaper told us that the Syrian government resented the international community for tying foreign aid for the refugees to political concessions by the Syrian government. Their response was to make it more difficult for refugees to enter Syria, forcing both the U.S. and Iraq to shoulder more of the burden for the refugees.

Economic issues also had an impact on domestic policy towards Iraqis. Both Jordan and Syria were experiencing a period of inflation and slow economic growth during the time of our case study, and many of these economic woes were blamed on the refugees. Both the Jordanian and Syrian government said that the refugees cost the country at least \$1 billion per year in access to services. Jordanians were also unhappy with the extra demand being put on scarce resources such as water. Our interviewees told us that the refugees would be blamed for being rich and driving up housing prices and being poor and straining their public services, often in the same breath. Jordan also suffers from extremely high unemployment rates, and so the issue of refugees' right to work was very sensitive, since the influx of refugees was seen as people taking Jordanian jobs. This was one of the reasons that the Jordanian government resisted integrating the Iraqis into society and granting them the right to work in Jordan.

In Syria, the government also began charging fees for the visas they now required Iraqis to have before entering the country, which they promoted as a way of raising revenue to offset the cost of hosting the refugees. It is notable that neither government, although they knew from economic studies that had been conducted that the refugees were not dragging down the economy in a significant way (and in fact may have been aiding the economy in certain cases),⁴⁰ made any effort to contradict these public perceptions about the Iraqis causing the economic problems.

National security was also a concern closely related to the Iraqi refugees. Both countries were worried about Iraqi sectarian issues spilling over the border and stirring up unrest within their societies. In Jordan, the hotel bombings of November 2005 led to strong security concerns. This gave the government the ability to enact stricter border requirements for refugees with the support of the people who felt that the Iraqis entering the country should be monitored more carefully. In Syria, there was a feeling that the Iraqi refugees were not being monitored or organized in any way; people were coming into the country under assumed identities with fake passports. Some of them had ties to terrorist or extremist groups. Furthermore, Iraqis exiting the country were hardly ever recorded meaning at any given time the Syrian government had virtually no idea who was in their country. Thus the security situations necessitated knowing who these people were, why they had come to Syria, and allow the government to validate its decision to contradict the dogma of “Arab brotherhood” and require visas for other Arabs to enter the country.

At the same time, public perceptions of refugees, as noted, were often negative. The Iraqis were blamed with price inflations, overcrowded housing and school systems and reduced

⁴⁰ Saif, Ibrahim and David M. DeBartolo. “The Iraq War’s Impact on Growth and Inflation in Jordan.” *Center for Strategic Studies: The University of Jordan*

access to resources and services. They also were seen as cause for an increase in crime, especially prostitution. One of our interviewees, however, told us that the security apparatus in Syria was very good at keeping the Iraqis in order and thus there were no major incidents or large crime waves associated with their arrival.⁴¹ Based on our interviews and research, we found a lot of contradictory opinions being circulated simultaneously. In one interview, we were told how similar the Iraqi and the Syrian people are, and how Syrians consider Iraqis to be like them so of course they welcome them into the country.⁴² Later the same day, we were told by another interviewee that Syrians and Iraqis are nothing alike; Iraqis are much more violent, sectarian, and nothing like Syrians.⁴³

This type of disparity in public perception also existed in Jordan. One of our interviewees told us that many Jordanians felt that the Iraqis had failed Saddam Hussein, and that they should have stayed and fought the U. S. in the name of their country.⁴⁴ In both countries, we also got a sense that despite the heavy burden the people felt they were carrying by hosting these refugees, they were proud of their “pan-Arab” heritage and were happy to host these “guests” in their homes or on their land. Notably, many of the articles we read before we went on our research trip mentioned that the Jordanians were probably prejudiced against the Iraqi refugees simply because they already had the Palestinian experience to serve as a warning sign against inviting foreigners into the country. During our interviews, however, we found the sentiment to be exactly the opposite - people felt that their country had a proud history of serving as a place of refuge for those in need, they were used to welcoming these “guests”.

⁴¹ Seifan, Samir. interview by Katie Epp and Kate Pazoles (March 17, 2011).

⁴² Seifan, Samir, interview by Katie Epp and Kate Pazoles (March 17, 2011).

⁴³ Hamidi, Ibrahim, interview by Katie Epp and Kate Pazoles. (March 17, 2011).

⁴⁴ Al-Masri, Mohammed, interview by Katie Epp, Jennifer Mikhail, and Kate Pazoles (March 15, 2011)

In both countries, however, public opinion about the government policy towards refugees aligned rather closely with the official stance and the policies enacted. Several of our interviewees in Jordan emphasized that the government, especially the monarchy, likes to keep its finger on the pulse in terms of what the people are saying. They do this by conducting regular opinion polls, even testing certain policies before they enact them to see the public reaction. “The government has a very good sense of what they can get away with, and what they would not be able to push through,” one of our interviewees from the Royal Court told us.⁴⁵ In addition, the Jordanian government is becoming more active on the social media sphere, which allows it to remain in even closer contact with the people and the public debate that is occurring around issues. One of our Syrian sources mentioned that one can see the government literally “priming” the people for the policies that they are going to enact, massing the official message to get the most support they can before the policy is implemented.⁴⁶

Role of the Media

Although the media in Jordan and Syria are not completely free, our interviewees told us that the media are able to print about 80% of what it wants, and many insisted that there were no topics which were expressly off limits to write about.⁴⁷ In Jordan, several people mentioned that self-censorship is far more prevalent than government censorship of the media, because the society tends to be more conservative and traditional than the government.⁴⁸ That is, journalists are far more constrained by traditions of modesty, humility, family or community loyalty, etc.

⁴⁵ Anonymous Jordanian Royal Court employee, interview by Katie Epp, Jennifer Mikhail, and Kate Pazoles (March 14, 2011).

⁴⁶ Hamidi, Ibrahim, interview by Katie Epp and Kate Pazoles. (March 17, 2011).

⁴⁷ Hamidi, Ibrahim, interview by Katie Epp and Kate Pazoles. (March 17, 2011).

⁴⁸ Seeley, Nick, interview by Katie Epp, Jennifer Mikhail, and Kate Pazoles (March 13, 2011); Abu-Rumman, Muhamad, interview by Katie Epp, Jennifer Mikhail and Kate Pazoles (March 15, 2011); Anonymous Jordanian Royal Court employee, interview by Katie Epp, Jennifer Mikhail, and Kate Pazoles (March 14, 2011).

than they are by official censorship, although one might argue that unfriendly press laws and harsh punishments for government critics would be a powerful motivation for self-censorship as well. Overall, the feedback we received suggested that editorials and other articles in the media could be used to gauge public opinion, rather than such pieces simply echoing official rhetoric.

Thus, another component of our research involved surveying Jordanian and Syrian media – namely newspaper – sources during this period of 2006-2008, on the assumption that newspaper editorials on the topic of Iraqi refugees would provide an accurate reflection of public sentiment towards the issue. Our findings were somewhat unexpected. First, there were virtually no editorials in prominent Syrian newspapers that addressed the issue at all. This could have been due to the poor archival quality of the newspapers; however, the more likely explanation is the extremely restricted nature of media in Syria. Second, the relationship between media, public opinion, and government policy was fluid, and media served to facilitate influence in both directions. Usually, it appeared that editorialists were merely parroting the official government stance on the issues. It was equally possible, however, that they were expressing the views that were impressed upon the public as a result of “priming” on the part of the government.

A look at editorials from prominent Jordanian newspapers addressing the question of Iraqi refugees demonstrates the instrumental role the media plays in the Jordanian government’s efforts to disseminate its views to the public in order to win support from or prepare the public for its policies. During the period in question – 2007-2008 –when the regime earnestly began its campaign to solicit aid from the international community for supporting its refugee population, the editorials read like a script of the regime’s talking points on the issue.

In almost all the editorials, sympathy for Iraqi refugees abounded. They were referred to as “brothers” and “guests,” with one writer asserting that the government needed to be firm in its position that the Iraqis were guests, not refugees. The motives behind this were not entirely noble; he acknowledged that to classify the refugees as such would open the Pandora’s box of naturalization options for the refugees.⁴⁹ Another writer enumerated the sufferings of the Iraqi people and the dire circumstances they have faced since the 1990s. This combined with Iraq’s long history of supporting Arab causes and Jordan’s history of mutual political and economic support with Iraq compelled the country to open its doors Iraqis fleeing the chaos in their country.⁵⁰

But while it was an Arab duty to welcome the refugees, the authors consistently pointed out that a small country like Jordan, already suffering from “economic and structural crises,”⁵¹ could not be reasonably expected to absorb 700,000-750,000 refugees without outside assistance. The writers called for a number of actions to be taken by the government in order to secure foreign assistance. One called for some sort of census to obtain accurate numbers of the refugees in the country, so the government would know exactly how much assistance to request. Another suggested that the Iraqi government itself should pay the Jordanian government in light of its failure to provide security and stability for its citizens, which forced many to flee. However, in lieu of collecting payment from the Iraqi government, fines should be levied against the Iraqis in country, particularly wealthy Iraqis, which would put “tens of billions of dollars” in the Jordanian treasury; this would presumably go towards meeting the needs of the refugees.⁵²

⁴⁹ Al-Safadi, Ayman. "Iraqis are Guests, not Refugees," *Al-Ghad* 2 March 2007.

⁵⁰ Al-Maitah, Sameeh. "Iraqis in Jordan," *Al-Ghad* 27 February 2007.

⁵¹ Abu-Rumman, Muhamad. "Iraqis and the National Economy," *Al-Ghad* 18 September 2007.

⁵² Al-Maitah, Sameeh. "Fining Iraqis," *Al-Ghad* 16 February 2008.

Not all the writers, however, were fully complicit with the government's views – a testament to the greater openness of Jordanian media. A researcher at the premier polling institute in the Arab world, the Center for Strategic Studies, was one writer who sought to debunk the myth that the refugees had an overall negative effect on the national economy, since their arrival in large numbers. Citing a study by his institute, he stated that, in fact, the Iraqis did not have a negative *or* positive effect on Jordan's economy. This was a departure from the government's turning a blind eye to accusations against Iraqis of damaging the economy; as mentioned before, the government generally did not seek to correct these notions, as they were a welcome distraction from its own economic policies, which were more likely behind the economic maladies, rather than the refugees. Overall, however, editorials by the elites appeared to converge with the ideas the regime wanted convey, to both its domestic and international audiences.

Analysis

The evidence overwhelmingly suggests that both the Jordanian and Syrian governments, despite being non-democratic, are in touch with and consider public opinions when making domestic policy. Both governments invest significant resources in attempting to learn what the public thinks in order to frame its policies in a manner that ensures they will be accepted by the majority of the population, or in order to determine what targeted propaganda is necessary to sway peoples' minds. Although both governments monitor public opinion, the methodology used to do so is reflective of the difference between the two political systems. In more liberal Jordan, this is done through public polling and focus groups, but also through their intelligence and security services. Simply by conducting polling, the government is sending a visible

message to its citizens that it is not opposed to dialogue about these issues and is interested in what the people have to say. The main mechanism in authoritarian Syria is the intelligence services or *mukhabarat*, which functions in secrecy solely to monitor popular discourse on the street and simultaneously discourage political dialogue. These differences are consistent with what we expected to find given the political leanings of the respective governments: Jordan is more open to public dialogue and more tolerant of public opinions, while Syria mainly attempts to monitor public opinion in order to determine the boundaries within which it must operate. Despite these differences, there is clearly some give and take in both countries when it comes to public opinion and policies. This suggests that although non-democratic countries will differ in regard to their approach to monitoring or controlling public opinion, it can safely be assumed that all state actors consider public opinion and perceptions within the public sphere to some degree.

Particularly when it comes to issues which affect citizens' individual livelihoods, the government is much more likely to be sensitive to the rumblings of the public sphere. The regimes still need to garner support from the population in order to secure their continued stability. Citing the example of bread riots in 1989 following the Jordanian government's decision to cut subsidies against the advice of pollsters, one of our interviewees observed that the government started to believe that it really was important to stay in touch with the people.⁵³

It is unclear, however, which direction this relationship is flowing - whether public opinion influences official policy or whether policy influences public opinion- although it is clear that it may flow in either direction depending on the issue, the timing and the context. Both regimes make an effort to know what people are thinking, but the Jordanian regime is particularly adept at packaging its policies in a way that public opinion will converge around

⁵³ Khoury, Mu'in, interview by Katie Epp, Jennifer Mikhail, and Kate Pazoles (April 17, 2011).

them. Perhaps because of its enhanced engagement with the public through polling, Jordan seems to do less backtracking of its policies than the Syrian regime, whose reliance on snippets of information causes them to employ more of a ‘trial and error’ strategy.

An example of how opinion influences policy can be seen in the Jordanian policy regarding the number of Iraqi refugees in Jordan. Initially, the government was trying to de-emphasize the number because of concerns about public reactions (large numbers of refugees meant more competition for jobs, resources, services, etc.). After the Human Rights Watch report was issued, there was a concern among Jordanians that the number of refugees in Jordan could be over one million, and the press and the public began to pressure the government to release accurate numbers. The government responded by saying that they would conduct a survey in order to find out how many refugees were in Jordan and some basic information about them. The press accused the government of using the survey to stall on releasing the information and suggested that the government knew that the number was very high. After these accusations, they shifted their policy to embrace the larger numbers. An example from Syria is that the issue of requiring visas for Iraqi refugees had to be framed in such a way that the strongly pro-pan-Arab public would accept restricting fellow Arabs’ access to their borders. For this reason, the issue was framed not as a restriction of entry (the government said several times that this policy was not about reducing the number of refugees traveling into Syria) but as an organizational system to keep track of the refugees.

On the other hand, we see both Jordanian and Syrian governments using the media to “prime” the public for new policies or shifts in policy. One of our interviewees explained to us that the Syrian government has to do this because “Syrians don’t like u-turns.”⁵⁴ By looking at the newspaper archives, you can see that the regime would disseminate their official rhetoric. It

⁵⁴ Hamidi, Ibrahim, interview by Katie Epp and Kate Pazoles. (March 17, 2011).

was then picked up on by the public and later it is reported that this is what the public has always thought. In this way, both regimes might be able to get the public to rally in support of policies they might not otherwise have supported.

Nevertheless, there are also some grey areas. In both countries, the regimes let the negative stereotypes of Iraqi refugees to continue, never making an effort to step in even when they knew the information being circulated about the refugees' effect on the economy, for example, was inaccurate. Also, as one of our interviewees pointed out, there are different "levels" of policies.⁵⁵ For policies that affect people's daily lives (domestic economic and municipal policies, as well as family policies), there is more give and take between the public and the government, and policymakers take public opinion very seriously. For other types of policies, there is less room for negotiation because governments are constrained by higher-level factors; for example, national interests must drive foreign policy.

In addition, it is important to remember that the public sphere in these two countries functions differently and utilizes different mechanisms of communication and control than western democratic states. In both Syria and Jordan, informal modes of communication are crucial for passing critical information, and self-censorship, rather than overt government censorship, is more prevalent among the media.

Ultimately, the people's voice is not unheard – especially for domestic issues that directly affect people's livelihoods and well being, the government is far less able to force top-down regime prerogatives on the people. This is why you often see these governments being resistant to implementing economic reforms such as reducing subsidies or shrinking the public sector.

⁵⁵ Khoury, Mu'in, interview by Katie Epp, Jennifer Mikhail, and Kate Pazoles (April 17, 2011).

Looking Forward

We would be amiss if we were to ignore the recent sweep of protests across the Arab world in our examination of the relationship between public opinion and government policy in the region. The so-called “Arab Spring” has reinforced the notion that even the most strictly authoritarian regimes cannot afford to completely ignore what their citizens say and think. While the outcome of the protests, particularly in Syria, is still uncertain, one thing is clear: the people are making their voices heard, and they will no longer be easily suppressed. Where Arab regimes were previously content to merely familiarize themselves with what their people were saying on the streets, but not necessarily acting on the public’s sentiments, now public opinion is sure to be taken more seriously. It remains to be seen exactly what the new role of public opinion will be – if it will be even more brutally suppressed as it is in Syria or if it will be coddled and pandered to as in Jordan.

In the meantime, our demonstration that public opinion does matter to some extent has important implications for how the U.S. approaches its interactions with authoritarian regimes and the Arab public sphere. As America struggles to adapt its policies to the new realities taking shape across the region, it is much clearer than ever that U.S. foreign policy needs to appeal not just to Arab leaders, but to the people as well. If Arab leaders themselves seek to understand and manipulate public opinion in favor of their policies, it only makes sense for American diplomats to seek to do the same in support of American foreign policy. As indicated by President Obama’s Cairo speech, U.S. politicians are acknowledging the agency of the Arab people in determining the course of their national policies. Engaging the public will be especially critical in places where the public opinion may not align with the foreign policies their governments have adopted upon the urging of the U.S. A salient example is the situation in Egypt, where a

majority of the public was opposed to the peace treaty with Israel. Despite having over 30 years to sway public opinion the way that American diplomats did with the Egyptian leadership, the failure to engage the public means that the institution of a democratic government this fall could have worrisome implications for U.S. interests in the region given that a recent Pew poll reported that 54% of Egyptians want to annul their peace treaty with Israel.⁵⁶ Another example is Jordan, where the public is much more conservative than their pro-Western government. In short, with democracy or semi-democratic openings beginning to sweep across the region, the U.S. needs to adjust its diplomacy in order to connect with the Arab people and not just their rulers.

Furthermore, a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between public opinion and policy provides U.S. policy makers with greater insight into how regimes arrive at domestic and foreign policy, and on a larger scale what their decision-making rubric is. An understanding of the rules of the game is crucial to being able to win the game – i.e. successfully promote U.S. national interests in the international arena. For example, in the case of Iraqi refugees, the U.S. was trying to get Syria and Jordan to shoulder more of the burden of dealing with the refugees, so that it didn't bear the responsibility for a refugee "crisis." If American diplomats in both countries had explored ways to influence public opinion, they might have been able to use the public support of "Arab brotherhood" values to pressure the governments into providing more services and support for refugees on their own, rather than having to use sizable amounts of financial aid to persuade them to continue to take in refugees.

In addition to enhancing the ability of the U.S. to promote their national interests, acknowledgement of the limitations of authoritarian states has implications for economic development. Using the theory that an authoritarian state is a strong state, economic restructuring plans often require regimes to push through unpopular reforms, such as cutting

⁵⁶ Pew Global Attitudes Project, Poll released April 25, 2011.

subsidies or reducing public sector employment. Middle Eastern governments often fail to introduce these reforms, or only manage to partially introduce them, and they fail to meet the terms of their foreign aid packages. However, recognizing the constraints placed on authoritarian actors by their publics' opinions could result in a more effective approach to economic development that focuses on creating sustainable growth without burdening the middle and lower classes in the short-term.

In sum, a better understanding of the interaction between public opinion and policymakers in non-democratic regimes is a step towards a more complete understanding of state actors and their decision-making processes. Since the Middle East is a critical region for the U.S. in terms of American political, economic and military interests, it is prudent to gather as much information that might predict state actors' next moves – or will predict where they *cannot* move – as possible.

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