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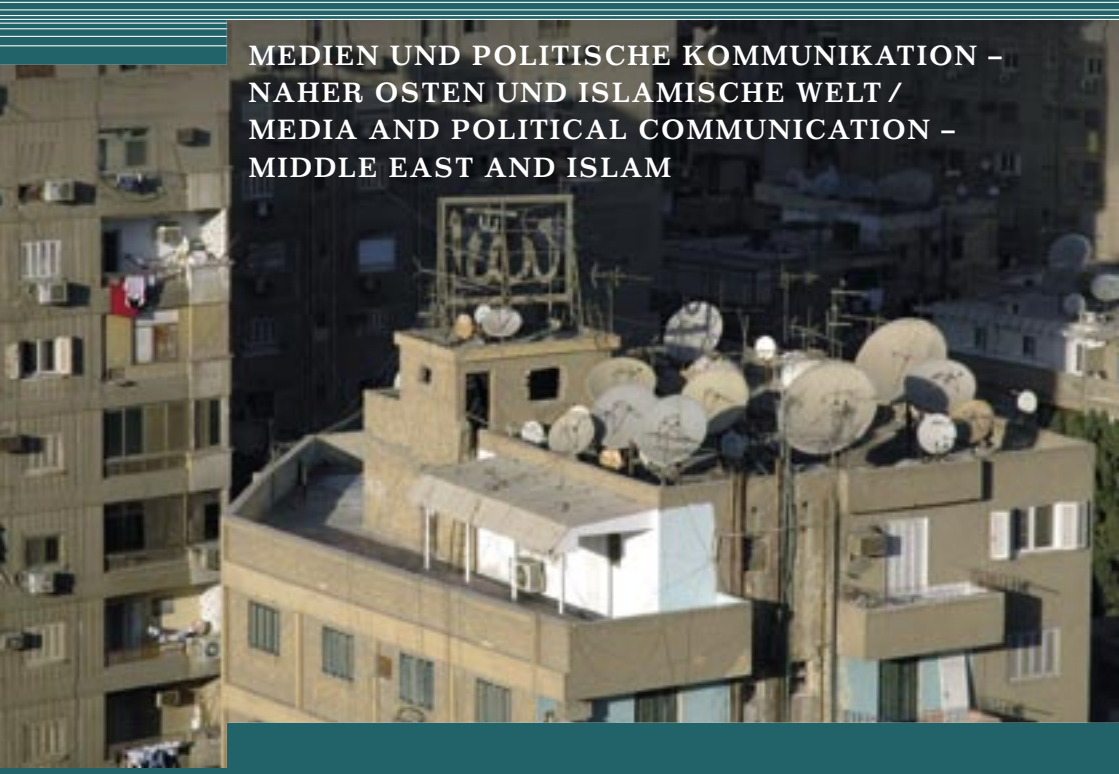

The New Arab Public Sphere

Muhammad I. Ayish

Frank & Timme

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Muhammad I. Ayish

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Dedication

To my Wife Halima whose enlightened vision in life has always been a source of inspiration and support

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I
INTRODUCTION

When the idea of this book was floated some two years ago, the author initially thought that it would be just another Arab World media survey of recent communications developments in a region extending from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Arabian Gulf in the east. It is a huge area of land with diverse subcultural and ethnic entities; yet, with significant common features of language, religion, and history. For hundreds of years, this area, referred to in this book as the 'Arab World', had experienced similar conditions of Arab-Islamic rule, Ottoman domination, European colonialism, and post-independence development. As the 21st century dawned on the region, the Arab World, more than ever before, has continued to grapple with inherited, yet more complicated, political and cultural ferment, centering on the evolution of its unique identity in the ages of both modernization and globalization. At no point in the region's history had political disintegration and cultural disorientation been as acute as in the first decade of the 21st century when state authoritarianism, religious fundamentalism, Western imperialism, and socio-economic under-development have converged to carry conditions into new appalling frontiers. Sadly enough, national and global power politics rather than public diplomacy and human dialogue, has become the key to defining the region's destiny. A prime backlash outcome of those historical tensions and their early 21st century culminations is clearly visible in the region's hurried search for common solutions to its complex woes in parochial nationalism, Islamic fundamentalism, or pragmatic alignment with Western-style socio-economic modernism.

In the midst of those scenarios, the development of modern communications institutions in the Arab World has also exhibited identical features relating to media role in national liberation, cultural integration, sustainable development, and political democratization. As in other world regions, mass and Web-based media have increasingly turned into central players in the evolving public sphere, defined here as the virtual incubator of diverse political and social views pertaining to society and the state. The modern Arab mass-mediated public sphere has traditionally mirrored not only the unidirectional, authoritarian, past-oriented, and exclusivist public discourse in the region, but has also exhibited the complexity of political and cultural norms and values giving rise to such discourse. Arabic, as a language of modern political discourse, has been viewed as 'inherently predisposed' to delivering rosy images of highly sentimental and detached realities. In the age of globalization, this emerging Arab public sphere has been hailed as heralding the region's transition into a more egalitarian phase of development. For the first time in their contemporary history, Arabs have found themselves face to face with a wide range of cross-road challenges arising, among other things, from the information and communications revolution and the expanding American influence around the globe. Governments no longer have the final say in deciding national agendas as more indigenous and exogenous voices seem to gain more ground in the struggle for the hearts and minds of the region's population. In this respect, the author cautions, the evolving public sphere should not

be uncritically taken for granted as it could prove to be no more than an arena of 'creative communications chaos', to borrow Condoleezza Rice's reference to the state of political and military confusion in the Middle East. The mass-mediated public sphere could neither be a function of 'coercive democratization', nor a product of imported high-tech media structures. It is rather a reflection of the community's evolution of genuine social visions drawing on a synthesis of the best and the brightest of its cultural heritage and of modern cultural and political practices.

The employment of the notion of the pubic sphere in the Arab political communications context dictates going further beyond traditional descriptions of media landscapes. It rather involves the analysis of moral, cultural, and political foundations that seem to give the evolving Arab public sphere its unique identity. If one claims that the public sphere is traditionally a product of specific European historical experiences, then its investigation within an Arab World setting would likely be plagued by serious conceptual and methodological tensions. But since the public sphere in the age of globalization is no longer viewed as a monopoly of a Western invention, but rather as a universal ingredient of national and global democratic politics, its use for understanding the communication-politics nexus in the Arab World seems highly relevant. In recent years, the issue has come to gain some vogue in the region as some Western, especially American intellectual voices embedded in global politics, have euphemistically described current media and political transitions in the Arab World as bearing seeds of a new public sphere. This optimistic intellectual tradition obviously seems to run counter to yet another stream of Western thinking that perceives the Arab World as a cultural wasteland, a breeding ground for hate and bigotry, with no relevance for contemporary democratic politics. From an intellectual point of view, both views concur in viewing the Arab Middle East as a source of global evil that could be redressed through democratization. In addressing this two-fold perspective, this book strongly argues that the Arab World could bring its rich cultural heritage to bear on contemporary political discourse through a process of creative synthesis that neither divorces itself from core Arab-Islamic values and norms, nor disengages from global political and cultural practices. The key to success in this endeavor is the evolution of a new understanding of both Arab-Islamic morality and global political realities as two mutually-inclusive intellectual domains with promising implications for the region's development for decades to come.

The challenge facing the author in reconciling moral Arab-Islamic traditions and contemporary social and political imperatives of the public sphere has been the subject of a two-century old debate centering on the notion of *Nahda* (Renaissance). Lewis (2005) notes that in the aftermath of Napoleon's expedition to Egypt in 1789, a profound sense of puzzlement dominated the intellectual atmosphere in the country over what seemed to be irreconcilable Islamic and

Western cultures. The puzzlement had continued until the answer was found by Sheikh Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, a very remarkable Egyptian scholar who had spent seven years in France as part of a scientific mission dispatched by Muhammad Ali, the Egyptian ruler at the time, to look into French technological and scientific advancements and harness them to Egypt's benefit. In his truly fascinating book about post-revolutionary France, al-Tahtawi pointed out that when the French talked about freedom, what they meant was what we Muslims call justice. He was quoted as saying that 'just as the French, and more generally Westerners, thought of good government and bad government as freedom and slavery, so Muslims conceived of them as justice and injustice', (Lewis, 2005). When considering how such bold and far-sighted interpretations of Arab-Islamic morality managed to surface in the region's public intellectual discussions two centuries ago, our spirits get surely dampened by the failure of current reconciliatory endeavors to deliver bright thinkers of Tahtawi's caliber at a time when they are most urgently needed.

As much as modern Arab-Islamic reconciliatory traditions were cognizant of significant common grounds shared by both Arab and Western cultural and political orientations, they seemed also conscious of their moral and philosophical disparities. Conceived and carried out within the 'dialogue of civilizations' traditions, Arab World -based efforts to harmonize Arab-Islamic and mainly Western worldviews have come some way, especially in the post-September 11 era. The whole issue of the 'dialogue of civilizations' has been intrinsically about creating and expanding common grounds; establishing bridges; and yet, recognizing diversity. Within that same tradition, this work is meant to be an intellectual exercise in cultural and political reconciliation. This synthetic approach suggests neither appeasing the West nor pushing Islamic norms beyond their prescribed limits by suggesting some illusive common grounds on both sides of the divide. It rather draws more on proven historical evidence that great ideas often derive their viability and sustainability from their dynamic assimilative potential and their built-in propensity to expand their boundaries to accommodate other great ideas and practices with profound moral redeeming values. This was exactly the essence of sustainability in Islamic civilization in different phases of history when Arabs, as bearers of the Islamic message, found themselves face to face with foreign civilizations in alien lands (Bliwi, 2005). Islam possesses a limitless assimilative capacity drawing on a comprehensive conception of the Universe as fully harnessed to the benefit of Man within an elaborate system of morality that embraces a great deal of diversity. It is a central theme of this book that because the two sources of Islamic morality, the *Qur'an* and the *Sunna* (Prophet Muhammad's traditions) flow from a Divine source; the legitimacy of their status as terms of reference could never be questioned. However, our interpretations of those references are always subject to scrutiny since they reflect imperfect human comprehensions of the scriptures as defined by social time and space contexts giving rise to those interpretations. Hence, religious

knowledge, as derived from the *Qur'an* and the *Sunna*, within varying historical and cultural contexts, could take multiple forms. It is within this diversity that Arab-Islamic history has seen the evolution of intellectual pluralism as evident in different schools of philosophy, jurisprudence, and politics. The Arab-Islamic community (*Umma*) began to dive into the abyss of darkness only when varying understandings of Islamic morality began to take on authoritarian, domineering and exclusivist tones that discounted other views as heresies. Knowledge in Islam is an open resource and nobody could claim monopoly of its acquisition and interpretation.

The use of the public sphere as a conceptual framework for addressing Arab media role in the region's politics as well as in the Arab-Western dialogue is justified on numerous grounds. First, the dramatic development of media in the Arab World in the past two decades has brought about new communications realities unprecedented in modern history. The information revolution seems to have expanded Arabs' media reach and opened up promising windows of opportunity for the emergence of new local and global players with unorthodox cultural and political views. The introduction of satellite television and the World Wide Web has enabled broader popular access to information in different areas of relevance for both official institutions and private individuals and groups. Second, political and social transformations sweeping the region have created an unprecedented mobility in Arabian societies as marked by the introduction of broader participatory arrangements and more open social and cultural orientations. To a large extent, the ongoing political transition has been induced by both global and local players with vested interests in the region both as a homeland (local players) and as a strategic asset (global powers). The process of change has spawned complex tensions between the modern and the traditional; the dominating and the marginalized; and the local and the global. The implications of how to deal with 'the other' in this highly-charged political transition have been quite immense. In one way or another, the interplay of both new communications and democratic developments has served as an impetus for accelerating the emergence of a new public sphere believed to carry both formidable challenges and bright opportunities for the region's population in the 21st century.

The emerging public sphere, as a prime function of this technological and political confluence, reflects a basic human penchant for social survival (since communication is the building bloc for human communities); and hence, it is not a Western-specific concept despite its historical European inception. In its basic configuration, the public sphere revolves around the broad communication phenomenon which furnishes the adhesive social foundations for community development and sustainability. In the age of globalization, the public sphere has become an indispensable pillar of public life, a benchmark for societies' political and cultural mobility, and more importantly, a corollary component of participa-

tory politics. This book is not intended to question the relevance of the public sphere for contemporary Arab societies, but rather to define conditions for enhancing its standing in an Arab cultural and political context. In this context, the writer argues that a solid and sustainable public sphere has to be based on a sound political conception of society and the state whereby a range of actors with varied rational understandings of reality seek to evolve consensus on how to best serve the interests of their communities. Because it is hard to conceive of the public sphere apart from a political perspective, the author puts forward the notion of 'Islamocracy' or Islamic democracy as the basic conceptual foundation for theorizing about the public sphere in the Arab World. 'Islamocracy' suggests significant compatibilities between Arab-Islamic morality and democratic structures and practices, and hence would provide a fertile ground for the sustainability and enhancement of a public sphere in 21st century Arabian societies. Islam, by default, promotes a public sphere-oriented congregational life-style whether in spiritual rituals or temporal social and political activities despite misunderstandings of its obsessive private sphere prescriptions relating to women and the family.

For many years, Jürgen Habermas' book on *The Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989) has informed a huge number of scholarly works and public discussions across a range of social science disciplines. As much as this work has generated positive reactions from researchers with varied political, cultural and sociological orientations, it has also spawned detailed critiques and discussions of corollary political concepts like liberal democracy, civil society, public life, public opinion, cultural empowerment, and social emancipation in the 20th century and beyond. In its original form, the public sphere was conceived by Habermas to describe a critical moment in human history, marked by the emergence of a new discursive arena in 18th and 19th century bourgeoisie Europe. In that era, coffee houses, cultural societies, and political salons were at the forefront of a new wave of popular enlightenment allowing for individuals' access to political, social and philosophical debates on issues of public concern. In that context, the concept of the public sphere was used to denote opportunities for individual empowerment and emancipation as well as for community welfare. The public sphere was never meant to describe the mere existence of communication channels accessible to community members. It rather reflected a state of community power relations conducive to free, rational, and critical exchanges of information among individuals and groups with diverse interests and orientations with a vision to achieving a good level of public consensus.

In modern sociological and political writings, the public sphere is conceptualized as a central pillar of democracy and intellectual liberalism, drawing on rational engagement in unfettered public debates to evolve better visions for the development and maintenance of social order. Contemporary political writers seem often keen on tracing issues of media, politics, and public opinion to the

genesis of the public sphere in the revolutionary liberal changes that had brought an end to centuries-long domination by aristocratic and ecclesiastical institutions in 16th and 17th century Europe. That era was marked by the growth of modernist thinking as evident in the rising centrality of reason and scientific empiricism, free enterprise, secularism, individualism, and popular emancipation. The institutionalization of Western liberal values of freedom and democracy, coupled with the diffusion of knowledge through emerging mass communication channels, brought about a new space in social and political life. For the first time in human history, public opinion became an instrumental factor in defining political changes in Western democracies. Individuals, more than ever before, were able to exercise tangible bearing on public life and public affairs (Garnham, 1986). They were empowered to do so by the diffusion of new media of communication and the institution of progressive social and cultural values and practices in their societies (Werbner, 1996). It is in this regard that the public sphere has been elevated to higher status in contemporary politics, viewed both as the incubator of public sentiments and concerns and the basis for decision-making.

The evolving arena of rational and critical information exchanges in contemporary times has led several scholars to conceive of the public sphere as the social space where participatory politics is bound to prosper (Benhabib, 1992). As such, the public sphere has turned not only into a significant mirror of public opinion trends, but into an indicator of how sustainable democratic practices could be. Researchers in modern political history argue that societies with limited public spheres are often steered by authoritarian orientations and their media are dominated by commercial and political interests (Lynch, 1999). Actually it was Habermas (1989) who bemoaned the deteriorating state of the public sphere in 20th century democracies as they came under increasing commercial and political influences. For Habermas, the public sphere in the West was losing its rationality and vigor as media institutions increasingly caved in to political and commercial interests. According to Habermas, freedom was losing ground as voices with legitimate concerns found themselves excluded from what seemed to be demagogic and propagandistic political and social debates, bound to generate skewed public opinion trends, and hence disastrous policies on major domestic and global issues. The most cited example in recent years has been the case of the public sphere in the United States on the eve of the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in late March 2003. The U.S. administration's claims about Iraq's links to al-Qaida and possession of nuclear weapons of mass destruction were rarely questioned in public sphere discussions; often taken for granted as warranting the invasion and even the destruction of another country.

The fact that the notion of the public sphere originated in a specific moment of Western history clearly adds up to its ethnocentric coloration. If the concept was originally meant to describe a state of liberal democracy in modern European times, how valid is it to apply it to non-European settings? In other words, if the

notion of the public sphere bears the seminal modernist features of Western enlightenment in the liberal sense of the word, how universal could it be in its relevance for non-Western cultures? Is it possible for non-Western societies to evolve their own versions of the public sphere as distinct from their European and North American counterparts? In consensus-based societies with a collective sense of community affiliation, could the notion of the public sphere generate some workable mechanisms for managing political communications in a manner conducive to social advancement on community-prescribed terms? Other than the concepts of individual empowerment and the realization of sound governance, what are the goals of the public sphere as an umbrella for public political interactions? To make the question more relevant for the theme of this book, how valid is our argument about applying the Western notion of the public sphere to contemporary Arab world settings marked by deep social, political, and cultural disorientations and consensus-based traditions? Is Arab-Islamic culture compatible with the Western notion of the public sphere or should we search for a culture-specific conceptual framework for the development of an 'Arab public sphere'? These are some of the questions this book seeks to address by noting significant harmonies between Arab-Islamic morality and public sphere imperatives. 'Islamocracy' or Islamic democracy is employed in this work to suggest not only how national or pan-Arab public spheres promote sound governance, but also how Arabs could engage with other nations in global public sphere contexts. An important point to be noted is that in a world of diminishing physical boundaries, theorizing about an Arab- public sphere is rather difficult outside the parameters of globalization.

A major question motivating the author to carry out this research project relates to the fact that while the notion of the public sphere is intrinsically Western in its historical genesis and contemporary applications, its manifestations are generally universal and human. Since communities could not survive and develop in the absence of public communications, it is impossible to speak about social and human development outside the confines of public arenas. In ancient times, tribal societies managed to develop their own public sphere systems by allocating physical spaces for regular meetings between leaders and subjects on issues of interest to their communities. When the authoritarian state began to take shape as the defining form of government, channels of communication were evolved to ensure the flow of information on issues of relevance to running citizens affairs, albeit from a domineering state perspective. As modern participatory and democratic forms of government started to evolve in the late 17th century in Europe and North America, the public sphere became more decentralized, tapping on a wide range of non-state actors to serve as 'building blocs' for democratic communities. This transformation in the human public sphere at that moment in history seemed to have inspired Habermas' commentary on the concept as the ideal mechanism for achieving maximum consensus on community issues. It should be noted here that a sphere turns truly public in Habermasean

terms only if it induces rational and critical discussions in which the majority of community members could engage. An arena that fails to exhibit these features is normally billed undemocratic, authoritarian, and inhibitive, not bound by all means to lead to true governance and community welfare.

The employment of the notion of the 'Islamocracy' as a conceptual tool for understanding Arab media contribution to the development of the national and transnational public sphere raises some questions that need to be properly addressed in this work. First, the author argues that despite the legacy of misconstrued political and cultural Arab-Islamic traditions and thought systems, the Arab World heritage, with its secular and religious components, possesses moral values that, when eclectically synthesized with contemporary political practices, would allow for the institution of a viable Arab public sphere in the age of globalization. Without a coherent Arab-Islamic political perspective, it would be impossible to conceive a public sphere model that adequately responds to evolving Arab societal needs in contemporary times. Second, this book argues that Islam, as a central source of contemporary Arab morality, possesses the capacity to accommodate significant features of modern democratic practices without compromising its basic intellectual premises. 'Islamocracy' or Islamic democracy draws on the moral values of Islam as a comprehensive way of life to produce a new perspective that embraces key contemporary social and political practices. Third, throughout this book, the author intentionally steers off the concept of secularism in describing Islamic political theory simply because Islam is intrinsically about both temporal and spiritual life matters. This feature of the Islamic worldview offers scholars ample opportunities to expand the realms of Islamic political theory to embrace relevant contemporary practices. The Arabian component of 'Islamocracy' emanates from secular Arab values like solidarity, dignity, honor, and community cohesion. Islamic components, on the other hand, include *Ibadah* (worship in its broadest spiritual and temporal sense), justice, equality, freedom, responsibility, and peaceful co-existence. Arabs' contemporary associations with Western norms and practices as evident in intellectual and political traditions dating back to Napoleon's expedition to Egypt in 1798, are often seen as reflecting renewed centrist understandings of the assimilative nature of their heritage. It should be noted here that 'Islamocracy' is presented here as reflecting Arabs' keenness on preserving their moral identity as the soul that gives life to their imported Western political practices and structures.

Although this book offers significant normative prescriptions pertaining to classical visions of politics and communication in Arab-Islamic history, political and media realities in the modern and globalization eras constitute the major bulk of discussions in this work. The proposed 'Arab public sphere' perspective is inspired by normative moral considerations; yet, it lends itself very much to media and political practices in the age of globalization. In this case, what counts is not the literal translation of normative heritage into concrete practices,

but the enlightened employment of the moral foundations of Arab-Islamic culture to evolve new visions for community development and sustainability in the midst of complex world transitions. As al-Jaberi (2003) notes, Islam's assimilative capacity has always been a driving force for the survival of Arab-Islamic civilization. When that feature failed to accommodate arising competing social and political choices, it was bound to run into historical impasses in different eras of Islamic history. The issue here is neither political, nor social, or economic, but intrinsically cultural, echoing stagnated initiatives on the part of religious and secular intellectual and political communities to evolve appropriate visions for the *Umma* (Community or Nation). To some extent, as noted earlier, this intellectual debate on reconciling tradition with modernity runs deep in modern Arab history as evident in the 19th and early 20th centuries' discussions of Arab *Nahda* (Renaissance) in the contexts of foreign domination of Arabian lands. The question of *Nahda,* as deriving from both tradition and modernity, has continued to define intellectual debates throughout the post-independence period, well into the current age of globalization with very minor tangible results realized.

A major portion of the emerging Arab public sphere in the early years of the 21st century lends itself to both traditional and modern political and communication practices and norms. Hence, to grasp the full dynamics, substance, and parameters of this public sphere, it is vital to survey and identify classical and modern features of communication patterns as well as cultural and political traditions in the Arab World. This historical continuity in Arab World's political and communication traditions stands out as the defining feature of the evolving public sphere of the early 21st century. In the same way, this historical continuity also provides the conceptual foundations for developing a more genuine public sphere perspective that adequately responds to both indigenous political needs and global imperatives. This book argues in fact that the emerging public sphere in the Arab World is seriously flawed primarily because it has failed to take account of and creatively apply and synthesize the rich moral values and traditions in Arab-Islamic history. Likewise, it has also failed to provide clear Arab-Islamic interpretations of contemporary media and political realities, drawing more on a sweeping transfer of Western political and media practices without proper consideration for their relevance. In this case, the public sphere has been a casualty of both fundamentalist interpretations of heritage as well as liberally-unfettered inclinations towards Western-oriented views of society and the state. Sadly enough, the development of a genuine Arab-Islamic public sphere has also been adversely affected by imperialist Western (especially American) interventionist policies either as part of the defunct Cold War politics or the current so-called global war on terror.

From a liberal Western point of view, the notion of the public sphere, as a vibrant arena of rational and critical information exchanges on issues of concern to

Arab societies, has been a rare commodity in a region long marked by authoritarian politics. Until the early 1990s, public opinion in the Arab World had been of ancillary importance in the minds of domestic and foreign policy makers as state-controlled media dominated the communications scene (Hamada, 2000). Since the inception of the Arab press in the aftermath of Napoleon's expedition to Egypt in 1798, a systematic trend of information monopoly and intellectual unilateralism has contributed to the emergence of an official-elitist public sphere that promoted state-sponsored discourse as the only viable option to be reckoned with. During Ottoman, colonial, and independence eras, Arab world media systems exhibited varied degrees of discounting public opinion as a reliable factor to be considered in public policy formulation. The main assumption in the 1960s and 1970s was that since Arab societies were engaged in nation-building as a prime post-colonial goal, issues of democratization and liberalization had to take a back-burner position on national agendas, often subordinated to the central questions of national development, Palestine liberation, pan-Arab unity, anti-imperialism struggle, national integration, socialism, and cultural revival. Guided by the Western-inspired modernization paradigm, Arab media demonstrated little propensity for creating a genuine public sphere in the absence of institutionalized participatory practices and structures. That situation reflected markedly on state-oriented media discourse as dominated by past-orientations, emotional appeals, personality cults, and dull formalities.

The 1990s were a revolutionary decade in post-modern Arab World history. The 1991 Gulf war, coupled with the end of the Cold War and the ensuing global technological revolution have sent out deep shockwaves throughout the Arab region. At the turn of the 21st century, the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States and the 2003 Anglo-American invasion of Iraq have brought about new shifts in Middle East political and cultural realities as the United States embarked on what was described as a 'global war on terror'. Since 9/11/2001, the U.S. strategy in the Arab World has generally followed a two-pronged track: fighting what is sweepingly perceived as 'Islamic terrorism' through numerous means, including military intervention, and promoting 'democratic reform' as a basis for prosperity and stability in the region. By mid 2007, the U.S. failure to bring about both promised democratic reforms and an end to *al-Qaida* threats, in addition to aggravated impasses in Iraq, Palestine, and Lebanon, have all deepened Arab mistrust in U.S. reformist initiatives. The democratization-based discourse advanced by the Bush administration on the eve of the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq began to lose its glamour on two grounds: first, spiraling violence in Iraqi, Palestine, and Lebanon has fostered long-held popular suspicions in the U.S. strategy in the region where people have to choose between bloodshed and 'American democracy'. Second, U.S. hostility to democratically-elected governments in Palestine, Iran, and Venezuela, in addition to sustained American support for the suppression of Islamic voices in Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, Morocco, Algeria, and Lebanon seem to have reinforced anti-

Americanism within the 'Arab street', which denotes grassroots-based public opinion (Pollock, 1992).

In the meantime, the media scene in the region was cautiously responding to surrounding political and military developments at structural and professional levels. For the first time in recent Arab history, traditional state media domination, especially in broadcasting, was challenged by the launch of private communications outlets and the realization of broader public access to information resources through satellite television and the World Wide Web. A good deal of conventional religious and political wisdom has been contested in Arab media by new enlightened indigenous voices pushing for broader political and social reforms on the basis of both secular and Islamist platforms. The introduction of the World Wide Web, new telecommunications systems, and satellite television have created more vigorous arenas for public political exchanges enabling individual citizens' exposure to information from a wider range of local and international sources. New media outlets have been viewed by Western writers as empowerment tools allowing for the exchange of information not only among elitist and official institutions, but also among members of the general public as evident in the region's fast-growing online blogs. These technological developments have been received with much fanfare by Western scholars and media observers, lauding them as 'the seeds for a new Arab public sphere'. As noted earlier, some Western writers have used the concept of 'the Arab Street', to describe the growing role of public opinion in shaping domestic and foreign policies in the region. But as political developments in the region have come to suggest, the long-preached public sphere has proven to be less attainable in the context of pervasively crude power politics as practiced by state authoritarianism, global imperialism, and religious fundamentalism. This undeclared alliance of the three orientations is bound to stifle the development of a genuine public sphere in a region that continues to grapple with serious socio-economic underdevelopment challenges.

Another central theme addressed by this book is that while the Arab region has seen significant media transformations marked by U.S.-sponsored 'democratic reforms', political and media realities on the ground do not yet warrant any development of a genuine public sphere. What is described by Western researchers as a 'public sphere' is no more than a politically-detached public arena operating in a constitutional vacuum with minimal effects on national or pan-Arab politics. Although the public sphere has traditionally contributed to sustaining liberal democracy for decades, its existence does never precede it. Because the public sphere is an aspect of participatory politics, its survival is highly contingent on setting up more egalitarian structures and instituting more symmetrical political practices. An important feature of the emerging Arab public sphere is the clear overlap of national, pan-Arab, and global public arenas. What looks like a local debate in one national Arab public sphere turns out to have both regional and

global manifestations. Whether it addresses conditions in Iraq, Lebanon, or Palestine, the public sphere discourse always involves regional and global players with significant stakes in those local issues. This suggests that the Arab political and cultural discourse has to address both the regional and the global, yet on different fronts. In the age of political transparency and cultural consistency, what counts here is not the evolution of specific local or global discourse strategies, but rather the institution of sound cultural values and practices that creatively promote Arabs' intellectual engagement in the age of globalization. Because national and regional issues are turning increasingly global, a major thrust of this book is the development of what the writer describes as 'constructive engagement' of Arab media in the global discourse through the realization of a genuine public sphere that serves to achieve Arabs' aspirations for political and cultural fulfillment while enriching their contribution to universal values of peaceful coexistence. The author argues that the Arab World holds a good promise to evolve its own sustainable public sphere on the basis of its development of an indigenous political and cultural system drawing on a creative synthesis of traditional and contemporary traditions. In a globalized political and economic system, Arabs have no choice but to engage in this process. Yet, to make such engagement highly constructive, Arabs need to produce their genuine vision of communication and politics through the integration of their cherished moral traditions into contemporary political practices.

From a contemporary political perspective, the view of political and social changes in the region as converging on a Western-style model of the public sphere seem to demonstrate a sweeping obfuscation of the varied cultural, cognitive, religious, and intellectual mosaic that gives Arab societies their unique identity. Lack of recognition for cultural variations between Western and Arab world societies was bound to generate serious misconceptions about how the public sphere should be instituted in non-Western settings. Two-century long endeavors to forcibly impose external values and lifestyles on Arab and Muslim communities have often been received with deep misgivings, leading to backlash outbursts, ranging from fierce media expressions to horrendous acts of terror. The self-prescribed patriarchal nature of the Western drive to 'liberate and reform' the Arab World has always been viewed with profound cynicism across the region which strongly believes that its survival and prosperity does not hinge on relinquishing its cherished cultural heritage, but rather on synthesizing its secular and Islamic moral values into significant features of contemporary political and cultural practices. This argument actually strikes at the very question of *Nahda* (Renaissance) which has informed intellectual debates across the Arab World since the landing of French expeditionary forces on Alexandria beaches in July 1798. Two centuries later, this very historic question remains as much significant as ever before as Arab societies continue to grapple with a widening cultural divide marking their relations with the West in the 21st century. Sadly enough, the prevailing mutual mistrust on both sides of the divide seems to sug-

gest a raging war of civilizations marked by spiraling anti-Western (especially anti-American) sentiments and violence against Western interests in the region. On the other hand, one could also see rising anti-Islamic orientations marked by a series of developments all targeting the Prophet and religion of Islam as manifested in the offensive Danish cartoons, the insulting comments made by the Pope of the Vatican, the Knight Medal conferral on Salman Rushdi by the Queen of England, and the banning of head covers for Muslim women in government workplaces and schools in France. Such attitudes have been tragically unleashed in the midst of an Anglo-American military occupation of Iraq and systematic support for aggressive Israeli policies in Palestine, thus feeding into well-entrenched anti-Western sentiments.

Although this book takes up the issue of the public sphere in the Arab World as the conceptual framework of analysis, the main focus will be on the media landscape as the backbone of the emerging public sphere in the region. This suggests that other pubic arenas like cultural centers, professional associations, religious platforms, and educational institutions will not receive the same level of attention in the analysis. The writer believes that the proliferation of new communication outlets in the region warrants an exclusive investigation of mass-mediated spaces as showcases for the emerging public sphere. In this mass-mediated arena, a range of actors in nascent Arab civil societies do contribute to initiating a more meaningful political and cultural discourse; albeit in recent years, their role seems to have receded in the face of more powerful state-controlled and commercial media orientations. Even though this work addresses media as prime institutions of the emerging 'Arab public sphere', there will be frequent references to what could be termed as the global public sphere that overlaps with national and pan-Arab media landscapes. The fact that traditional boundaries between the global and the local are being gradually eroded by transnational political and economic forces seems to warrant the investigation of how global political agendas shape local media handling of international issues and events. In fact, as noted by many scholars, the locus of control inducing media transformations (as well as political trends) in the Arab world is largely global as local arenas continue to play reactive functions (Ayish, 2003a). As the United States, with its military might and political clout continues to push for the 're-invention' of a new Arab World, whether as part of the Broader Middle East and North Africa Plan, or as part of other strategic visions, media institutions in the region would always take the brunt of coercive changes. The stakes get higher for media players as the United States seems bent on extending its domination to the evolving Arab World public sphere by forcing its agenda on mass-mediated discussions. In many instances, the U.S. government was not hesitant to show hostility towards some media institutions in the region for what was perceived as their role in promoting 'an ideology of terror and hate'. President G. W. Bush's reported threat to bomb the Qatar-based al-Jazeera Satellite Channel, revealed in

November 2005, underscores the bitter realities of how global factors bear on the Arab World media scene.

On the other hand, it might be an oversimplification to describe ongoing transformations in the Arab World public sphere as mere responses to global stimuli. Situating national transformations in external settings goes counter to the thesis of this book that only a synthesis of indigenous religious and cultural traditions with contemporary democratic practices would give rise to a sustainable public sphere in the Arab World. If it is true that Arab national politics is exogenously driven, it is primarily because political processes have reached an impasse with viable local players constantly subdued by authoritarian state machinations, religious fundamentalist tendencies, and domineering global power orientations. In the final analysis, global players could launch the process of change drawing on their own political, economic, and communication resources; but who would give such a change its concreteness and sustainability on the ground? It is the very governments, business sectors, civil society groups, and media institutions who are entrusted with redefining their own missions and goals to fit in with the new metamorphosis in global relations. Those local players, be it official figures, media practitioners, businessmen, religious scholars, political and professional leaders, or other members of the grassroots communities are the ones who will either make or break the promised public sphere. Those are the national players who are bound to generate new social choices for their societies to follow. Hence, local players are accounted for as viable partners in intellectual and political endeavors to construct a genuine Arab-Islamic public sphere drawing on both indigenous traditions and contemporary practices. From a practical point of view, the argument about domestic players as possessing the capacity to evolve their distinctive visions to stand up to external competing strategies has been untenable. It has been observed that influential local players have generally drawn on foreign policy agendas in their struggle against other competing local forces espousing more balanced synthetic schemes of governance for their communities.

The past few years seem to demonstrate that the process of establishing a new public sphere in the Arab World could never be viewed as an easily-accomplishable mission, especially when it involves players with radically-diverse cultural and political norms and values; eventually giving way to a rather coercive public arena mirroring the discourse of the ‘powers that be’. This suggests that the institution of a new public sphere in the Arab World is not about business investments in new digital technologies, but more about cultural opportunities and limitations; creative compromises; visionary leaderships; and clear socio-political-horizons. In other words, though the emerging public sphere has initially gained momentum by officially-declared U.S.-driven democratic reforms and the diffusion of new communications technologies, its long-term sustainability has yet to be based on a sound convergence of key traditions and con-

temporary norms and visions. Its realization draws more on society's propensity to understand, extract and digest the new values of change and synthesize them into indigenous social and cultural systems without risking the loss of their originality. Sadly enough, since the early 1990s, the new public sphere in the Arab World has been evolving as a problematic phenomenon primarily because it has existed outside local democratic arrangements (which are virtually absent), markedly in response to global political and technological developments. The missing indigenous variable will always make the promised difference in either stifling or empowering the institution of a sound public sphere in the region.

It is not the mission of this book to posit global and local social choices as two mutually-exclusive cultural entities that defy intellectual and practical synthesis. Arab-Islamic civilization is rife with a wide range of unique cultural and political experiences drawing on constructive engagement with other cultures (al-Jaberi, 2003). Contemporary Arab intellectual and political communities need to sift through both their accumulated traditional heritage, on the one hand, and modern cultural, political, and philosophical traditions, on the other hand, to generate new perspectives of governance, social relations, and economic welfare. Globalization as a Western undertaking has already taken root in the contemporary Arab World, creating, to Arabs' detriment, serious threats to their cultural identity and societal fabric. An eclectic pragmatic approach to globalization based on values of co-existence rather than confrontation would ensure the development of more viable social choices for Arab societies in the 21st century and beyond (Hamada, 2004). Both Arabs and Westerners are not facing a shortage of moral values on both sides of the divide, but they are in dire need for the goodwill to integrate those values into workable visions of cultural coexistence. Arab-Islamic heritage prides itself on generating a unique universal moral system that does not simply mesh with contemporary human morality, but also contributes to its enrichment and further perfection. A subsidiary stream of Islamic *Fiqh* (Jurisprudence) called *Maqasid Shari'a* (Ends of Islamic Law) has been harnessed by contemporary Islamic thinkers to generate more constructive interpretations of Islamic teachings based on outcomes rather than on procedural formalities. As long as arising practices do not contravene the pillars of Islamic law (*Shari'a*), and as long as they contribute to community advancement, they would be instituted as integral parts of the envisioned Arab system.

Although this work addresses a wide range of questions relating to the very notion of the public sphere and its manifestations in different non-Western settings, the central theme taken up by this book relates to the extent to which an Arab concept of the public sphere, drawing on the notion of 'Islamocracy', could be evolved in the 21st century. This issue seems to take on additional significance as it directly pertains to ongoing post 9/11 debates about the relevance of Arab-Islamic political culture in the age of globalization (Hamada, 2004). In other

words, the long-term value of the study lies not only in scrutinizing what is termed as an emerging Western-style Arab public sphere, but rather in reinforcing convictions in the plausibility of developing a public sphere model drawing on the eclectic synthesis of both contemporary and classical Arab-Islamic traditions and practices. This integrationist approach derives its conceptual and practical strength from the assimilative capacity of Islam, as a comprehensive way of life, to accommodate contemporary universal values that seek spiritual and temporal human advancement. In general, the thesis of this book may be broken down into the following components:

1. Since the early 1990s, the Arab World has experienced major political and technological transformations that warrant a legitimate discussion of an 'emerging public sphere.'
2. Aforementioned political and media transformations have been accompanied by a resurgence of what amounts to be a Western 'neo-Orientalist' tradition based on a sense of American-style 'democratic determinism' in an Arab World often viewed as an intellectual wasteland.
3. There is a strong historical continuity shaping Arab political and media landscape of the 1990s and beyond. To understand this historical legacy, we need to study communication patterns in classical and modern eras of Arab World history.
4. A genuine public sphere would be realized in the Arab World when indigenous and modern communication and political traditions are synthesized into a new perspective drawing on the notion of 'Islamocracy'. The proposed framework harnesses the best and the brightest of Islamic moral values to confer a unique identity on modern political institutions and practices. It draws on representative participation, written constitution, and power separation.
5. The 'Islamocratic' mass-mediated public sphere bolsters a synthetic political culture drawing on justice as a pivotal concept for community welfare. It promotes centrist orientations based on freedom, diversity, equality, accountability, respect, and co-existence.

A major argument offered in this book is that the 'Islamocratic' public sphere is an important and an indispensable arena for the re-production of 'life world' political actions on the ground. It is a social space needed by a wide range of actors affiliated with different political and cultural orientations in the community to present their views, debate rival perspectives; and justify their actions. As an imperative of national and global politics, the 'Islamocratic' public sphere is a window from which communities judge the relevance of 'life world' actions and formulate their positions on them. As much as this space is needed by political actors, it is also of paramount importance for stimulating national and global communities' inputs into political processes. In the age of globalization, it would be quite unthinkable to imagine national and international affairs being run outside public sphere boundaries. The information and communications