



Insights 001

The Dynamics of Middle Eastern Political Language

Dr Matthew Gray

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Executive Summary

- Political language – defined in the broadest sense as the language of political organisation, the rules of political conduct, and the ideologies and symbols underpinning legitimacy and power – is formulated, shaped, and applied in the Middle East in a variety of ways.
 - It is broader, and more important, than empty state rhetoric.
 - Political language not only describes what politics is about, it also reflects and formulates what politics actually *is* and therefore is a way to understand the actual dynamics behind a political system and a society.
- Political language is important for policy-makers to understand for two reasons: for its nature, and for its impact.
 - While it may seem excessively rhetorical or lush, the political language of the region provides insights into political dynamics, the balances of power, the legitimacy of the state, and the perspectives of civil society actors such as businesspeople, trade unions, and others.
 - Understanding it is important for policy-makers, to ensure that they read state communication with society correctly, that they understand both formalised and informal networks of power, and that they read language in other contexts accurately.
- Political language in the Middle East occurs most commonly in an authoritarian context, within states possessing weak institutions or poor legitimacy. Middle Eastern leaders, like those in other parts of the world, use colourful political language for a multitude of reasons, including to:
 - disguise their actions by reference to earlier ideology;
 - distract popular attention from or alter perception of an issue;
 - demarcate the boundaries of acceptable social discourse on politics; and to
 - confuse and disorientate people and ‘crowd out’ alternative political explanations.
- However there are some unique characteristics in the Middle East that impact political language, including the link between Islam and politics, the nature of the Arabic language, and the styles of discourse that use humour and conspiracy theories.
- Moreover, the use of imagery and symbols is a prevalent and striking element of Middle Eastern political language.
 - Multiple political meanings can be derived from the same public poster or statue of a leader, or from public monuments. These may include generic symbols invoking nationalism or claiming a monopoly on certain powers and specific symbols of Arab history and heritage.
 - Symbols also frequently draw on religious images, terminology, or implications to add legitimacy to the narrator – even when the regime is a secular one.

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- This is a type of communication from the state to society, typically with similar aims to verbalised political language, but with its own unique characteristics and points of departure.
 - Society does not passively accept the political language and symbols transmitted by the state.
 - Sometimes, open debate occurs in response to the narratives of the state. In the Middle Eastern context, this may involve oppositional, nationalist, ethnic, or religious claims to authority or correctness.
 - Often, however, given the authoritarian context so common in the region, social actors and forces respond less directly to the state and its language.
 - Methods of challenging state orthodoxies include informal mechanisms such as discourses within the family or tribal groups or casual social gatherings; recourse to transnational or online media or other sources beyond the state's control; or the use of unconventional discursive styles such as political humour and conspiracy theories. The Middle East has its peculiar forms of political humour, claims of religious seals of approval and conspiracy theories that differ from other regions in their content or style.

Introduction

George Orwell once described political language, especially in its service to tyrannical authority, as “designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.”¹ To many observers, political language is either empty state rhetoric loaded with self-justification, or disorientating propaganda, and is a global, even pathological characteristic. To others, political language has a causal role in the assertion of state power, where a state’s control of language may equate to a control of the population.² One book on Saddam Hussein’s Iraq argues that words divide everything into “black and white” and thus acts as a “smoke screen between the facts they purport to refer to and the impression they seek to create.”³ This arguably is a widespread political phenomenon.

Looking specifically at Middle Eastern political language (in Arabic, *al-lugha al-siyāsiyya*), other observers see it as being predominantly concerned with propaganda (*di‘āya*) in the region’s authoritarian politics – a practice with a long history in the region.⁴ Undeniably, political language serves such purposes, in the Middle East as elsewhere too.

This paper takes a broad view of political language, especially since the above perspectives ignore the breadth of its manifestations – which include both verbal and non-verbal communication – and the variety of ways in which it is linked to the political dynamics of the Middle East.

Political language is defined here as the language used in political organisation to establish the rules of political conduct and to formulate, shape and apply the ideologies and symbols that underpin legitimacy and power. It is, therefore, not only the self-justifying language of the authoritarian state, but also the language used in communication between state and society, and even encapsulates the symbolism (*al-ramziyya*) – the innuendo, imagery and signs – of politics as well.

This paper discusses the various expressions of political language; the nature and meaning of such language; and how those outside the circles of power respond to state political language using not only direct counter-discourses but also more subtle approaches such as humour, innuendo, conspiracy theories, and other tools. The paper argues that while some elements of Middle Eastern political language are generic – discourses designed to confound, distract, or justify a regime – are used throughout the world – the region’s political language also contains some unique dynamics. Among these are the unique dynamics of the Arabic language, the role of Islam in Middle Eastern political discourse, and some specific narratives employing conspiracies or humour that give insight into the region’s particular political characteristics.

1. Quoted in this context in Geoffrey Nunberg, ‘Simpler Terms; If It’s “Orwellian”, It’s Probably Not’, *The New York Times*, 22 June 2003, n.p., retrieved 6 August 2008 from <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9507EED6163BF931A15755C0A9659C8B63>>.
2. John Wesley Young, *Totalitarian Language: Orwell’s Newspeak and its Nazi and Communist Antecedents*, Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1991, p. 3.
3. Bengio, Ofra. *Saddam’s Word: Political Discourse in Iraq*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 10.
4. There is a relevant and interesting discussion of the history of propaganda in the Middle East in Bernard Lewis, *From Babel to Dragomans: Interpreting the Middle East*, London, Phoenix, 2005, pp. 97-113.

The Importance of Political Language and its Policy Implications

Political language is important for policy-makers to understand for two reasons: for its nature, and for its impact.

Political language elucidates and sharpens an understanding of political power, signifies stability/instability and accord/discord within society and in the state-society relationship, and provides a barometer of stasis and change. Frustrating as self-serving political rhetoric may be, onlookers can discern political insights from observed public language.

Even where empty rhetoric contains little information or other hard fact, its style and the ways in which it is transmitted offer important insights for policy-makers. Middle Eastern leaders' language may be predictably dull yet rhetorically lush, but political dynamics can be discerned from changes in the targets of the language, the 'heroes' and 'villains' in a speech, the style or degree of self-justification adopted in it, or the urgency of any call to action made by a leader or elite. The societal response to state language is crucial for its insights into state legitimacy, the popularity of ruling elites, and the public mood in general. It is of crucial importance, moreover, to recognise political language not only as speeches, mass media reports, broadcasts and other such formal, enunciated statements of a political nature, but as popular gossip, humour, conspiracy theories, and the like. Political meanings may even be contained in non-verbal forms, such as public art. Appreciating the breadth of political language enhances its value to the observer.

Furthermore, many people mistakenly assume that the Middle East is homogenous and therefore its politics, too, is homogenous. This is not the case. The style and sophistication of political language in the region, therefore, depends on the political structures in place, the aims of the state and the level of support it enjoys; and the degree of political freedom and social space available to society to articulate their own political discourses and respond to those of the state. It is through political language that this often occurs.

Political language has powerful and important implications for policy-makers and for those who have dealings with the region. Perhaps most important, rhetoric retains a strength in the region that surprises many outsiders. The toxic language between officials of Israel and Syria, or Iran and the United States, can seem venomous – even in a diplomatic context it can seem very undiplomatic indeed. Such speech derives from the modern history of conflicts between these states, which has created mythologies about the other side that are reflected in invectives about the evilness or ill-intent of the other.⁵ It is important to recognise two things about such rhetoric: firstly, that powerful though it can be, it is not always meant literally, and is often targeted at the mythologised biases of a domestic audience; and secondly, that what such language symbolises or represents is more important than the literal meanings of the text itself. In other words, such language is important, but may not always be what it appears to be.

5. William Beeman has made this point convincingly in reference to US and Iranian rhetoric about each other, but albeit in a different context. The same overarching argument can be constructed about Israel and Syria, the Israelis and the Palestinians, and numerous other examples. Mythologies carry great power in the region. See Beeman's *The "Great Satan" vs. the "Mad Mullahs": How the United States and Iran Demonize Each Other*, Westport: Praeger, 2005.

Also important is the fact that political language is influenced by politics, but not always in the direct ways assumed. For example, the question of who is speaking is often overlooked, but is crucial in a state such as Iran, where greater power lies with the Spiritual Leader than the President, or for that matter in an autocratic republic where great power can often be informally concentrated in the hands of seemingly marginal figures such as party officials or well-connected businesspeople. The informal patronage networks, *wastā* (meaning ‘intercession’ or ‘intermediation’), and extended family networks all serve to create such opaque but potent social and political bonds, and *who* said *what* can be enlightening and insightful depending on where a person fits into such networks.

Finally, it is important to recall that language in the business or social arena is not the same as political language, though some of its styles or characteristics are similar. Negotiations, for example, can include lush rhetoric or feigned offence as a tactic, a style and tactic used in the political realm too. However business language, as anywhere, is often also tactful, finessed, and circumspect – if anything, a contrast to the language of politics – and locating a clear answer among such speech can be difficult. In short, not all language translates between politics and business.

What’s in a Name?

The name of the thumb-shaped body of water that separates Iran from the Arabian Peninsula has been the source of considerable dispute: should it be ‘the Persian Gulf’ (as Iran insists), ‘the Arabian Gulf’ (as many Arab states insist), or just ‘the Gulf’ (which seems to please neither)? Osama bin Laden has referred to it as ‘the Islamic Gulf’, and at various points it has had other names, too.

The term ‘the Persian Gulf’ is historically the more widely-used term. It is the term used by the United Nations, the US State Department, and others today. However since the 1960s and the rise of Arab identity and Arab nationalism, many Arab states have insisted on ‘the Arabian Gulf’. It is a contested term now. Goods exported to Iran or their paperwork must use the term ‘Persian Gulf’ where applicable, while offence may be caused if it is referred to as ‘the Persian Gulf’ in conversation with Arabs in the region. Addressing it by whatever the local preference is advisable to avoid offence.

This dispute is a case of political language having real and current implications. To Iran, it is part of its nationalist identity and its historical claim to cultural and other influence in the region. To deny the term is, to many Iranians, to deny Iran’s ancient civilisation and accomplishments in the past. To many Arabs, especially those in states along the coast of the Gulf, using the term ‘Persian Gulf’ gives credence to Iran’s attempts to dominate the region and denies the fact that the majority of the coastline is populated by Arab states and has been over a very long time.

The Nature of Middle Eastern Politics and Political Language

It is recognised at the start that Middle Eastern political language share features observable in political language all over the world, for example as a tool for regime justification. Keeping this in mind, the following discussion serves as a background to highlight the salient features of Middle Eastern politics and thus to the political language.

Political language in the Middle East occurs most often in an authoritarian context where weak but often brutal states face challenges to their legitimacy. Yet, authoritarian rule is not simple, dull or homogenous across the region. There are varieties of authoritarianism in the region, and political structures dictate heavily the types of political language used by the state and how society can or does respond to that language. The rhetoric and symbols used by post-populist⁶ republican regimes in contemporary Syria or Libya, or in Saddam's Iraq, are very different from the language used by the conservative monarchies of the Gulf, and different again from the monarchies of Jordan and Morocco, given the legitimacy that royal families seek to derive from historical precedent or even by lineage from the Prophet Muhammad. Even within a single context, political language varies according to other political factors as well as to social and socio-linguistic factors.

Authoritarian regimes vary in how they assert their authority over citizens, and the degree of dissent or debate that they will tolerate. This affects the style of political language adopted by a regime and used in response by its people, with implications on the breadth and sophistication of public political discourse within this society. A regime may employ political language of various sorts, contexts, and reasons: to assert authority; to elicit compliance; or to co-opt individuals or societal actors.⁷ This is not unique to the Middle East. What makes the region's political language significant is the limited legitimacy of most regimes and their struggle to balance repression and co-optation in a bid to ensure compliance with their authority. While legitimacy is a difficult term to pin down,⁸ a good point of departure is to conceive it as a pool of tolerance that allows a regime to rule or justifies it as the best option for governance. Legitimacy can be enhanced, undermined or reconstructed by the actions of the regime or by its oratory. To elicit compliance or co-opt people to the regime, political language may be of a different style. Specifically, legitimacy-building language has to be persuasive, but compliance-inducing or co-opting language need not be. The latter can be much cruder, even propagandistic, provided that the regime's point in enunciating it is clear to the listener. Authoritarian regimes have been observed to use particularly strong or crude and even outrageous language. Such language – especially propaganda – has been called “rejected rhetoric”⁹ because it need not be believed and the listener need not assume that the orator believes it either. The ability of societal groups to respond is

6. The term is Raymond Hinnebusch's in reference to Hafiz al-Asad's Syria, but applies to other regimes as well. On it, see his book *Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Ba'thist Syria*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1990. The term here is used to mean a regime that has moved away from its traditional bases of support, or they from it, with these bases including trade unions and urban working classes, the rural peasantry, and in some cases intellectuals.
7. These distinctions are drawn from similar arguments in Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1999, especially pp. 6-8.
8. As Wedeen notes; see *ibid.*, p. 7.
9. On this, albeit in a different context to this paper, see the mention in David Parkin, 'Political Language', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 13, 1984, p. 354.

often constrained to indirect approaches such as the use of innuendo, elusion, hypotheses, humour and conspiracy theories, which do not directly challenge the state and instead rely on agreed subtle meanings for their communicative value.

Political language has an importance and a wide span in the region because regimes face problems of legitimacy and are struggling to maintain and widen their support bases. This stems from several facts: that most states are hobbled by being relatively recent creations, often with artificial, foreign-designed borders and with multiple social, ethnic or sectarian groups within their borders; that most states of the region have strong repressive capabilities, but not as much popular legitimacy; and that the region is in a period of economic and political transition, from state-led development and secular modernisation policies to a new political and economic order, which has occurred only partially and haphazardly, mixing economic liberalism, pressure for democratisation, and Islamic politics and economics.

As a result, the region's political language is eclectic, containing the rhetoric of the past, but also promises for the future, as well as lies, myths and arguments about the challenges faced by the region and its people. While the state often determines what acceptable political language is, it can also find itself having to respond to political pressures and the political language of others. Pressures for economic and political liberalisation, for example, have created a wealth of state narratives about democracy, even where the regime is no more liberal than in the past. Some regimes accompany this language with calculated measures aimed at 'political decompression'.¹⁰ For example, Saudi Arabia's municipal elections in 2005¹¹ were arguably aimed at sending an impression of political reform – and perhaps even at modestly reforming the conduct of politics in the Kingdom – but without the risks of political change at the national level, and keeping repressive mechanisms intact.¹² In Egypt, despite the regime's claim of political reform,¹³ there has been a de-liberalisation of socio-political space over more than a decade.¹⁴ That this has occurred under US pressure, including a landmark speech by the US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in Cairo in mid-2005 about the need for Arab democracy,¹⁵ suggests the regime was responding to external calls for political reform with strong language of positive progress to mask an actual de-liberalisation. The example also demonstrates that a regime may not have the luxury of choosing when and how to use specific language.

10. This refers to the process of some reforms seeking to provide an outlet to popular anger so that people feel as though their concerns are addressed, rather than to develop an economy or political system into something new.

11. "'Islamist win' in Key Saudi Poll", *BBC News*, 11 February 2005, retrieved 13 August 2008 from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4252079.stm>.

12. 'Shifting Sands', *The Economist*, 12 February 2005, p. 54.

13. This includes, for example, a 2005 claim that Egypt would transition to a stronger, more independent and democratic parliamentary process. For a critique, see the editorial 'Hosni Mubarak's Democracy', *The New York Times*, 29 December 2005.

14. For an excellent outline of this de-liberalisation and the problems of political reform in Egypt, see Glenn E. Perry, 'The Arab Democracy Deficit: The Case of Egypt', *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 26, 2, Spring 2004, pp. 91-107. A more extensive discussion is to be found in Eberhard Kienle, *A Grand Delusion: Democracy and Economic Reform in Egypt*, London, I. B. Taurus, 2001, which posits a thorough set of political economy arguments about why Egypt has not made the transition into a more democratic polity under Mubarak.

15. 'Rice Calls for Mid-East Democracy', *BBC News*, 20 June 2005, retrieved 13 August 2008 from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4109902.stm>.

Preliminary Explanations for Political Language

Before considering the peculiarities of political language in the Middle East, it is worth explicating the conceptual background with four generic observations on the roles and aims of political language. These four points are not unique to the region but are still frequently cited by observers to explain the rhetoric or meanings emanating from the region's political leadership. The aim here is to outline the fundamental linguistic styles and rhetorical tools used by states, in the Middle East and virtually anywhere, to communicate with society, and the reasons for such dynamics.

The first role of state political language is as a tool for justification. This can be legitimacy-building rhetoric as mentioned before, where the state seeks to justify its position, explain its decisions, maximise support, or minimise opposition. Sometimes, as in contemporary Syria or Saddam's Iraq, the regime draws on the language of the party and its original ideology to lay claim to power.¹⁶ Even where such ideology is long passed, it can, as Bengio noted in the case of Saddam's Iraq, act as "a smoke screen between the facts they purport to refer to and the impression they seek to create".¹⁷ More widely across the Middle East, state-controlled media are used as voices to build legitimacy for the regime, with discourses that are heavily ideological or which draw on nationalism, religion, and popular fears and angers to appeal to a spectrum of people.¹⁸ Hudson has argued that such rhetoric is used to assert a regime's right to rule on the basis of tradition, emotion, rationality and legality of rule, among others,¹⁹ while similar arguments have been made by others.²⁰

Second, political language can be a tool of distraction used to divert attention away from a leadership's failings and to blame problems on real or imagined enemies, or to alter the way in which an event or dynamic is understood by the people. A significant body of the more colourful rhetoric emanating from the Middle East can be understood from this perspective, including anti-Israel language, which often tries to distract people from domestic issues by mobilising them against a constructed international threat. Explanations for economic problems or perceived cultural threats routinely blame forces such as globalisation or specific actors such as international financial institutions or the US.²¹ Conspiracy theories arguably play this role, too and will be discussed later.²²

16. For an account of the use of such language in Saddam's Iraq, see Bengio, Ofra, *Saddam's Word: Political Discourse in Iraq*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

18. James A. Bill and Robert Springborg, *Politics in the Middle East*, 3rd Edn., Glenview, Scott, Foresman, Little, Brown, 1990, p. 31.

19. See Michael C. Hudson, *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1977, pp. 16-24. Though this book was published over 30 years ago, it continues to offer some useful insights into the dynamics of Arab politics, including political language and related topics.

20. Mordechai Kedar, *Asad in Search of Legitimacy: Message and Rhetoric in the Syrian Press under Hafiz and Bashar*, Brighton, Sussex Academic Press, 2005, pp. 2-3.

21. See the examples cited in Fred Halliday, 'The Middle East and the Politics of Differential Integration', in Toby Dodge and Richard Higgott (eds.), *Globalization and the Middle East: Islam, Economy, Society and Politics*, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2002, in particular pp. 42-53.

22. For some ideas on how conspiracy theories in the Middle East can be conceptualised and explained, as well as some of the issues in trying to explain them, see Matthew Gray, 'Explaining Conspiracy Theories in Modern Arab Middle Eastern Political Discourse: Some Problems and Limitations of the Literature', *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 17, 2, Summer 2008, pp.155-174.

Related to this is the role of such language as inverse-relevance rhetoric, where an explanation is utilised in opposite proportion to its meaning or the speaker's intent. This is observable when republican states, previously founded on strong state-led models of economic development, adopt economic reforms. During such economic shifts, states will almost invariably retain the rhetoric of earlier ideologies, often expressed in populist terms, especially where the masses constitute a traditional base of support for the regime. One example is Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak renaming *al-infitāh* (economic reform) as *al-infitāh al-intāji* (productive reform) when Sadat's earlier reforms had become popularly associated with corruption and profiteering.²³ Another example is when he used the language of political freedom and economic success²⁴ to mask his failings and the unpopularity of his rule; or pan-Arabist rhetoric²⁵ because of its broad appeal to the Arab street, even as he presided over a strong nationalist state and regime. Similarly, the retention by the Syrian president Hafiz Al-Asad (and since 2000, his son, Bashar) of much of the language of Ba'athism and of hostility towards Israel, are further examples of the use of inverse-relevance rhetoric.²⁶ This oratorical style serves to distract attention from the political leadership as the agent of change, by declaring that nothing is changing and that the regime is trying to defend the status quo. Even if not believed, it is still useful as a way for people to justify to themselves their conformity with the state.²⁷

A third reason for the nature and style of Middle Eastern regimes' political language is that it is a product of authoritarian communication: a tool by which a regime not only provides an orthodox explanation for events to society, but through which it also sends messages to society about the permissible types of political discussion. If the regime articulates a particular explanation for events, this is often a veiled method of also saying where blame ought to be placed, or alternatively where it ought *not* to be placed. Crackdowns on corruption have had this goal, where the arrests of senior officials or businesspeople have been about a regime creating interpretations and avoiding alternative ones arising in society.²⁸ Again, such explanations need not be believed by the population – in fact, they may be seen as the crude propaganda that they so often are – so long as the intention of the state is made clear to the listener.

The final reason for regimes' political language, somewhat linked to the third, is that authoritarian regimes seek to dominate public discourse on particular issues and to crowd out contending arguments. This crowding-out may be as simple as the regime trying to monopolise the space available to analysis and debate, but in a more subtle setting, it is achieved by establishing a dominant, orthodox narrative in the public arena. Either way, the aim is to enhance the state's authority through the omnipresence or dominance of its narratives.

23. Bill and Springborg, *Politics in the Middle East*, pp. 426-427.

24. 'Excerpts: Egypt's President on Election Reforms', *BBC News*, 26 February 2005, retrieved 13 August 2008 from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4300633.stm>. Note for example the claim that greater democracy is possible because of the 'economic stability which we enjoy' and the regime's self-justification that '[t]his basic change is a confirmation of the republican democratic regime that aims to maintain the sovereignty of the people and respect for its will and enable it to have the first and last say in choosing whoever it wants to lead its process.'

25. 'Excerpts of Mubarak's Speech', *BBC News*, 25 April 2002, retrieved 13 August 2008 from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/world/monitoring/media_reports/1949857.stm>.

26. For a wealth of examples, see Kedar, *Asad in Search of Legitimacy: Message and Rhetoric in the Syrian Press under Hafiz and Bashar*.

27. Wedeen, Lisa, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1999, p. 41.

28. This observation is based on author's interviews with businesspeople and officials in Damascus, May 1996.

Some Additional Middle East Dynamics

The four explanations for political language are, of course, fairly generic – one could argue similarly in the case of most other parts of the world. So what elements are unique or especially significant to the Middle East? There are a couple.

One paradox of Middle Eastern political discourse is that it contains examples of very vague, ambiguous political language and terminology, but also of very precise, ideologically inflexible rhetoric. The former is a technique to maintain stability, whereas the latter occurs in situations of conflict. The relationship between a state and its opposition is the driving factor in a conflict – with an opposition that works within the system, vague or generalised language is used; with an aggressive opposition, the state reacts with stronger language. The variation also depends on the target recipients of the state's communication. Particular societal actors, especially civil society groups, make more specific demands to the state than does society as a whole or the “political society”.²⁹ In this light, the duality of styles is shaped by the state-society dynamic and the status, especially the autonomy, of civil society within that dynamic.

Perhaps most unique and important to note is the reference to Islam in Middle Eastern political language. All but the most deliberately overt secular regimes seek to incorporate a religious approval for their rule as a component of their legitimacy. Even Asad's secular Syria³⁰ and Saddam's Iraq³¹ did so. In both cases, the regime's minority status may also account for the importance placed on a religious seal of legitimacy, however flimsy or coerced such a seal, to subsume followers of the religion into its rule. Specifically, the use of language couched in religious overtones, or the assertion of state actions as being in the pursuit of religious goals, is observed in the Middle East more frequently than elsewhere. Some examples are generic, such as observing religious holidays, using religious greetings, or launching a religious publication, while others are more specific, including the symbolism of performing the *Hajj* (the pilgrimage to Mecca), observing *Ramādān* (the month of fasting), or bringing religious elite into state roles that promote religion or piety. The use of religious language may simply be an attempt at building support, but it may also be an attempt to neutralise a potential source of opposition from the clergy by adopting their language and imagery.

Moreover, beyond the political elite, the neo-patrimonial style of rule in the region means that religious elite are often co-opted or coerced into using rhetoric that supports and justifies the regime on religious grounds, such as at Friday prayers or through religious rulings. In Saudi Arabia, the royals have constructed a symbiotic understanding of mutual support with the mainstream clergy,³² and in exchange they usually seek clerical consent for important decisions. In Egypt, Al-Azhar mosque and university remain under tight state control, with the Shaikh of Al-Azhar appointed by

29. This idea is drawn from points made in Sami Zubaida, 'Islam and the Politics of Community and Citizenship', *Middle East Report*, 221, Winter 2001, p. 21.

30. Kedar, *Asad in Search of Legitimacy: Message and Rhetoric in the Syrian Press under Hafiz and Bashar*, p. 78.

31. Jerry M. Long, *Saddam's War of Words: Politics, Religion, and the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004, particularly pp. 81-159.

32. On the evolution of this relationship and its importance in the Saudi royals' maintenance of power, see Guido Steinberg, 'The Wahhabi Ulama and the Saudi State: 1745 to the Present', in Paul Aarts and Gerd Nonneman (eds.), *Saudi Arabia in the Balance: Political Economy, Society, Foreign Affairs*, London: Hurst, 2005, pp. 11-34.

the president.³³ In more authoritarian settings such as Syria, the clergy is repressively controlled, although Bashar's regime has started to narrow the rift with Islamic leaders by bestowing greater room to moderates.³⁴ While religion is used by secular leaders everywhere, the ability of Islam and religious authorities in the Middle East to mobilise the peoples, and the concept of religion and politics as intertwined in Islam, put particular pressure on Middle Eastern regimes to seek religious endorsement of their rule.

Finally, among scholars there has been an assumption, perhaps not surprisingly, that political language will have at its core good political argument; that it will be "rational" and that abstract concepts will have an agreed set of meanings that determine and shape discourse.³⁵ However this assumption can be challenged somewhat in the case of the Middle East. First, there is a distinction in the Arabic-speaking world between the formal political and legal language of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA, *al-fuṣṣiḥa*) – in effect, the *lingua franca* of the Arab world – and in each state a spoken dialect (*al-lahja al-‘āmiyya*) or several that constitute the bulk of societal discourse and informal political talk. The high language of MSA carries with it not only a formality but also a claim and impression of prestige,³⁶ which arguably can be translated by regimes and leaders into an assertion of authority, while the colloquial dialects are widely viewed as informal and low forms of the language. Moreover, to lack fluency in the formal MSA can induce vulnerability in debate and argument. An interlocutor may neutralise an opponent with the claim that he or she does not speak Arabic [ie, MSA] fluently³⁷ and therefore lacks education or credibility. Thus, what constitutes rationality or accepted discursive structures can vary or be challenged, as can the speaker him- or herself.

33. The Shaikh of Al-Azhar, Mohamed Tantawi, is derisively called "Mr OK" by some Egyptians because of his willingness to issue fatwas and other decrees in support of certain people and of the regime.

34. The degree of room that Bashar is providing is debatable, but undoubtedly some rapprochement with moderate Islam is part of his strategy. See for example Eyal Zisser, 'Syria, the B'ath Regime, and the Islamic Movement: Stepping on a New Path?', *The Muslim World*, 95, 1, January 2005, pp. 43-65. Zisser understates the use of Islamic language and symbolism by Hafiz al-Asad, but his points on the cautious re-introduction of political space to Islam are sound.

35. Ira L. Strauber, 'The Rhetoric of an Ordinary Political Argument: Liberalism and Zionism', *The Western Political Quarterly*, 39, 4, December 1986, p. 603.

36. Niloofar Haeri, 'Form and Ideology: Arabic Sociolinguistics and Beyond', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 29, 2000, pp. 64-65.

37. *Ibid*, p. 65.

Other Political Language in the Middle East: The Power of Symbols, Art and Images

What the state literally *says* is only part of the equation explaining political language. Of considerable importance is the power of non-verbal communication and imagery to articulate political space and acceptable discourse. The state, through art, public works, symbols and such representations can often make political statements to society that are as clear as if they had been articulated verbally. As Kanan Makiya noted in the case of Saddam's Iraq, public art is not just an aesthetic object. It contains political intention, a political message in its form, and even a created experience for the individuals between what they privately experience and how this relates to the outside (political) world.³⁸ This is not unique to the Middle East. Public art or buildings such as war memorials serve such a purpose across the world of promoting remembrance; nationalising grief; and having a political purpose of describing and promoting a collective memory of past events. What distinguishes the Middle East and a small number of other authoritarian states is that such public works go beyond war memorials or major architectural pieces to include ubiquitous images or statues of a political leader, his elite and displays of how the leader would like to be seen. Thus art is not just reflective of collective memory and identity, but an attempt to fashion and (re)shape them. This may constitute totalitarianism – or more likely authoritarianism in the case of the Middle East – or an autocratic contract where society acts “as if” they believe the images and revere their leader.³⁹ This is an extended view of political language as crowding out competing arguments or indirect communication mentioned earlier.

It is important to recall that Arab political language and symbolism is occurring in a context of underdeveloped state structures and poor state legitimacy. This context helps to explain the prevalence of political symbols and imagery emanating from the state. Narratives go only part of the way to assert a fierce but ultimately vulnerable authority or to prop up a regime with frail legitimacy. Images and symbols assist further, by providing non-verbal cues on the behaviour patterns the state encourages or considers acceptable; and by linking individual experiences and impressions to a wider societal or nation-building enterprise. Public art under Saddam Hussein's rule in Iraq provides a consummate example of multiple messages being concomitantly presented in a single piece of work, with potent political meanings to the viewer. Such images are typically explained in two ways. One is that such images represent part of an authoritarian – some would argue totalitarian⁴⁰ – assertion of rule, with the images complementing and supplementing more explicit political language in speeches and the mass media.⁴¹ This explanation is reinforced by events such as the destruction of

38. Samir al-Khalil (pseudonym for Kanan Makiya), *The Monument: Art, Vulgarly and Responsibility in Iraq*, London, André Deutsch, 1991, p. 6.

39. This is the theme in Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, cited earlier.

40. The argument that any current or recent regime in the Middle East is totalitarian is problematic. The term implies a regime penetration of virtually *all* aspects of ordinary life. In fact, even under the most brutal and autocratic regimes there remain some areas of freedom and state non-intervention, for example in private conversation among close-knit groups and in many of the dealings of the private sector. While ‘authoritarianism’ may not quite do justice to the degree of control exerted, for example, over Iraqis by Saddam Hussein's state and its apparatus, it is nonetheless preferable to totalitarianism.

41. Kanan Makiya has made this type of argument, or similar, in his works; see especially Samir al-Khalil (pseudonym for Kanan Makiya), *Republic of Fear: Saddam's Iraq*, London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989 and in al-Khalil (Makiya), *The Monument: Art, Vulgarly and Responsibility in Iraq*, cited above.

Saddam Hussein's statue in Paradise Square on 9 April 2003, as Baghdad fell to US forces. The involvement of US forces in its removal shows that the symbolism of destroying it was important to them, too – not just to Iraqis, though they were ultimately encouraged to take the lead.⁴²

Political Images as Political Language

Former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein (1937-2006, r. 1979-2003) provides a perfect example of how political images are used by leaders to send messages to society. Murals and public art featuring the Iraqi president were ubiquitous during his rule, and included images of him on horseback, in prayer, and in traditional Sunni, Shi'a and Kurdish clothes, with background imagery of Iraq and of contested sites such as Jerusalem. The mural below is an example of the political meanings found in artwork during his rule:



Image: United States Department of Defense (public domain image) retrieved via pingnews <http://www.flickr.com/photos/pingnews/510880940/> (20 August 2008).

The white text in the middle reads: *My admiration in you is special [and different] from other armed forces' formations and rows because you delivered an immortal message to the world in the heroic, eternal 'Mother of all Battles'.*

The text on the rocket launcher reads: *Struggle.*

The mural was probably painted soon after the 1990-91 Gulf War to depict the Republican Guard forces in the supposed 'mother of all battles' that Saddam promised to coalition forces. Note that the troops carry both Iraqi and Palestinian flags – a symbol of Saddam linking the war to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories and his (unsuccessful) attempts to frame the war as an Arab-Israeli one. Note also that Saddam is in military uniform, demonstrating his claims of military leadership as part of his legitimacy-building. It is an example of how multiple meanings and claims are often included in a single political artwork, including some claims that would be widely believed and/or are popular among Iraqis (e.g. the links to the Palestinian cause, and the capabilities of the Republican Guards) and others easily recognisable as nonsense (e.g. the implication of Iraqi success in 'the mother of all battles'.)

42. The destruction of the statue echoed the demolition of statues in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe as communist regimes there collapsed at the end of the Cold War, demonstrating the importance of public art in politics in other parts of the world.

The Societal Response to the State's Language

The ability of, and methods by which, individuals and social forces can directly and verbally respond to the state and its political language is limited. This is true both in an authoritarian context and in less restrictive but highly-contested political terrain such as post-2003 Iraq or contemporary Lebanon. In the former, there is the danger of engaging in discourse which the state or its ruling elite find objectionable, and where the outlets for public discussion are constrained, whether merely influenced by political dynamics or under direct state ownership and control. In the latter, dissent or political commentaries can attract attention from contending groups, sometimes violent, and again, the communicative institutions in society will often be under the control, influence or co-optation of particular groups.

Individuals and social groups have several important, if less overt, ways of responding to the language of the state or its elite.

First, political discourse occurs very frequently within confined or specific social circles where interlocutors are known and trusted. This is not so much underground politics – although it can be – but more akin to the informal coffee salon gatherings in 18th and 19th century Europe, which acted not only as a place to drink coffee but also as a gathering spot for the politically-minded. Modern Arab coffee houses and restaurants, but more importantly family, tribal and other social gatherings, serve as social-political outlets and a chance for people to exchange political ideas and impressions. The mosque has increasingly assumed this role in recent decades as well; a role it played prominently in Islam's early years. While direct challenges to the state by religious elite are uncommon – and dangerous in more authoritarian settings – the messages contained within sermons can have political resonance. Rhetorical influence by clerics on societal views and state policies most often occurs with circumspect language which, for example, couches an ideal policy or action in a somewhat abstract religious context; or in more substantive form, which combines supposedly universal religious concepts with specific local or national experiences and contexts.⁴³ Religious gatherings with political undertones may assist to bridge the gap that exists between state and society and being usually unstructured, casual and localised, are less threatening to the regime than formal opposition meetings, mass mobilisations, broadcasts or publications. Political discourse in this environment may still be cautious or self-censored but to a much lesser extent than public discourse.

Such opposing discourse may not always be constrained. Opposition groups will sometimes actively and overtly challenge the state and meet its rhetoric and symbols head-on. In such cases, similar tactics to those of the state are used. Claims of policy superiority and the appropriation of Islamic symbols and language,⁴⁴ especially Islamist ones, are articulated to construct their own legitimacy and challenge the state's authority. In overtly contested political environments, this can be quite glaring. The imagery on the banner/logo of Lebanese Hizballah, for example, developed during the 1975-1990 civil war but still carrying enormous political relevance now, includes symbols of peace and of violent resistance. There is a globe in the background but 'Lebanon' is firmly

43. John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, pp. 164-167.

44. Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, 2nd Edn., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, pp. 63-67.

stated in the group's title with a Qur'anic quote implying legitimacy that says: 'Truly the Party of God will be the victors.'⁴⁵

Even where the state dominates political space, its narratives are facing growing competition from international media and communication outlets. Most notable are the Internet and transnational mass media, especially satellite television channels. These have grown so rapidly in the Middle East that it is difficult to recall that it is an essentially post-1990 phenomenon. Prior to the 1990s, Arab televised media was dominated by state-owned and -controlled firms, many of which published the party line in a dry, uncontroversial and lacklustre fashion.⁴⁶ It was a standard, and boring, route for state political narratives. Moreover, events often went unreported or delayed due to the state's attempts to conceal or manage information.⁴⁷ Transnational satellite television stations outside of traditional state control (or at least beyond the patterns and usual reach of state control) arose to meet a demand from Arab audiences, a demand spurred by the growth in the 1980s and 1990s of such media in the West as CNN in the US and BBC in the UK. Prominent channels created in the 1990s and 2000s include Al-Jazeera, a Qatari-owned channel created in 1996 with a reputation for strong coverage, a sharp Arab perspective, and broad debate in its news and current affairs, and Al-Arabiyya, a Saudi channel started in 2003 which has become a strong competitor to the previously-dominant Al-Jazeera.⁴⁸ Attempts by states to censor or control transnational satellite television suggest that they take its threat seriously,⁴⁹ although their ability to confront it through repression is limited.

Finally, the use of indirect political language to counter the state's narratives is common. Two methods are most often used: humour and conspiracy theories. The Arab world has a rich history of political humour, stemming from repressive governments inhibiting more direct criticism and as a form of escapism from political reality.⁵⁰ Such humour takes the forms of jokes, lyrics, poetry, cartoons and comics.⁵¹ Political humour allows the narrator to be opaque about the characters in the joke, poem or story, and to avoid explicit criticism by masking disparagement using the hypothetical. It also provides an amount of deniability if offence is caused. Not all humour targets the state, of course, but much of it serves a similar purpose: it is a safer way to criticise those in power (not just the state, but also external powers such as foreign governments and firms) than direct declarations. Moreover, it is an entertaining form of political discussion.

45. Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, p.67.

46. S. Abdullah Schleifer, 'The Impact of Arab Satellite Television on the Prospects for Democracy in the Arab World', *YaleGlobal Online*, 13 May 2005, retrieved 20 December 2007 from <<http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/article.print?id=5716>>.

47. A famous example was the Saudi media not reporting Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait until almost three days after the fact. *Ibid.*, n.p. and Naomi Sakr, *Satellite Realms: Transnational Television, Globalization and the Middle East*, London: I. B. Taurus, 2001, p. 10. Other examples of state-controlled media secrecy, not to mention outright misinformation, abound.

48. Marc Lynch, 'Watching al-Jazeera', *Wilson Quarterly*, Summer 2005, p. 38.

49. Sakr, *Satellite Realms: Transnational Television, Globalization and the Middle East*, p. 163.

50. See Khalid Kishtainy, *Arab Political Humour*, London: Quartet Books, 1985 for a detailed and insightful discussion of both these points.

51. *Ibid.*

Arab Political Humour as Popular Political Language

A hypothetical president is looking for a new economic and financial adviser, and calls for those interested to present themselves at the presidential palace.

The first applicant is a successful, professional accountant.

The president begins the interview by asking: "What does two plus two equal?"

The accountant, surprised at the simplicity of the question, answers: "That's easy, Sir – four."

"No", says the president firmly, and dismisses the poor accountant.

The second applicant is a career bureaucrat - cautious and unused to making decisions by himself. The president poses the same question, to which the bureaucrat responds by stalling:

"Well, Sir, perhaps I could chair a committee across multiple departments, that would investigate this with a view to reporting, say, early next year with a well-considered—".

"Get out!" the president interrupts, clearly displeased with the waffling bureaucrat.

The third applicant is also an official, but corrupt, well-connected, and with a string of business interests.

As the president poses the question "What does two plus two equal?", the third applicant smiles - he knows already that he will get the job.

"That's easy, Sir – two plus two equals three for you, one for me."

This joke, with only slight variations, is heard throughout the Middle East. Such humour is typically critical political language using the security of humour and veiled in the hypothetical. The 'president' is a hypothetical one – unnamed – and the position itself is often vaguely expressed to avoid alluding to a real person. The three applicants represent stereotypes with political meaning: the accountant as highly professional yet somewhat naïve in the ways of power, technically competent but unable to jump to the political ranks of the bureaucracy or state-owned firms. The first bureaucrat is spineless and self-protecting, unable to decide on the simplest of matters but keen for the status of chairing a committee to investigate the seemingly obvious. The presumably-successful third applicant represents much that is criticised in the corrupt political economies of the Middle East: a beneficiary perhaps of dilatory or shady economic reforms (the Egyptians have a term *al-munfāṭihūn* to describe the profiteers of economic liberalisation), and certainly one who has used connections and *wasta* (intercession/intermediation) for personal gain. In more authoritarian states, humour such as this will often be permitted, while to point to actual cases of corruption, or to criticise those in or near power, is out of the question.

Conspiracy theories, like humour, form a complex rhetorical tool that serves well the goals of societal political discourse. While the Middle Eastern state will generate conspiracy theories to build support against a real or perceived threat or to elicit obedience during hard times, conspiracy theories that come from society are used as explanatory tools and also routinely as a form of political language. A conspiracy theory may be a way of pitching society ("us") against the state ("them"), in effect "othering"⁵² a regime that is seen as aloof from society and not representative of its interests. It may also serve as a route towards self-empowerment in the face of a strong state.⁵³ Examples include cases where leaders are argued as being in cahoots with external powers or specific interests, thus sending the political message that the regime is acting for the

52. The term "the other" or "othering" was originally a concept of philosophy, now commonly adopted in political science. It refers to the act of defining and identifying something or someone as different – "the other" – in the process helping to define and assert one's own values and self-identity. In politics, "othering" can be used to define one's own identity and values, or to mark out other people so as to conflict with or control them.

53. Gray, 'Explaining Conspiracy Theories', pp. 170-171.

other. In cases where past conspiracies are raised as evidence of a current conspiracy, the former lends the theory intellectual weight and the narrator a claim to knowledge or access to information. As with political humour, conspiracy theories are attractive because they have a sense of deniability if they cause offence, and because some actors can be concealed or excused in the narrative. They are also a popular form of entertainment, which facilitates their acceptance and spread but also, arguably, their acceptability in more formal or serious contexts.

Conspiracy theories in the Arab world and Iran commonly posit that Israel or the US is behind events. This is a form of political explanation for the strength of Israel, the weakness of the regional response to Israel and the Palestinian plight, and – where the theory includes US support for the Jewish state – an implication that external powers are supporting the status quo of Israeli occupation in the Palestinian territories and Israel's military dominance in the region. By their nature and the ways in which they can be massaged, conspiracy theories may have multiple beneficiaries. Those mentioning Israel and the US, for example, can contain implied criticism of a government for not doing more in the cause of the Palestinians. Yet they may also be of benefit to a regime: if Israel is painted by a conspiracist as especially powerful, this can serve as an implied excuse for the regime not being able to act more forcefully against it.

Conclusion

Middle Eastern political language includes generic elements that can be found anywhere in the world. However, several dynamics are distinctive of the region. The region shares with other parts of the world some basic characteristics of political language, especially in the ways in which leaders frame public discourse to justify their rule, build support and legitimacy, and contest alternative explanations posited by opposing forces. Yet the region includes some unique political discourse and distinctive sources for certain political language and symbolism. – how the language is constructed using Arabic; the real or perceived relationship of the narrator to religious authority; the allusion to particular political principles in Islam; and the prominence of the state as a narrator of conspiracy theories – are all dynamics that are either unique or significant to the Middle East. The region's politics, therefore, can be partly understood by reference to wider political explanations drawn from around the world, including on political language, but only to an extent.

Ultimately the region and its political language must be understood on its own terms and from its own points of departure. Comparisons with other regions are important, but there is much to be derived from a study of the region's political, economic and social dynamics as expressed through verbal and non-verbal political language and imagery. Given this breadth and complexity of political language across the region and between various interlocutors, the issue is an important and enduring one.

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