

When Arab Politicians’ Shouts and Whispers Contradict

by Daniel Pipes

In 1933, an exasperated [British ambassador](#) to Iraq dressed down the country’s King Faisal. “Was I to report to my government,” he asked rhetorically,

that Iraq’s public men, men who had held the highest positions in the State, made speeches on solemn occasions in which they voiced opinions which they knew to be false and meaningless? Was I to say that the Iraqi Parliament was just a sham, a place where time and money was wasted by a handful of men, who, while masquerading as statesmen, neither meant what they said, nor said what they believed?¹

In like spirit, a U.S. ambassador to Iraq in the 1950s wrote of Nuri al-Sa’id, who served as prime minister on fourteen occasions:

Nuri’s public statements on Israel differed sharply from what he had to say in private. His public statements, like those of all Pan-Arab nationalists, were bitter and uncompromising. In private, he discussed Israel calmly, reasonably, and with moderation.²



¹ Foreign Office 371/16903, E 1724/105/93, 22 March 1933, quoted in Mohammad A. Tarbush, *The Role of the Military in Politics: A Case Study of Iraq to 1941* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1982), pp. 53-4.

² Waldemar J. Gallman, *Iraq under General Nuri: My Recollections of Nuri al-Said, 1954-1958* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1964), p. 167.

In 1993, regarding Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, the author [Kanan Makiya](#) noted that

Arab politicians roar emotional messages to their masses and sotto voce speak in off-the-record remarks to Western interlocutors.

so many of the best minds and intellects of the Arab world went along with the Iraqi dictator's project during the Gulf crisis even though the very same people would not dream of living under his rule. In private, they despise Saddam Hussein and everything he represents; in public, they stand by him.

These examples concerning Iraq highlight a feature of Arab public life: politicians roar emotional messages in speeches to their masses and sotto voce speak in tactful off-the-record remarks to Western interlocutors.

That raises two questions: Should an outsider heed the shouts or the whispers? Which is the better guide to policy? (This differs from asking about true personal beliefs because how a politician acts matters more than how he thinks deep-down.) A historical review finds the answer to be quite easy—and perhaps surprising.

Statements about Israel

The Arab-Israeli conflict prompts the best-known inconsistencies between public and private utterances with politicians shouting fiery anti-Zionism in public and whispering more subdued messages in private. Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egypt's strongman from 1954 to 1970, exemplified this contrast.

Publicly, Nasser relentlessly forwarded an anti-Zionist agenda, making Israel the core issue of pan-Arab politics and riding his opposition to it to become the most powerful

Arab leader of his era. But, according to Miles Copeland, a CIA operative who liaised with Nasser, he actually considered the Palestine issue “unimportant.”³

The same pattern applied to specific issues. Addressing the world, Nasser rejected the very existence of the Jewish state as well as any compromise with it while, in private, he spoke to Western diplomats about a readiness to negotiate with Israel. Publicly, he led the fight in the Arab League against a U.S. plan for a Jordan Valley Authority to allocate Jordan River waters; privately, he accepted this plan.⁴ After the 1967 war, he publicly [rejected negotiations](#) with Israel and insisted, “That which was taken by force will be regained by force,” even while secretly signaling the U.S. administration a willingness to sign a non-belligerency accord with Israel “with all its consequences.”⁵

The public statements in all these cases defined the actual policies. Nasser even tacitly admitted that shouts offer a more accurate guide than whispers, telling John F. Kennedy that

some Arab politicians were making harsh statements concerning Palestine publicly and then contacting the American government to alleviate their harshness by

³ Miles Copeland, *The Game of Nations: The Amorality of Power Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969), pp. 69-70, 113.

⁴ Michael B. Oren, *The Origins of the Second Arab-Israeli War: Egypt, Israel and the Great Powers, 1952-56* (London: Frank Cass, 1992), chap. 5.

⁵ Michael B. Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 316.

saying that their statements were meant for local Arab consumption.⁶

That precisely described his own behavior.

Syria's strongman, Hafez al-Assad, acted similarly. [Richard Nixon](#) wrote of him,

I was convinced that Assad would continue to play the hardest of hard lines in public, but in private, he would follow the Arab proverb that he told me during one of our meetings: "When a blind man can see with one eye, it is better than not being able to see at all."⁷

(The proverb seemingly implies that Assad is shielding the Syrian population from the softer line he conveyed to Nixon because, due to their indoctrination, they could not handle the truth.)

Assad publicly rejected any restriction of his military options vis-à-vis Israel, but [Harold H. Saunders](#), a leading U.S. diplomat, reported,

The position taken by the Syrians in private is that demilitarization of the [Syrian-Israeli] border can be negotiated.

A U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia in the 1970s related that King Faisal would carry on about the Zionist conspiracy. After some hours of this, the king dismissed his note-taker and got down to the real business at hand when he became distinctly more reasonable.

⁶ Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Daily Report*, Near East and South Asia, Sept. 21, 1962, no. 185.

⁷ Richard Nixon, *Memoirs* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978), p. 1013.



Syrian president Hafez al-Assad (right), Golan, 1973. Assad publicly rejected restrictions on his military options against Israel. In private, the Syrians professed to believe demilitarization of the Syrian-Israeli border could be negotiated.

Henry Kissinger observed in 1973,

Every leader I have talked to so far has made it clear that it is far easier for them to ease pressures [on Israel] de facto than as public Arab policy.⁸

Jimmy Carter raised eyebrows when he revealed in 1979, at a moment when Arab politicians were pushing especially hard for an independent Palestinian state, "I have never met an Arab leader that in private professed the desire for an independent Palestinian state."⁹ Three years later, Carter explained in his memoir that

almost all the Arabs could see that an independent [Palestinian] nation in the heart of the Middle East might be a serious point of friction and a focus for rad-

⁸ Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), p. 657.

⁹ *The New York Times*, Aug. 31, 1979.

icalizing influence. ... However, because of the powerful political influence of the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization] in international councils and the threat of terrorist attacks from some of its forces, few Arabs had the temerity to depart from their original position in a public statement.¹⁰

In private, one Palestinian leader convinced several people of his desire for peace. In public, he endorsed terrorist attacks.

Several people, the analyst Barry Rubin recounts, told him how nice the Palestinian leader Faisal Husseini

was to them in private, and how they were convinced of his true desire for peace. In public, though, Husseini adhered to a much harder line, endorsing specific terrorist attacks, and, in a Beirut speech just before his death, setting Israel's destruction as the Palestinians' goal.¹¹

A confidential U.S. government cable dated October 2, 2009, concerning [Tunisia](#) (released by WikiLeaks) points to another private-public discrepancy where again the public message is more instructive:

Tunisia has clearly been wary of public opinion, which has been enflamed by images of violence from Israeli-Arab conflicts, particularly the fighting in Lebanon in the summer of 2006 and in Gaza in early 2009. Tunisian leaders occasionally complain to us that Al-

Jazeera's coverage of these conflicts has riled Tunisian public opinion, limiting the Government of Tunisia (GOT)'s perceived range of policy options. Ironically, Tunisian media, tightly controlled by the state, actively fans the flames of public anger regarding the conflict. The Tunisian tabloid press in particular, while slavishly obsequious in its coverage of President Ben Ali, has a free hand to publish as fact outrageous conspiracy theories involving Israel and Jews, and generally imbalanced coverage of events in the Israel-Palestine theatre.

Cairo bellowed loudly with anti-Israel and anti-American conspiracy theories when Egypt's culture minister, Farouk Hosny, failed to be elected head of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), also in October 2009. Of course, the confidential [U.S. government cable](#) (released by WikiLeaks) on this subject pointed to a much more nuanced private reaction (calling the incident but an "irritant").

The journalist [Matti Friedman](#) found Hamas engaging in private deceit:

certain Hamas spokesmen have taken to confiding to Western journalists, including some I know personally, that the group is in fact a secretly pragmatic outfit with bellicose rhetoric, and journalists—eager to believe the confession, and sometimes unwilling to credit locals with the smarts necessary to deceive them—have taken it as a scoop instead of as spin.

¹⁰ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), p. 302.

¹¹ *The Jerusalem Post*, June 12, 2001.



Israeli foreign minister Moshe Dayan (left) and Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, 1977. According to Dayan, in private, Sadat “frequently stated” his opposition to a Palestinian state, contrary to his public position.

Israelis have noted similar discrepancies. Prior to 1948, [Laura Zittrain Eisenberg](#) writes, Jewish Agency operatives “found that while many of their contacts privately endorsed partition [of Palestine], few were willing to do so publicly.”¹² According to Moshe Dayan, Anwar al-Sadat “frequently stated” in private his opposition to a Palestinian state, quite contrary to his public position.¹³

Even Palestinians point out the inconsistency. George Habash, the Palestinian leader, observed in 1991 that while the Algerian and Yemeni governments really do want a Palestinian state, “Jordan doesn’t. Syria is not decided.” He concluded, “You could say that perhaps the *effective* Arab states do not want one.”¹⁴

¹² Laura Zittrain Eisenberg, *My Enemy’s Enemy: Lebanon in the Early Zionist Imagination, 1900-1948* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), p. 23.

¹³ Moshe Dayan, *Breakthrough: A Personal Account of the Egypt-Israel Peace Negotiations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), p. 162.

¹⁴ *The Nation*, Dec. 30, 1991.

Whatever Nuri al-Sa‘id’s private conversations, his conduct toward Israel remained steadily hostile. Nasser made war three times with Israel. Regardless of personal feelings, Arab leaders pay homage to the Palestinian issue. Were the views expressed in tête-à-têtes with Western officials operational, the Arab-Israeli conflict would have been resolved long ago.

Seduced by Whispers— and Not

Appreciating confidential information more than the overt makes intuitive sense. As the Spanish writer [Miguel De Unamuno](#) puts it, “Some people will believe anything if you whisper it to them.” Plus, insiders naturally attach value to exclusive and confidential one-to-one conversations with leaders. In this spirit, Westerners often privilege private words over public ones.

In late 2007, [Mahmoud Abbas](#) publicly refused to recognize Israel as a Jewish state, a major issue at the time, saying only,

From a historical perspective, there are two states: Israel and Palestine. In Israel, there are Jews and others living there. This we are willing to recognize, nothing else.

Despite this clear unwillingness to accept Israel’s Jewish nature, Israel’s Prime Minister [Ehud Olmert](#) insisted on twisting Abbas’ private words to supersede his public ones:

My impression is that he wants peace with Israel, and accepts Israel as Israel defines itself. If you ask him to say that he sees Israel as a Jewish state, he will not say

that. But if you ask me whether in his soul he accepts Israel, as Israel defines itself, I think he does. That is not insignificant. It is perhaps not enough, but it is not insignificant.

Analysts warn against seduction by whispers, concluding that public pronouncements count more than private ones.

In 2010, WikiLeaks published diplomatic cables reporting that several [Arab leaders](#) urged the U.S. government to attack Iranian nuclear facilities. Most flamboyantly, King [Abdullah of Saudi Arabia](#) wanted Washington to “cut off the head of the snake.”¹⁵ American analysts generally agreed that these private statements unmasked the real policies of Saudi and other politicians, despite the absence of comparable public comments.

[Eric R. Mandel](#) “regularly briefs members of the U.S. Senate, House, and their foreign policy advisers,” making him an insider. In a 2019 article titled “Israelis and Arabs say one thing in public and another behind closed doors. Politicians and pundits need to understand the difference,” he argues for private conversations being more useful than public speeches. His evidence? Finding that,

despite some public lip service to the Palestinian cause, the Sunni Arab world knows that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is at most a “[side issue](#).”

But other analysts warn against seduction by whispers, concluding as this writer does that public pronouncements count more than private ones. The journalist [Lee Smith](#) notes, with reference to the “cut off the head of the snake” quote, that Arab

politicians may be telling Americans what they want to hear: “We know what the Arabs tell diplomats and journalists about Iran,” he writes, “but we don’t know what they really think

about their Persian neighbor.” Their appeals could be part of a process of diplomacy, which involves mirroring one’s allies’ fears and desires as one’s own. Thus, when Saudis claim Iranians are their mortal enemies, Americans tend uncritically to accept this commonality of interests; Smith maintains, however, that

the words the Saudis utter to American diplomats are not intended to provide us with a transparent window into royal thinking but to manipulate us into serving the interests of the House of Saud.

We think they are telling the truth because we like what they are saying, not a wise assumption.

Or, as [Dalia Dassa Kaye](#) of the Rand Corporation notes, “[W]hat Arab leaders say to U.S. officials and what they might do may not always track.”

[Yehoshafat Harkabi](#) observed in his classic 1972 study, *Arab Attitudes to Israel*:

If in the United States a private statement is an indication of real intentions, the reverse seems to be true, very often, in Arab countries, where public proclamations are more significant than the soft words whispered to foreign journalists. Even if the masses cannot impose their will on their leaders by democratic processes, the importance of the public declarations lies in the fact that they create commitments and

¹⁵ Reuters, Nov. 28, 2010.

arouse expectations that the leadership will practice what it preaches.¹⁶

Digging Deeper

Before looking at the psychology underlying this phenomenon, some exceptions need to be flagged.

First, when Arab politicians speak privately not to Westerners but to their own audiences, they tend to tell the truth. Three days after Nasser accepted U.N. Security Council Resolution 242 in 1967, with its provision of “a just and lasting peace in which every State in the area can live in security,” he instructed the army brass not to “pay any attention to anything I may say in public about a peaceful solution.”¹⁷ Likewise, Arafat publicly signed the 1993 Oslo Accords recognizing Israel, but he expressed his real intentions in semi-private when he invited Muslims [in a South African mosque](#) “to come and to fight and to start the jihad to liberate Jerusalem,” an indirect call to help end Israel’s existence.

Second, what is said in Arabic counts more than in English. A [study of Arafat’s speeches](#) in the two years after Oslo found that he held up “only an olive branch for the West and a Kalashnikov for his fellow Arabs,” with the Kalashnikov the operational symbol.

Third, politicians do not always speak differently in public and private. Nasser on occasion privately told U.S. officials the same as he publicly told Egyptians, that the U.S. government “was trying to keep Egypt



Nasser told his army brass not to “pay any attention to anything I may say in public about a peaceful solution” to the conflict with Israel.

weak and that this resulted from Jewish influence” in the United States.¹⁸

As for the cause of this shout-whisper discrepancy, [Abdelraouf al-Rawabdeh](#), prime minister of Jordan in 1999-2000, incisively explained it in a 2013 statement that bears full quotation:

The preacher speaking from the pulpit, the philosopher, the politician, the university professor, the school teacher—they are all attuned to the conscience of the nation ... and they are true to what they believe in, but they are not responsible for its implementation. A preacher steps up to the pulpit and declares: “We must confront America, the spearhead of heresy.” Fine. What does he want us to do about it? He doesn’t say. Along comes the politician, whose

¹⁶ Jerusalem: Israel Universities Press, 1972, p. 390.

¹⁷ Quoted in Mohamed Heikal, *The Road to Ramadan* (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co., 1975), p. 54.

¹⁸ Telegram from George V. Allen, 1 October 1955, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957*, vol. 14, *Arab-Israeli Dispute 1955* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1989), p. 539.

job it is to understand the local, regional, and international balance of power, and he talks only about what he can accomplish.

Once, when I was running for office, someone tried to give me a hard time. He approached me and asked: “What do you think about America?” I asked him: “Are you asking me as a politician or as a candidate?”

He said he was asking me as a candidate, so I said: “America is an enemy state, which provides weapons to Israel, kills our Palestinian people, controls our Arab countries, expropriates our oil, and destroys our economy.” So he was pleased, but then he said: “And as a politician?” I said: “America is our friend. It stands by us and provides us with aid.”

He said: “Don’t you see that as a moral contradiction?” “No,” I said. “I say that America is an enemy in order to appease you, and I say it is a friend in order to get you food. You tell me which you prefer.” [laughs]

Rawabdeh’s candor concisely accounts for the contrast between political campaign and diplomatic necessity with the former shaping policy and the latter diverting attention from it. In other words, politicians lie in both public and private, so neither provides an infallible guide, but the former predicts actions better than the latter. Privileged information tends to mislead and whispers tend to distract.

What advice proceeds from this overview? To understand policy, rely on public statements, not hushed murmurings. To understand Middle Eastern politics, better to read newspapers and press releases or listen to radio and television than read confidential diplomatic cables or talk privately to politicians. Rhetoric, not what goes quietly from mouth to ear, is operational. What the masses hear matters. They learn policies while high-ranking Westerners encounter seduction.

This rule of thumb, incidentally, explains why [distant observers](#) sometimes see what on-the-spot diplomats and journalists miss.

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