



الله أكبر



2026/6/20

## State Discourse and Public Sphere Discourse (Between Hegemony and Communication)

Dr. Adnan Sabeeh Thamer

● **Opinion Article**



## State Discourse and Public Sphere Discourse (Between Hegemony and Communication)

Series of publications of Al-Bayan Center for Studies and Planning  
Research Department / Social Studies

[Publication](#) / Opinion Article

[Topic](#) / Education and Society, Governance, Constitution, and Law

[Dr. Adnan Sabeeh Thamer](#) / Researcher specializing in the anthropology of discourse

---

### About

Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies is an independent, nonprofit think tank based in Baghdad, Iraq. Its primary mission is to offer an authentic perspective on public and foreign policy issues related to Iraq and the region.

Al-Bayan Center pursues its vision by conducting independent analysis, as well as proposing workable solutions for complex issues that concern policymakers and academics.

---

حقوق النشر محفوظة © 2026

[www.bayancenter.org](http://www.bayancenter.org)

[info@bayancenter.org](mailto:info@bayancenter.org)

Since 2014

The essence of the social and political system in countries is shaped on the basis of its discourse, and on the basis of its nurturing of that discourse. Social and political discourse is nurtured in different ways depending on the structure of the political and social system, and the relationships representing these two systems. If the relationships are built on direction and guidance, with a centralized connection based on the authority of a few people over other individuals, the discourse of authority (social and political) therein deals with individuals on the basis of “instrumental consciousness.”

On the other hand, if the relationships are based on democratic dialogue, partnership, and contribution to decision-making, where authority belongs to everyone, then decisions and the context of discourse are made on the basis of “communicative consciousness.” The public discourse of society and the state is formed by a number of sustaining factors, the most important of which is state discourse, which is considered the first formulation of political discourse, as state discourse affects the other factors, namely: (the public sphere, the private sphere, elite discourse).

Thus, if state discourse is based on “instrumental consciousness,” the discourse of the public sphere is shaped in

an instrumental manner. However, if it is unclear, the discourse of the public sphere becomes muddled. And if it remains silent and fails to produce discourse at times that require explanatory discourses for events, the private sphere hastens to compensate for the silence by seizing control of the public sphere; thereby, the private sphere becomes the public sphere, and the characteristics of the private dominate the public.

This paper proceeds from the hypothesis that the public sphere in Iraq has transitioned from the stage of “spontaneous formation” to the stage of “organized colonization.” According to Jürgen Habermas, the public sphere is supposed to be a space for “communicative action” aimed at mutual understanding and formulating the general will (in the sense of Jean-Jacques Rousseau). However, the Iraqi reality has revealed a dangerous slide toward “instrumental action,” where public rhetoric has transformed from a tool for persuasion into a means of control and coercion. We attempt to investigate the causes that create a discursive vacuum during crises in Iraq, and how state discourse served as a catalyst for private spheres to dominate the public sphere, in addition to the absence of the elite’s role in communication, debate, and dialogue. Attempting to cross from the stage of theorization to empirical work, we examine

the views of a number of theorists, including the German thinker Jürgen Habermas in the theory of the “Public Sphere” and his updated interpretations of Weberian rationality.

## **State Discourse**

State discourse is linked to the nature of the relationship between the state and its citizens, and the extent of the state’s desire to depict that relationship. For if the relationship is based on “communicative consciousness”-which is the consciousness based on answering and explaining the question: “How did this action happen?”-it is what prompts the state to interact in a certain way. Meanwhile, the second type is “instrumental consciousness,” which is the consciousness based on answering and directing the question: “What happened?”. The difference between the two answers, “how” and “what,” is the difference between government discourse that deals with the public on an instrumental basis: “what” (not needing explanation), and a communicative basis: “how” (needing explanation and exposition).

Conversely, both methods affect the public sphere; if the discourse is instrumental, the public sphere is confined to describing what is happening without engaging in dialogue

regarding the role assigned to the public in what is occurring, which creates a relationship based on criticism or submission between the public and the political system. Meanwhile, communicative discourse, which is based on explanation rather than description, creates a participatory public that is neither conventional nor submissive.

The German scholar Jürgen Habermas refers to the concept of linguistic communication, considering it a transcendence of the concept of instrumentality, as language must not be confined to matters of eloquence, its charm, and its link to expression and description; rather, he made language a means to create communicative action that produces a kind of intersubjectivity among acting subjects through participation in communication via language. Jürgen Habermas's emphasis on communicative rationality, in which validation is arrived at through participation in communication, differs from teleological (Weberian) rationality, which moves toward a specific goal, whereas the goal of communicative rationality is formed through communicative argumentation and participation through language. Thus, he shifts from the philosophy of consciousness to the philosophy of language.

Traditional or totalitarian regimes often deal with the public

in their discourse on the basis of instrumental discourse, which contents itself with linguistic eloquence and description without reaching the stage of exposition and explanation, due to these regimes' belief that they possess sovereignty and hold the sole right to make decisions related to the public good, or that they are more capable of interpreting the public good without the public having any role in it. That discourse creates a detachment between the state and the public, as communication is nullified, the public sphere loses its value, and it transforms into a private sphere belonging to the authority or the group dominating the authority.

In regimes transitioning from totalitarianism to democracy, their discourse also suffers from transformations, as it has not reached the stage of communicative discourse due to totalitarian socialization based on the premise that authority is the source of discourse and the holder of sovereignty; thus, the public good remains, discursively, shifting between silence, confusion, and contradiction, which establishes a loss of the existing relationship between it and the public, to the point of questioning the legitimacy of the discourse itself.

In the empirical model for measuring the extent to which discourse transforms into communicative discourse, the

discourse of the Iraqi state, following the transition in 2003, did not make focusing on political discourse a goal or a project for the political system to accompany this transition, as successive governments within the political system did not care to form a discursive model based on connection with the public and the creation of a communicative process. Among the pillars of the communicative process is that the language must be intelligible and its context must carry "communicative competence." Communicative competence, a concept tracing back to the anthropologist Dell Hymes, means the departure of language from being a mere set of grammatical and lexical structures into its social and cultural context as a means of communication between human beings.

One of the elements of communicative competence for state discourse is the existence of a shared discursive lexicon established by the state as part of the processes of producing a communicative memory between itself and society, such that these concepts create fertile ground for communication through the existence of agreed-upon meanings. The conceptual discursive lexicon of the state helps avoid falling into the trap of contradiction and confusion, and it frequently explains the discursive silence accompanying certain events.

Among the necessities of the discursive lexicon are also clarity in discourse production, the absence of confusion and contradiction, and the delineating of clear features for international relations, whether linked to the concept of strategic or short-term relations, or to the concept of the enemy.

The Iraqi state has been unable to form that lexicon due to the discursive shifts between successive governments, and the discursive transformations that keep pace with international and political changes. Consequently, the state did not seek to move toward explanatory communicative discourse, and most of what is produced of state discourse remained distributed between instrumental discourse or silence, creating a society incapable of communicating on issues of public concern.

### **The Public Sphere**

Among the other concepts that Jürgen Habermas theorized and worked to apply empirically is the concept of the public sphere, which is a postmodern concept that examines the transition from a centralized discourse based on a vertical axis to a communicative discourse based on a shared horizontal axis. Jürgen Habermas is considered one of the thinkers

who discussed the idea of the public sphere at length, as he distinguished between the public and private spheres; the public belongs to everyone, which does not mean that everyone is able to exist within it, but rather it belongs to anyone who has the ability to participate in it. It stands in contrast to the private sphere, whose domain is specific to a particular group, nationality, or system.

Jürgen Habermas adopted the concept of the general will put forward by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his book *On the Social Contract*, which means the sum of individuals' wills regarding the public interest—not all individuals, but rather those who can have a will within the public sphere. Among the characteristics of that will is that it is indivisible and inalienable; meaning that a part of it cannot be dedicated to the public good while the other part is abandoned, just as individuals do not have the right to waive the right to the public good on behalf of others or even subsequent generations. Rousseau considers the general will, not authority, to be the sovereign, and its existence is necessary for true freedom and the protection of the public interest. Jürgen Habermas applies the concept of the general will empirically to the public sphere, which is the sphere where speech regarding the public good is permitted for anyone who

can speak.

Historically, the public sphere dates back to the coffeehouses and taverns where dialogue about public affairs took place, then developed in the nineteenth century with the spread of print journalism, and in the twentieth century through other mass communication media, from broadcasting to the internet and social media. Among the conditions of the public sphere that distinguish it from the private sphere is that its discourse is horizontal; that is, everyone is equal in participating in dialogue, without discrimination on a class, ethnic, or communal basis. Meanwhile, the private sphere has a vertical (centralized) discourse, in which discursive centers feed the base and it is circulated hierarchically. If the public sphere is based on communicative (explanatory) action, the private sphere is based on instrumental (descriptive-directive) action; that is, the discursive center in the private sphere describes “what happened” without explaining “how it happened,” whereas the public sphere relies on explaining “how.”

Thus, the public sphere is linked to state discourse: if state discourse is based on communication, the public sphere becomes based on communication, dialogue, and interactions; however, if state discourse is based on description or silence,

the public sphere is afflicted by confusion or contention and conflict between supporters and opponents of the state discourse. The elite play a pivotal role in feeding the public sphere, shaping debates, and categorizing dialogue using more rational methods; however, this does not mean that the elite dominate the public sphere, but rather they contribute to enhancing the rationality of communication.

The overlap between the public and private spheres occurs during times of crisis, when the state's discursive vacuum becomes more apparent than ever, and the absence of a shared discursive space (which is the space created by memory policies and the state's discursive lexicon), as well as the emergence of emotional aspects, contributes to making this discursive vacuum clear; for there is no ground for debate regarding the public good, and the public sphere becomes vulnerable to dominance by groups or parties, thereby transforming it from a public sphere into a private sphere.

In the Iraqi arena—which suffers from a vacuum resulting from the state's (instrumental) discourse that turns debate into conflict due to the vacuum left by the absence of “explanation,” which is the foundation of debate and dialogue—the proprietors of the private sphere exploit that discursive vacuum in the

public sphere to control it; conversely, those demanding the reclamation of the public sphere, such as cultural or social elites, are excluded. The dominance of the private sphere over the public sphere works to transform the public sphere into a private one, its discourse becomes vertical based on direction, and forms of participation in dialogue erode. Correspondingly, the goals of the private sphere, which belong to a religious, ethnic, or partisan group, are converted into public goals that concern everyone. Anyone who opposes those goals is deemed a violator of the public good, deserving of treason accusations or exclusion through specific means. This process is called the “colonization of the public sphere,” which is the dominance over the public sphere and its transformation into a domain private to a specific group or into teleological goals belonging to that group.

On the level of mass social communication in Iraq, the colonization of the public sphere is not limited to partisan groups alone; indeed, the Tishreen protesters at the beginning of the protest in 2019 dominated the public sphere, capitalizing on the authority’s silence resulting from its lack of a participatory lexicon with the public, and with the help of some protest theorists among the elite. Even if the protesters’ goal was

the public good, the conditions of the public sphere based on dialogue, debate, and communication were not met; thus, the general will, according to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, cannot be divided, but rather its completeness lies in not losing any of its characteristics; meaning that the absence of dialogue and debate deprives the general will of its communicative value, which prevents it from falling into error.

After Tishreen, the traditional parties holding power in Iraq noticed the possibility of controlling the public sphere, so they trained specialized cadres in social media and political debate, making the opportunities presented by crises a means to dominate the public sphere. This is precisely what occurred in several crises and events, most recently the events after October 7, 2023, followed by the 12-day war (Israeli-Iranian) and the forty-day war (American-Iranian), where anyone demanding dialogue about Iraq's capacity and role in this war and its aftermath is deemed an opponent of the public good, whereas this "public good" is originally a private good presented as a public good.

## Conclusion

Through what has been presented in the thesis of this paper, it becomes clear that the strength of democracy in Iraq is determined by its discourse, which is established by state discourse, and by its ability to preserve the public sphere. As for allowing room for private discourse to colonize the public sphere, its danger lies in the formation of divisive binaries based on treason accusations and exclusion.

Added to this is the importance of the relationship formed between individuals and their political system (political culture), which is considered one of the pillars of democracy establishing the legitimacy of participatory authority built on the basis of contribution and participation, not on the basis of dominance and submission. This is achieved through socializing individuals into the independence of the public sphere and its horizontal dialogue, which does not recognize any divisions or distinctions among individuals on an ethnic or class basis, as well as activating legal aspects that protect the public sphere and preventing treason accusations as one of the tools of colonizing the public sphere.

The reclamation of the public sphere in Iraq is not achieved by

responding to noise with similar noise, but rather through:

- Detaching the partisan or communal (private sphere) from the (public space) as the space of the public good.
- Protecting the elite from campaigns of treason accusations through legislation and norms that guarantee the ethics of communication.
- Educating on the transition from the rhetoric of coercion that creates followers, to the rhetoric of persuasion that creates participating citizens.



**For an Active state  
and a participating society**

---

[www.bayancenter.org](http://www.bayancenter.org)  
[info@bayancenter.org](mailto:info@bayancenter.org)

---