

The Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs  
(RIMA), Singapore

&

Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAF), Singapore

# Covering Islam: Challenges & Opportunities for Media in the Global Village

Edited by

**Syed Farid Alatas**

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# CONTENTS

<i>Forewords</i>	v-ix
<b>Preface</b> SYED FARID ALATAS	1
<b>Four Years after September 11<sup>th</sup>: The Failure of Western Media</b> STEPHEN SCHWARTZ	5
<b>Globalisation of Media Ethics and Localisation of Media Values</b> JOHN RICHARD GEE	27
<b>Is Objective Reporting on Islam Possible? Contextualising the Demon</b> SYED FARID ALATAS	41
<b>Islamic Imagery and American Policy</b> YUSEF J. PROGLER	53
<b>Right, Left &amp; Wrong: A Comparison of East and West Coverage of Islam</b> SUNNI M. KHALID	89
<b>Religious Ideas: Islam in the Malay Press</b> AHMAD MURAD MERICAN	115
<b>Harnessing Inter-Religious Harmony through Media Agencies</b> HAIDAR BAGIR	133
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	149

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*Appendices*

<b>Keynote Speech</b>	155
YAACOB IBRAHIM, Minister for Environment and Water Resources and In-Charge of Muslim Affairs	
<b>Peace Journalism as a Tool for Rapprochement</b>	161
FRANK LEMKE, Radio Training Centre, DW-AKADEMIE	
<b>Seminar Programme</b>	173

# WELCOME ADDRESS

by

## Abdul Razak Chanbasha

Chairman, the Centre for Research on  
Islamic & Malay Affairs (RIMA)

One glance at the title of this book will remind one of the landmark work by Edward Said, “Covering Islam: How the Media and Experts Determine How We See The Rest Of The World”. In his book, Edward Said highlighted the media and the experts’ monolithic effect when they interpreted Islam for others’ consumption. The result of this effect was not only a misunderstanding of the subject matter but also a mistrust of the people of this faith. His advice was clear – not to defend Islam per se, but to be critical in one’s understanding of Islam, and of other religions for that matter.

In the same spirit, this seminar is the result of two major motivations. One is the need to understand the media as a producer instead of a mere transmitter of news, with the ability to influence views and opinions, and the other is to empower readership to engage media practitioners on the coverage of religious issues, particularly issues on Islam. These two motivations share the underlying sentiment that inter-religious harmony and understanding can be cultivated through the media, provided that each and everyone of us make the extra effort to critically review daily news that have cumulatively shaped our understanding of religious ideology and practices.

This seminar is not to redress the grievances that the media have perceivably imposed on Islam or Muslims. It is, essentially, about cultivating and exploring the spirit of engagement with what is reported and analysed in terms of news and opinions expressed in the media. It is about coming to an understanding

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about the roles and accountabilities of the society at large and for the media, exercising discretion in producing news and reproducing views. Readers and viewers on their part must be critical and yet open to different points of view and appreciate diversities in thoughts.

The notion of the “global village” is all the more real when we have various media agencies that serve as links between the different nations, countries, and some may even say, civilizations. Whether these links serve as a positive harness for peace and inter-cultural understanding or as a negative force that instigates misunderstanding is an outcome dependent on many parties. RIMA hopes that this seminar has sparked the will to harness the positive energy of media agencies in cultivating inter-religious relations and wishes to thank KAF for its support towards such an endeavor.

# WELCOME ADDRESS

by

## Werner vom Busch

Regional Representative of the  
Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Singapore

The challenges for reporting on Islam in an era of global interconnectedness are considerable. If they are not adequately met, then the global village threatens to remain a hollow concept in which prejudiced and dysfunctional feuding families are divided by hatred, injustice, inequality or simply ignorance.

The present publication of seven articles and two speeches attempts to counter this threat. It is the product of a seminar entitled 'Covering Islam: Challenges & Opportunities for Media in the Global Village', which was held at the Holiday Inn Parkview in Singapore on 3 and 4 September 2005. Organised by the Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA) and supported by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, this public seminar brought together leading academics, activists, authors, editors and journalists as well as an attentive audience.

The timing and theme of the seminar were no coincidence. It was conceived of and held at a time when images and events suggested not only a clash of the Muslim with the non-Muslim world, but also a battle within the Muslim world about the meaning and purpose of Islam.

In the face of so much violence, there is a distinct need for the media to defuse rather than ignite religious and ethnic tensions. Informing through enlightened, balanced and objective reporting, not only as a means of conflict resolution but also as a method of conflict prevention, is the order of the day. However, as discussed during the seminar and laid out in greater detail in this publication, the obstacles are considerable:

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- a) How can news coverage be objective if journalists lack the historical knowledge, first-hand experience, or the contacts to understand, for instance, the schisms within Islam?
  - b) How can news coverage be even if terrorist violence by Muslims against non-Muslims is given far more attention than, for instance, Muslim violence against other Muslims, or non-Muslim violence against Muslims?
  - c) Furthermore, how can news coverage be neutral if it is embedded in differing mediascapes and serve different masters and audiences?

Clearly, possible answers to these questions are not purely technical but also relate to questions of identity (religious, ethnic, gender, generational) and power. Who is reporting about Islam, who are the opinion-shaping experts cited in the media, and whose views are predominantly represented in the media?

Although the challenges in covering Islam evenly, objectively and with insight seem considerable, it clearly emerged during the seminar that they are not insurmountable. In fact, every challenge presents opportunities for improvement, and every crisis provides a window for change.

The Konrad Adenauer Foundation's Media Programme Asia is a good example of how such challenges might be met. Headquartered in Singapore, but covering most countries between Pakistan in the west, Mongolia to the east, China in the north and Indonesia to the south, it promotes a free, responsible and ethical press. It does so by strengthening dialogue among leading editors and journalists through regional conferences and meetings, and through its three key initiatives: the Asia News Network (ANN), the Council of Asian Press Institutes (CAPI) and the Konrad Adenauer Center for Journalism at the Ateneo de Manila University (CFJ).

While none of the above initiatives are explicitly concerned with Islam, they nevertheless provide a framework of dialogue and exchange of information. In fact, the seminar and this publication demonstrate how much can be achieved through open inter- and intra-faith dialogue.

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In this context, I would like to congratulate the Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA), and in particular its Director, Mr Yusof Sulaiman, for their excellent work. Not only did they bring together an interesting and well-qualified group of speakers and commentators, but they also facilitated the keynote speech by the distinguished Guest of Honour, Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, Minister of the Environment and Water Resources, and Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs, Republic of Singapore.

I would like to further extend my thanks to the contributors to this volume and in particular to Dr Syed Farid Alatas, Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore. Without his professional expertise, the compilation and editing of this volume would never have been achieved in such record time.

It is my hope that this publication will find the audience that it deserves because it makes a modest but substantial contribution to a better understanding about the challenges and opportunities faced by the media in reporting about Islam.



# Preface

*Syed Farid Alatas*

It cannot be denied that the events of the last few years in both the global and local arenas have had some impact on tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims. The 9-11 incident, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the rise of global terrorism have all posed inevitable challenges. The media plays a very important role in analyzing and reporting these events given that they shape public opinion, which, subsequently, translates into reactions in the various sections of society. The media must, therefore, be sufficiently engaged so that biased reporting and prejudicial views are minimized as the realities of the day are presented to the public.

The chapters of this volume deal with a few issues relating to the coverage of Islam in the international media. Most are revised versions of papers read at the seminar “Covering Islam: Challenges & Opportunities for Media in the Global Village”, which was organized by the Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA), Singapore, with the kind sponsorship of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAF) in Singapore, from 3 to 4 September 2005.

Although the media coverage of Islam is a much discussed topic, the papers of that seminar as well as the chapters of this volume, attempt to discuss different aspects of the problem instead of engaging in the usual “revelations” of Western media bias as far as reporting on Islam is concerned. The seminar brought together academics, journalists, students, civil servants and civil society activists. The speech by the Minister for the Environment & Water Resources and Minister-In-Charge of Muslim Affairs, Dr. Yaacob Ibrahim, as well as forewords by Mr. Abdul Razak Chanbasha, from the Centre for Research on Islamic & Malay Affairs (RIMA) and Mr. Werner vom Busch, Regional Representative of the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation, Singapore – all of which are included in this volume – not only set the tone of discussions for the two-day seminar, but also reflected the desire of the government and civil society to listen to each other where issues of mutual interests are concerned.

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Taken together, the papers of this volume present a number of challenges that the media needs to meet, so that the reporting on Islam is more balanced and objective. Stephen Schwartz, for instance, discusses several examples of how the Western media is ignorant of basic Islamic beliefs and practices, as well as of important facts and events in Muslim history. The urgency of the situation is stressed by John Gee who has advice for conscientious media workers, on how they can go about reporting Islam in a more ethical manner, while at the same time taking into account the cultural, national and religious differences between societies. The nature of the image of Islam as constructed by the media, and its impact on the formulation and implementation of United States' foreign policy, are discussed by Syed Farid Alatas and Yusef J. Progler respectively.

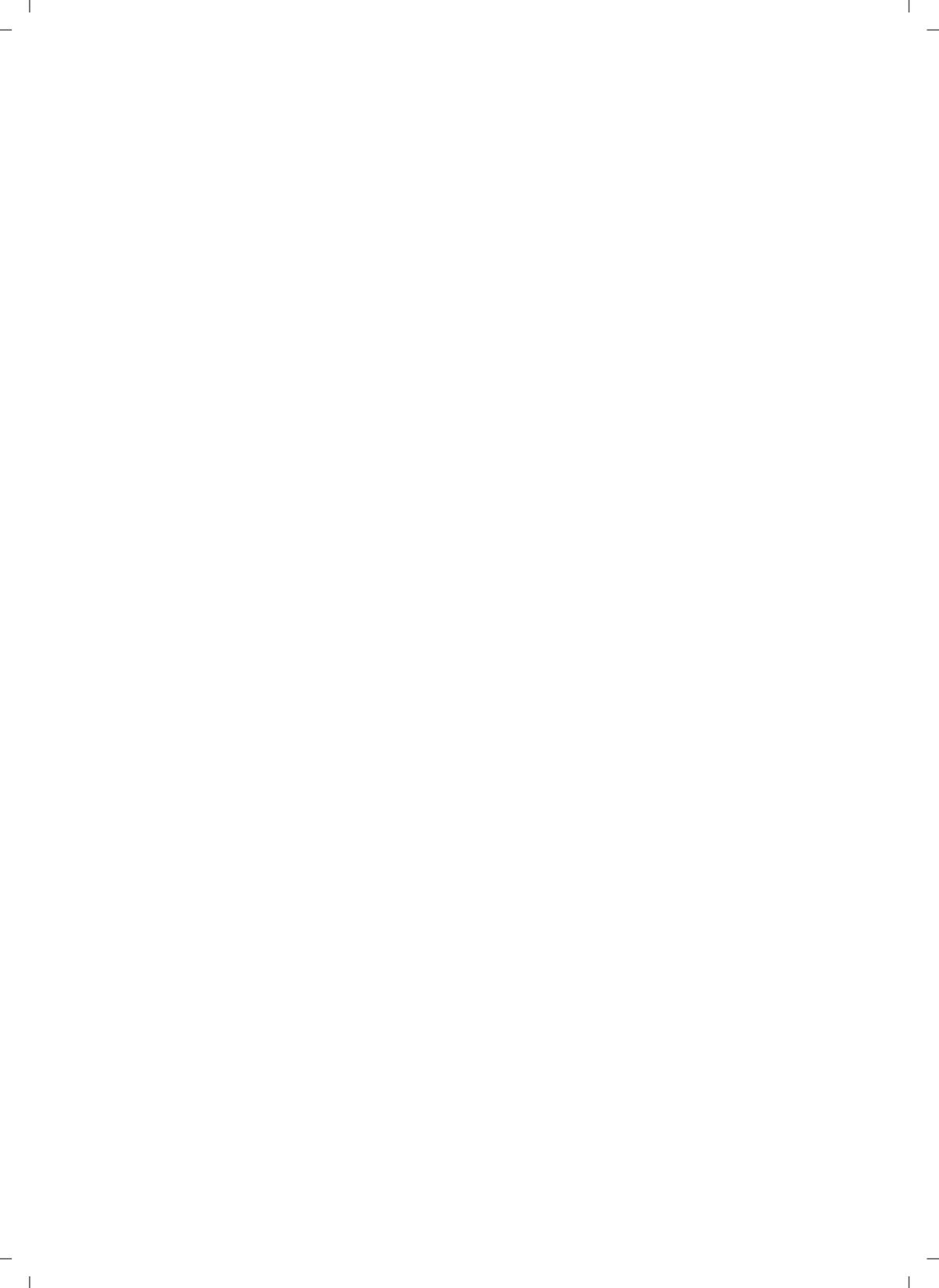
Sunni Khalid, on the other hand, shifts our attention to the manner in which Muslim-controlled media are equally, if not more guilty, of distortions and half-truths, to the extent that many citizens of the Arab and Muslim world prefer to rely on foreign news services like the BBC or Radio Monte Carlo for their news. This line of thought is continued in the next chapter by Ahmad Murad Merican, who discusses the coverage and “cover-up” of Islam, and highlights how the coverage of Islam in the Malaysian media is to the relative exclusion of other religions.

Finally, Haidar Bagir's chapter gives an idea of the practical uses of the media in contributing to inter-religious harmony. Noting that there has been an antagonistic side to the media's coverage of religious affairs, this chapter makes a case for the positive role of peace journalism with a concrete example from the case of Indonesia. We are also glad to include in the appendix, a presentation made at the seminar by Frank Lemke about peace journalism. The organizers view the seminar to be in line with the broader aim of discussing issues surrounding the presentation of religion and ideology in the modern world. Another goal was to fill in the gaps in interfaith understanding that may have been brought about by problematic media representations of inter-religious, inter-ethnic and inter-civilizational tensions. Among the broader objectives of the seminar are to examine the role of the media in encouraging and facilitating inter-civilizational dialogue, to identify instances of religious discrimination and incorrect/unfair reporting, to provide an avenue for feedback from media players and the public on how the media can contribute to the discourse on religious harmony, to eventually work with the media in the areas of promoting inter-

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religious and inter-civilizational harmony. RIMA would like to encourage all interested individuals and groups that are committed to these goals to actively seek collaborations with national media corporations and networks. RIMA was especially heartened by the presence of various media practitioners, academics and observers who took time off from their precious weekend to address these issues. Their contribution to the discourses was enriching. Special thanks also to the chairpersons of the various sessions – Yang Razali Kassim (Chairman, Association of Muslim Professionals), Syed Adha Aljunied (RIMA activist), Tan Tarn How (Fellow, Institute of Policy Studies), Idris Rashid Khan Surattee (Head Librarian, Singapore Press Holdings), Puad Ibrahim (Correspondent, Berita Harian), Zuraidah Ibrahim (Political Editor, Straits Times) and Sharon Siddique (Director, Sreekumar Siddique & Co. Pte. Ltd).

The seminar and its proceedings as found in this volume were made possible by the financial support of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAF), Singapore, and RIMA would like to acknowledge in particular Mr. Vom Busch and Dr. Colin Duerkop, Regional Representatives of KAF in Singapore. I would also like to express my very sincere thanks to the following from RIMA: Syed Adha Aljunied, Raziff Hamid, Sazali Abdul Wahid, Shariffa Aminah Alsree, and Nur Azha Putra for their help in the organization of the seminar. Mention must also be made of the members of the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP), who were active supporters at various stages of the planning of the seminar. They are Mohd Anuar Yusop, Anny Roezza A Aziz, Mohd Khalid Bohari, Sarjono Salleh Khan and Hameet Khanee JH. I would also like to extend a very special thank you to Sharifah Maisharah of RIMA for the industry and professionalism that she displayed in organizing the seminar as well as the putting together of this volume. Finally, as convener of the seminar, I would like to acknowledge Mr. Yusof Sulaiman, Dr. Sharon Siddique and Mr. Abdul Razak Chanbasha, all board members and activists of RIMA, who were the originators of the idea of the seminar to begin with.



# Four Years After September 11<sup>th</sup>: The Failure of Western Media

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*Stephen Schwartz*

We have reached the fourth anniversary of the terrible attacks of September 11, 2001. I am sorry to say that, in my view, the U.S. and Western media have completely failed to meet the challenge of reporting on Islam in the four years since then, or in reaction to the atrocities that followed, including the extremist violence in Iraq which I would not dignify with the titles “insurgency” or “resistance”; the Madrid metro and London underground bombings, and the terror assaults in Indonesia, Morocco, Turkey and elsewhere.

On September 12, 2001, it was as if two civilizations, the Judeo-Christian and the Islamic, which had shared the planet and had contacts with one another for 14 centuries, sometimes violently, sometimes peacefully, but nearly always fruitfully, became completely unknown, one to the other. Indeed, it seemed that Muslims knew a great deal more about the West than the West knew about Muslims. To borrow a simile from the film industry: in this “war of the worlds” the Muslims may as well be “invaders from another planet”, whose beliefs, customs and habits are completely unknown and incomprehensible to Westerners.

For example, in the 2005 Western media debate over the Iraqi constitution, it was repeatedly stated with horror and condemnation that the new national charter embodied the principle that Islam is a source of law, and that lawmaking shall not contradict the principles of Islam. This was taken by U.S. and foreign commentators, both who opposed the Iraq intervention and some alleged supporters of President Bush, as evidence that a Shia Muslim theocracy is being implanted in Iraq, or at least in its southern areas. Few seem to have fully understood the political alliance of the Kurds, who are Sunnis, Sufis, and, in many cases ultra secularists, with the Shias – presumably, the Kurds would not support a theocracy. But this aspect of the question was too complex and deep for most Western media.

In reality, the concept that lawmaking should not conflict with Islam in a Muslim country is an entirely uncontroversial principle established in many moderate Muslim states: Saudi Arabia and Turkey are the only countries that consistently deviate from it significantly, with the Saudi kingdom requiring that all law be derived exclusively from a Wahhabi definition of *shari'a* (Islamic jurisdiction), and Turkey long banning *shari'a* altogether. An experiment in the imposition of monopolistic *shari'a*, in its most radical and exclusivist form in Sudan, has essentially failed. Nearly all other Muslim countries, including even Iran, have legal systems based on the coexistence of *shari'a* with Western or Soviet laws, either inherited from the colonial past or borrowed, as in the case of the non-Islamic legal components in the Iranian model (Paul and Novick, 2005).

I have the habit of referring to this state of affairs as the “Israeli” standard, and not merely to provoke discussion: Israel maintains Jewish religious law in personal and family matters (*halakhah*, which is structurally modeled on *shari'a*), alongside *shari'a* for Israeli Arabs and Palestinian Muslims, and criminal law inherited from the British. The system is known as the “opt out” legal structure because those who wish to opt out of religious law may do so. Indeed, the regulation of holy sites in Israel, including Christian monuments, remains based on Ottoman law.

The parity of *shari'a* and non-Muslim laws in Islamic polities is nothing new; it has existed since the fall of Baghdad in 1258 C.E. to the Mongols, who became Muslims but would not abandon their customary law (Schwartz, 2003). Indeed, when it is said that a law must not conflict with Islam, it is rather difficult to

imagine what laws would do so. Aside from the former Soviet Union, only a few Communist regimes foster state atheism, and none makes it official as former-Communist Albania did – that would obviously conflict with Islam. No country in the world mandates alcoholism or sexual depravity, which also conflict with Islam. No country in the world bans Muslims *per se*. One may argue that the French law forbidding head coverings contradicted Islam, but a notable and peaceful civil debate over this law has taken place, in which Muslims are supported by Jews as well as Sikhs.

When the Serbs destroyed mosques and murdered ordinary Muslims as well as clerics in the Balkans, one could argue that their regime was in legal conflict with Islam; but Muslims living in southern Serbia and elsewhere did not declare that the Serb state was actually in conflict with Islam, according to *shari'a*. When the Russians destroyed mosques and massacred people in the Caucasus, they did so lawlessly, but even when such atrocities were carried out by the state, only fanatics who have infiltrated the Caucasus have consistently claimed that Russia acted primarily in violation of the rights of Islam. Traditionalist Chechens (most of them Sufis) defend *shari'a* by advocating for peace, not war, in the Caucasus.

Islamic *shari'a* is quite clear on what constitutes a state policy that contradicts Islam: it is one that silences the call to prayer (*adhan*), and prevents the teaching and preaching of the religion. Serbia, Croatia, Macedonia and Russia may be said to have done so in recent times, although indigenous and legitimate clerics did not judge it to be so. Thus, regardless of conflicts over land, Israel does not interfere with the peaceful activity of Muslim teachers and the faithful. Neither does the United States. So one could just as quickly describe the U.S. constitution as a document that does not conflict with Islam, as to so label the Iraqi constitution. Is there reason to be concerned about the U.S. constitution as an Islamic theocratic document? I think not.

The failure to grasp the nature of the new Iraqi constitution extended to the document itself. Much noise was made about Article Two, in which it was stated that “Islam is the official religion of the state and is a basic source of legislation”, and some praise was issued for Article 14, which proclaimed equality of gender, ethnic groups, religion, opinion, social and economic status, etcetera. But little was said about one of the most remarkable and significant elements of the new Iraqi charter:

the ban in Article Seven on “entities or trends that justify or propagate racism, terrorism, *takfir*, sectarian expulsions”, as well as the Saddamist Ba’ath party.

The ban on *takfir*, which means the excommunication or expulsion of one’s opponents from Islam, is exceptionally important, but I can say with considerable certainty that most Western journalists do not have the slightest idea about it. I have found no Western media commentaries on the issue of *takfir* as treated in the Iraqi constitution, but many that seek to associate tribal customs in the treatment of women, which have no basis whatever in Islamic tradition or law, with the future Iraqi legal system.

I recently noted that a major Saudi cleric, Sheikh Abd Al-Muhsin Al-Abikan, has called for a ban on the practice of *takfir* (Schwartz, 2005). The significance of this is potentially immense. Wahhabis, that is, followers of the state cult in Saudi Arabia, have for centuries declared that those who do not share their fanatical doctrines are apostates from Islam. This has been their excuse for murder and pillage against Shias and non-Wahhabi Sunnis. *Takfir* has also been taken up as an ideological weapon by the Muslim Brotherhood or *Ikhwan* in North Africa, and the Jama’ati movement in Pakistan – indeed, by nearly all Sunni radicals from America to Indonesia. And it is important for another reason.

By labelling all non-radicals as apostates from the religion, and blessing as the only faithful Muslims the adherents of their own violent ideology, the practitioners of *takfir* bind their followers together as an elite, and at the same time also, as a pliable human mass, convinced that their brutal urges are sacred and worthy. Many, if not most, Muslim terrorist recruits are weak in their religious belief and knowledge, and the power they assumed by expelling a billion people from the religion fills the intellectual and spiritual void within them.

A movement against *takfir* has taken hold elsewhere in Sunni Islam, in which many clerics appeared to be deeply repelled by the horrific events in Iraq. In July 2005, an international Islamic conference in Jordan produced a statement opposing the Sunni use of *takfir* against Shias (a practice enunciated time and again in the bloodthirsty manifestos of Abu Musab al Zarqawi), as well as condemning *takfir* against Sufis. The Amman declaration called for the restoration of a pluralistic debate in Islam, banned under Saudi rule in Mecca and Medina, and for the affirmation of liberty as a principle.<sup>1</sup>

*Takfir* is, therefore, an urgent issue for discussion among Western media that seek to “cover Islam”. But it is not the sole example of a concept lacking in sensible understanding and even context when dealt with by journalists. Here are some other aspects of Islam apparently unknown to Western media:

- The Ottoman caliphate abolished death sentences for apostasy from Islam long ago, but Western media still widely report that all Muslims believe the penalty for apostasy must be death. One Islamophobe in the U.S. even warned me that if I were to leave Islam, I would be subject to a death sentence, which is absurd.
- Almost no Western journalists have any idea what a *fatwa* actually is. A fatwa is not a death sentence. It is a religious opinion comparable to a *responsum* or *teshuvah* in Judaism. *Fatawa* (the correct plural) are not binding on Sunnis. They are binding on Shias if issued by a *marja* or Shia legal authority. *Fatawa* cannot be composed by individuals who do not have the training and credentials. For example, Osama bin Laden cannot and has not written authentic *fatawa*, either in their content or style.
- Almost no Western journalist seems to be aware that *shari'a* exists in every country in the world where Muslims live. I well remember the shock and horror of a certain esteemed academic “expert” when I informed him that *shari'a* courts exist in New York, London and Paris. He said that they should be immediately suppressed. He was unaware that *shari'a* courts exist to issue *halal* meat butchers’ licenses as well as to pronounce on the appropriateness of financial contracts – since Islam bars profit by interest – and to settle family and property disputes. Participation in them is generally entirely voluntary, except in extreme *shari'a* milieus created by Saudi-funded radicals. In this context, it is worthwhile to note the commentary included in the English language book, *The Reliance of the Traveller*, the widely-hailed compendium of *shari'a* according to the Shafi’i school of Islamic jurisprudence, which holds that “none of the lands to which Islam has spread to and in which something of it remains can be considered an enemy land... there is virtually no country on the face of the earth where a Muslim has an excuse to behave differently than he would in an Islamic country, whether in his commercial or other dealings” (Al-Misri, 1994). Thus, *shari'a* governs the morality and conduct of all Muslim believers.

The worst effect of this particular item of ignorance has emerged in Canada. On September 11, 2005 – perhaps thinking that on a hallowed anniversary in the war against Islamist radicalism, he was engaged in a courageous defense of Western democracy – Dalton McGuinty, premier (equivalent to governor) of the Canadian province of Ontario, announced that no form of religious arbitration of family disputes would be permitted in his jurisdiction. McGuinty represents the Liberal party, traditionally standing for a section of the business elite, which favors Canadian unity over Protestant particularism, *vis-a-vis* the French-speaking Catholics of Québec. His presumptive aim, widely applauded and trumpeted, was to curb the infiltration of *shari'a* or Muslim religious law into “the true north, strong and free”.

McGuinty declared that “there will be one law for all Ontarians”.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, he seems not to have taken into consideration that religious arbitration courts have long served Ontarian Catholics, Jews, Mennonites, Jehovah’s Witnesses and indigenous (tribal and Arctic) communities. To oppose the alleged Islamic threat, McGuinty announced his willingness to liquidate the family law rights of all significant religious and cultural minorities. A coalition of Canadian female advocates that included the author Margaret Atwood, and which raucously pressed for a ban on Islamic family law, also did not seem to care much about the consequences of their demands.

Ontario has recognized religious arbitration courts since 1991, and their decisions are enforceable so long as they do not contravene Canadian law. That standard is, in reality, the same proposed in Iraq by writers of the constitution who desire a recognition of Islam as a source of law, and allowing the coexistence of religious and civil codes so long as they do not conflict, which I have previously called “the Israeli model”. Canadian media were grossly biased in their coverage of the incident, which seemed to have ended, at least temporarily, when McGuinty was smacked by a wave of criticisms, with Jews in the forefront. In Ontario, as in France – where a ban on Muslim head coverings among public school girls was protested by French Jews, anxious to preserve the right of their own children to wear head coverings – the Jewish religious leaders were the first to defend the rights of Muslims.

Joel Richler, provincial chairman of the Canadian Jewish Congress, commented, that “we’re disappointed, we’re very disappointed”. Richler described the

McGuinty argument as “a knee-jerk reaction to the *shari’a* issue” (Freeze and Howlett, 2005). An apparently non-Jewish leader of the Progressive Conservative party, the Ontario legislative opposition, with the hilarious name of John Tory, similarly denounced McGuinty for a “seat of your pants, back of the napkin approach to policy making”. Frank Dimani, executive vice-president of B’nai B’rith Canada, asked, “Why destroy something that’s working in the province? Why would you penalize Judaism and Christianity?” (Jiménez, 2005)

Some Muslims argued that McGuinty had actually endangered Muslim women by his action; in refusing to allow official regulation of religious courts, he would drive those requesting religious arbitration underground. One Muslim woman, however, took credit for McGuinty’s position in strident terms, verging on a fanatical denunciation of any expression of religious law. Homa Arjomand, a Canadian woman of Iranian origin, declared, “Women’s rights are not protected by any religion” (Freeze and Howlett, 2005). She went on to call for the prosecution of *all* religious leaders participating in “faith-based arbitration” (Corbella, 2005), which called forth the piquant image of rabbis, Mennonite ministers, Catholic priests and indigenous religious leaders sharing Canadian prison cells with Muslim clerics. Interfaith dialogue under such absurd conditions would certainly be novel, but one cannot suppose that McGuinty would necessarily appreciate it.

Arjomand has lived in Canada since 1990, but her speech about the McGuinty decision gave the impression that she was carried away by perpetual rage at events now past in Iranian history. She claimed to one avid admirer, “In Iran, [having] a computer is a crime, they want to find out why you have it. Even [possession of] a typewriter is a crime. Even searching for anything that makes copies, you are arrested. They would name you anti-Islam... [a] *kafir* [unbeliever] who deserves to die.” While the clerical regime created by Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran was itself heretical in Islamic terms, and is clearly despised by the majority of its subjects today, to paint so lurid a picture clashes with a reality that anybody who has a computer can confirm. Iranian clerical and state institutions, media, literary and artistic professionals, and a considerable number of individuals, maintain websites; three million Iranians among a population of some 66 million, use the internet. This would make little sense if the possession of a computer were criminalized in Iran. The recent introduction of broadband would be even

more incomprehensible. Do you know that Iranians travel to the West, as well as to East Asia, to purchase the latest in personal communication?<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, in 2000, Farhang Rouhani, a U.S.-based academic, published a paper with the interesting title “The Spatial Politics of Leisure: Internet Use and Access in Tehran, Iran” (Rouhani, 2000). Implicit in his observations was the (fairly obvious) point that, as in China and Saudi Arabia, personal computers are the defining symbol of prosperity. Computer acquisition and use among upwardly mobile elites inevitably brings the latter into conflict with repressive authorities. Iranian clericalists have responded to this challenge not by trying to take people’s computers away, but rather by limiting access to certain sites, like that done by China and the Saudi kingdom. Of course, the internet cuts both ways, enabling and encouraging radical Islamists no less than advocates of liberal political reform (Schwartz, 2003).

*Shari’a* has become something like a hate term in the West, along with ‘*mullah*’. Canadian media are now replete with reprehensibly false, alarmist claims that *shari’a* was to be “imposed” and “entrenched” in Canada, and loudly proclaimed assertions that Ontario had refused to become the first Western political entity in which such an invasive abuse might take place. The fact that *shari’a* exists wherever Muslims live, even if only in the form of boards licensing *halal* meat markets and advising on the propriety of business practices, is impossible for Canadian Islamophobes and their American imitators to conceive. Perhaps next they would call for a ban on Muslim and Jewish (kosher) slaughtering and dietary observance, and forbid religious officials to serve as advisers of faith-based economic enterprises.

The chairman of the rabbinical court of Toronto, Rabbi M. Z. Ochs, wrote in a Canadian national daily, sharply criticizing the McGuinty policy. He astutely identified the hypocrisy of claims that the abolition of religious arbitration would support democracy. He noted that Ontario does not maintain democracy or equality in education, since Catholic parochial schools are financed by the provincial government to serve the French-speaking minority, but Protestant and Jewish private schools are denied state support. Rabbi Ochs accused the Ontario authorities of “pursuing not freedom of religion, but freedom from religion” (Ochs, 2005).

One of the most interesting aspects of the controversy over the implementation of *shari'a* in the West is that the standard published reference works of the schools of Islamic jurisprudence, such as *The Reliance of the Traveller*, are not easily obtained by American or Canadian Muslims, because the Saudi/Wahhabi campaign for the radicalization of global Sunnism has encouraged Western Sunnis to turn, via internet, to Saudi clerics for *shari'a* opinions. Westerners should deal with issues of religious law in personal affairs by educating themselves, not by hysterical agitation. As the noted critic of political Islam, Daniel Pipes, recently wrote, “as long as women are truly not coerced (create an ombudsman to ensure this?) and Islamic rulings remain subordinate to Canada’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms, I see no grounds on which to deny Muslims the right, like other Canadians, to revert to private arbitration” (Pipes, 2005). Unfortunately, for too many reasons, such wisdom has not been heard or understood, in Ontario.

Furthermore, I do not know of many Western journalists who understand the theological differences between Sunnis and Shias. It is for this reason that one continually read about the absurd claim that Sunni and Shia “insurgents” are cooperating against the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq. Many Western journalists also do not know much about Sufism; many seem to think it is a separate phenomenon from the Sunni and Shia traditions. It is not. But Sufism also has very different characteristics according to the country in which it is found. For example, Albanian Sufism, which is a powerful, organized force, is completely different from Sufi-influenced Islam in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In general, the substantial diversity of Islam is lost in Western media.

The list of just plain myths about Islam in the Western media is pretty long. A great deal of anguish has been expressed in the European media about the specter of Islamic re-conquest of areas once under Muslim rule, such as Spain, or al-Andalus. I find it characteristic that nobody ever suggests that Muslims would want to re-conquer Greece, Romania, southern Ukraine Hungary (where they ruled for 150 years) or, for that matter, the formerly Muslim-ruled tracts of India. Rhetoric about the re-conquest of lands once under Muslim rule is verbiage and nothing more, with no basis in Islamic law.

A similar and absurd belief among Western media commentators involves the alleged Islamic division of the globe into two worlds - the *dar ul-Islam* or “land of Islam and peace”, where Muslims rule, and the *dar ul-harb*, or “land of war”,

where non-Muslims rule. The presumption is that all Muslims are required to observe a state of permanent military jihad against any country not ruled by Muslims, and therefore intend world conquest through violence. This returns us to the above citation from *Reliance of the Traveller* about “enemy lands”. While it would be ludicrous to deny that most Muslims, like most Christians, believe theirs is the best faith and is ultimately destined to win over the planet, or that *takfiris* indeed subscribe to the “theory of two worlds”, it is worse for Westerners to simplify their view of Islamic law and political conceptions in a way that reinforces prejudice. The *dar ul-harb* has a specific and restricted meaning, referring to places where Muslims are victims of violence because of their religion. It is worth observing, once again as above, that even during the ex-Yugoslav and first Chechen wars, the local *ulema* (Muslim cleric) of these communities did not define their enemies as representing the *dar ul-harb*.

In reality, Islamic law has long recognized a third category: the *dar ul-sulh* or “land of contract”, where Muslims do not rule but live as peaceful subjects permitted to practice their religion. *Takfiris* have preached that Muslims living in non-Muslim lands cannot and should not obey non-Muslim authorities or participate in non-Muslim politics. But the Iraqi Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Husayni Sistani, the Shia *marja* of the time, holds the exact opposite view, which is that of mainstream Sunnis as well: Muslims migrating to non-Muslim countries, if they have signed even a document like an immigration form, have given an Islamic oath to obey local laws that do not directly contravene Islam (as described above) and to live at peace with their neighbors. Muslims who cannot execute such an oath in good faith should not migrate to a non-Muslim country, according to Sistani and others.

I am especially somewhat exercised about the frequency with which it is stated that Osama bin Laden has called for or seeks the overthrow of the Saudi monarchy. Bin Laden and al-Qaeda have never called for the overthrow of the monarchy, and I challenge anybody to find serious evidence that proves otherwise. Bin Laden is a scion of a family that owes its position to the House of Saud; he seeks a reinforcement of Wahhabi ideology in the monarchy, not its overthrow. That is why his statements have always called on the Saudi rulers to “return to the straight path”. In addition, Bin Laden and al-Qaeda are products of Saudi society and Saudi politics, which is why the Saudi rulers have typically called on him to “return to the straight path”. Neither side has employed the idiom usually

found in a revolutionary movement or its opponents. And although thousands of Saudi aristocrats travel around the world, and thousands of Saudi enterprises are located across the globe, and thousands of Saudi government offices operate in the kingdom, none of them (with the exception of a single latter example involving a local licensing office) have been attacked by al-Qaeda.

In Saudi Arabia, al-Qaeda targets foreigners, not the rulers. In Saudi Arabia, al-Qaeda terrorists, curiously enough, always appear to have access to government vehicles and government uniforms, and some terrorists are obviously government employees. Western media seldom draw the obvious conclusion from this, which is that al-Qaeda is protected or supported by a faction within the state; I excuse Western media from further comprehension of this problem because the Saudi kingdom continues to bar independent, foreign media from working on site.

Yet, in what I fear are the worst such instances, Western media, especially in the U.S., continually criticize Muslim clerics (*ulema*) around the world for failing to oppose terrorism. In reality, a great number of prominent *ulema* have condemned aggression in the name of Islam. I can cite the example of an aggressive and insulting American “academic” who demanded “five names” of leading Islamic religious officials who denounced terrorism. I first pointed out to him that the five names would mean nothing to him – that he would likely never have heard of them, not because they are obscure, which they are not, but because these names are not known in the non-Muslim world, regardless of their prestige among Muslims.<sup>4</sup> I finally asked him if he thought Ayatollah Sistani, in Iraq, had failed to issue binding *fatawa* as well as condemnatory statements against the desecration of holy places and murder of his co-believers. It was as if I were talking to myself. My interlocutor was simply imprisoned in clichés. What are the reasons for this problem?

First, Western media are not engaged in “covering Islam”. Rather, they are engaged in reporting on events that happen to involve Islam. There is an obvious difference.

Secondly, reporters are “first responders”, rather like police and fire personnel. They are expected to get the basic facts about a story, not to offer serious analysis or background. There is nothing wrong with that, except that the ‘fire’ caused by Islamic radicalism is of such magnitude that greater expertise is necessary.

There is some unavoidable fault in that as journalistic enterprises and their reporters are expected to compete, with much detail lost in the search for original stories and headlines. But that probably cannot be helped.

Thirdly, when they need expertise and analysis, Western media often turn to academics and governmental experts whose knowledge of Islam is distorted or limited, or to representatives of Islamic trends that have become well-established in the West but which do not represent any consonance between Islamic and Western values. In turning to such academics and groups, Western media may find their prejudices and mistakes reinforced rather than corrected. Western academic experts often express contempt for what they call “Orientalism”, while practicing a form of it themselves. What this means is that academics of both the left and right shove Islam into categories determined by Middle Eastern politics, even though the very simplicity of Islam as a faith should obviate this temptation. Fourthly, Western education for the past one hundred and fifty years has concentrated on the gap between the two worlds rather than study the real elements they have in common.

For example, an honorable, recently deceased Indonesian Muslim philosopher, Nurcholis Madjid, in a comment soon after September 11, 2001, noted the paradox of contemporary Muslim hatred of the West, when one of the most famous chapters of the Qur’an, *surah 30*, titled “The Greeks”, praises the Byzantine empire, representing Rome and the West, in their conflict with the Persians, who are seen to embody the cultures of the East. Brother Madjid noted, “The Muslims sided with [the West], and not with [the East].” The reason was simple: the Byzantines were Christians, and therefore monotheists, while the Persians did not believe in an almighty God, creator of the universe. Madjid further pointed out that the arrival of the “news to the followers of the prophet Muhammad *aleyhisaalam* about the defeat of [the Byzantines] by the Persians made the people of Mecca, the enemies of the Prophet, happy.”

It will come as a surprise, I am sure, to most western European editors and reporters to learn that there is a significant and respectable body of scholarship showing the influence of Islamic thought on Dante Alighieri, the greatest Christian author outside the church. This concept is not some new claim advanced by Muslims for the gratuitous aggrandizement of the faith. It was developed in the 1920s by Miguel Asín Palacios, a Spanish Catholic intellectual of the highest

caliber, who, because of his own background, had no reason whatsoever to exaggerate or falsify (Miguel, 1984). In a detail that seems almost impossibly heart-rending, the same materials were the subjects of an article published on the eve of the Jewish Holocaust in Bosnia-Herzegovina, by the Sephardic Jewish author Kalmi Baruh, in a Muslim periodical in Sarajevo (Baruh, 1940). Baruh died in a Nazi concentration camp.

Most Western editors and reporters are equally shocked to learn of the real similarities between Judaism and Islam, and of the authentic influence of Islamic religious practice on Judaism. Let me describe a single such example:

Menachem Mendel Schneerson was the *rebbe* or spiritual guide of the *Lubavitcher* Chasidim, a sect of extremely pious and mystically oriented Orthodox Jews originating in tsarist Russia. When he died in 1994 at the age of 92, he was considered by his followers to be *moshiach*; the Messiah, the Redeemer of Jewry, whose coming would mark the End of Days. Schneerson lived in Crown Heights, a Brooklyn neighborhood, and often met with large groups of his followers, to dispense teachings and blessings.

It is said that at times Schneerson would give himself over to a *niggun*, a “Song of Longing”. This is a wordless melody, which he hummed ecstatically. As he made recollections through this tune, his emotions would visibly increase, so that soon he would be seen crying uncontrollably. According to Sally Gross, a scholar who studied the *Lubavitchers*, the *niggun* was known as “Shamyl’s Song”, and Schneerson would often continue weeping while telling the story of its creation.

Schneerson taught that Shamyl was the ruler of a mountain kingdom, which the Russian tsar sought to conquer and incorporate into his empire. Because Shamyl and his followers held the strategic high grounds in the mountains, the Russian campaign failed by use of arms. The Russians then sent Shamyl a message offering him a truce and an alliance; but when he came to negotiate, he was seized and imprisoned. In his cell, he composed the melody.

The Russian Chasidim heard the melody, learnt the story, and were deeply moved by it, Gross said. She wrote in an e-mail to me, “They saw it as a metaphor for the lofty primal state of the soul, of its descent into materiality, and of the hope

of future spiritual exaltation. For this reason, they adopted the melody and made it a part of their own tradition” (Schwartz, 2005).

I never knew Schneerson, though I have encountered many of his disciples; and I have also met and spoken with many individuals who consider themselves successors to Shamyl. Shaykh Shamyl, as he is known to Muslims, was the greatest *Gazi* or Islamic warrior of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and is among the outstanding exemplars of *jihad* in defense of Islam. He was both a brilliant guerrilla fighter and a mystical dervish.

Shamyl was born in 1796, a member of the small nation of Avars in the Caucasian highland of Daghestan. He was a childhood companion of Kazi Mollah, a fellow-Avar and dervish who was a key figure in launching the resistance of Caucasian Muslims against the tsarist regime. Shaykh Shamyl became the symbol of this struggle, which lasted more than 60 years and took almost 80,000 Russian lives. Shamyl inflicted such serious defeats on the Russians that he was credited with the psychological undermining of the empire, leading to a revolution two generations later. Karl Marx wrote of the Caucasian liberation struggle, “The brave Cherkess seriously defeated the Russians several times. People, learn from them, see what people who want to remain free can do” (Russian Information Centre and RIA Novosti, 2000).

That the *Lubavitcher rebbe*, representing a Jewish sect that had been outrageously oppressed by the Russian authorities, both tsarist and Communist, should honor the memory of a Muslim fighter against the same tyranny, might not seem surprising. What is especially intriguing, however, is the apparent emotion he attached to the song and story of Shaykh Shamyl. Other correspondents on these topics have busied themselves with attempting to trace the path of transmission of the tune – presuming it is a Caucasian Muslim song – to the *Lubavitchers*. For me, however, when I learned of “Shamyl’s Song”, the shock of recognition came in finding evidence of the parallel path of Judaism and Islam, which extends back to the origins of Islam as well as to the post-Talmudic era.

Jewish-Muslim relations, especially those “hidden” from broader scrutiny, are the foundation of my literary interest in this subterranean current in the affairs of the world, which was reinforced by three additional streams in life. I spent many years researching the cultural history of Kabbalah, the classical school of

Jewish mysticism, according to the interpretation of Spanish Jews and their heirs, the Sephardim, who had lived in Muslim countries. Leading secular scholars have seen in Kabbalah something very close to Sufism, or Islamic mysticism. Indeed, anybody who studies Kabbalah historically sees in it the phenomenon I call “Islamic ecstasy”, in the relationship between man and God. Kabbalah and Sufism share the goal of a human merging with the divine presence, which leads in turn to eloquent speeches in praise of the Creator, through poetry and song.

A similar tradition I learned in Sarajevo illustrates how, in the legacy of Jewish-Muslim coexistence in the Ottoman lands, peace and justice may prevail.

Rav Moshe Danon of Sarajevo is known to some as “the rabbi of Stolac”, nicknamed after a town in Western Hercegovina, although he did not serve as rabbi in Stolac, and was not born there. He is associated with the town only because he died there on the road to Eretz, Israel. But the events that led to his departure from Bosnia for the Holy Land are legendary, reflected even in beautiful Sephardic balladry. Rav Danon is a Bosnian Jewish saint, or, as Muslims would say, a *wali*.

Reworking this material in the year 2002, I could not readily remember when I first heard about Rav Danon, his blessed biography, his burial at Stolac, pilgrimages to his tomb, and Bosnian Jewish songs about these. While I had completed a substantial account and survey of the literature on these events, the tomb and the songs, it took me a bit of review before I decided that my first contact with the epic had come by reading Noel Malcolm’s *Bosnia: A Short History* (Malcolm, 1994). Malcolm’s description of these incidents represents the most elementary account, stripped to what many others and I would consider the central feature, it bears repeating here, as a starting point.

Malcolm writes in his discussion of the Bosnian Jews and Gypsies, “One intriguing story involves the fate of a Jew from Travnik, Moses Chavijo, who converted to Islam, took the name Derviš Ahmed, and began to rouse the local Muslims against the Jews. In 1817, the leaders of the Bosnian Jews complained of his attacks, and had him tried and executed. Some of his followers later complained to the next governor of Bosnia, Ruždi-paša, who seized the opportunity to squeeze some money out of the Jews: he commanded that they pay a recompense

of 500,000 *groschen*, and seized ten leading Sarajevo Jews, including the rabbi, threatening to kill them if the payment was not made. The end of the story, however, is that a crowd of 3,000 Muslims took up arms and demanded the Jews' release – which was promptly done.”

But that is hardly “the end of the story”. Malcolm cites this account to the work of Rabbi Moric [Moritz] Levi, *Die Sephardim in Bosnien*, published in 1911 (Levi, 1933). This volume is not considered very reliable. Consulting the Bosnian language edition of this book, issued in 1996 (Levy, 1996), we find that Levi embroidered the tale by declaring the alleged Jewish apostate, an “ignorant folk among the Muslims, (who) believing the convert to be a true miracle-worker, lamented his death and complained”. However, the religious aspects of the anecdote, when I first encountered it, were secondary to that of Muslim-Jewish solidarity in the face of a manifest injustice.

Bosnia-Herzegovina is the only European country aside from Spain itself where Sephardic Jewish culture is considered part of the common cultural legacy. Upon beginning an extended residence in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1999, I learnt that the story had other significant resonance for Bosnian scholars and Sarajevans – *Sarajlije* – who knew of it. While the element of Muslim solidarity remained significant, the obscure story of the alleged apostate and dervish from Travnik receded into the background. To the forefront came the figure of Rav Danon of Sarajevo, the rabbi imprisoned by Ruždi-paša; followed by the story of his burial in Stolac, the habit of visiting his grave, and the composition of songs in Judeo-Spanish about the epic and the pilgrimage.

The Jewish account of these events is best told, in my view, not in the Levi volume but on a source Levi used, that is, the mainly-unpublished history of Sarajevo Jewry written at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – at least a decade before Levi – by Mōse ben Rafael Attias, known as Mōse Rafajlović and as “Zeki-Effendi,” a leading Sarajevo Jewish notable of his time.<sup>5</sup>

In Zeki-Effendi's account, also beginning in 1819, Derviš Ahmed, an Islamic mystic who lived in Travnik, had a reputation as a dissident. For an unknown reason, this individual came into conflict with a Travnik Jew named Benjamin Pinto. Derviš Ahmed was arrested by the Ottoman authorities and executed. Other dervishes then revealed that Derviš Ahmed was a Jew named Moše Haviljo.

It was also alleged that Pinto and some Jewish accomplices had conspired to punish him for apostasy.

Ruždi-paša reacted to the case by launching an attack on the Jews in general. The small and poor Jewry of Travnik did not offer much of a target, and they were left in peace. But the governor's eyes turned to the Jews of the great city of Sarajevo – he demanded a payment of 50,000 Turkish gold *groschen* from them, as indemnity for the dead man. He then ordered the arrest of ten of Sarajevo's leading Jews, beginning with Rav Danon, the outstanding Jewish spiritual leader in the country. Furthermore, the fine was increased to 500,000 *groschen* to be paid within three days, or the Jews would be executed.

Panic seized the Sarajevo Sephardim as they faced a wholesale assault on their security and their rights. The situation looked extremely grim. But a well-known Sarajevo Jew, Rafael Levi, who was greatly respected by Muslims, had the idea of appealing to his neighbors' humanity. On the fourth of *Heshvan* in the Jewish calendar, which fell in October, the night before the hostages were to be executed, Rafael Levi went to the coffee houses where he knew Muslims met and talked, and exhorted them with an emotional description of the dreadful threat hanging over the Jews. It was Sabbath eve, when as a pious Jew, Rafael Levi should have remained in his home, but the welfare of the community impelled him to violate religious law.

The Muslims were profoundly touched, and consoled Levi for the tears he shed as he spoke. Then, "all together, as if they were one", the Muslims swore an oath, pledging to give up their lives, if necessary, to save the arrested Jews. The Muslims rushed to the house of Ahmed Barjaktar Bjelavski, the *barjaktar* or local commander of the Bjelave neighborhood, where Jews and Muslims lived together. Barjaktar Bjelavski swore, "By Allah, I will not allow this injustice!" He summoned the other *barjaktars*, ordering them to come with their best horses and most loyal servants.

Before dawn the next morning, some 3,000 Bosnian Muslims led by Barjaktar Bjelavski, armed and ready for combat, surrounded the governor's place of lodging. The *barjaktar* struck the gate with his scimitar, shouting that the governor must come out. When the governor appeared, the *barjaktar* denounced him and demanded justice for the Jews. The governor ordered Rav Danon to be brought

from his cell and forced him to bow before an executioner. But before the sword could fall, the *barjaktar*'s men had broken the gates. They liberated Rav Danon and the other imprisoned Jews, then followed the Rabbi to the synagogue where he preached the story of Purim to them – the great Jewish holiday celebrated by Balkan Sephardim, and which commemorated the rescue of Persian Jewry from a genocidal plot. The incident became known as the “Sarajevo Purim”. The Bosnian Muslims later denounced Ruždi-paša to the Sublime Porte in Istanbul.

Most remarkably, it is said that throughout this ordeal Rav Danon remained completely indifferent to the events around him. He carried a copy of the Torah and assured those who visited him in his cell that there was nothing to fear, that all was foreordained. According to one source, the Sarajevo historian Vlajko Palavestra, the ransom that had been raised to save the Sarajevo Jews was used to refurbish the city's first synagogue, which was built in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Palavestra, 2000). Other reasonably accessible published sources on this incident include the work of another Sarajevo historian, Miroslav Prstojević (Prstojević, 1991), and the outstanding study by the Bosnian Muslim scholar Muhamed Nezirović, *Jevrejsko Španjolska Književnost (Jewish Spanish Literature)* (Svjetlost, 1992). Nezirović's book is especially useful in describing the confrontation between the virtuous Rav Danon and the evil, Haman-like Ruždi-paša. An inaccessible but precious document is a printed pamphlet in Judeo-Spanish, the *Livriku* or Little Book – which we would call a chapbook, since it consists of only one signature, or 16 pages.<sup>6</sup>

A decade afterward the events, in 1830, Rav Danon left for Palestine, with crowds of Sarajevo Jews saluting his departure. But he died at the coffee house of Mehaga, in Stolac, on the way to take a ship from Dubrovnik. He was buried nearby, at the order of the local authorities. Annual pilgrimages to his grave during his birthday, which is celebrated in June, were common among the Bosnian Sephardim until World War II; photographs that survived the war show adults clustered around the Hebrew-inscribed sarcophagus. Sad meditation on such images has become, of course, a common experience for all writers who wrote about recent Jewish history. Through the faces of the mostly women pilgrims, we see many who must have died in the Holocaust. As with other such saintly Jewish monuments in the Sephardic world, the grave was also honored by local Muslims, especially dervishes.

Before the recent Serbo-Croatian war came to Stolac, a former Sarajevo Jew living in Switzerland, Moric Levi – not the rabbi and author – had sought to transform the grave of Rav Danon into a world-renowned spiritual center comparable to the nearby Catholic shrine at Medugorje. The local authorities facilitated the transfer of the property to the Jewish Community of Sarajevo. Ivan Čerešnješ, a Sarajevo architect and, for some time, president of the Jewish Community of Bosnia-Hercegovina, oversaw the partial rehabilitation of the site, which was interrupted by the war. The *kheder tahora* or mourners' washhouse was left unreconstructed, even though painted decorations were “still visible in one corner of the seriously decayed building”, according to Čerešnješ. This latter structure is known in Bosnia-Hercegovina as a *chevra*, short for *chevra kaddisha* or burial society.

And so we face incomprehension about Islam in Western media. What, then is to be done?

In my view, most of the blame rests outside the journalistic profession. Solutions to the knowledge gap about Islam will not be easy in the wider sphere, but may be so in newsrooms. If a reporter is going to “cover Islam”, he or she should handle it as a separate and full-time beat, and should study the basic and published authoritative works about it. When “covering Islam”, reporters should do more to identify the opponents of extremism and to learn what questions to ask them. A Western writer who does not know what is *takfir* or its significance, will not get very far in covering Islam.

Furthermore, moderate Muslim parents in the West should encourage their talented children to enter the journalistic profession, if their offspring show a desire to do so. I have heard, too many times, the stories of Muslim parents who tell their children that only computers and engineering, management studies, or medicine are worthy professions. Western media enterprises, especially in the U.S. and UK, are presently concerned to encourage diversity in employment and remain very open to hiring Muslims. I have elsewhere proposed the establishment of an Islamic institute for journalism, with campuses around the world, to form new cadres for the profession. Muslim as well as non-Muslim governments and media enterprises should contribute to the creation of such institutions.

In addition, moderate Muslim authors should do more to patiently, intelligently, carefully and competently write, so that they may become trustworthy and authoritative sources for Western media. They must master the Western idiom to better convey the realities of Islam to non-Muslims. These works should be motivated by the need for clarification and accuracy rather than *da'wa* or missionary works to convert non-Muslims.

Finally, the Muslim *ulema*, other institutions and governments should investigate the need to replace or supplement existing donations or programs at Western universities, so as to refine and improve the quality of Western scholarship and media coverage of Islam.

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## Endnotes

- 1 The Amman Declaration of 2005 is accessible at [www.kingabdullah.jo/news/details.php?kn\\_serial=3409&menu\\_id=26&lang\\_hmka1=1](http://www.kingabdullah.jo/news/details.php?kn_serial=3409&menu_id=26&lang_hmka1=1)
- 2 The McGuinty opinion was widely reported in Canadian and U.S. media. See, for example, Unsigned, "McGuinty rejects use of Shariah law," *Guelph Mercury* (Guelph, Ont.), 12 September 2005.
- 3 See Arjomand's comments in A. Lappen, Alyssa, "Ontario: A Sharia'- Free Zone", *Frontpagemag.com*, 20 September 2005 at [www.frontpagemag.com/articles/ReadArticle.asp?ID=19547](http://www.frontpagemag.com/articles/ReadArticle.asp?ID=19547).
- 4 Here are five such names: Reis ul-ulema Mustafa Efendija Cerić of Bosnia-Hercegovina, Mufti Naim Ternava of Kosovo, Shaykh Muhammad Sadiq Muhammad Yusuf of Uzbekistan, Ayatollah Sistani, and Singapore minister of state Zainul Abidin Rasheed. Disgracefully, these names, except for that of Sistani, are honored in the Muslim *ummah* but mean almost nothing to Western audiences.
- 5 Unsigned, "Sarajevski Purim/Sarajevska Megila," in *Jevrejski Kalendar 5759*, n.p., Beograd, 1998-99 (based on account of Moše ben Rafael Attias, known as Moše Rafajlović and as "Zeki-Effendi.")

- 6 *Livriku de la orasjon ke se dizi e Stolac dispoes de TEFILA sovre la KEVURA del CADIK maalat Moreno arav rebi MOŠE DANON zehuto jagen alenu AMEN, Trezladado por mano del hadži MOŠE HAJIM moreno arav Alevi, Saraj en anjo 5697.* n.p., Sarajevo, 1937.

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# Globalisation of Media Ethics and Localisation of Media Values

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**Abstract:** *The reading and viewing public are not passive consumers. They react to the media, and influence how it speaks to them. Globalisation is not sweeping all previously established values before it, but being embraced selectively. This places new demands on conscientious media workers. The media should take account of cultural, national and religious differences between societies and communities, but it should not be constrained by them simply to respond to public demand. Whoever their viewers and listeners may be, there are sound values within the traditions of journalism that can guide them in their work.*

I have chosen to deal with broad issues and the raising of questions. I do not want to pre-empt what others will say, particularly not the summary session, but I apologise if this leaves my contribution less concrete and less focused than many of you might have wished. It might be wondered why, when this seminar is titled “Covering Islam”, I do not concentrate more on the media treatment of Islam and Muslim affairs, but there are reasons for this. I am confident that

others will handle this ably, but I also think that there is some value to approaching this issue by placing more emphasis on the media-public relationship and on what any community may validly ask of the media. It is consistent with a standpoint that stresses equality and fair treatment for all and resists tendencies to present Muslim concerns as if they are a special case, demanding privileges denied to others.

In what follows, terms such as ‘the public’ and ‘the media’ are necessary generalisations. ‘The public’ is a vast mass of people with different interests and views, and it might be wondered how much validity any remark about what it thinks can have. ‘The media’ is a term that embraces various elements, though I believe that our primary concern will be with newspapers, television and radio. Within the media’s treatment of current affairs, a necessary distinction needs to be made between news reports, analysis, commentary and editorial policy. In theory, the first is strictly about the facts, while the others allow the expression of opinion and interpretation – distinctions that it is important to bear in mind in determining how one should respond to news and current affairs coverage.

News is made, heard and viewed in specific contexts. An event takes place, but that event is turned into the news that people removed from the scene receive through the processes of reporting and editing. This is a basic function of the media, and it is widely believed, with some justification, that they have the potential to influence public opinion and sway the development of the policies of states, corporations and other entities. Discomfort at some of the consequences of portions of the media exercising their power, has given rise to calls in all societies, at some time or other, for changes in media standards, whether made voluntarily or enforced by states.

How news is received, and the particular issues that provoke criticism (or, for that matter, invite praise), depends upon the prevailing values within specific societies. Those same values influence how terms such as ‘globalisation’ and ‘ethics’ are understood.

A newspaper takes up a cause in which it believes and promotes it through its editorials, commentaries and reports. It calls for a social reform or for the righting of an injustice, and its intentions are widely recognised as deserving of respect. In the West, this would often be described, even today, as ‘crusading journalism.’

When I did a web search for ‘crusading journalist’, it immediately came up with 27,245 results, referring to journalists past and present. Interestingly, although ‘crusading journalist’ is used almost exclusively as a positive description, ‘crusading journalism’ is now sometimes used as a negative term, usually by conservative writers who are averse to the raising of issues such as social inequality, discrimination against women or black people, and other causes deemed to be liberal or left wing.

Muslims are familiar with the concept that is described by the term ‘crusading journalism’, but have very sound reasons for expressing it in other terms. Crusades and crusaders have very different connotations for them than for Westerners from historically Christian countries. The positive use of these terms in the West reflects the lingering influence of the image of the crusades of the Middle Ages as campaigns waged by idealistic men in pursuit of a worthy aim, though it has to be added that they are now applied to a wide range of subjects. ‘Batman’ is frequently called ‘the caped crusader’ in comics and review articles of the Batman films, and Ralph Nader, an American of Arab descent, was sometimes labelled a crusader for consumers’ rights in the years before he became a presidential candidate. In such cases, ‘crusader’ has assumed the meaning of ‘determined campaigner for a cause’ for most of the non-Muslim public, and has lost its anti-Muslim associations.<sup>1</sup>

Muslims were victims of the crusades, which are remembered for the bloodshed and suffering that they inflicted. In modern popular political culture in the Muslim world, they have become the supreme symbol of Christian anti-Muslim hostility, but not only a symbol – they are ‘remembered’ as campaigns against Islam and Muslims.

The First Crusade aimed at the capture of Jerusalem, and when it was taken both its Muslim and Jewish populations were massacred. The Second Crusade was a response to the conquest of the crusader-established County of Edessa by a Muslim leader, Zengi and the Third was a Western Christian campaign to retake Jerusalem after its capture by Salah al-Din. Some later crusades were directed against pagans on the Baltic coast and the Cathars, a sect centred in southern France that was denounced as heretical by the Papacy. No crusade was ever proclaimed as being simply against Muslims or Islam.

Most of the earliest Muslim writers on the subject recounted the events of the wars between Muslims and ‘the Franks’ (as they called the western European Christians, distinguishing them from the eastern Christians of their own countries and the neighbouring Byzantine Empire), without speculating on their causes. The few who did so, placed the First Crusade in the context of other Western Christian offensives against ‘the lands of Islam’. Only one (al-‘Azimi), a contemporary, noted the obstruction of travel by Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem as the immediate reason for the launching of the First Crusade. Until the disruptions caused by the fragmentation of the Muslim eastern Mediterranean lands and the collapse of Byzantine authority in central Anatolia, Christian pilgrims had travelled through Muslim territory to Jerusalem in relative safety, without obstruction, and the hardships of would-be pilgrims were a central part of Pope Urban II’s papacy, when he called for the first crusade in 1095 (Hillenbrand, 2000: 50-54).

As in the non-Muslim West, in the Muslim world, the term ‘crusades’ has acquired meanings and associations beyond those it originally had. For some Islamist political trends, it has become an all-purpose term for any waged war by ‘Christian’ states against or in Muslim countries. In recent times, al-Qa’eda has played upon the popular cultural memory of much of the Muslim world by referring to its contemporary enemies in the West as ‘crusaders’. It is a term used by some of those fighting against US forces in Iraq to refer to their adversaries, particularly the group led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The USA’s political leadership, with one notable exception, well understands the emotive force that the term has for Muslims and has studiously avoided using it to refer to US military intervention in the Muslim world, and a cooperative US media has followed that lead. The notable exception among the political leaders is President George W. Bush himself. On 16<sup>th</sup> September 2001, days after the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks, he said, “This crusade, this war on terrorism, is going to take a while.” A White House statement expressed regret for any offence caused by Bush’s reference to a ‘crusade’ and the president did not use the term again, but it had been widely noted. Osama bin Laden seized upon Bush’s misstep in a ‘message to the Muslims of Pakistan’ on 24<sup>th</sup> September, in which he wrote: “We incite our Muslim brothers in Pakistan to deter with all their capabilities the American crusaders from invading Pakistan and Afghanistan. The new Jewish crusader campaign is led by the biggest crusader, Bush, under the banner of the Cross” (Miles, 2000: 110-111).

One might make similar points about the now much discussed term, 'jihad'. Its various levels of meaning are appreciated in the Muslim world, and it is interpreted positively, but in the West, it is normally automatically equated with the violence of religious fanatics by most of the public. The press is normally careful not to refer to terrorist attacks such as those of September 11<sup>th</sup> or those in Madrid and London as examples of 'jihad', but when the non-Muslim public reads reports, factual or otherwise, about people who urge Muslims in the West to wage jihad, it becomes alarmed.<sup>2</sup>

### Cultural context obviously matters.

These examples illustrate, in a small way, why it is necessary to be cautious in assessing the reach of globalisation and the applicability of the concept in many areas of human life. It is not free of cultural baggage, as its enthusiasts well understand. The process is dominated by ways of thinking and values that come from Western societies, and above all, from the USA. The end of the Cold War meant the defeat of communism as a global alternative to Western capitalist democracy. For a variety of observers with differing opinions on the subject, the Muslim world and its values are seen as the chief remaining resistant element to the universal acceptance – or imposition – of the Western capitalist democratic order as the global norm, for that is what globalisation means to many of its advocates, as well as to others who fear it. Some critics see the promotion of globalisation in conspiratorial terms, but above all, it is a reflection of where economic and political power lies in the modern world, which, among other things, tends to shape the content of the most widely distributed films, popular music, and news media.

There are schools of thought that treat globalisation like an inexorable historical force. It may be celebrated or bemoaned, but it will prevail anyway. This is only partially true. There are many centres of opposition to what most of the world sees as the more negative aspects of globalisation – the erosion of valued cultural traditions, the destruction of social security networks in developed countries, and damage to the environment inflicted by an ideology that holds nothing more sacred than the right to make money. Some of these issues are of basic concern to Muslims, who find core values under challenge, but they are probably a minority among a much bigger worldwide population that is not so much opposed to globalisation as such but rather against the version currently dominant in the USA.

Away from the ideological battlegrounds, people are picking and choosing what they want from it. They embrace what they feel is useful to them and reject whatever they suspect is harmful. They do this with the media, as with everything else. In doing so, they are, in an extremely messy way, both showing an appreciation for the higher ethical standards that are the ideal of the media worldwide, but also saying that they want them to be expressed with respect for their own particular values. This is the meaning of the Arab public turning en masse to satellite TV channels that are enquiring, challenging and not mere mouthpieces for governments nor Arabic language organs of Western broadcasters; also, of the upsurge in the diversity of the Indonesian media since the fall of Suharto.

How far states should take a hand in the picking and choosing process is another matter altogether. Sectors of the public in all countries approve of some forms of censorship, in line with their religious or cultural values, but they do not necessarily want the state to be able to appeal to the idea of having 'respect for our cultural traditions' as a cover for the censorship of dissident political views or the suppression of information that happens to be embarrassing to existing leaders. It can sometimes seem in Southeast Asia that the term "Asian values" is less a description of a loose assortment of values considered to be shared by diverse Asian peoples than a tool for countering human rights advocates and suppressing the non-conformist and questioning.

The role of the public as an active element in the relationship between it and the media must be fully recognised. Too often, discussions on the media in the modern world focus upon the perceived qualities and faults of the media as such, but newspapers and the broadcast media need to be seen as part of the societies within which they function. Certainly, they should be subject to critical comment, but anything like an attempt at an objective view of the media's role ought to dare to question the public's attitudes, beliefs and expectations. Just because a view is widely held, it does not follow that it must be accepted as right and be allowed to dictate what the media say. Only if one tries to start from a standpoint of critical detachment can one hope to come close to achieving a balanced view of the role that the media plays and ought to play in our world and its different societies.

Worldwide, there seem to be many inconsistencies in the way the public regards the media. They extend to perceptions of the people who work in newspapers and broadcasting. Journalists have frequently appeared in Western films as principled and heroic figures. Leading characters in films such as “The Third Man”, “All The President’s Men”, “Salvador”, “The China Syndrome” and “Veronica Guerin” have offered the kind of positive images that have inspired idealistic young people to enter the media. Yet, opinion polls in the West suggest that, when it comes to respect and trustworthiness, journalists are generally ranked somewhere near the bottom of professions, above used car salesmen and politicians.

It makes a difference to people’s perceptions of the media, from society to society, whether they are state-controlled or privately-owned, whether they are subject to heavy censorship or speak freely, and whether they are identified with a narrow interest group and act as its mouthpiece, or provide a platform for a wider range of views. So much is fairly obvious, but public attitudes to the media are not just formed by what the various media are and what they do – there are views, prejudices and preferences derived from cultural traditions, religious faith and political loyalties that come into play when the public encounters the media. To a certain extent, these condition how a television news broadcast or a newspaper’s general coverage will be received.

Examples from the realm of politics abound, for there the issues are comparatively clear cut: BBC, CNN and print media news agency reports on the evacuation of Israeli settlers from the Gaza Strip<sup>3</sup>, the conflicts in Iraq, and Iran’s nuclear plants, have tended to be received very differently by Muslims and non-Muslims, but the differences extend to other matters. In the West, scandals involving sex are a staple item for a particular part of the print media and their readers generally treat such reports as a form of light entertainment, but more devout Muslims tend to regard them as vulgar and decadent. I have used the word ‘tend’ very deliberately, as it is well to be wary of categorical statements that suggest religious or national communities have a monolithic, united view on anything.

People want to be informed about what’s going on around them, but most are not particularly enquiring – they are looking out for the things that have the most immediate bearing on their own lives. Many, it could be argued, opt to be misinformed, or at least, to be informed very selectively – they choose the

newspapers they read and the current affairs programmes that they view according to their existing opinions, which they wish to have confirmed. It is an interesting illustration of the workings of the human mind and of why it is important to try to maintain an objective outlook towards public comments about the media. Ask individual members of the public what they want from the media and high up in most check lists will be values such as factual accuracy, objectivity, balance and independence, all of which feature frequently in newspaper advertising campaigns. But what people decide to buy and to view tells a different story. They equate desirable qualities with their own standpoint and assess the objectivity, independence and so on of a newspaper according to the extent to which it reflects their own views. They do not suspend their critical faculties and may disagree with things that they read and see, but the parameters of what they find acceptable and objectionable are set around central beliefs and approaches with which they are comfortable.

The relationship between various sections of the public and media, in the more open societies at least, is largely a collusive one of mutual reinforcement. Newspaper owners and media networks have their own agendas and they do push for particular viewpoints, as much critical literature has correctly pointed out. Conrad Black, Rupert Murdoch and Robert Maxwell have each supported the policies of right wing Israeli governments towards the Palestinians<sup>4</sup>, for example, rather more than their readers may have been inclined to do, but they were able to do so and retain their readership because the general outlook of the paper largely matched their own. Nevertheless, there are times when the media promote changes in public views, but also when they feel obliged to follow a change in the outlook of the reading public. This occurs particularly when popular views on an issue become entrenched and pervasive.

The Iraq war is a case in point. Most of the English-language media in the West took a strongly pro-war stance in the months before the US-UK ground offensive.<sup>5</sup> Certain publications zealously promoted claims about the existence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and have subsequently maintained a disposition to highlight news and views that defend the decision to go to war and to continue waging it. This position is becoming increasingly untenable, particularly as the toll of the conflict worsens, and the reading and viewing public grows increasingly distrustful of the claims made by the Bush and Blair administrations, and recalls the contradictions in what it has been told about Iraq. The pro-war media is

having to adapt to this mood.<sup>6</sup> The power of the public should not be underestimated.

How, in these circumstances, should terms such as ‘media ethics’ and ‘media values’ be understood? Mention such words and what springs to many people’s minds is the conduct that they most dislike in the media: sensationalist, muckraking, shallow and opinionated journalism. This is unfair to those who have held to high standards of writing and reporting. There really are lofty ideals of how the media should behave, and the standards a journalist should uphold. Every year, dozens of journalists pay with their lives for seeking out stories that some people would rather bury, and for writing truths that some would rather not be told. Organisations such as Reporters Sans Frontieres, the Committee for the Protection of Journalists or Article 19 stand up for the rights of media workers and for freedom of expression, but they are not advocates of journalistic license – they believe that journalists should be truthful, accurate and uphold basic ethical standards.

Most of those who work in the media worldwide believe in the principle of freedom of expression, but even when it is not circumscribed by state laws, they voluntarily place certain limits on what they do or say, or how they say it, out of deference to the prevailing values of the societies within which they operate. These can vary markedly from one society to another.

It is widely accepted, for example, that there is a distinction between the public and private domains. Reporting upon whatever is in the public domain is usually considered legitimate, but most societies operate some degree of formal or informal veto over media intrusion into individuals’ private lives, though they make a partial exception to this rule when it comes to celebrities. Asian societies in general do not welcome media intrusion into the home lives of citizens.

When it comes to religion, workers in the media in general accept that consideration must be given to the sensitivities of believers, although often differing on how far to take this. It is very clear that branding an entire religious group as being guilty of some evil is wrong, but what responsibility should the media take when reporting that an influential individual or institution has made an inflammatory or unjust remark directed against adherents of a particular faith? It should not be treated as a news item – that isn’t ‘journalistic objectivity’ or ‘just reporting

what was said', but a dereliction of responsibility to the public. In this instance, those delivering the report should 'editorialise' on the inflammatory remark.

This is quite a different question from that of 'balanced coverage' – an expression of religious bigotry is not something to be countered by an equally objectionable statement from an opposing point of view, which could indeed inflame ill feeling between the groups concerned.

A distinction has to be maintained between balance and objectivity – it is crucial, but many people assume that they mean much the same thing. Balance implies giving equal weight to opposing views. Objectivity involves weighing up arguments and facts without prejudice, but usually upon the basis of an ethical standpoint. They are not equally applicable. In the weeks leading up to the Iraq war in 2003, it can be argued that cases made for or against a war, deserved to be heard. The print media internationally were divided and aligned themselves, for the most part, to one side or the other, but some publications and parts of the broadcast media gave space and time to opposing viewpoints. There was scope here for the media, if they were so minded, to strive for balance and objectivity. That was not the case when the Bali bombings took place – there could be no question of dignifying the views of the killers of a large number of innocent civilians by seeking to balance them against those of the families of their victims and the survivors. They had crossed a line of unacceptability according to ethical values generally accepted by human beings around the world.

But what is the responsibility of the media when events happen that are bound to arouse the concern and anger of particular communities? Sometimes governments and others accuse newspapers or television stations of inflaming a situation through the stories reported and the images shown. If they misrepresent what is happening, then that deserves to be condemned, but should they be taken to task for showing things that really have happened? The Arabic-language television station, Al-Jazeera, has repeatedly come under attack in the USA and Israel for screening images of Israeli violence against Palestinians during the second intifada. It was accused of inflaming Arab public opinion against Israel. Al-Jazeera didn't make up those images: it showed things that really happened. They may only have been part of the truth, but they were only part of its coverage – it has also interviewed Israeli spokesmen, unlike many other Arab stations.

US and Israeli protests were directed at allowing Israel to get on with repressing Palestinian resistance with a minimum of outside protest; Al-Jazeera believed that it had good reason not to fall in line. Maybe the best way for a government to avoid having images of its troops acting brutally be broadcasted to other countries is to stop the troops from acting badly in the first place, rather than rushing to cover up their misdeeds.

Al-Jazeera receives the kind of responses that one might expect a media outlet seeking to achieve a certain standard of balance to have: it has been slammed in the West for showing scenes of violence by occupying forces in Palestine and Iraq, and for giving a platform to those on the other side, and ironically, has also been condemned by some in the Arab world for letting representatives and supporters of Israel have a voice during its broadcasts. By and large, it covers current events from the kind of standpoint that a detached observer might expect – it reflects its Arab home environment just as Western broadcasters reflect theirs.

Individual decisions it makes can be questionable, but overall it should be seen as bringing something very positive into the world. To an area in which television news and current affairs coverage was top heavy with reports on the latest activities of heads of state and ministers, and officially sanitised versions of events that were often misleading, Al-Jazeera brought a breath of fresh air – real news, live reports from its own professional teams of cameramen and correspondents in global hotspots, controversy and clashes of opinion. The viewing public relished the change of diet. Wherever they could in the Arab world, they voted with their remote controls to watch Al-Jazeera in preference to other channels. This set off a small avalanche of changes – to reclaim viewers or to wean them off Al-Jazeera, some existing broadcasters have tried to become a little more like it and a little less like their old selves, and new stations have been established to try to compete with Al-Jazeera largely on its own terms.<sup>7</sup>

What does the public have a right to ask of the media? It should always be wary, in my view, of curtailing freedom of expression, but it ought to have its cultural and religious values treated with respect. This should never be used to suppress the truth, however repulsive it might sometimes be, but it does mean the media should be thoughtful about how they say what they need to say. Above all, media workers need to take the trouble to make sure that they do their utmost to discover

the background to the issues they cover, and their companies should give them the necessary support. Much shallow and inaccurate reporting and a great deal of insensitive commentary are due to a lack of understanding of what lies behind a current event, rather than malicious intent. As it happens, in the past few years, incidents involving terrorist groups that espouse some form of Islamist ideology have made the news fairly frequently, and this has led to some rather poor writing, produced as an instant response, although there are distinguished exceptions. Some journalists uncritically picked up handouts and commentaries from various groups and institutions without having much understanding of their thinking and aims. They are learning, it seems, and the active interventions of some Muslim writers and institutions have played a big part in countering the worst deficiencies.

The media also need to use good sense by taking into consideration the values of the people in the areas from where they present reports and likewise in deciding what to write or broadcast. The reporting of disasters is one difficult area – there are good reasons to try to bring home the horror of an event such as the tsunami catastrophe, but at what stage does it become exploitative and unfeeling to dwell upon people’s grief? What should be shown of the dead and injured? Some religious figures of different faiths offered interpretations of the divine purpose behind the tsunami that would strike most observers as particularly unfeeling and inhumane, but most of the media seem to have thought, quite wisely, that that was not the time to take them to task – the public would form its own judgements.

The relationship between the public and the media in most countries is bound to be a prickly one at times, and that should not be troubling. It can be a consequence of the media being thought provoking, championing causes or taking on injustices. What should provoke objections is any consistent demonstration of prejudice towards a group of people on the basis of their religion, nationality, colour or gender. The media can earn respect by maintaining their best traditions and highest ideals – by seeking out the facts, checking them, obtaining the opinions of the various parties involved and attempting to be fair. That wins respect in any society – it is a global response that stems from our shared human values.

## Endnotes

- 1 Incidentally, when I looked for recent examples of its use in Singapore's press, I found that those described as 'crusaders' included a man who founded a charity to help runaway teenagers ('Getting to the heart of charity', Theresa Tan, Yap Su-Yin, Vivi Zainol and Suzanne Wong, *Straits Times* 23/7/05), and the Philippines' Archbishop Oscar Cruz, who was called 'a crusader against illegal gambling' in an AFP report ('Witness admits being used against Arroyo', *Straits Times* 5/8/05).
- 2 Muslim discussions of the meaning of jihad have hardly come to the attention of Westerners. They tend to place a heavy reliance upon the Qu'ran and the Sunna. These arguments may not be readily understood or appear convincing to non-Muslims. Other approaches to exploring the concept of jihad – for example, considering the contexts in which it has been proclaimed, who responds and why, how it is understood at a popular level, and to what extent its role in Islam might be compared to that of religiously sanctioned violence in other religious traditions may be more effective. Karen Armstrong is one Western writer who has used such approaches well (see her recent articles in *The Guardian*: 'The label of Catholic terror was never used about the IRA' 11/7/05 and a piece on religious literalism, 'Unholy strictures', 11/8/05.) A valuable study of the evolution of the concept of jihad during the period of the Crusades is offered in Hillenbrand (2000: 89-255). In showing it as a far more fluid concept than would be appreciated by most of those who employ the term today, her work suggests possible fruitful approaches to a contemporary appreciation of its meaning.
- 3 Extensive coverage of settlers talking about how they would be forced out of 'their' land and homes made them appear to be victims of an inhuman government policy. They often appropriated the language of Palestinians who really had been dispossessed of all they had, without 'kid gloves' treatment or compensation, but this would not have been appreciated by most Americans, who have been badly served by their media on anything touching on the Palestinians and Israel. Europeans are generally better informed about the attitudes and behaviour of the settlers.
- 4 The point bears emphasis – it is not just Israeli governments, but right wing Israeli governments that were the most resistant to any accommodation with the Palestinians. Black and his wife, Barbara Amiel, who was given ample scope to express her views uncontested in Britain's *Daily Telegraph* while her husband was firmly in control, were strong supporters of Benjamin Netanyahu, who did much to frustrate the implementation of the Israel-PLO Declaration of Principles when he was Israel's prime minister; the Murdoch press has been strongly supportive of Ariel Sharon,

Israel's present prime minister; during the Palestinian uprising that erupted in 1987, Robert Maxwell pledged that the papers he controlled would back the position taken by the government of Yitzhak Shamir.

- 5 In 2003, newspapers with the largest circulation in the USA all supported the war, to one degree or another – in Britain, among the dailies, *The Times*, *The Telegraph*, *The Sun* and *The Daily Mail* were strongly pro-war, while *The Guardian* and *The Daily Mirror* were against. *The Independent* hovered.
- 6 This has been particularly evident in the case of *The New York Times*, which has published a self-critical statement on its own ready embrace of the Bush administration's justifications for going to war in 2002-3.

A poll by CNN-USA Today-Gallup released on September 22, 2005 found that 59 per cent of Americans now consider the Iraq invasion to have been a mistake; 63 per cent want some or all of the troops withdrawn and 56 per cent either believed that the USA could not win in Iraq (34 per cent) or could win but probably would not (22 per cent). Politicians and lobbyists still wedded to the goal of a US victory in Iraq are worried at such evidence of the erosion of public support for the Bush administration's policies in Iraq. They blame it, in part, on sections of the media that report or show Iraqi civilian casualties, US casualties and 'the bad news' from Iraq ("If you believe the liberal media's reporting on the American military effort in Iraq, you're almost forced to be ashamed of America," said the Media Research Center, one of the US conservative media-watch groups, in a message to potential donors). (Ron Hutcheson, 'Mainstream news media suffer collateral damage from Iraq war', *Knight Ridder Newspapers* 19/8/05): they would evidently like the media to endorse the line out of the White House, a position that the more thinking elements of the US press recognise as increasingly inconsistent with reality and out of step with what the public knows and believes.

- 7 Hugh Miles' "Al-Jazeera", subtitled 'How Arab TV News Challenged the World' is a very up to date and readable account of the station and its impact.

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# Is Objective Reporting on Islam Possible? Contextualizing the Demon

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**Abstract:** *Although much of the media in the West claims to be impartial, liberal, free and objective, in reality it is biased, subjective, illiberal, insensitive and intolerant, although often not politically controlled. One sense in which the media is biased has to do with Orientalist assumptions underlying media images of Islam. In this sense, the media in many Muslim and other Third World countries is also biased. Orientalist stereotypes and misconceptions regarding Islam have often been internalized by non-Europeans and Americans. This includes Muslims themselves. On the other hand, it is also true that there is no such thing as non-perspectival reporting. That being the case, what then is meant by objective reporting, if that is possible at all? This paper reflects on these questions.*

The fact that there has been an increase in knowledge and understanding with regard to Islam and the affairs of Muslims during the last few years, in many countries around the world, is undeniable. The expanding public awareness of Islam in both negative and positive senses more than ever signifies the importance of the media's impact on the way people construct images of communities that are strange to them. The role that is often set up for the media is a technical one.

It involves the gathering of data, its processing, and presentation in the correct context and in a variety of forms. Beyond this, however, the media is a powerful agent of change and many individuals and groups vie for its control. In other words, the media is by no means insulated from politics. Since neither the international nor regional media coverage of Islam is not innocent of politics either, the question of whether the media is up to the task of covering the issues relating to Islam in an objective manner is very relevant.

The discourse on Islam is not without its political uses. The media is one of three actors in a triangular relationship with the government and civil society. The media has often been accused of being irresponsible and distorting the truth. To be sure, there are a number of problems connected with media coverage. I would like to suggest what the natures of these problems are.

This essay proceeds as follows. The next section introduces the problem of the “demonization” of Islam. This is followed by a discussion of how a contextualization of the news surrounding the Muslim world may lead to a different picture or image of Islam. I then conclude with a remark on the meaning of objective reporting.

## The Demonization of Islam

If Islam is, as Muslims define it, a religion of the middle way, then why are there many misconceptions about Islam floating around? Why does Islam receive such bad press? The fact that there are Muslims who perpetrate crimes of terrorism in the name of Islam, does not explain it. What needs explanation is why the world does not seem to be able to make a distinction between the minority who pervert the teachings of Islam and the majority of law-abiding, moral and civilised Muslims.

Islam had been in conflict with the West since the eighth century. First, there was the conquest of Spain and Sicily. The Arabs were in Spain for seven hundred years and in Sicily for five hundred years. Then, there were about two hundred years of the so-called Crusades. Some centuries later the Ottomans threatened to overrun Europe, making their way to Vienna. Even after the ascendancy of Europe and then America, the Muslim civilization continued to constitute a

threat and problem in the form of anti-colonial and other types of movements following political independence. Therefore, the feeling of animosity and threat is deep-seated both in the West and among Muslims.

The fact that the West is today the dominant civilization in economic and cultural terms has meant that Western perceptions of Islam, often informed by Orientalist assumptions, are influential throughout the world. As far as the media is concerned, what make the headlines are not so much the realities concerning the Muslim world but rather the Orientalist stereotypes and misconceptions of Islam. Many Muslims around the world are convinced that the West is against them, to the extent that media reports of Muslims, Hollywood's trafficking of the stereotypes of Arabs, Iranians and Muslims, and the writings of Orientalist-type journalists in a way that demonizes Islam, all influence public opinion in the United States and elsewhere in the world. Consider the song from "Aladdin" which refers to Aladdin's birthplace as a place "where the camels roam...where they cut off your ear if they don't like your face. It's barbaric, but hey it's home". There was also the depiction of two "stupid Arab couples" trying to read an "Exit" sign on the Titanic, when more than 300 Lebanese lost their lives on that ill-fated journey. In "The Siege", Arab jihadists actually came to New York, blew up Times Square and kidnapped school children.

Related to the process of the demonization of Islam is the "moderate-extremist" and "modern-backward" Muslims dichotomy. What do we make of the notion that there are two versions of Islam, as we often hear about in the media, that is, moderate and extremist Islam? This perception has to be corrected. Muslims do not understand Islam in that way. In fact, there is no distinction between moderate and extremist Islam because Islam as a system of beliefs and practices is quite internally consistent and homogeneous.

There are, of course, Muslims who act in an extremist way, but the problem with the extremist/moderate dichotomy is that it implies that those who are stricter in the practice of Islam are the ones more prone to extremism. The problem with that line of reasoning is that it further implies that the greater the devotion to Islam, if you measure this in terms of the strictness in following the tenets of Islam, the greater the propensity to extremism. It is because of this kind of thinking that some people get alarmed when they see Muslims being concerned about saying their prayers on time, being uncompromising in their

dietary restrictions, or being more “orthodox”.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps for such people, it is better for Muslims to be moderate, that is, to be less devout, less strict Muslims.

This idea is completely at odds with the way Muslims understand and practice their religion. They understand Islam as a religion based on “the middle way”, which is captured by the Quranic term “*ummatah wasatan*” meaning the community of the middle way, the middle between two extremes. And it is this middle way, which is the “straight path”, that Muslims are told by the Quran to travel.

One extreme is the negligence of Islamic duties, the failure to remember God and to carry out duties to oneself, one’s family and one’s fellow human beings. The other extreme is the violation of the tenets of Islam involving the excessive use of force, harshness, lack of compassion and finally, the wrongful interpretation of Islamic laws. So, on the one hand they are lax, they do not follow Islam, they neglect Islam. On the other hand, they apply the religion, but in a wrong way without compassion, by being too harsh in their interpretations. So, it is not that there are extremist versions of Islam, but that those who are extreme, are actually transgressing the laws of God in one way or another.

A letter by a Mr Lewis J. Mitchell, “Principle a sticking point” (ST, Oct 30),<sup>2</sup> expressed the view that if the adherents of various religions stuck strictly to their respective rules, this would result in polarisation and division in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society like Singapore. This was in reference to a talk I gave on Islam, which was organised by the Pasir Ris (East) Inter-Racial Confidence Circle on 27 October, and reported in The Straits Times on 28 October. This is precisely the kind of lack of understanding about Islam that I was addressing in that talk. There, I had explained that Islam defines itself as a religion of the middle way and that if Muslims were truly devout, they would not be extremists.

When I suggested that Muslims should not apologise for being devout, I meant that it is unnecessary for Muslims to compromise on the fundamentals of their religion, such as their belief in the oneness of God and creation, the five obligatory prayers, the observance of the fast, the payment of the poor tax (*zakah*), the performance of the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*), and so on. I find it quite strange that anyone could think that if Muslims were devout in this way, there would be divisiveness and polarisation.

Of course, religions, like secular ideologies, are not immune from manipulation by various groups with vested interests. This is why it is necessary to stress the need for devotion. Mr Mitchell suggested that if Muslims stuck to the rules, they would execute adulterers, or that if the Jews stuck to the rules, they would “claim an eye for an eye”. Had he checked the Quran, he would have discovered that there is no such punishment for adultery and that execution is precisely not part of the rules. There are many aspects of the beliefs and practices of Muslims that are a matter of tradition or politics, rather than religious obligation. For hundreds of years, including the time of the Prophet Muhammad, courts in Muslim countries did not execute adulterers. There are rare instances today where the sentence had been imposed, such as in Nigeria recently. This is, strictly speaking, civil or man-made law, as it is not found in the Quran. Had those responsible been uncompromising in their devotion to Islam and stuck to the rules, they would not have drafted and passed such laws. As far as the Jews claiming “an eye for an eye” is concerned, I understand that it is well known in Jewish tradition, that this Biblical ruling is not to be taken literally, and refers to some form of monetary compensation. The Jews are unequivocal in their interpretation of this rule.

The moderate Islam-extremist Islam dichotomy is a creation in the minds of politicians and journalists, and does not have an empirical referent. But this dichotomy functions to “educate” the public that moderate and, by extension, less strict Muslims are the good Muslims while extremist and, therefore, stricter Muslims are the ones prone to evil. An example of the trafficking of this misconception is an article by Farrukh Dhondy that first appeared in the *City Journal* and was reprinted in *The Sunday Times* (Singapore).<sup>3</sup>

The article drew severe criticism from the Malay-Muslim community of Singapore for what many saw as its objectionable and inaccurate statements on Islam. For example, Dhondy suggests that “if you prostrate yourself to an all-powerful and unfathomable being five times a day, if you are constantly told that you live in the world of Satan, if those around you are ignorant of and impervious to literature, art, historical debate and all that nurtures the values of Western civilization, your mind becomes susceptible to fanaticism. Your mind rots”. In other words, being religious and ignorant of Western culture breed fanaticism. This is Eurocentrism combined with very shallow thinking on the nature of religious experience. Even a less-educated Malay farmer or Bangladeshi worker

knows that there is no correlation between religiosity and fanaticism. Many Muslims in Singapore were unhappy with the publication of Dhondy's article. For example, Saharudin Kassim, who was the Special Assistant to the President of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, wrote a very articulate critique of the Dhondy piece and suggested that such "a malicious piece of writing" should not have been published in *The Sunday Times*.<sup>4</sup> I have a different view. It is such articles that create the conditions for dialogue. Singaporeans would not have benefited from Saharudin Kassim's correction of Dhondy's views had Dhondy's article not been printed to begin with. Many Singaporeans may have held such erroneous views and here, there was an opportunity for these to be corrected. In a sense, the printing of wrong opinions has their functions as well. I would encourage more of such discussions in the media.

Another problematic dichotomy is that of modern Muslims who regard the United States as a benign power versus anti-modern Muslims who regard United States as a malevolent power, as if to say a Muslim could not be modern and highly critical of United States' foreign policy at the same time. Applying the same faulty misconception, but this time not in reference to Islam, is a report earlier this year carried in *The Sunday Times* of Singapore.<sup>5</sup> The story is of an Indian national who murdered his Singaporean wife of Indian origin. The story revolved around the man as being traditional and religious while the woman was cosmopolitan and liberal. Within a year of their marriage, he stabbed her to death and was sentenced to 10 years in jail and 15 strokes of the cane.

The demonization involves instilling a fear of Islam because Islam is regarded as an ideological competitor to capitalism and socialism, and a challenge to the West. There is often a focus on the strange and bizarre that only serves to "confirm" stereotypes. Examples are the execution of a princess, terrorist acts, and the oppression of women. These are generalized to the whole Muslim world and Islam is reduced to these things.

The media tends to portray Islam as oppressive (hence, women in *hijab*); that Islam is out-moded (hence, hanging, beheading and stoning to death); anti-intellectualist (hence, book burning); restrictive (hence, ban on post- and extra-marital affairs, alcohol and gambling); extremist (hence, Algeria, Lebanon and, of course, Egypt); backward (hence, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Afghanistan); causes conflict (hence, Palestine, Kashmir and Indonesia); and dangerous (hence, Iran).

Correcting media bias in reporting about Islam is not simply a matter of correcting the facts. What allows the news about Islam to be conveyed and consumed in a particular way has to do with the predominance of Orientalist thinking. Orientalism refers to a type of discourse, which systematically managed and produced the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-enlightenment era (Said, 1979: 3). What is significant about Orientalism is not the correspondence between what it says of the so-called Orient but rather the manner in which it constructs an image of the Orient and the internal consistency of that image, despite the lack of correspondence with a real Orient (Said, 1979: 5). According to the Orientalist construction of Islam, Muslims are generally backward, irrational, obsessed with the erotic, and are waiting to be conquered. While these have more to do with classical, rather than modern, Orientalism, expressions of these traits live on in today's media.

What is important about Orientalism as a discourse is that it is founded on stereotypes and distortions that play a role in the cultural and political life of the West. Some may be inclined to believe that Orientalism is a thing of the past but Islam continues to be represented in Orientalist ways, as can be readily seen from an observation in the West of advertisements, consumer products, pop fiction, Las Vegas souvenirs, and architecture.<sup>6</sup>

## Contextualizing the “Demon”

Let us say that many of the negative aspects of Muslims as reported by the media do happen in and out of the Muslim world. However, there are problems with this kind of reporting:

1. There is little attention to the positive aspects of the Muslim world. The media tends to prefer the strange and the bizarre. Much of what is positive is also often commonplace and boring, and does not tend to find its way into the international media.
2. There is little reporting on how Muslims themselves think about the strange and the bizarre. For example, it is rare that there are interviews in the media of ordinary Muslim citizens speaking against the punishment of stoning to death for adultery.

3. There is little reporting on the plight of Muslims. If there was such reporting, it might help to provide some perspective on what might otherwise seem unfathomable. For example, while there is often coverage of the deeds of Abu Sayaf in the Philippines in the Singapore press, there is little reporting on the decades long process of the gradual marginalization of Muslims in the southern Philippines. Muslims are more often than not presented as aggressors rather than victims.
4. There is little on how Muslims themselves are affected by the transgressions of their own people. For example, there was little coverage of the Muslim victims of September 11. There were no interviews of the families of Muslims who lost their lives on September 11, 2001.
5. There is little reporting on the demonization of Islam. In the Singapore media, for example, there was little coverage of the prejudiced and biased views held by Christian religious leaders in the United States and Europe towards Islam.
6. There is also little coverage of the inter-religious encounters of peace. Throughout the world, there have been instances of inter-religious encounters of peace, friendship and comradery between Muslims and Jews, and between Muslims and Christians, which if told to the world, would help all to restore their faith in the goodness of humanity.<sup>7</sup> I had come across many such stories, but these were mainly in “alternative” media. One such story that I found particularly moving took place in Chicago a few days after September 11, 2001. As Muslims throughout America attended Friday prayers days after the attack in New York and Washington DC, they feared backlashes against them. At two mosques located on the southwest side of Chicago, people from a coalition of churches and Catholic schools formed a human chain providing physical and symbolic protection to Muslims as they performed their Friday prayers.<sup>8</sup>
7. The media also tends to adopt the prevailing Western terminology when it talks about Islam and the problems of extremism and terrorism. Very often, these are terms that Muslims not only do not use, but also find offensive. For example, the term “salafi” is often used. Some Muslim extremists had arrogated to themselves the right to use this term to describe their own orientation. The

media then used the term in the same way offending many Muslims who regard such use as a contamination of a good term that refers to the pious forbearers of Islam.

8. The media tends to be selective in its reporting on religious fundamentalism. For example, there is little on Jewish, Christian and secular fundamentalism and extremism that would serve to provide a more balanced view of the problem, that is, to show that the problem is not restricted to Muslims. Let me provide an example. Sheikh Ahmad Yasin, the late leader of Hamas, a Palestinian organization, was said to be an advocate of suicide bombing and the killing of non-Muslim combatants in Israel. Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, the alleged brains behind suicide bombings and beheadings in Iraq, also harbours extremist views with respect to his fellow Muslims, regarding the Shiite Muslims of Iraq as infidels and contributing to sectarian conflicts in that country.

The Islamic position, of course, is that suicide and the killing of innocent men, women and children are sins of the worst kind. Yet, there are Muslims who support the views of Yasin and Zarqawi, who glorify them, are unwilling to condemn suicide bombings as sinful and murder, and unwilling to brand the perpetrators as terrorists, a label which they readily use on the Israelis. Such people suffer from a moral incompetence and impotence. But the evil behind such advocacy is trans-religious, that is to say, it is an orientation that exists across religions. For example, Rabbi Dov Lior, Chairman of the Yesha Rabbinical Council (of Jewish settlers in Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip) is reported to have said in a Halachic (Jewish law) ruling that the Israeli Defence Forces are allowed to hurt innocent civilians during warfare. He went so far as to say that “during warfare killing non-Jewish civilians is permitted if it saves Jewish lives”. The Christians also have their share of extremists. A leading Greek Orthodox priest in Jerusalem, Attallah Hana, supports various means adopted by Palestinians in order to achieve freedom from the Israeli regime, including suicide bombing.

Furthermore, the worst cases of genocide in recent history took place in the name of secular ideologies, namely, fascism, liberal democracy, and socialism. I am referring to the Nazi holocaust, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and genocide under Stalin and Polpot. Of course, it would be as illogical to

conclude that it is secularism that is the cause of such genocide, as it is to conclude that secularism is the reason behind religious harmony. I feel that it is necessary to clarify these distinctions because of the dominant perception that it is religion, which is the cause of many problems. There is also the view which is founded on the notion that religion breeds intolerance. It is more accurate to say that all belief systems are corruptible and can be perverted, and that there are specific social and historical conditions that result in these perversions.

## Conclusion

I would not insist that every media has to report about Islam in the way that is being implied from the above discussion. Objective or balanced reporting does not necessarily have to be found in a single reporter or paper. It would be unreasonable to expect that an individual or group is not influenced by interests. The objectivity, however, can come about through the presence of a plurality of sources.

For the long term, however, I would like to suggest that the media take the idea of the dialogue among civilizations more seriously.<sup>9</sup> Much of what we have heard in the media concerns conflict. Nothing much on dialogue had been covered. What can we do to prepare for and engage in dialogue?

1. While recognizing that neither the West nor Islam is a monolithic entity, we should also accept that there are irreconcilable historical and cultural differences between the two. Let us not pretend otherwise. So, why not channel the conflict to the relatively friendlier arenas of intellectual and economic competition.
2. There is a need for a more balanced media reporting which covers, for example, all suffering around the world, anti-war protests in the United States and Europe, sane voices from within the Muslim world, cooperation, respect and love between Muslims and non-Muslim, and so on. Americans need to know that most Muslims are not scruffy-looking “jihadists” (another misused term), and Muslims need to know that most Americans are not tough guy, red neck types.

3. Serious efforts in education should be made to inform young people about the multicultural origins of modern civilization, about the contributions of Islam to modern Western civilization, about the positive aspects of Western civilization, and about the common values and problems that Islam, the West and the rest of humanity share.
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## Endnotes

- 1 “The terrorists won’t win, says SM Lee”, *The Straits Times* September 28, 2002.
- 2 “Principle a sticking point”, *The Straits Times* October 30, 2002.
- 3 Farrukh Dhondy, “Muslim misfits in Britain”, *The Sunday Times* December 23, 2001.
- 4 Saharuddin Kassim, “It’s a malicious piece of writing, not a critical exposition”, *The Straits Times* January 2, 2002.
- 5 March 17, 2002.
- 6 “Orientalism in the Media, the Arts and Academia”, *Intersections* (UCLA Center for Near Eastern Studies), Spring/Summer 2005, p. 19.
- 7 Some of these encounters were documented by Schwartz (2005).
- 8 Ayub Khan, Islam Online <<http://www.islam-online.net/English/News/2001-09/17/article5.shtml>>
- 9 For more on dialogue, see Alatas (2006).

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# ISLAMIC IMAGERY AND AMERICAN POLICY

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**Abstract:** *As the self-proclaimed “sole world superpower,” the United States has taken a sharp turn toward militarizing its response to a wide range of problems, both social and political. It has moved toward a nearly constant war footing, using the metaphors of war – if not actual attacks – in multiple contexts, domestic and international. Despite the defeat in Vietnam and the quagmires in Afghanistan and Iraq, American power remains the power to make war, in both words and deeds, and its military is one of the few growth industries in a nation that was once an industrial superpower. But to maintain this war footing, to constantly requisition public funds into the military budgets and the industries that feed off the military, American policy makers need an enemy. For half a century, the Soviet Union served that purpose well, but in the wake of its collapse the Americans needed to find another enemy. The specter of “Islamic terrorism” has served this purpose well for international affairs, and has also provided service to a range of security based domestic policies that many fear are marching the American society toward a police state. This article will examine the role of Islamic imagery in formulating and conducting American policy, from the Patriot Act and its domestic predecessors to the international occupation of resource rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia, and will also consider the role of the global media and the contribution of academics to maintaining that imagery.*

## 9-11 and Its Aftermath

Soon after three jetliners slammed into the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington DC on 11 September 2001, the American corporate news media reported these acts to be the work of “Palestinian terrorists.” That spurious accusation, soon discarded, paved the way for several additional hasty associations, including recycled, and misleading, images of Palestinians dancing in the streets of Ramallah, allegedly celebrating the crimes but which were later shown to be out of context. Within hours, the attacks had been pinned on Saudi dissident and former American Cold War ally Osama Bin Laden. Conjectures continued to circulate as if they were proven facts, including a list of nineteen alleged Arab Muslim hijackers that included the names of six individuals who were said to be on the fateful flights but who later turned out to be quite alive (or previously dead) with no connection to the events of 11 September. As the story of crazed “Muslim terrorists” unfolded in the days following the incident, the names and other details were quietly revised or marginalized, while loud calls for revenge mounted and public hate crimes against Muslims increased. Few people questioned the initial conclusions of the authorities, the unbelievably convenient clues that almost appeared to have been planted with the intention to be found, the bizarre accounts of the alleged Muslim hijackers’ oddly uncharacteristic behavior before the incidents, or the manifest lack of any real conclusive evidence pointing to Bin Laden or any Muslim organization.

Careful observers of the independent media would have noticed a parallel discourse to that of American officialdom. According to several reports, in the weeks prior to the 9-11 attacks, there was an unusual volume of trading in airline and insurance stocks on Wall Street, suggesting that insiders may have had prior knowledge. Soon after the attacks, a number of Israeli citizens were quietly arrested by the FBI under suspicion of espionage, stemming from a communications security firm for which they worked, but with some reports suggesting that they had prior knowledge of the attacks, or that they may even have been involved, as implied by the mysterious “Stern Report”, citing an American intelligence memo indicating that the Mossad had plans to orchestrate a terror operation in the United States. Other alternative news sources pointed to American domestic terrorist involvement, while a few even claimed to have found links with Russian intelligence. Still others went as far as to suggest that

the attacks were part of a domestic coup, the shades of a Reichstag or Gulf of Tonkin-type operation designed to instigate retaliation against a third party and provide cover for a fascist takeover of the United States government, citing the “Northwoods Memo” from the Cuban missile crisis era, which recommended staging phony terrorist attacks on American citizens and blaming them on Cubans.<sup>1</sup> Since then, the incident has generated a host of conspiracy theories, including those put forward by Thierry Meyssen in a series of books claiming that a missile, not a plane, hit the Pentagon, and many others who said that the World Trade Centre was a planned demolition, with the plane crash as a cover. Whatever the actual relevance or veracity of such observations and claims, none have been worthy of any official scrutiny. At the same time, no one thought twice about the similarly incredible claim that such a sophisticated operation could have been masterminded from a cave in a Third World country. All that seemed to matter was the foregone conclusion that Muslims, and only Muslims, would carry out or even conceive of such acts, and it was as if a mass contingency plan was put in motion by the US government, while a mass will to believe was enjoined by the US corporate media.

Still unable to shake the accusations that he stole the 2000 election, President Bush immediately framed the American reaction to the attacks as a “war against terrorism”, speaking as if it was to be an epic battle of good versus evil. Bush soon insisted that “either you are with us or you are with the terrorists”, and at one point he even boldly proclaimed that the US response was to be a “crusade”. Some public commentators were occasionally less bombastic and crass, but it was still quite common to hear public discussions framed in terms of “civilization” versus “barbarism” and Western “values” versus valueless “savagery”. Such comments seemed to imply that there could be no neutrality in such a confrontation, that this was clearly to be a matter of “us versus them”, and that the enemy was everything America was not. In fact, according to Bush’s view, “all Americans are soldiers” in the War on Terror, presumably whether they want to be or not. Bush himself seemed to be operating in a Huntingtongesque paradigm of a “clash of civilizations”, an argument that gained credence from his quasi-missionary rhetoric that either reflected or pandered to the Christian right in the US. Meanwhile, as the world tried to come to grips with the attacks, statements from other influential quarters of American officialdom began to reveal the political contradictions of American society. For example, leaders of the Christian Right initially used the attacks to chastise Americans for moral laxity, including

notorious public comments from Jerry Falwell, who pointed a finger of blame at American “pagans, abortionists, feminists, gays, lesbians” and other nefarious characters like the ACLU, and who claimed that such attacks were the result of them having angered God. While not all religious groups fell into a pattern of such behavior, several prominent American Evangelical Christian leaders who command huge followings did take the opportunity to spew vitriol at Arabs and Muslims, calling Islam a “wicked” and “backward” religion, that its followers did not worship the Son of God like Christians but that they follow a “very different” God, and that “Islam has attacked us,” urging their loyal flocks to support any military responses.

Within days, the official story coalesced into a conspiracy involving nineteen men of Arab Muslim origin, and although their names did not appear on the flight manifests released by the airlines the day of the incident, and despite a few candid admissions that some of the hijacker’s identities had likely been forged, the American corporate media acted as accuser, judge and jury. As alarming TV images and stories of “Arab and Muslim terror” flashed on the nightly news alongside documentaries with seductive titles like “Behind the Veil”, real Arab and Muslim men and women in America suffered the consequences. There were half a dozen murders and hundreds of hate crimes in the first week after the attacks. So alarming were their ferocity that American officialdom had to warn citizens not to form lynch mobs and blame all Arabs or Muslims for the work of a supposed “terrorist fringe” among them. Some airtime was given to Arab organizations and spokespeople, but most never got beyond stressing their patriotism and love of the American flag. Calls mounted for racial profiling, internment and expulsion of Arab and Muslim immigrants. By the end of September, according to some accounts, nearly 1500 Arabs and Muslims had been detained by law enforcement and immigration authorities. One syndicated columnist demanded that “every Middle Eastern looking truck driver should be pulled over and questioned wherever he may be in the United States”, while a prominent TV commentator assured viewers that “if people are of Middle Eastern extract, they should be treated a little differently, just for the security of the United States”. Chilling exchanges on CNN and in *Newsweek* suggested that truth serum or even torture should be used to interrogate “suspected terrorists”. Pundits called on the Arab American community to police itself, and accusations of discrimination were met with cold hearted remarks, such as “this

is not racism, this is necessary” or mean spirited retorts, such as “not all Muslims are terrorists, but all terrorists are Muslims”.<sup>2</sup>

Some mainstream corporate news reporting took on a surreal quality reminiscent of the Cold War and Red Scare days. The day after the attacks, the *New York Post* suggested a connection that demonstrates more about corporate media feelings than the realities of terrorism, insisting that “the anti-globalist rioters seek to intimidate world capitalism into shutting down altogether, and the distance between breaking the windows of McDonald’s to achieve that end and blowing up the World Trade Centre is pretty damned narrow” (cited in Hart, 2001). Other media pundits and news editors made connections between general political dissent in the US and the terror attacks attributed to Muslims. As Bush’s War on Terror gathered momentum, the anti-war movement and other protestors urged for “justice not vengeance”, though the corporate media wrote off most dissent with headlines such as “Protestors Urge Peace with Terrorists” (*The New York Times*, 30 September 2001). As the simplistic and politicized imagery further circulated in public, lawmakers worked quickly in private to pass new anti-terrorism legislation. On October 26, President Bush signed into law the “USA Patriot Act,” which gave sweeping new powers to law enforcement agencies to conduct surveillance, carry out secret searches and detain suspects without evidence, while the CIA was granted rights to spy on Americans at home and act with impunity abroad. New laws purposefully relied on a notably vague definition of terrorism that could be used against a broad range of political dissent, according to the ACLU, who warned that, “This vast expansion of power goes far beyond anything necessary to conduct terrorism investigations.” There was little time for public debate on the laws and, with very few exceptions, the corporate media virtually ignored the implications of these developments that would clearly amount to a major rollback of hard-won American civil liberties. This was evident very early on in official government statements. House of Representatives Minority Leader Richard Gephardt noted that “we’re not going to have all the openness and freedom we have had,” while White House spokesman Ari Fleischer made it plain: “People have to watch what they say and watch what they do.” Like cheerleaders for President Bush’s War on Terror, the corporate news media dutifully told American viewers to accept reduced freedoms and curtailments of their rights for the sake of patriotism and US national security (Coen 2001:21-22).

By the time the American military unfurled its bombing campaign on Afghanistan in early October, public attention had already been focused away from the investigation of 9-11 and subsequent domestic developments, and had moved almost entirely toward President Bush's War on Terror. In practice, the War on Terror had, for the moment, become a war on Afghanistan, which was clearly intended to topple the Taliban regime, although few people noticed that plans to achieve this were already formulated long before the 9-11 attacks. Instead, reminiscent of a Hollywood epic, the corporate news media adopted catchy slogans like "America Strikes Back". The battle lines had been drawn, and the mediascape focused overseas upon images of bearded and barbarous Muslims. Even though the US and Britain prosecuted their war through various Afghan mercenaries, most viewers would not be able to tell the difference. The story continued to be framed in terms of good versus evil, "us versus them", with America as the ever-righteous set to defeat the forces of evil in the world, while guiding the less fortunate to "freedom". Some Western politicians even came off sounding like modern day crusaders, such as the Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi, who proclaimed that Western civilization was superior to Islam. However, as America revved up its war machine, some politicians could paradoxically be heard praising Islam as a "great world religion". Several Western emissaries traveled around the Muslim world trying to convince regional leaders that the Western world always had the best intentions in the Muslim world, and that the US cared about suffering Afghans and dispossessed Palestinians. But this was all a cynical farce, designed to gain Muslim support for the War on Terror and to try and position the West as the arbiter of all that is good and evil in the world: "The sudden pietism of Western politicians towards Islam, their discovery that Islam is a great world religion devoted to peace, are calculated to prove what Muslims know – the depth of both ignorance and prejudice against them and their faith" (Seabrook, 2001). Just as quickly as the Afghan war began, it ended without apprehending Bin Laden or Taliban leaders, while leaving the country in shambles; a spectacle war close on the heels of the 9-11 media spectacle. President Bush by then had moved his attention to yet another war, the real prize in Iraq, with ridiculous claims that Saddam Hussein had a hand in the 9-11 attacks. As all the US government double talk mounted, the American corporate media dutifully played along.

But perhaps there could have been no other response to the 9-11 attacks. After all, the world witnessed a horrific spectacle – replayed over and over from

multiple angles on the evening news – and the visceral images struck a chord with any one who had ever flown in a jetliner. In the face of such a spectacle, and as with all horrifying crimes, there is immense pressure to name the culprits and put law enforcement on the case, to take some sort of action immediately, even if only for the sake of public relations. Whatever the final outcome of any ensuing investigations, quickly putting a face to reprehensible acts serves first and foremost to help restore security, and the uglier and more distant the face, the better. However, this also served to distract attention away from political moves concurrent with the attacks, including the calls for quelling domestic dissent since the anti-globalization protests in Seattle, or the American bid for control of the largely undeveloped Caspian Sea energy reserves, or the CIA's interest in manipulating the lucrative Afghan opium traffic, or the contingencies for seizing Pakistan's nuclear weapons installations, or the seizure of Iraq's oil fields to destabilize OPEC, not to mention a renewal of America's waning Cold War-era "terrorism industry" after a few inopportune setbacks in the early 1990s. Real issues like these got sidelined by simplistic imagery of barbarous and backward Arabs and Muslims. The sly and sinister image of Bin Laden, whatever his culpability in 9-11, served that purpose well, as did the brutality of Saddam Hussein. They are the evil ones, we all know that, and now law enforcement and the US military are on the case so we can all feel safe once again. But how do all these really work? Why do people so readily evoke and accept simplistic images of Arab "terrorism" and Muslim "barbarity"? What circumstances can create such uniformity of thoughts? Who benefits from this usage of stereotypical imagery of Arabs and Muslims?

## Shadows of Oklahoma City

The sequence of events that followed 9-11 was not the first time in recent history that simplistic images of nasty Arabs and backwards Muslims seemed to overshadow reality. Closer examination of incidents over the past three decades reveals a pattern of behavior in the way Americans have related to the Arab and Muslim world. If, as anthropologists and psychologists have suggested, "patterns of behavior" constitute culture, then it is fair to say that American attitudes toward Arabs and Muslims are deeply ingrained in the American culture. While this American attitude toward Arabs and Muslims was evident in the public portrayal of the events stemming from 9-11, the pattern of behavior also brings to mind earlier incidents, in which Muslims were publicly framed as terrorists.

Immediately after a truck bomb blew up a federal office building in Oklahoma City in 1995, the American corporate media laid blame on “Islamic terrorists”. Commentators drew parallels to incidents of “Mideast terrorism,” citing this as “proof” that Muslims were responsible for the bombing. Live television programs with inflammatory logos like “Terror in the Heartland” occupied airtime on major networks the days following the blast. Speculations ran wild, with most pointing toward an international conspiracy of “Muslim terrorists” who were retaliating for one or another act of American aggression in the Muslim world, or acting out of pure fanaticism. Media pundits insisted that “radical Muslim extremists” intended to prove that Americans were no longer safe at home, and that “religious zealots” from the Muslim world were lashing out at hated American freedoms. Policy analysts and academic mercenaries used the incident as a platform to air their theories about how vulnerable the US was to attacks by “Muslim militants”. For example, the director of the House Republican Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare, Yossef Bodansky (an Israeli scholar with ties to the Mossad and well known for his conspiracy theories about a centrally controlled Islamic Holy War against the West), warned viewers that “we have a host of enemies that have vowed to strike at the heart of the Great Satan” and called upon law enforcement agencies to take preventative measures that amounted to severe curtailments of civil liberties. As one prominent terrorism investigator insisted: “we’ve got to know what’s going on in these fanatical terrorist groups.” Others called for increased governmental powers to collect intelligence on immigrants from Arab and Muslim countries (Reuters, 20 April 1995).

Politicians worked quickly to capitalize on the Oklahoma City attacks, recognizing its utility for pushing new anti-immigration laws and wiretap legislation through Congress. Republican Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole reminded President Clinton that the Senate was ready to pass the Omnibus Counterterrorism Act, which included provisions for enabling the use of “secret evidence” to jail and deport immigrants and other characters deemed suspicious or undesirable by authorities, and which allowed for the banning of fundraising by “suspected terrorist” organizations, while lessening or even eliminating restrictions for conducting phone taps (Reuters, 20 April 1995). House Judiciary Committee Chairman Henry Hyde emphasized that the US will now need to identify “potentially dangerous foreigners” and that “we should keep them from getting into the country in the first place,” while Florida congresswoman Ileana Ros

Lehtinen cried that “the radical Islamic movement has penetrated America and presents a real threat to our national security and serenity” (Reuters, 20 April 1995). Meanwhile, the INS announced that it was on the lookout for men of “Middle Eastern appearance”, having detained several “suspicious men” of “Middle Eastern origin”. The Pentagon detailed Arabic language interpreters to the FBI to help interrogate the suspects, and law enforcement agencies began to question Arab and Muslim citizens and groups (Associated Press and Reuters, 20 April 1995).<sup>3</sup> Though the American corporate news media had ignored repercussions of racial profiling, the independent Muslim press reported a series of hate crimes and bomb threats against Muslims (Crescent International, 1 May 1995).

All these political and police activities were set in motion from the moment of the blast. However, in the late afternoon of the second day, when composite sketches of two white males were released, some journalists began speculating about a possible “lone kook” or “disgruntled employee”. When a suspect with ties to the US military and the American militia movement was arrested, public attention shifted to the possibility of “domestic terrorism”. Suddenly, the cruel ironies of American domestic policies and problems mounted for Muslims: once it was announced that a man with ties to the militias had been arrested, emphasis shifted away from “Islamic terror”. Once a white Christian American veteran stood accused of the crime, news programs appeared with titles like “Tragedy in Oklahoma”. Once it was clear that there were no “Islamic extremists” to blame, the tone of public discourse softened remarkably, with less talk about “retaliation” and more about “forgiveness”. However, once the counterterrorism legislation was put in place under the momentum of the incident, it was quickly used against Muslims and Arabs. For example, a Palestinian activist in Florida was arrested soon after the legislation was passed, and he was subsequently detained for three years with “secret evidence”. After civil liberties lawyers challenged that and other cases, the 9-11 attack would reinvigorate the legislation.

The rush to blame Muslims for the events in Oklahoma came on the heels of a campaign the previous year to vilify American Muslims. In the fall of 1994, public television aired a spurious “documentary” by a little-known but well connected journalist named Steve Emerson. Provocatively titled “Jihad in America”, the program pursued a theme initially developed by a cadre of Israeli scholars working for the Clinton administration (Bodansky, 1993). Despite its

journalistic pretensions, evidence within the program suggested that Emerson was less than fair in his assessment. Much of the program consisted of interviews with Muslim activists, many of whom later complained that Emerson had set them up and quoted them out of context. The program also used news footage, sound bites from speeches at Muslim conferences, home videos confiscated from Muslims in FBI sweeps during the 1990-91 Oil War and in the wake of the 1993 World Trade Centre incident, and what appeared to be police surveillance videos, while some clips seemed to have been taken from staged amateur videos featuring mysterious and unidentifiable masked men. While Emerson piously recited a disclaimer stating that the “terrorists” he was profiling represented only a small percentage of the American Muslim community, he warned “moderate” Muslims in the US that they must work to police their own “extremists”. To bolster the point, he trotted out several “moderate” Muslims, who promptly denounced “extremism” and “terrorism”, and affirmed their patriotism. Building a career at the expense of Muslims, Emerson soon became a sought after “expert on terrorism”, although he was later discredited when his overly enthusiastic accusations pertaining to Oklahoma City alienated even the mainstream corporate media.

## A Pattern of Misrepresentation

The American corporate news media often rely on pre-existing images of supposed Muslim barbarity in order to strategically explain the need for military or police intervention, or to help the government save face when operations do not turn out as planned. For example, a 1994 news story about the disastrous American intervention in Somalia began with a reporter solemnly intoning “night falls in Mogadishu” over an eerie sounding Islamic call to prayer against the backdrop of a mosque silhouetted by a cloudy sky. The report segues to visceral images of destroyed American helicopters and corpses of American soldiers. The sound bite of the Muslim call to prayer forebodes death and terror, and it is the only Somali voice in the piece. Similarly, when the US Marines were escorting members of the UN out of Somalia in February 1995, ABC News televised a grainy and inaudible video of a supposed multiple amputation, featuring a man who allegedly had just been convicted of theft in a Muslim law court and sentenced under Islamic law. Such “news” reports are pure emotional imagery, seeming to say, with a sense of self-righteous justification: “look at

how the natives revert to their barbarity once we leave them,” lending an air of tragic inevitability to the American intervention.

Other recent incidents could be cited in which a similar array of politically charged images were pressed into service for strategic ends, but a major turning point in the American portrayal of Arabs and Muslims as terrorists emerged from the Persian Gulf Oil War in 1990-91. Although the United States supported Saddam Hussein in his brutal war against Iran throughout the 1980s, his strategic utility shifted in Bush the Father’s “New World Order”. The American government and corporate news media were able to quickly rally public support for that first senseless and destructive war against Iraq by portraying Saddam Hussein as a wicked dictator. Academic experts and journalists, who ignored Saddam when he served American strategic interests, cynically mimicked each other’s simplistic depictions of “bad” Arabs and Muslims, while promoting official public relations-fueled imagery of the “good” Muslims. US policy had to encompass Washington’s Arab allies, and so the Kuwaiti monarchy received a royal makeover with expensive American public relations painting a decidedly undemocratic regime as worthy of American military support in its struggle for “freedom” (Kellner 1992:68-70). Concurrent with the propaganda against and public relations on behalf of Arab and Muslim regimes, the American media aired a number of programs about Muslims in America, most of which juxtaposed two images: there was a “terrorist fringe” among American Muslims (the “bad Muslims”), but the “vast majority” of Muslims in the US are hard-working and eager to be assimilated (the “good Muslims”). Audiences were told that Islam was now the “fastest growing” religion in the US, while they were also being warned that Islamic “terror cells” were on the rise in the US, laying at the wait as a threat to the very core of American values and interests. These devices serve two purposes: they provide a scapegoat for American domestic and foreign policy problems, but they also serve as an intimidation for “good” Muslims to quickly assimilate into American society.

The above incidents were not the first time that Arabs and Muslims had been targeted in the United States. Government and law enforcement agencies had profiled Arabs and Muslims throughout the Reagan years, especially during the Iran-Iraq War and after the Palestinian uprising. In 1987, lawyers for the “Los Angeles Eight”, a group of Palestinian activists facing federal deportation charges, uncovered a contingency plan that recommended detaining thousands of Arabs

and Iranians at internment camps in Louisiana. At that time, the Immigration and Naturalization Service was pushing for legislation that would presage the anti-terrorism legislation passed a decade later, including provisions for using secret evidence against “alien terrorists and undesirables”, under which Muslims and Arabs had been identified as a national security threat (Hudson, 1988). Along with these policy moves, the Reagan era was also noteworthy for its spate of Hollywood films depicting a host of terrorists and other “reel bad Arabs” vanquished by Americans (Shaheen, 2001), neatly complementing the media and policy imagery.

After the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, which toppled the American-installed Shah, and the ensuing hostage crisis, American media consumers were introduced to what would become another persistent image in their menagerie of memorable Muslims: “The Ayatollah”. For most Americans, Iran represented nothing more than a distant and backward country that injured American national pride, a dark and dangerous place led by grim “mullahs”. But there has always been more to Iranian-American relations than can ever possibly be understood by way of storybook fairy tales of good and evil. One could cite the CIA sponsored coup against a popular Iranian republican government in the 1950s, or the horrific human rights record of the American-backed Shah’s brutal torture regime from the 1950s up until the 1979 revolution. Iran is another instance of complex and interrelated political and economic events being distilled down to simplistic, self-serving and easy to consume images: Iran is a bad place of crazy “Moslem” clerics headed by an evil “Ayatollah”, all of whom are sworn enemies of American “freedom”.

Long after the hostage crisis was resolved and Reagan was swept into office, this Iranian Muslim imagery remained in the waiting to be called upon should the current political circumstances require it. Despite Iran’s peacetime restructuring under the popularly elected President Khatami, its ongoing cooperation with the UN on refugees and drug trafficking, and its reconciliation with regional neighbors, the images of “The Ayatollah” and the “Iranian Threat” have been retained as useful icons for policy formulation long after Khomeini’s death. “Western diplomats and arms salesmen have regularly used the Iranian threat to justify the continuing presence of American troops in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other Gulf sheikdoms, as well as the purchase by Gulf states of billions of dollars’ worth of weapons” (Fisk, 2000). In 1996, Clinton’s re-election year, the US

Congress passed the “Iran and Libya Sanctions Act”, which became “a useful way to curry favor with pro-Israel lobby groups with influence on Capital Hill” (Jones, 2001:15). Clinton even announced an embargo on Iranian goods at a meeting with pro-Israel organizations. In this context, one organization “that has made an astoundingly good living from the ‘monster’ (Iran) is AIPAC, the Jewish lobby in Washington which today is linked with the Republican Party. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, and the Oslo agreement, Iran of the ayatollahs remains almost the only enemy around whom it is possible to unequivocally rally pro-Israeli Jews. Equipped with Republican refusal to forget the humiliation of the hostage crisis of the 1980s and provided with wall-to-wall Israeli support, AIPAC leads the massive anti-Iran battle in the United States in general and Congress in particular” (Sprinzak, 1998). More recently, AIPAC has been implicated in the August 2004 Pentagon spy scandal, in which an Israeli mole allegedly passed classified US documents on Iran to Israeli officials (Ibish, 2004). Though it is for the most part ignored by the American corporate media, the role of Israel and AIPAC in formulating images of the Islamic enemy deserves careful consideration.

## Islamic Imagery in American-Israeli Relations

Negative images of Arabs and Muslims in the 20th century are closely linked to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Prominent Arab American scholars like Edmund Ghareeb (1983), Jack Shaheen (1984) and Michael Suleiman (1988) have consistently found connections between stereotypical images of Arabs in American media culture since the establishment of Israel on the land of Palestine in 1948. These and other scholars have concluded that in order for the dispossession of Palestinians to be supported by ordinary Americans, it was necessary for Arabs to be written off as backward savages (who cannot understand that colonization is really in their own best interests) or violent terrorists (who deserve, by definition, to be exterminated). These scholars have documented the role of Hollywood and the news media in constructing and maintaining negative images of Arabs and how this imagery helps to justify the one-sided American support for Israel. From the 1950s through the 1970s, few people used the term “Muslim fundamentalist”, and Cold War concerns were the defining feature of US foreign policy. The Palestinian resistance was driven by Arab nationalist and leftist groups like the PLO and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, allied

with other leftist individuals and organizations, like Carlos “the Jackal”, the Red Army, or the Badermeinhoff. However, with the Islamic revolution in Iran and the acquiescence of Arab regimes to American or Israeli positions throughout the 1980s, there was a steady shift away from “Arab terror” and more toward “Islamic terror”, which coincided with the rise of Islamic resistance movements in Palestine and Lebanon. Although the brutal and ongoing Israeli occupation is still the central political problem in the Arab world, the “terrorists” are now defined as Muslims, the new “enemies of peace”.

The American understanding of the Palestine conflict is driven by an “enormous pro-Israel (and anti-Arab) bias of the mainstream media and intelligentsia”, which can be traced to several factors including Israel’s strategic value to the US during the Cold War, Western feelings of guilt toward Jews, and anti-Arab racism. In this context, anti-Arab racism is “mainly an effect and reflection of interest and policy rather than a causal factor... Arabs who cooperate with the West... are not subject to racist epithets and stereotypes. This suggests that if other Arabs were more tractable and responsive to Western demands they would cease to be negatively stereotyped. Scapegoating is a function of power and interest” (Edward Herman writing in *Z Magazine*, October 1994). The role of AIPAC and other pro-Israel lobbying groups in directing American foreign policy is an often-overlooked factor in studies of US international relations. As noted above, AIPAC is one of the most powerful of all the American lobbying groups, and it has strategically aligned itself with the shifting winds of political power in Washington.

A useful example is the Clinton-era AIPAC conference about the “Middle East Peace Process” held in Washington DC on 7 May 1995, which was aired live on the cable public television station CSPAN. The guests of honor included US President Bill Clinton, nearing the end of his first term in office, and Israeli prime minister and recent Nobel Peace Prize winner Yitzhak Rabin. In his speech, Rabin warned his audience that “extremist radical Islamic fundamentalists” are the real “enemies of peace” and that “Khomeinism without Khomeini is the greatest danger to stability, tranquility and peace in the Middle East and the world.” Rabin insisted that the “scourge of Khomeinism” had replaced the “scourge of communism”, and even as the Israelis “consolidate peace with Jordan”, the forces of “terror” are seeking to “destroy peace between peoples of our area”. Rabin called for the “free world”, which successfully mobilized

itself against communism, to now mobilize itself against “Khomeinism”. He concluded by stressing that “only a strong Israel can guarantee stability in the Mideast”, and that, therefore, American foreign aid “must remain a key pillar of the peace process”. Since the Camp David peace agreements in 1979, Israel and Egypt have each been receiving up to \$5 billion annually in foreign aid, not to mention private donations. While the Cold War provided the impetus for supporting American foreign aid to Israel as the “first line of defense” against the “communist threat”, it now appeared that the “Islamic threat” and the “Iranian monster” were being dutifully utilized for essentially the same purpose.

After Rabin left the podium to thundering applause, AIPAC president Steve Grossman introduced President Clinton, noting that Clinton had raised the “strategic partnership between the US and Israel to new levels”. Clinton began his speech by declaring that the American role in the “peace process” was to “minimize the risks taken for peace”. He then noted that Russia’s recent cooperation with Iran was a “prime concern” of the US because Iran seems to be “bent on building nuclear weapons”. Clinton’s rationale for preventing Iranian-Russian cooperation was that since Iran has “ample oil reserves” it therefore does not need nuclear technology to serve its energy needs. He also warned that while “Iran haunts the Mideast”, the US will seek to “contain Iran as the principle sponsor of terrorism in the world”, thanking Israel for “drawing our attention to Iran’s history of supporting terrorism”, adding that “Iran undermines the West and its values”.

Clinton continued by stating that American support for Israel was “absolute” and that all forms of assistance will be continued. He chastised the US Congress as “budget cutting back door isolationists” for feeble suggestions that the US reduce its foreign aid programs, emphasizing that the US “did not win the Cold War to blow the peace” on budgetary issues. But the brand of “peace” that Clinton was pushing is evident from the promises he made to his AIPAC audience. Clinton revealed that the once closed American space launcher vehicle market would now be opened to Israel, along with previously unavailable high-tech weaponry. He also noted that the US would escalate its pre-positioning of weaponry in Israel, and that it would buy \$3 billion worth of Israeli-made military products. Since the US already has the largest military-industrial complex in the world, buying weapons from Israel is a thinly disguised form of economic aid. As with other forms of aid, unwary American taxpayers foot the bill in the name

of “national security”. Clinton framed the need for all the sophisticated weaponry as a necessity, because “Israel is on the front line of the battle for freedom and peace”. Seeming to assume that AIPAC had influence over American public opinion, Clinton suggested that the group help to lobby the American people about budgetary matters. Clinton also assured his audience that the US would continue to support loan guarantees for the “settlement of 600,000 immigrants from the former Soviet Union”. The latter is perhaps the most inflammatory problem in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and one of the main causes of tension in the region, since many Jewish settlers are given inducements (and military training) by the Israeli government to settle in the illegally occupied territories in and around Palestinian towns, where they routinely terrorize the indigenous population. However, in the American media view of the Palestine conflict, when people who live under a brutal occupation resist further Zionist colonization, they do so because they are inherently “terrorists”, not because of any machinations of state power. Israeli military aggression defines the public understanding of terrorism, and Arabs and Muslims are portrayed as “terrorists” according to economic, military and political necessities.

## The March of the Orientalists

As one of the first scholars to systematically analyze the implicit connections between Western colonization and its imagery of the Muslim world, Edward Said found, among other things, that academic knowledge of “the Orient” was necessary to maintain colonial power. According to Said, traditional Orientalism proceeds from several central dogmas:

...absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior... abstractions about the Orient, particularly those based on texts representing a ‘classical’ Oriental civilization, are always preferable to direct evidence drawn from modern Oriental realities... the Orient is eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself; therefore it is assumed that a highly generalized and systematic vocabulary for describing the Orient from a Western standpoint is inevitable, and even scientifically “objective”... the Orient is at bottom something either to be feared

(the Yellow Peril, the Mongol hordes, the brown dominions) or to be controlled (by pacification, research and development, outright occupation whenever possible). (Said, 1979:300-301)

Building upon the 19<sup>th</sup> century foundations of traditional Orientalism, a new type of Orientalist emerged out of strategic Cold War concerns and the American national security state. By characteristically fusing the dogmas of traditional Orientalism with a post-World War II social science oriented toward social control, Western academics put the new discourse of Orientalism at the service of foreign policy makers who emphasized strategic prediction and control in a Cold War context. Images of Muslim terrorists have taken their place as a strategic asset in this American academic culture, with a recent wave of policy-oriented literature painting an imposing picture of Islam as an opposing force of the West. This is part of a larger genre of strategic literature of the sort that celebrates the triumph of liberalism and the “end of history” (Fukuyama, 1992), or which portends a “clash of civilizations” (Huntington, 1993), or which posits a global battle between consumerism and tribalism (Barber, 1995), and which includes various other permutations of the “linearity myth” (Beck, 2000). Such academic works, which often oppose Islam as “the Other” vis-a-vis the West, “continue to perceive persisting conflict in the world as a by-product of one single catchy and overarching thought”, contributing to a series of “monolithic, deterministic, black-and-white typologies” (Khalaf 2001:25).

Among the strategic imperatives providing fertile ground for self-serving oppositional imagery of Arabs and Muslims, one could cite the official American support for Israel after President Truman first recognized the Jewish state in 1948. The Zionist slogan of “a land without people for a people without land” tragically complemented an earlier romantic American cultural assumption about Arabs as wandering nomadic peoples riding camels in a desert wasteland. But as both the urban and rural based Palestinian resistance to Zionism gained international support, they soon become “terrorists” and “guerillas”, and this remains the prism through which they are viewed in many academic circles, particularly those beholden to the Zionist cause. A good example of this genre is the immensely popular work *The Arab Mind*, written by the Arabist and scholar of Zionism Raphael Patai, and which has recently gained some notoriety when it was revealed to be “required reading” in President Bush’s policy and military

establishment as a way to understand Iraqi behavior. Patai's title harkens back to a remark by the infamous Orientalist adventurer Lawrence of Arabia: "The Arab mind is strange and dark, full of depressions and exaltations, lacking in rule" (cited in Kabbani 1994:110). In his "Arab mind", Patai takes a rejectionist stance on Palestinian national sovereignty and expounds upon the old Zionist mythology of "a land without people" to justify the Israeli occupation (Patai, 1983:151). He bolsters his case by citing the spurious authority of another Zionist tirade, Joan Peters' notorious *From Time Immemorial*, which claims that Palestinians only migrated to Israel in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century to share in the modern Western prosperity brought by the Zionist colonizers. Although this thesis has been revealed as a fraud by several scholars (Finkelstein, 1988:33-70), it remains a key tenet for the defamation of Arabs in the name of supporting the Zionist state. In fact, upon a closer examination of *The Arab Mind*, although it pretends toward universality, the majority of Patai's interpersonal and fieldwork experiences with Arabs are actually with Palestinians, though the only time he really uses the word Palestinian is when he refers to them as "guerillas" and "commandos" (Patai, 1983:221, 237, 336, 343).

While his work has several precursors in the Orientalist and national character study academic corpus, Patai seems to be writing in an oppositional academic tradition that emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when European Jewish Orientalists used the Arab Muslim world "as a proxy in working out their own dilemmas vis-a-vis Christianity; Islam could be treated as an alternative Western tradition, one close to Judaism, but differing in not being constrained by minority status in a Christian environment" (Marcus and Fischer 1986:175). This may explain some of Patai's work and that of other contemporary Zionist and Jewish scholars of Islam, but there is also a more blatant political dimension to Patai's discourse, which resembles the work of contemporary American Arabists, "who divide the world in Manichaeic pro-Zionist versus pro-Arab factions" (Marcus and Fischer, 1986:175). *The Arab Mind* is fairly representative of the kind of reductionist academic discourse produced during the peak of the Arab-Israeli conflict, especially the period from the 1967 Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, Sinai, Golan and Jerusalem, to the 1982 invasion of Lebanon. In his 1983 postscript, Patai cites these and other conflicts in the region as his "proof" of the aggression inherent in the "Arab personality". Yet, he completely ignores the most brutal episode of the period, the destructive 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, led by then-Defense Minister Ariel Sharon and intended to root out

Palestinian “terrorists”, but which ended with Beirut in rubble and 20,000 dead Lebanese, in addition to at least 2,000 Palestinians (mostly women and children) cruelly massacred in refugee camps around the city (Jansen, 1982; Ang, 1989).

Patai’s work has found a new audience among American policy officials and military officers eager to understand the new Arab enemy in Iraq. The ongoing American prisoner torture scandal has highlighted this little known aspect of American policy toward the Arab world. It has recently come to light that *The Arab Mind* is required reading within Washington policy circles, especially among the influential “neo-cons” in the Defense Department, as well as the American military. A posthumous edition of the book has been promoted by the American publishing industry as “one of the great classics of cultural studies” and described as “an impressive spread of scholarship”. Patai himself had reached the heights of prestige in American academia, with professorial positions at several much-vaunted “ivy league” universities, including Princeton and Columbia. According to journalist Seymour Hersh (2004), whose *New Yorker* article exposed the depths of depravity in the US torture scandal, *The Arab Mind* is “the bible of the neo-cons on Arab behavior”. A professor at an American military college has said that *The Arab Mind* is “probably the single most popular and widely read book on the Arabs in the US military”, and a former US army colonel, who wrote an introduction to the 2002 edition, added that it is “essential reading” at the military institution where he teaches.

Among other things, *The Arab Mind* depicts Arabs as lazy and sex-obsessed. Two quotes give an indication of Patai’s perspective. On Arabs being lazy, he asked, “Why are Arabs, unless forced by dire necessity to earn their livelihood with ‘the sweat of their brow,’ so loathe to undertake any work that dirties the hands?” And on sexuality, Patai opined: “The all-encompassing preoccupation with sex in the Arab mind emerges clearly in two manifestations. In the Arab view of human nature, no person is supposed to be able to maintain incessant, uninterrupted control over himself. Any event that is outside routine everyday occurrence can trigger such a loss of control. Once aroused, Arab hostility will vent itself indiscriminately on all outsiders.” Such statements have led some observers to see the book as shaping the degrading forms of torture used by the Americans in Iraq. But beyond its specific connection to the American military torture scandal, *The Arab Mind* is instructive for two general reasons. First, it demonstrates to what lengths the American military and policy establishment

will go to justify its brutalities against Arabs, and, most importantly, it raises serious questions about the credibility of American “scholarship”.

It seems amazing that such a dated work can be revived to serve the needs of a new crisis, because even by Patai’s narrow standards things were destined to change from the days of the “terrorists” he described in the 1970s and 1980s. After OPEC oil money began fueling expensive public relations and political action in support of American policy goals for its Arab allies in the 1990-91 Gulf War, and after Yasser Arafat signed a peace agreement with Israel in 1993, the emphasis in academic as well as official circles has steadily shifted away from Arabs and more toward Muslims as adversaries. Orientalist academic works like those of Patai can be easily reconfigured into the new framework, with the old Arab enemy disappearing down the memory hole, replaced by the dreaded Muslim terrorist, equally irrational and equally the direct object of abject Western hatred.

## The Emergence of the “Islamic Threat”

As noted above, the United States supported Israel in part due to its role as a strategic ally during the Cold War. Although the Cold War has recently ceased to be the primary American policy concern, many of the relationships framed during the Cold War era remain as distinctive features of American foreign policy. Even though the conflicts in Yugoslavia and Iraq did have vestiges of Cold War policy, in that they were intended to dismantle even nominally socialist states,<sup>4</sup> Communism as an ideology seems to have subsided as an opposing mirror of the American self-image. It has therefore become necessary to locate another equally reprehensible oppositional force for the West’s self-proclaimed “new world order”. In the early 1990s, the resulting demonization of Arab and Muslim figures like Saddam and Qaddafi suggests that there was an attempt to resurrect old but stubborn Crusader images of the Islamic world (Salman, 1991). However, a few academics have problematized the new “Islamic threat” (Esposito, 1992), warning Western academics to avoid polarizing the world into simplistic “us and them” dichotomies. Despite this, the dominant voices in the “new world order” proclaimed by Bush the Father seemed to be those like Harvard Cold War theorist Samuel Huntington, who put forth his infamous thesis of an impending “clash of civilizations” (1993). Huntington, writing in *Foreign Affairs*,

the influential journal of the Council on Foreign Relations, which has a vested interest in maintaining American political hegemony, warned the Western ruling elite to be on its guard against a potential Confucian/Islamic bloc replacing the Soviet bloc as a new enemy for the new millennium. In the same year, NATO, another Cold War artifact in search of a new purpose in the post-Cold War world, published a report outlining emerging challenges for the new world order. NATO cited “Islamic fundamentalism” as the next plausible threat to Western interests in the world. Predictably, NATO concluded by recommending that Western forces remain at the ready for future conflicts involving the Islamic world, such as with Iran, Iraq, Libya and Sudan, but especially involving Muslim “terrorists” that could threaten loyal Western allies, such as the oil producing Arab regimes. Still another policy report, penned by Israeli scholar Yossef Bodansky for the Clinton administration, warned that “rogue states” like Iran were gaining a foothold in Europe and America by way of Muslim minorities and immigrants, a fateful association that fueled “ethnic cleansing” against Bosnians and Albanians throughout the 1990s.

Despite the chorus of support, a few scholars continued to challenge the Western siege mentality carried over from the Cold War, pointing out the geopolitics at work and noting that “the distance separating [Huntington’s] view from a policy of intervention in support of corrupt regimes threatened by fundamentalist Islamic movements was dangerously narrow” (Bello, 1994:109). Bello suggested that, despite what he sees as some drawbacks, “Islamic fundamentalism also represented a revolt against the materialism associated with Western culture, against the domination of transnational capital, and, in countries like Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco, against the miseries imposed by IMF-World Bank structural adjustment programs” (Bello, 1994:109). Many policy makers, while not falling into the trap of absolute “us/them” polarities, have nevertheless ignored Bello’s observations and insist instead upon positioning Muslims largely in terms of Western political and economic strategic needs. It is, of course, also possible to see Huntington’s clash as being more about contested spheres of influence in the post-Cold War world, and what to do with the stubborn holdouts to the American sphere of influence, among which are Islamic states like Iran and Sudan, but also including Cuba and North Korea. In any case, as Hippler and Lueg (1995) suggest, simplistic imagery as reflected in the recent policy reports of Western governments and academic institutions can be used to explain the need for bloated post-Cold War military budgets and interventions in the Islamic

world, rediscovering an old enemy with deep roots in the Western imagination, lying dormant during the half-century Cold War, only to emerge once again with a vengeance.

Academics working for American intelligence agencies have also developed positions on foreign policy toward Muslims, and these too reflect signs of the times, with a bit more academic nuance. For example, CIA analyst and RAND Corporation political scientist, Graham Fuller, warned in 1995 that there need not be a “clash of civilizations” between Islam and the West on the horizon (Fuller, 1995), but that Islamic “radicals” are the new threat. Consistent with many other contemporary policy pundits, Fuller sees Islamic radicals as posing much more of a threat to Western client states in the Arab and Muslim world than to the West. His solution, repeated in many of his works, is to politely co-opt the more modernist Muslim activists and political movements into West-directed political processes, and help them to get a bigger piece of American-style progress and prosperity, while eliminating “radicals” and “terrorists”. He believes that economic development is the best way to achieve this, and that support for client regimes in the region can help in this overall mission. Fuller exemplifies the discourse of many policy pundits, in that the oppositional racist imagery found among the Zionist and Cold War theorists is largely absent. But while policy pundits often talk in terms of cooperation and collaboration, their discourse is still wedded to Western, and especially American, policy interests.

Fuller has worked for the RAND Corporation, an influential US foreign policy think tank that conducts research under contract from the US government, including the Department of Defense, and which makes recommendations on a number of issues that are considered to be of importance to US interests in the world at any given time. RAND was one of the main policy institutes advising the US government throughout the Cold War, especially during the tragic Vietnam era, and it has been a main driving force of US policy toward Cuba and other holdouts to the American order. Fuller’s 1991 RAND policy report on “Islamic fundamentalism” consistently emphasized several themes, two of which can be summarized as follows: electoral and party politics are a useful “instrument” to diffuse Islamic opposition movements, and can help to “deradicalize” them, while militant Islamic activists can be constructively redirected toward countering the left and other political opposition movements (Fuller, 1991:21). Fuller reminds his readers that “Islamic fundamentalists” have been used successfully

to combat Communism in places like Afghanistan, where the US armed and advised Afghan “freedom fighters” against the Soviets. After the collapse of the USSR, the Americans supported Afghan factions, and especially the Taliban throughout the 1990s. It was only when the Arab fighters hosted by the Taliban began to make America’s OPEC client states like Saudi Arabia nervous in the late 1990s, coupled with the Taliban’s reluctance to hand control over the Caspian Sea energy resource development to the US, that the “freedom fighters” in Afghanistan became “terrorists”. The Bush administration’s War on Terror is a complete reversal of American policy toward Afghanistan, an illustration of the shifting utility of imagery.

It had in fact become faddish throughout the 1990s for academics to explain “terrorism” as retaliation against US policies in the Muslim world, and while Fuller admits that the US has engaged in a few “indiscretions” in the past in order to expedite its Cold War goals, he feels that recent criticisms by Muslims about US policy and interests are unfounded. To Fuller, Muslims are strangely irrational for not wanting to accept “modernism”, and they merely have “resentments” toward US wealth, power and influence in the world. He suggests that any Islamic opposition which questions these truths must be suffering from some kind of mass “paranoia”, fed by illusions in the “popular mind” (Fuller, 1991:27). Throughout Fuller’s work, there are examples of his subtle use of policy jargon, which only further highlights his categorization of acceptable and unacceptable Muslim behavior. For example, he suggests that Islamic beliefs sometimes “impinge” upon politics, while secular education is “making inroads” into Islamic societies (Fuller, 1991:13). Regarding the latter issue, Fuller has only praise for “secular” Turkey under the Kemalist generals and especially for its founder, “the great secularizer and Westernizer, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk” (Fuller, 1991:7). However, like many other US policy pundits who see Turkey as a model modern Muslim state, Fuller refers to gross human rights abuses against Kurds as “a relatively minor ethnic problem” (Fuller, 1991:6). In the conclusion of his RAND report on Islamic fundamentalism, Fuller ventured a few long-term recommendations for US foreign policy. In addition to maintaining the status quo as much as possible – known as “stability” in political science doubletalk – Fuller made two specific recommendations, and mentions that both may help “improve the US image in the Muslim world” (Fuller, 1991:42). First, after noting that Muslims “perceive” the US as favoring Israel in the Middle East, Fuller suggests making a “motion toward a settlement” of the conflict over

Palestine. He stresses that “while close US ties with Israel will always be a reality”, making a motion toward settlement “will go a long way toward reducing the importance of this issue in US-Muslim state ties” (Fuller, 1991:42). President Clinton heeded this directive by widely publicizing the Arafat-Rabin handshake in 1993, the results of which amounted to little more than a “motion”, doing virtually nothing in terms of providing a just settlement in Palestine, or in alleviating the suffering of most Palestinians under occupation. However, almost immediately after the 1993 “motion”, there were open meetings between Israeli officials and those of several US client states, including Indonesia, Oman and Qatar. In this context, it is interesting to note how Yasser Arafat was reworked from “terrorist” to “statesman”, though he had not been able to fully shake off his former appellation, since being a “statesman” in the American vision of leadership seemed contingent upon him terrorizing Islamic activists of the Palestinian uprising.

In addition to empty public relations in support of Palestine, Fuller suggested as a policy goal that the US make an effort to portray itself abroad as a place where “Islam is an important religion, practiced by a growing American Muslim population”. In order to do this, he recommended “media coverage of the observance of Islamic holy days and celebrations in America”, which would “play well abroad where there is a deep fascination for Islam as practiced outside the traditional Islamic world” (Fuller, 1991:42). This, too, was soon put into practice with help from the Saudis, when CNN produced several programs about Ramadan in America, thus implementing a policy intended to ease Muslim distrust toward the US New World Order and diffuse dissent toward allies and client states who depend on that order for their survival. That policy directive has only increased in recent years, with vast sums of money still being spent by the US government to establish propaganda outlets in the Muslim world. Fuller also stressed that the “American Muslim community itself must develop greater self-awareness as a community to help gain greater prominence among the public and in the media” and that the “political expression of Islam... does not at all have to assume extremist or anti-US form” (Fuller, 1991:42). It is noteworthy that at about the same time that Fuller made these policy recommendations, an organization called the American Muslim Council suddenly appeared in Washington, complete with a staff, offices, publications and funding. Its first order of business was to build Muslim support for the US war against Iraq. Similar organizations subsequently worked to channel Muslim political activities

into areas that were subservient to US policy goals, and eventually Muslim political support for the Republican Party in the 2000 elections helped bring President Bush to power. These early initiatives did begin to provide some autonomy for American Muslim political activism in the mid to late 1990s, although this has been severely curtailed in the wake of 9-11, after which many of the same organizations have been accused of “supporting terrorism”. At the same time, Muslim organizations and prominent activists have begun ostracizing dissenters in their own communities, who have now become “terrorists”, and such “terrorists” have become a counterweight to American Muslim political activism.

In the strategic scheme offered by Fuller and other academics, it is perfectly welcome for Muslims to appear on American television and talk about Ramadan or assert their patriotism – in fact, this is a welcome contribution to US propaganda abroad. It is quite acceptable for Muslims to have an occasional political event, such as the 1993 Bosnia rally in Washington – in fact, begging for US government intervention serves to bolster its image of power. It is especially desirable for Muslims to join the Republican party, form political action committees, and vote in American national elections – in fact, this helps to corral Muslim public opinion within the limited framework of US party politics. However, it is definitely not desirable, acceptable or even welcome for any Muslim at any time to question any US policy and interests in any way. If any Muslims dare to do this, they will quickly be labeled as “extremists” and “terrorists”, and then be dealt with accordingly. Besides the usual ways of dealing with such “extremists” and “terrorists”, including propaganda, embargoes, sanctions, imprisonment, deportation, assassinations, or military and police action, a strategy has taken shape that divides the Muslim world so that it polices itself according to the dictates of the US government, through its surrogates and proxies. At the same time, the new Muslim enemy remains necessary for maintaining American strategic interests in a “new world order” that seems to be driven by the same old oppositional attitudes and interests, which have been evident throughout modernity.

## The Precarious Need for Nefarious Characters

One of the ways to understand the ascendancy of terrorism in Western policy formulation is to look at how the term has evolved and been applied according

to self-serving double standards. Most wars and conflicts of the Cold War era were in many ways colonial wars of the “state-versus-nation” variety (Nietschmann, 1987), and in many cases states defined the nations that they are trying to subdue as “terrorists” or “extremists”. Those states, which are often clients of larger states like the US, are also generally supported by the mainstream Western corporate news media. In this context, a term like “terrorist” is polemical and rhetorical. Part of American power in the world during this period has been based on its insistence to define the terms used to describe peace and conflict. Therefore, “terrorist” has no clear or agreed upon definition outside post-colonial power struggles, because it is most frequently used in a one-way monologue to describe those who struggle against state power, or who are resisting the emerging transnational world order headed by the US and Europe. One could add to this vocabulary of power the term “fundamentalist”, which came into vogue after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, or the French use of “integriste” (for Mideast and North African struggles) or the Indonesian use of “fanatico” (for Acheh Sumatra and East Timor struggles). In many cases, the nations struggling against state power are indigenous peoples – Native Americans, Arab Palestinians, Black South Africans, Chiapas Indians – who have been displaced by Western and other state-sponsored invaders and their surrogates. In this context, an important struggle of colonized and oppressed nations in the world today involves gaining control of normative definitions (Wilmer, 1993), since powerful states and their media cheerleaders have insisted on restricting the normative definitions that are officially and publicly used to explain their actions. State terminology defines most conflicts today, and this terminology obscures the struggles of oppressed nations. Conversely, states define their own wholesale terrorism as a legitimate response to retail “terrorists”, who are most often portrayed as acting out of some kind of irrational nationalist, religious, socialist or tribal fanaticism. The best recent case of this tendency is in the Israeli insistence to dismiss all legitimate Palestinian and Lebanese national resistance as mindless acts of terrorism, which also serves to dehumanize Arabs and Muslims and thus making it easier to exterminate them when the necessity arises.

There are precedents for this behavior in Western colonial history. For example, when Mexicans resisted American expansionist policies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they were labeled “bandits”. Texans had a policy to shoot on sight any “bandits”, and sometimes marched as far as Mexico City to root out Mexican “banditry”. This “war against banditry” was accompanied by a systematic process of land enclosure

and depopulation, followed by mass ranch ownership for American rangers, who within a few years had confiscated over a million acres of Mexican territory. “Banditry” continued to serve this purpose well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when it was used as a general term for anyone who stands up to American hegemony. Eventually, “bandits” were relegated to the realm of American popular culture, only to be replaced by “terrorists”. Since then, “terrorist”, like “bandit”, came to designate “an enemy of the Western establishment, somebody who stands in the way of realization of American aims” (Herman and O’Sullivan, 1989:6). Similarly, when the US was involved with military action against Haiti in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, American newspapers featured stories about barbarous Haitians, drawing upon a previously constructed repertoire of images and tales of “cannibalism” and “voodoo”. Similar rhetorical flourishes could be unearthed in describing actions against Native American and East Asian victims of America’s long colonial march Westward (Drinnon, 1990) or during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the British used a myth of Arab “piracy” to justify their colonial domination of the Persian Gulf (Al-Qasimi, 1986).

During the Cold War, “terrorists” were most often associated with leftist nationalist movements, with the main sponsor of “terrorism” being the Soviet Union. In pursuing its Cold War aims, American policy pundits developed a “culture of terrorism” (Chomsky, 1988) supported by a “terrorism industry” (Herman and O’Sullivan, 1989), the main features of which were to defame and then defeat any and all obstacles to American policy at any given time. State terrorism, such as that practiced by South Africa, Israel or various Central American regimes, were exempt from this nomenclature. If America’s allies in such places can be portrayed as “combating terrorism”, then “any civilians they kill are easily written off as terrorists, terrorist supporters, or regrettable victims of an obviously necessary effort to counter terrorists” (Herman and O’Sullivan 1989:23). As South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu once lamented, “We have wondered why it was that Dr. Savimbi’s Unita in Angola and the Contras in Nicaragua were ‘freedom fighters,’ lionized especially by President Reagan’s White House and the conservative right wing of the United States of America, whereas our liberation movements such as the African National Congress and the Pan-African Congress were invariably castigated as ‘terrorist movements’” (Herman and O’Sullivan, 1989). In fact, Ronald Reagan himself had declared a “war on terrorism” during his 1980-88 tenure in the White House. Despite the demise of the Soviet Union, which Reagan had labeled as an “evil empire”, preceding

President Bush's arch enemy the "axis of evil", the term "terrorist" has continued to be utilized in formulating normative descriptions of anyone who gets in the way of American aims at any given time. Today's "terrorists" are the Muslims.

As we have seen, modern Western cultural history is infused and firmly intertwined with a shifting array of images of Islam and Muslims, and these images can be called upon as needed to explain, justify or simplify all sorts of complex political, social and economic problems, whether they be international or domestic. As Western civilization encountered Islam, a tradition of portraying the Islamic religion and Muslim cultures in largely negative and self-serving ways developed. Looking at the cultural history of Islamic-Western encounters from the perspective of the utility of these images helps to locate a correlation between knowledge and power. Journalists, entertainers, politicians and academics all conceptualize for American citizen-consumers an array of images featuring Arabs and/or Muslims in sometimes amusing and other times cruel or tragic ways. These images tend to perform real conceptual work, while also serving essential purposes throughout the history of the modern West. At times these purposes seem benign, at others quite sinister; most often, there are tragic consequences for Muslims resulting from the socio-political climate fostered by the American dependency on Islamic imagery.

The utilization and perpetuation of negative images of Arabs and Muslims, which have been frequently documented (Daniel, 1961; Said, 1979; Djait, 1985; Hentsch, 1992) has deep roots in the Western colonial drive. As Edward Said puts it: "knowledge of Islam and of Islamic peoples has generally proceeded not only from dominance and confrontation but also from cultural antipathy. Today Islam is defined negatively as that with which the West is radically at odds, and this tension establishes a framework radically limiting knowledge of Islam. So long as this framework stands, Islam, as a vitally lived experience for Muslims, cannot be known" (Said, 1981:155). Norman Daniel identified a two-sided image of "luxury and bellicosity" that Medieval Western Europeans had formulated toward Islam and Muslims, which soon got intertwined with "ignorance and malice" in Western civilization (Daniel, 1961). In considering how images of Islam persist, Daniel suggests that in some cases the reason is ignorance, and in others it is malice. To extrapolate from this, ignorance and malice can work together, as in, for example, when a malicious campaign directed by state power toward a scapegoat is explained by using images that rely on the general ignorance

of the state's subjects and constituents. This is an important factor in the creation and utilization of imagery in policy formulation. Since imagery also acts as a shorthand to explaining complex events, the "persistence of cultural myths is a sad testimony to the inertia of thinking, the tenacious grasp of our minds on facile generalizations and stereotypes that enable us to categorize human beings and realities cleansed of their complexity and individuality, and pigeonholed in clearly labeled boxes of collective identity" (Zhang, 1998:98). Most critics generally agree that pursuits of knowledge in such settings are inextricably tied to state power, and that as a result of this knowledge/power nexus the West's own self-image has been cultivated in a binary relationship with Islamic and other civilizations, thus making "terrorists" and other nefarious characters necessary for self-identification.

Western images of the Muslim world are often projections of insecurities about the Self onto the Other, and they become entrenched as self-telling myths, which in turn perform conceptual work for the colonizers in search of self-justification. As Rania Kabbani suggested: "the West had to reshape the Orient in order to comprehend it; there was a sustained effort to devise in order to rule" (Kabbani, 1994:138). Many of these devised myths were born of the Crusades and further bolstered during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they were adopted by Western scholars attempting to explain contemporary realities. The Muslim world has been a self-reflecting mirror for Western civilization, in which the West continues to define and re-define itself by constructing and remaking an Other that is everything the West is not. The West's myth of the Orient will continue to serve its explanatory functions throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century, unless the legacy of oppositional identity construction is faced. One way to escape this legacy is to "continually question the testimony we have inherited, be it from the soldier, the scholar or the traveler. In questioning those notions that are supposed to prove how different we are as peoples, perhaps we may, with sympathy and effort, arrive at an understanding of how similar we are as humans in an increasingly complex world" (Kabbani, 1994:139). Because the Muslim world is an "immense repository of our own imagined world", it has become necessary that "we reveal ourselves through our way of seeing" (Hentsch, 1992:ix), and in this framework a supposed pathology like ethnocentrism is, ironically, "not a flaw to be simply set aside, nor is it a sin to be expunged through repentance. It is the precondition of our vision of the Other. Far from offering us absolution, this precondition compels us constantly to return to our

point of departure, if only to grasp the internal and external imperatives which shape our curiosity about the Other” (Hentsch, 1992:xiv). In other words, “any study of the Other is futile unless we first observe ourselves face to face with it, and in particular, unless we attempt to understand how, and why, we have studied and represented this self-same Other down to the present day” (Hentsch, 1992).

There are several consequences of this ongoing relationship between imagery and policy. The conventional American media and academic discourse, of both the left and right variety, has for the most part characterized Islamic resistant movements as intolerant and predisposed toward violence, without explaining any of the history or context for these movements. Some contemporary Islamic movements do have strong anti-Western and anti-modern sentiments, but this is often qualified and in any case is a fairly recent phenomenon that may more accurately be termed as a postmodernist movement (Hardt and Negri, 2000:148-150). If Arabs and Muslims are extremists in anything, a case can be made that it is in the extreme patience they have shown toward persistent Western interventions until very recently. Seen from within, Islamic movements have much more important characteristics than intolerance and violence. A central concept is social justice. In the West, where it is fashionable to be anti-social under the pretense that socialism is obsolete, it is easy to overlook calls for social justice and fixate instead on instances of violent struggle. But seeing social movements only in terms of violence, real or imagined, is seeing them only in those terms that are important to a narrow set of strategic and policy interests. This might be understandable for Americans who may be unaware of global complexities, or who adhere to various patterns of behavior such as those described above, but in such a climate, to be a Muslim – moderate, extreme or whatever label one chooses – has become politicized. On the contemporary scene today, Muslims cannot be apolitical; they can only be unaware of how their identity has become politicized. Until this is accepted and until it informs public relations, academic endeavors, media productions and other encounters with the West and its various institutions, or any efforts to detach Muslims from old forms of colonialism may turn out to be temporary and even irrelevant distractions from larger issues looming on the horizon.

One such issue is the ongoing decline of the United States and what might be called the new realization that what some feel is an emerging American empire

is more or less an illusion. American civilization has become unsure of itself in the wake of 9-11, and it is currently in the process of redesigning its own image and purpose, which in part involves a growing rift between America and Europe and an increasingly reliance on “micro-militarism” (Todd, 2002). To the extent that Islam is oppositionally intertwined with the Western self-image, the West also has to redesign Islam to suit its evolving Self, and this has been happening in part by way of shifting images. While the Americans have risen to this task, European responses have become more tentative, with the focus being more on creating a European Union independent of American power. But as long as the Other is a mirror for the Self, there will always be conflict. This has become evident in the recent usage of Islamic imagery to frame global conflicts, which is built upon not only centuries of oppositional imagery in general but more recently upon very carefully constructed images born of Israeli insecurity. Since the West still has the power to define images, and thus maintain its own power, those who do not have their images in the mix, who do not control how they are publicly represented, are in some sense left powerless. More importantly, the West, with the American media setting the pace, stubbornly clings to an image database of Muslims for its utility in defining policy. In this context, “terrorists” are needed in a number of ways: to provide an “evil other” against which to oppose one’s own good self; to wait in the wings and intimidate citizen-consumers into all sorts of security schemes to “protect freedom”; to hit the city streets and storm rural villages in the service of state power, at which time they may become “police” or even “freedom fighters”; and, to provide an inexhaustible stream of villains and “bad guys” as foils for the impoverished entertainment industries. Above all, terrorists are needed to keep out-of-work Cold-warriors in their jobs, and reinvigorate the national security state with its various terrorism industries, not to mention distracting citizen-consumers away from complex real world problems that impact everyone, such as economic recession and environmental degradation. In order to effectively address their serious domestic and international problems, Americans will have to examine themselves and how they have related to other peoples and cultures, and take an honest look at the ways in which their own self-proclaimed global leadership has become dependent on Islamic imagery.

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## Endnotes

- 1 These and several other alternative news stories were archived online by the Media Monitors Network at [www.mediamonitors.net](http://www.mediamonitors.net).
- 2 For a fully documented account of the media fray, see the November/December 2001 issue of *Extra*, the journal of the New York-based media watchdog group, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting.
- 3 For a fuller account, see the July/August 1995 issue of *Extra* from Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting.
- 4 Cuba, North Korea and Iran fit this profile as well.

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# Right, Left & Wrong: A Comparison of East and West Coverage of Islam

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*Sunni M. Khalid*

**Abstract:** *This paper is intended to be a brief comparison of some of the Western and non-Western media coverage of Islamic movements, Muslim countries and individual Muslims, with particular emphasis on the post 9-11 era. This is a broad subject, which I hope to bring some justice to. I come at this subject from a rather unique perspective, personally and professionally. Firstly, I am a practicing Muslim. I took my shahada at a mosque outside my hometown, Detroit, Michigan, nearly 30 years ago. I am an Orthodox Muslim, as some of you may have guessed from my first name. I am also an African-American Muslim, but I am not now, nor have I ever been, a member of the so-called Nation of Islam.*

The Detroit area is the home of the largest number of Muslims of all nationalities, as well as Arabs, in the United States. In addition, one of the first mosques in the United States was established by Arab-Muslim immigrant auto-workers in my hometown of Highland Park, Michigan in 1913.

Around the time of my conversion, I began my undergraduate studies in journalism at Howard University in Washington, D.C. My career goal was to become a foreign correspondent with a major U.S. newspaper, like *The Washington Post* or *The New*

*York Times*. I really liked the *Times*' slogan, "all the news that's fit to print". These were the mainstream print media's papers of record. They carried not only national influence but also international prestige. This was in the era before the Internet, during the infancy of cable television, where a 500 channel universe had not been dreamt of, before high-tech had not leveled the playing field.

After about 10 years of paying my dues at various mainstream newspapers, up and down the East Coast, I finally got my break, but in another medium – radio. I returned to Washington to report on foreign affairs for public radio, specializing on sub-Saharan Africa, but also being called upon to report on Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia and the Middle East.

A few years later, in fact, exactly 10 years ago, I was assigned to open a bureau in Cairo, Egypt – the first permanent bureau for public radio in the Arab and Muslim world, with, of course, the rather obvious exception of Israel. I was the first African-American to be given such a promotion by my company. In addition, I also became the first African-American Muslim to be given such an assignment by a major, mainstream U.S. media organization. I held this post for three years, during which time I reported on Islamist movements in Egypt and throughout the region. I interviewed members of Egypt's officially-banned Muslim Brotherhood, as well as top officials of Lebanon's Hizbollah and leaders of Hamas in Gaza and the West Bank.

A few years later, I accepted a position as the news editor of the Washington-area office of Islam Online, a website headquartered in Doha, Qatar. I spent about six months there, before I resigned to take on a job as an assistant television producer with "Africa Journal", a show broadcast by the Voice of America. I held that position for about a year, before being asked to create the news department at WYPR, a small public radio station in Baltimore, Maryland. I run the day-to-day operations of the news department, supervise reporters and stringers, and arrange for training, purchase equipment, and edit stories. In other words, I am the "boss", a title I am pleasantly surprised to have achieved in my professional dotage.

The fact of the matter is that my experience has been unique. During my career, at various times, I have worked for the White House, the Department of State and Congress. I have also reported on each of these institutions. I have worked

for mainstream news organizations, both large and small. I have worked for private-owned and state-run media outfits in print, television, radio and the internet. At each job, I learnt different journalistic styles, saw first-hand how they operate, and been able to analyze their strengths and weaknesses. I have sat in on countless editorial meetings, story conferences and editing sessions. I have pounded the pavement as a working journalist on the streets of major cities, such as Washington, New York, Baltimore and Los Angeles. And I have also parachuted into war zones and international trouble spots like Angola, Somalia, Haiti, Lebanon, South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal province as well as the Gaza Strip and West Bank.

In addition, I have learnt how to work various government bureaucracies for stories, including the Central Intelligence Agency, the Pentagon, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and various law enforcement agencies.

And, over the years, I have earned a number of awards, including the prestigious A.I. Dupont-Columbia University Silver Baton for team coverage of South Africa's 1994 democratic elections; the Ben Grauer Overseas Press Club award during the same year for coverage of Haiti's crisis; as well as awards from the Professional Radio News Directors and the Society of Professional Journalists.

Let me now dispel some of your expectations. If there are those of you who expect a long and broad discourse consisting primarily of criticisms of the Western media, specifically the U.S. mainstream media organizations, then you've come to the wrong place. I have no interest in participating in reciting a litany or laundry list of the perceived shortcomings of the U.S. media, and how they do, or do not, faithfully report the news from the Muslim world, specifically the Middle East conflict.

It has been my experience that these sorts of discussions do not promote an honest dialogue, do not provoke thought, and, in the end, usually deteriorate into polemics and histrionics that do not provide insight. Some previous criticisms do, indeed, have merit, but they detract from the bigger picture I hope to sketch out for you.

In addition, the credit or blame for reportage on the Muslim world cannot be confined just to the Western media, nor should it be. In many respects, Western-

based news organizations have done a far superior job in covering a variety of issues in the Muslim world, far exceeding that of locally based outfits.

My job is dedicated to providing truthful, accurate information in a timely manner. This usually requires me to be as specific as possible in the words and terms that I, or my reporters, use. So, let us start right now on “the media”. It is such a broad term and one that is misused. There are many different forms of media, which I mentioned earlier. These are newspapers, radio and television stations, magazines, the internet, tabloids and even corporate newsletters. What are these organizations? How do they work? What drives them? Who drives them? And, what about their product?

There is an old adage in the news industry, which I am sure you have heard before – “if it bleeds, it leads”. In the West, much of the news that we report, whether we are based in Boston or Baltimore, is crisis-driven. This means that there are usually at least two parties with an on-going dispute. If there are a large number of people involved in this crisis, or if it is worth a lot of money, then news organizations assign a reporter or reporters to that story.

In addition to the day-to-day reporting, nearly all news organizations have editorial boards, which are separate, I repeat, SEPARATE, from the newsrooms where the reporters do their work. Editorials are essentially opinions either written or voiced. They appear in their own section in most newspapers, usually across from the op-ed page, where columnists or guest writers get to have their say on any particular subject. So, it is quite common, nowadays, for a newspaper to have a report that is critical of one party in a dispute, but also print an editorial that essentially sides with the other party. There is no contradiction – this is how modern, Western news organizations work. There is a dividing line between news and opinion, which reflects a self-imposed system of institutionalized checks and balances that date back to the days when America’s first newspapers evolved from political party spreadsheets to modern newspapers.

The charge of bias is one that every news organization should take seriously. By its very nature, this calls into question the motivations of individual reporters and editors, as well as the credibility of what you read, see and hear every day. Increasingly, news organizations have chosen to do their own in-house investigations of bias, or farm it out to independent bodies. In recent years, one

of my former employers, *USA TODAY*, commissioned an independent probe into the work of its former senior correspondent, Jack Kelley, and found that he had unfortunately fabricated the details of several of his more spectacular stories, including some which earned him and the paper a nomination for a Pulitzer Prize. Kelley, an old friend of mine, was forced to resign.

Kelley is by no means alone. Former CBS anchorman Dan Rather, former CNN foreign correspondent Peter Arnett and others have also been investigated for either not checking their facts thoroughly enough, or fabricating news stories. This is an on-going, self-correcting dynamic of self-criticism within the industry, driven not only by professional traditions, but also by increasing competition among outlets for ever-more segmented audiences.

There is a pervasive feeling among many Muslims that many news organizations have a bias toward Israel in the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict. And, it is true that many of the editors and reporters based in Israel are, in fact, Jewish. Many have a deep personal and emotional attachment to not only their religion, but are also staunch Zionists. It is also true that the Israeli historical narrative, along with its attendant myths, is as much a part of the American popular perceptions as the “brave settlers” who “won” the West from the Native Americans. Many syndicated columnists are also strong supporters of Israel and Israeli policies. These are givens – part of the social, political and institutional landscape. But these factors alone do not prove editorial or journalistic bias in favor of the Jewish state.

For most of the past 10 years, I have read a number of daily press digests on the Arab-Israeli conflict, for example, *The Electronic Intifada* and *Electronic Iraq*, both of which are compiled faithfully by a Palestinian-American activist, Ali Abunimah. The other is done by the American Task Force on Palestine. Both contain news articles, editorials and commentaries from most major mainstream news organizations, including those in the United Kingdom. And from my reading, mainstream U.S. news organizations have been extremely balanced in their reporting and editorials in recent years, including editorials in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* that have been extremely critical of Israeli policies towards the Palestinians.

There are, of course, some rather obvious exceptions. Media outlets owned by magnate Rupert Murdoch, like the Fox television network and *The New York Post* tabloid newspaper, are unabashedly right-wing and pro-Israel, both in their reporting and editorial pages.

But there is more to it than that. News organizations have long based their reporters and correspondents in Israel, proper, for some very tangible reasons, primarily because it is EASY for them to do their jobs. I have reported from Israel on three occasions and it was not hard for me to understand why there was a preference for basing journalists there. You have to understand that the journalism industry, for all the talk about protecting the public trust, is a business. Managers, ideally, want to have their charges conduct their business with a minimum amount of obstacles.

Reporters in Israel have easy access to media savvy Israeli politicians, policymakers and ordinary Israeli citizens. Cars with Israeli license plates can travel relatively easy from one destination to another. There is first-class communication, either by land-line, cellular telephone or the internet. For radio and television, there are top-line production facilities. Getting first-world accommodations, conducting international banking transactions are all much easier than they are in most Arab countries. And there is a very strong tradition of press freedom in Israel, where journalists have fought a number of court battles in recent years against government restrictions. All these mean that correspondents based there can report easily and meet deadlines, upon which the news business is driven. Only recently have Arab capitals been able to compete with what is offered in Israel.

Reporting from Israeli-occupied territories in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank has steadily grown more difficult even before the beginning of the second *intifada*, because these areas are under Israeli military control. The cost of the continued occupation is regularly reported on and debated in the Israeli media. In fact, one of the best English language accounts of the hardship faced by the Palestinians is done by Amira Hass, a reporter with *Ha'aretz* newspaper. Her book, "Drinking The Sea At Gaza", which chronicles the three years she lived in Gaza among the Palestinians, is a must read for any serious student on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Being a Jew and the daughter of Holocaust survivors did not "get in her way", or protect her from charges by the Israeli right that she was biased towards the Palestinians.

Amira is an exceptional person and an exceptional reporter. Another is Ori Nir, who now works for the U.S.-based *The Forward* in the United States. He reported on the Palestinians during the first *intifada*, speaks Arabic, and did exceptional and first-hand reporting on the Israeli crackdown on the Arab-Israeli communities in the Galilee during the first weeks of the second *intifada* – at great personal risk.

But there are others based in Israel for Western news organizations that, because of their privately stated prejudices against the Palestinians and Muslims – which they have shared with me – go out of their way to avoid reporting directly about their conditions. Some say it is because of a well-founded fear of violence, using it as an excuse to give Israel exclusive coverage.

Many of these reporters have only a cursory knowledge of Islam, and little, if any, first-hand knowledge, contact or interest in Islamist movements, such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, nor the environment in which these groups operate. The reporting on these groups, which are secretive by nature and outlawed, is most often episodic (after an armed attack on Israeli targets), dealing almost exclusively with the armed wings and the threat they constitute to either the Israeli government or the Palestinian Authority.

In fact, only within the last few years, has there been any in-depth reporting on the structure of Hamas, its origins, and its inherent value and place within the Palestinian society. This will no doubt increase, as Hamas becomes more of a player in the electoral politics of the post-Arafat era, perhaps the dominant one as the fortunes of the Palestinian Authority, the Palestine Liberation Organization and Fatah, continue to slide.

The danger with basing reporters in Israel is that they concentrate almost entirely on Israeli politics, which are similar to the rough-and-tumble of the American game, and since there are travel restrictions to most neighboring Arab countries, have little, if any, idea of what is going on elsewhere, let alone in the Palestinian territories. This is not entirely their fault.

Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority, which did much to restrict press freedom, made life just as difficult, not only for Western journalists, but Arab journalists as well. But, many Palestinians understand the impact and importance of media

coverage and have become just as savvy as many Israelis. I have worked with several brave and resourceful Palestinian journalists, who have assisted Western news organizations in addition to working for their own outlets. My good friend, Taher Shriteh, the former editor of *Filastin*, helped me immeasurably during my visits to Gaza, during which time he was targeted by both the Israeli government and Palestinian Authority.

It is also true that there is a strong pro-Israel lobby in the United States. Arguably, the most powerful political lobby in Washington is the America-Israel Public Affairs Committee, which has long held sway in Congress. Zionist and Jewish groups are active, some functioning as media watchdogs, and ever vigilant in responding to anything written or broadcast that is perceived to be critical of Israel. Pro-Israeli supporters are well represented in the ranks of Washington's think tanks, always ready with a quote or a sound bite for inquiring reporters working a story State-side, or from abroad.

It is little wonder, then, that many Western news organizations have adopted a whole set of Israel-centered perceptions and norms over the years. For many Americans, Israel is “us”, our “kith and kin” so to speak, sharing the Judeo-Christian heritage and the hagiographic similarity as a lonely settler state amid hostile neighbors.

Americans know more about Israel – its history, its politics, its foreign relations, its society – than about any country in the world. In the mind of Americans, Israel is something apart (Christison, 1999:288). The scholar Bernard Reich has explained this special identity, as emanating from a sense that Israel is “a like-image state whose survival is crucial to the ideological prospering of the United States. This perspective goes beyond the more general concern for all similar states, to one associated particularly with Israel” (Reich, 1984:179).

In this respect, the Jewish state has largely been given *carte blanche* in the minds of many Americans and the editorial boards of many mainstream American media organizations. Israel's military adventures are seen, on the whole, as justified acts of defense. It's domination of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights is rarely, if ever, referred to as what it is – an illegal military occupation and colonization. There is no shortage of advocates

for Israel in the editorial conferences of many major mainstream media organizations.

Extremist attacks against Israel are almost universally portrayed by an overwhelming majority of mainstream media outlets as “terrorism”, the perpetrators are categorized as “terrorists”, who practice “terror”. Even if one or two Israeli civilians is killed or wounded, the news blares it in headlines. When Palestinian civilians are killed, there are often no headlines, no rush to get an official condemnation from the White House or the State Department. Subsequent Israeli military attacks, regardless of the disproportionate amount of carnage and damage, are almost always antiseptically termed as “retaliation”.

This was especially the case during the early months of the second *intifada*. There was scant attention in the U.S. media of the devastating impact of Israel’s routine use from the outset of battlefield weapons like long-range sniper rifles, tanks, missiles, helicopters and fighter-bombers in heavily built-up Palestinian civilian areas. Moreover, even attacks on Israeli troops inside the occupied territories became “terrorism” in the media, mimicking the Israeli government’s practice of calling all opposition to its illegitimate rule terrorism, and assimilating Palestinian resistance to its military occupation to the kinds of attacks on unarmed civilians that Americans ordinarily, and rightly, associate with the term (Khalidi, 2004:144).

Because there is no uniform standard for using these terms, and strong evidence that there is, in fact, a double standard in this conflict, there is an inherent tendency to misuse them. In the main, these are sloppy terms, which serve to obfuscate, not to clarify. They are, in effect, “loaded” political terms used so carelessly and so often that they have lost much of their utility. They have, instead, become code words intended to create impressions of what is *politically* considered “good”, “bad”, “acceptable” and “unacceptable”. They have reduced the sum of all Arab and Muslim actions to the pejorative, while the Israelis are ever cast as the protagonists.

Then, of course, there is one of my favorite buzz words – “Islamic fundamentalism”, which is applied almost across the board to a variety of Islamist groups, who may, invariably, differ in terms of tactics, policy and institutional character, if not goals. I have been a reporter for 25 years now, and a Muslim

for longer than that and even I do not have the foggiest notion of what “Islamic fundamentalism” is. Now, imagine a non-Muslim, with not even a cursory understanding of Islam, attempting to divine what this hackneyed term means.

I am a Muslim. I believe in the five pillars of Islam: there is no god but Allah and the Prophet Mohamed is His Holy Apostle; and I also believe in prayer, charity, fasting, and, *inshallah*, I intend to make *hajj* – these are quite fundamental. But does that make me an “Islamic fundamentalist”? I also do not support indiscriminate violence against any civilians. After all, I was raised by parents who are confirmed pacifists. Imagine what it was like for me, growing up in the inner city of Detroit in the violent 1960s, as a “pacifist”.

When I was overseas reporting, I rarely, if ever, used the term “terrorism”. I, instead, used the term “political violence” as a sort of universal term to cover all, because the groups and governments I was reporting on, no matter in which terms they cast themselves, were essentially attempting to achieve political goals – the creation of an Islamic state, the withdrawal of Israel from the occupied territories, eliminating armed opposition, and other objectives. As a reporter, it was not my responsibility to make a valued judgment on any of these stated goals. That was the responsibility of my editors. But, for the purposes of this discussion, the designation of what constituted “terrorism” was made, and is made, by editors or editorial boards and is primarily related to what they feel is a just, or unjust, goal.

There is much truth to another old journalistic adage that is, to wit, “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter”. When I was in the field, my credibility is what mattered most. Armed with my objectivity, it was simply not in my purview to make what were editorial, not reportorial, judgments. In the past few years, as I have been “seduced by the Dark Side of The Force”, so to speak, and elevated into management, I have been given the institutional authority to make those decision on what terms can, or cannot, be used in our news reports. Not surprisingly, it is just as much a tough decision to make as an editor, as it was to ponder as a reporter.

What litmus test can we use to determine what is “terrorism”? Is it simply attacks made on innocent civilians, such as those made by various armed Islamist groups across the world, such as al-Qaeda’s spectacular strikes on “9-11”? If so, then

what should we call the extra-legal attacks of large, lethal, state-sponsored conventional armies or security forces? Are they also a form of “terrorism”, since many of their victims are also innocent civilians?

What of suicide bombings on Israeli buses? Are Israeli attacks on residential neighborhoods in Gaza or the West Bank “terrorism”? Are similar attacks by American forces in Iraqi cities, such as Fallujah, “terrorism” as well? Is there an elastic, universal, one-size-fits-all definition? Is there any way around double standards? What about relying on international legal definitions? What is “collateral damage”? Is it a military bureaucratic term to describe unavoidable losses in the pursuit of some operational objective?

I decided that it was simply not a judgment that I could make. When I was reporting overseas, various armed opposition groups in the countries I visited used violence to achieve political aims, such as Egypt’s *al-Gama’a al-Islamiya*. But, in almost every case, it was the government, or state-sponsored security forces that held the overwhelming advantage in terms of force, manpower and media control. Victims in the majority of the attacks (mostly innocent civilians) differed little, aside from the occasional high-profile target.

When I arrived at Islam Online to become the news editor of the Washington bureau, I had to confront the same conundrum. My bosses in Egypt and Qatar wanted to refer to all of the individuals killed in attacks by Israeli, American or Russian forces as “martyrs”, a *religious* term. After all, they were *Islam* Online. I objected immediately on editorial grounds. It was very soon that I discovered that these “journalists” were not really interested in what I had been trained to understand was news, but propaganda. Propaganda-as-news was the tradition they have grown up in, which has essentially deteriorated into a contest on who can shout the loudest and longest, not disseminating news. But it was their call, not mine, ultimately. They were not interested in the craft of journalism, but the art of “spin”. They had their own agenda and I was simply getting in the way. And this process is repeated at EVERY news organization. And the level of objectivity varies from newsroom to newsroom.

In the U.S. there are very few, if any Muslims, sitting in on daily editorial meetings, where decisions are made on what stories will be covered, by which reporters, with which slant, let alone what resources will be committed to

reporting a particular story. Very few of those sitting on the editorial boards have more than an elementary knowledge of Islam, the Arab or Muslim worlds, have never visited any of those countries, have no knowledge of history, culture, language or politics, and also have no personal interaction with Muslims of any kind. Some harbor prejudices about Muslims and Arabs and express them with impunity, because these attitudes are acceptable. With all these, why is it that Western press coverage of the Muslim world, and this includes growing communities in the global Diaspora, are considered so negative?

But the door swings both ways. You can find the same institutional “blind spots” with regards to the Arab and Muslim media, on a different set of stories. The most glaring example is that of the continuing turmoil in Sudan’s Darfur region, where an estimated 40,000 people have been killed and another half-million internally displaced in a conflict pitting rebel groups against ethnic Arab militias, the *janjaweed*, supported by that country’s Islamist government.

The great majority of the victims, as well as the alleged perpetrators on both sides are Muslims. What seems to be the determining factor for the paucity of press coverage in primarily the Arab world is that the victims are also ethnically non-Arab Africans. The plight of the Darfuris is almost totally ignored, despite the fact that it is one of the largest humanitarian crises in the world today. When it is covered by news outfits, like Islam Online, reports of wide-scale human rights atrocities against the Darfuris are ignored or omitted. Instead, the stories are slanted in such a way that foreign assistance, some of it from Christian relief agencies, is portrayed as an attempt at converting the victims, and therefore, a blatant attack against an Arab-Muslim country.

No matter the institution, blind spots are exactly that, blind. We cannot demand or expect fair coverage, for example, of Palestine, if we, as Muslims and as journalists, do a far worse job of reporting on events in Darfur, or in other trouble spots around the world.

There is a much greater sensitivity about news coverage after “9-11”. In the West, resources that had been gradually pulled out of the Arab and Muslim world were dramatically restored, if not greatly expanded, following the attacks, ostensibly in the attempt to answer the question: “Why Do They Hate Us”? To many in the Muslim world, the question was, to different degrees, rhetorical and

ahistorical, if not totally nonsensical. But the question cannot be so easily dismissed. It reflected a severe deficit of knowledge about Islam and the Muslim world and, to a large degree, a tacit acknowledgement that the public had not been well-served by the information it has received in the past.

U.S. colleges and universities reported a dramatic increase in enrollment in courses on Islam, as well as the number of students wishing to learn Arabic and other languages spoken throughout the Muslim world.

In the mainstream U.S. media, many outfits, seeking to best their competitors, flooded Afghanistan and other parts of the Muslim world with reporters. As the U.S. war to topple the Taliban and hunt down their al-Qaeda allies in Afghanistan evolved into the so-called “War On Terror”, and then gathered momentum toward the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, some news organization began to rely more and more on Muslim journalists. As the security conditions on the ground throughout the country have deteriorated over the years, many mainstream U.S. organizations have discovered that they have had little, if any, choice but to rely heavily on Arab Muslim journalists to do on-the-scene reporting that had clearly become too dangerous for Westerners to do.

At Knight-Ridder, one of the largest newspaper and media chains in the U.S., my former editor at National Public Radio, Joyce Davis, had become the deputy foreign editor. Joyce speaks five languages (including Arabic), has traveled throughout the Arab and Muslim world, and has written two books on modern Islam. When Knight-Ridder was preparing to send its team of reporters to cover the war in Iraq, Joyce was able to select two young reporters to participate – Hannah Allam of *The St. Paul Pioneer-Press* and Nancy Youssef of *The Detroit Free Press*. What made this noteworthy was not only the fact that they were Arab-Americans, who spoke fluent Arabic, but both are Muslims – and women! Many mainstream American media organizations have, in the past, hired Arab-Americans, but nearly all of them have been Arab Christians. But they were hired for the job because they were young, hungry and had, as my youngest son says, “mad skillz”.

Hannah went on to serve as Knight-Ridder’s Baghdad bureau chief, before transferring to her newest posting in Cairo. Nancy did four tours in Iraq. And, as one of her mentors, I am proud to announce that next month she will be

starting her one-year assignment to succeed Hannah as Knight-Ridder's bureau chief. Their reporting on Iraq has consistently been among the best.

In addition, an old friend and former colleague, Faiza Ambah, a Saudi-born journalist, has been writing extensively about the democratization effort in her native land as a correspondent for *The Christian Science Monitor*. In addition, although some of you may not share his opinions, Fareed Zakaria, an American-born and educated Indian Muslim, is the editor-in-chief of the international edition of *Newsweek* magazine.

This comes in addition to tremendous achievements by many Arab-American Christians. One of them, my friend, Anthony Shadid, won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Washington Post* two years ago for his coverage of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. His subsequent reports on the growing influence of Islam and Muslim movements in post-Saddam Iraq and elsewhere are among the finest examples of reporting anywhere. Jenny Abdo, a Lebanese American, has also amassed a sterling body of work with her reporting for a number of U.S. mainstream newspapers, as well as two books on Islam and Muslim movements in Egypt and Iran.

All of these are tremendous accomplishments, spurred, in part, by the events of 9-11, just as the dramatic emergence of African-Americans in mainstream U.S. newsrooms was quickened by the racial turmoil that swept major American news in the 1960s. The smart news organization realized now, as they did then, that they could provide better news coverage in comparison to their competitors by training and empowering a different kind of reporter, with the skills and the sensibilities, to get the story.

Now, it must be said that major U.S.-based wire services, like the Associated Press, and several European news organizations, have employed Muslims as local staff in host countries. Some worked as reporters, but others were primarily employed as fixers, translators and drivers. In fact, it would have been almost impossible for former foreign correspondents, such as myself, to set up an office, conduct interviews and function without the considerable assistance of local staffers, many of whom were Muslims. But they played a largely behind-the-scenes roll. That barrier is now being breached.

Arab-Americans and Muslims in growing numbers are now inside the newsrooms at several mainstream news organizations, where the recognition, remuneration and rewards are greater. Now, the challenge is to bring in larger numbers, as well as getting them inside the editorial meetings, where the real decisions are made. The quality of mainstream U.S.-media coverage of the Arab and Muslim world in future years will, in part, be determined by the amount of progress made by Arab-American and Muslim journalists.

These accomplishments are primarily the product of “corporate altruism”. There are still problems in the newsrooms, and attitudes towards Islam and Muslims rarely, if ever, change overnight. Suspicions about the loyalty or qualifications of Muslim reporters persist. But the decision to promote Muslims and Arabs, are prompted by the pace of healthy competition among companies to get the story, get it right, get it quickly, and to satisfy the growing popular appetite for news about the Muslim world.

On the other hand, I do not see the same type of dynamic institutional changes within the Muslim world, primarily in the Middle East, despite incredible progress in high technology, which should increase and enhance the dissemination of news and information. Legislation in the region’s mixed bag of countries stretching from Morocco to Iran is the first block to press freedom, whether emergency measures or press laws (Reporters Without Borders, 2005). Reporters Without Borders stated in its Annual Report for 2005 that “authoritarianism and crippling official corruption prevents the growth of truly free news” (Reporters Without Borders, 2005).

The primary obstacles are state-run control of media outlets, specifically the licensing of newspapers, radio, television and the internet, and also the psychological state that long-term control has fostered to reinforce these controls. In varying degrees, Arab media personnel in most Arab countries encounter serious difficulties in gaining access to information, documents, data and official and unofficial news sources. Authorities often hinder their efforts citing official secrecy or national security (Farjani, 2003:60).

In addition, a pervasive tradition of official propaganda, as opposed to the best features of journalism practiced in free societies, still predominates. News of interest to the majority of the population, and which relates to daily concerns

or which could enrich their scientific and cultural knowledge, is scarce. Despite more openness that allows the media to address certain events, some news items are suppressed or dealt with in a manner not equal to their importance (Farjani, 2003:61). The result is a poorly-informed audience, or one that has grown increasingly cynical of its traditional media outlets. And, unfortunately, many of the best journalists are harassed, beaten, imprisoned, in exile or dead. The threat of prison hangs over Arab journalists and most write very respectfully or just censor themselves. Most Arab governments keep a tight monopoly of radio and TV broadcasting (Reporters Without Borders, 2005).

These conclusions are drawn from my own experience as a news consumer during my three years in Cairo, as well as my subsequent reading of Middle Eastern newspapers and viewing of cable and satellite television outlets. I also draw the conclusion based on my brief working relationship with Islam Online, the Qatar-based website. During my six months with Islam Online, I discovered to my dismay, that the news managers were not interested in giving their audience a sophisticated menu of news stories or content with the intention of allowing them to make up their own minds, but were interested only in re-cycling news from other sources, ignoring other stories altogether, and, worst yet, wholly fabricating news stories altogether.

In this respect, Islam Online has chosen to re-create the worst traditions of the media in the Arab and Muslim world, adhering to a rigid editorial line in keeping with another old news axiom: “Do not confuse me with the facts; my mind is already made up.” This reflects a rather cynical view of the audience as a largely ignorant mass, incapable of digesting news and must be constantly told what to think.

### **I’d like to share a few examples of this:**

During my brief tenure as news editor, I received an unattributed news story from Cairo during the first weeks of the U.S.-led invasion to topple the Taliban regime in Afghanistan after the “9-11” attacks. Islam Online’s stringer in Afghanistan had been writing a series of articles, which had recounted the suffering borne by many Afghans in the wake of the invasion, although he had done little, if any, reporting on the grievous toll the Taliban’s rule had taken on many Afghan civilians. I could tell that he had long ago abandoned any pretense

of objective reporting and was simply pursuing his own agenda, or that of Islam Online's upper management.

Anyway, we received a startling story, which, if true, would have made headlines around the world. It quoted supposed eyewitnesses, of not one, but TWO downed American military helicopters outside Kabul. Up to this point, there had been very few reported U.S. military casualties as the Taliban and al-Qaeda had largely attempted to melt away into Afghanistan's countryside. One of the eyewitnesses was quoted as saying that he had visited the wreckage of the helicopters and seen the bodies of many American troops still lying inside the downed copters.

I received a message from Cairo to run the story immediately, but as the news editor, I demurred. The number of casualties was simply too large to come from two helicopters. I had done some reporting at the Pentagon and was familiar with the kinds of helicopters they used to ferry troops. I started sending a number of queries to Cairo about the kind of helicopter that was found and serial numbers, which all U.S. Army aircraft carry. Again, I received an urgent message telling me to run the story immediately.

By this time, there were a number of similar stories appearing, including one TV news piece showing an Afghan holding what was supposed to be some wreckage of a helicopter, but with a partial serial number. But, still, there were no photos of the bodies of the supposed casualties. I made calls to the Pentagon in an attempt to verify the reports. The Pentagon issued an official denial, which did not, in and of itself, disprove the story from the field. ALL governments lie. And there are two more axioms that I have had drilled into me over the years: 1) If something is too good to be true, it usually is; and 2) Trust, but always verify.

Still, my bosses in Cairo began to call urging me to run the story on the news section of our website. And then I began to re-state my reservations. I was told that our stringer had seen the bodies in the allegedly downed U.S. military helicopter. I said that, if this was indeed true, he could get some sort of identification from one of the corpses. I explained to Cairo that U.S. soldiers have two sets of metal dog tags, one, which hangs around their necks, the second which is inside their boots. All dog tags are stamped with the name, rank and military identification number. If I could get this information, I would be able to take

this to the Pentagon's daily press conferences for an official admission or denial. And, I told Cairo that I would rather run a story that was verified as opposed to running what appeared to be nothing more than a collection of rumors. I told them that the credibility of the news department and website depended on credible, verified information. I would not budge, which angered my superiors in Cairo.

A few days later, no photos of dead American soldiers surfaced, and it turned out that the whole incident was part of a disinformation campaign managed by Taliban supporters in Pakistan. My decision, I thought, had been vindicated.

The following month, I met my immediate superior in Cairo. During our conversation, he told me that it was he who had personally urged for the bogus story to be run. He was disappointed that I had not run it, even though he knew that the story was **TOTALLY INVENTED!!!** It was clear to me, judging from our conversation, that my boss was from the old school of Middle Eastern journalism, namely that of manufacturing propaganda, which may have temporarily swelled breasts, but also misled, misinformed and ultimately disappointed millions.

While in Cairo for a month to work with my staff there, most of them young, Egyptian women, I was asked to edit another story. This one was of a number of purported sermons that have occurred in mosques throughout the nation, where the imam had publicly called for attacks against the U.S., Israel and Jews. Again, I was told to run the story. But, as an editor, there were too many questions that had not been answered by the "reporters". Who made these sermons? When were they made? Which were the mosques in question? Were there any worshippers that we can talk to? What was their reaction? And, since I lived in Egypt for three years, I also knew that any public sermon must first be reviewed and approved by state-run religious authorities.

Again, I would not budge. If true, this would be an important story about the public mood in Egypt in the wake of the 9-11 attacks and the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. It would also indirectly implicate the Egyptian government, a close U.S. ally, with the groundswell in anti-American sentiment that was once again sweeping the region.

I waited in vain for two days for these questions to be answered. I then assigned one of my reporters to personally check on the story. To my surprise, she told me, after a few hours, that this story had been transmitted to her by my boss. This was part of a pattern and, in many ways, a test of my professional obedience and not my editorial skill.

There is one final example. I had returned to Washington to run the bureau. Former Attorney General John Ashcroft was then scheduled to testify on Capital Hill before a Congressional subcommittee on the Patriot Act, a controversial legislation introduced by the Bush administration that would empower the government with sweeping powers to pursue alleged terrorists. But there was concern among several legal groups that the legislation could also seriously erode established protections on privacy and other individual rights.

I had covered countless Congressional subcommittees before, but I had a young staff and I wanted to give them some valuable experience. I assigned the story to Ayesha Ahmad, a U.S.-born Pakistani, who had just completed her Master in journalism at the University of Maryland. She was an excellent reporter, good writer and enthusiastic, the kind of young reporter who should be filling newsrooms around the world. I advised Cairo that we were going to report on the Ashcroft hearing and would be filing a report for the website later.

Ayesha is a pious woman and grew up wearing the *higab*, or headscarf. I saw no objection to this, even though it turned some heads in Washington and elsewhere. She went to the hearing and filed an excellent report, quoting both Ashcroft and some of the Patriot Act's detractors on the merits of the bill. It was an excellent account; as good as anything you would expect to read in a mainstream newspaper or website. I edited the story and sent it to Cairo to be posted on the website.

A couple of hours later, I noticed that the Ashcroft story had still not appeared on the website. I called Cairo to inquire about any problems. And what I heard over the telephone line left me angry and flabbergasted. One of my sub-editors, a young Egyptian woman, began to abuse both Ayesha and me! She said that it was obvious to her that we were rooting for Ashcroft and supported the Patriot Act! We had, of course, done nothing of the sort. Apparently, to have a story

merely quoting Ashcroft, who had made a few derogatory remarks about Islam without being reprimanded by the Bush administration, was considered offensive.<sup>1</sup>

Our personal views about the Attorney General had never entered the picture; we were simply doing the professional and responsible thing of accurately quoting a public official. This did not seem to matter to my sub-editor, who had grown hysterical. I later received a phone call from my counterpart in Cairo, who repeated her criticisms, despite my explanations that neither I, nor Ayesha, had done anything wrong. Another axiom: “Do not try to confuse me with the facts, my mind is made up.”

That was the beginning of the end for me. Cairo decided to take full control of the news section, in effect, demoting me and my staff. We were told that we could not be objective by dint of our American citizenship and upbringing. I tendered my resignation and, within a few months, Cairo decided to close the Washington news bureau altogether. Ayesha, who had been reporting from the White House and the State Department for Islam Online, went on to work for a small, suburban Washington newspaper.

What the whole episode with Islam Online revealed was that the mindset of propaganda-as-journalism and editorial-as-news was pervasive. We had grown up in different societies, where a different relationship had developed between media organizations, individual journalists and the audience. Our Cairene colleagues had grown up in an atmosphere of heavy state controls, reflecting the preoccupation with ensuring national security, and not cultivating a well-informed public. Everyone was expected to march in lock-step with the prevailing government view.

Needless to say, this type of news coverage does not help the ordinary citizen to comprehend events, increase his or her awareness and knowledge, or develop a considered and informed point of view on national, regional and international issues (Farjani, 2003:61).

The lesson was clear; those in leadership positions simply did not think their audiences deserved better. And it was clear to me that far too many journalists in the Arab and Muslim world had simply decided to go along and toe the party line. In the old days, control of the airwaves and the printing press were among

the main priorities of coup plotters from Algeria to Egypt to Indonesia. All of these regimes adhered to the idea of centralization, which means state control or ownership of mass media outlets, where editors and producers are appointed and dismissed by the government, and where newsrooms are filled with censors and sycophants. But to what end?

The Arab and Muslim audience have not been well served. They continue to be ill-informed not only on world events, but stories within their own countries. The example I often cite is the Egyptian news coverage of the 1967 Six Days War. After Israel's daring air raids on Egyptian airfields and its subsequent rout of Egyptian forces in the Sinai, the state run radio and television, for THREE DAYS, was filled with accounts of stunning Egyptian military victories.

The Egyptian army, its audiences were told, was marching on Tel Aviv! There were impromptu celebrations held in the streets of Cairo to mark the long-awaited defeat and the destruction of Israel. Not only had the Egyptian government withheld the news of its own humiliating defeat, but it had also manufactured lies about its "victory". When news from the outside world about the true nature of the situation began to trickle in, the Egyptian government was finally compelled to break the news to its people. It was finally left to President Gamal Abdel-Nasser to address the nation, admit to the defeat, for which he took responsibility, and briefly resigned. The Egyptian government had not only lost the war, but the state-run and state-controlled media had lost its credibility with its own people. The lies simply made the impact of the defeat even more painful. Egypt, as well as the Arab and Muslim worlds have been dealing with the multi-pronged impact ever since.

You would think that, over the years, governments in the Arab and Muslim world would have learnt that news cannot be "managed", that the truth cannot be hidden, even if it can, on occasion, be "shaded". But this pattern of trying to hide the truth continues.

In Egypt, the sudden death of President Gamal Nasser was not officially confirmed until several hours after his death. The same is true for his successor, Anwar Sadat, who was assassinated during a military parade on a NATIONAL HOLIDAY! There was no announcement that he had even been shot for several hours, nor any report on his medical condition.

As an American, one of my earliest memories was sitting at home, as a morning kindergartener, watching and listening to the television bulletins of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. To even think of withholding such news is too fantastic to even comprehend, but this is still the case in far too much of the Arab and Muslim world.

A few years ago, when an Egyptair passenger jet went down off Long Island shortly after take off from New York, the state-run media did not broadcast news of the disaster for many hours. Instead, state-run media publicly advised the families of many of the passengers to go to Cairo International Airport to wait for the return of “the survivors”.

In the subsequent reporting on the official investigation of the crash, the Egyptian media was filled with rumor and innuendo of any number of supposed conspiracy, including a Mossad plot to down the plane filled with Egyptian air force pilots, an elevator malfunction, but not the most obvious explanation, that the Egyptian co-pilot had taken controls of the plane and intentionally crashed it. But the Egyptians are not alone.

In Jordan, there was no official announcement of Saddam Hussein’s invasion of neighboring Kuwait for THREE DAYS! I could go on and on, citing numerous, if not innumerable, examples.

Is it any wonder that large numbers of Arab and Muslims citizen have simply tuned out the state-run media whenever possible, and decided to rely on foreign outlets like the BBC, Radio France International or Radio Monte Carlo. Is it also any wonder that many of the best and brightest Arab and Muslim journalists have sought gainful and more professionally satisfying work with these foreign-based outlets, or abroad, as opposed to facing frustration and prison at home?

The means by which repressive regimes can control the dissemination of news and information are dwindling. They can no longer simply jam radio broadcasts, or clip offending news articles from magazines or newspapers at the airport. This is the age of the internet, satellite dishes and 24-7 instantaneous, global communications.

This is the era of Al-Jazeera, whose popularity and reach have not only stunned both Arab and Muslim governments, but Western leaders as well. Al-Jazeera, bankrolled by tiny Qatar and staffed by Western-trained Arab and Muslim journalists, is the pre-eminent news source in the Middle East today. No other outlet is even close. It has spawned a number of imitators, including those sponsored by the United States and other Arab competitors, but Al-Jazeera is alone at the top. It has earned a reputation, albeit controversial, for hard-hitting, in-your-face news coverage.

I was mostly unfamiliar with the Al-Jazeera phenomenon until I visited Cairo, a month after 9-11. Then, seeing friends socially, I found nearly all of them tuned to Al-Jazeera. Even when going out on the streets to sit at a café, sipping Turkish coffee or smoking water pipes, all eyes were on Al-Jazeera, with its “live”, on-site news reports on the continuing war in Afghanistan or the latest on the bloody second intifada. They were showing items that state-run television either completely ignored or glossed over. There was no competition before, but Al-Jazeera has arrived.

Later, after I arrived in my apartment in the evenings, I would watch some of the pale imitators to Al-Jazeera on state-run television, which copied some of the slick graphics and studio sets, but had none of the Qatar-based satellite TV’s edge or professionalism. The U.S. has also joined the list of al-Jazeera imitators, through the VOA’s radio and television stations, which is an ill-considered and costly attempt at public relations aimed at an increasingly hostile Arab audience.

These private channels have instilled a new spirit in Arabic television, helping to change thinking and procedures among some Arabic satellite stations, many of them government-run, such as the “Abu Dhabi Television Station”, the “Nile News Channel” and other official channels in North African Arab countries. There is no doubt that independent Arabic channels have managed to break the monopoly of the big channels over images and news (Farjani, 2003:66).

The fact that both Osama bin Laden and top Bush administration policymakers have sought out al-Jazeera are just but a few indications that it has arrived as a medium outlet of the first rank. Al-Jazeera has also interviewed Israeli leaders on its airwaves, and hosted discussions with a wide variety of pundits and experts from around the world. They also ruffled a few feathers over the years, getting

their correspondents kicked out of countries like Morocco, Jordan and U.S.-occupied Iraq while managing to remain in Israel and the Palestinian territories, which is considered a badge of honor by proud news organizations before.

Of course, Al-Jazeera has its own institutional blind spots. There is very little reporting critical of its sponsor, the Qatari government, or the strong support the al-Thani monarchy gave to the U.S. military invasion of Iraq.

But none of this terribly diminishes Al-Jazeera's overall significance. It has raised the bar, rather dramatically, for the kind of news that Arab and Muslim audience have not only longed for but, now that the "genie is out of the bottle", are demanding. In the future, they will simply not support more of what they had to settle for in the past.

This is the information age. As a Muslim, I believe in a higher ultimate power, but the power of information will increasingly reign. It is paving the way to the modern world. And, if Muslims and Arabs want to be part of it as participants instead of merely spectators, they will have to join in the competition. This process will take time, but it need not be drawn out any longer than necessary. Arabs and Muslims want the same access to information that people all over the world want. And they are going to have it one way or the other; it's as inevitable as the next sunrise.

This is not a risk-free proposition. Neither can it be isolated from the overall process and development of more open societies. The veil of group paranoia and the crutch of never-ending conspiracies are part-and-parcel of a condition of ignorance and superstition. This need no longer be a part of any forward-thinking society. The passage of time, the introduction of new technologies, and growing social and political maturity will help herald a new day within Arab and Muslim media organizations and the societies, which they seek to serve. Of that much I am confident.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Interestingly enough, if Ashcroft's previous comments about Islam had not been accurately reported and disseminated, my colleague at Islam Online would never have had any statement on which to base his dislike of the former Attorney General in the first place!

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# Religious Ideas: Islam in the Malay Press

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**Abstract:** *The coverage of Islam in Malaysian newspapers is an intricate matter. This paper discusses the concept of Islam and other religions as reflected in the nation's Malay-language broadsheets. Coverage of Islam in its various manifestations and about Muslims is a daily phenomenon in the Malay press. Owing to Islam being the official religion of the country, coverage of other religions and their adherents are mainly subdued. There do not seem to be any dialogue. The portrayal of Islam as a monolithic way of life in Malaysia somehow denies the existence of other faiths, making dialogue almost impossible. While not positioning Islam as equivalent to other religions, this paper calls for public space in the discussion of religions and the consciousness of God. There has to be a re-understanding of the idea of religion and spirituality. One of the significant values in modern newspaper journalism is that news be based on the contingent. Timeliness is the essence and that has contributed much to the distortion about Islam and Muslims. It is time that the journalistic profession in non-Western societies initiate reforms principally at re-conceptualizing news values.*

## By way of Introducing the News of Religion

Religion in its conventional understanding has never been compatible to the ethos of news and journalism. News is the immediate, timely, current and presents a kind of novelty. Such values stand in direct opposition to godhead and the transcendent. News in its very nature is the antithesis of spirituality and structurally dependent on fact. On the other hand, religion is not a realm of facts, but a field in which every statement can be contested and all claims can be challenged, as claimed by Ernst (2005:8). News, which strives on the secular and using the language of the present, is meant to convey factual information. However, religious language, which is also used in the public sphere, is not meant to convey information, but to establish authority and legitimacy through assertion and persuasion. The problem then arises in the coverage of Islam.

Journalism (and for that matter, journalists) in non-Western societies, particularly in Muslim countries, needs to comprehend the various dimensions of Eurocentric prejudices against Islam. In the same way, journalism and journalists in Muslim societies who use Islamic religious language against the West could be seen as giving an ideological response against colonialism. Here, we must understand that religious language that is expressed on a mass scale is essentially rhetorical. Ernst suggests that sweeping religious statements of extreme opposition should not be accepted at face value, especially since they generally have immediate political consequences (Ernst, 2005:8-9). In statements that attribute political differences to fundamental religious positions, the implicit conclusion is that there is no possibility of negotiation, because religious positions are eternal and unrelated to passing events. It inherently dismisses dialogue.

In discussing the position of Islam in the eyes of the West, Ernst gives two examples. Extremist movements in opposition to the state can describe their struggle as a religious quest mandated by God. Even if the extremists are few, by making such absolute claims they can justify any action, no matter how violent, because their struggle is based on 'the truth' and the fight against 'evil'. On the other hand, governments that wish to eradicate dissent find it convenient to label their opponents as religious fanatics, relieving them of the responsibility to deal with legitimate grievances, because their opponents may be dismissed as irrational and incapable of responding to reason.

The coverage of Islam in the Western media has been inundated with stereotypes. These stereotypes are repugnant to reason and justice. As is available in much of the literature since the 1960s (see for example Suleiman, 1965, and Terry, 1975), these stereotypes of Islam and Muslims have a history deeply embedded in the psyche and self-image of Euro-American societies. The vision of the world has drastically been transformed when “Islamophobia has succeeded anti-Semitism as a form of acceptable racial and religious prejudice” (Ernst, 2005:29).

## The Coverage and the Cover-up of Islam

This paper sees religious ideas in Malaysian newspapers, especially in the Malay mainstream press over the last three decades, as not being totally divorced from the interest in Islam as expressed by the West – namely American contemporary experience in West Asia, and especially the Iranian Revolution of 1978/79. In particular, the American response to the perceived Islamic world, as noted by Edward Said in his 1981 book *Covering Islam*, was immensely relevant, and yet, antipathetically problematic. Said’s treatment of the subject, even though it was perhaps the most incisive, intense and ‘angry’ thus far, was nevertheless precise. On the outset, Said explains the semantics of the term ‘Islam’ as it is used: “One of the points I make here and in *Orientalism* is that the term “Islam” as it is used today seems to mean one simple thing but in fact is part fiction, part ideological label, part minimal designation of a religion called Islam.” One must be cognizant and logically sound in reasoning that there is no significant direct correspondence between the ‘Islam’ in common Western usage and the enormously varied life that goes on within the world of Islam (Said, 1981:x). More than two decades thence, Shamsul Amri Baharuddin (2005) echoes Said’s reasoning that 99 percent of peace-loving Muslims are perceived to be a destructive and violent people as a result of the one percent who behaved in that manner. This observation has vast ramifications on the cultural and information producing apparatus, which includes the mass media, the institution and profession of journalism, journalistic genres and in particular the criteria for news selection. In this context, the media and journalism cannot regard itself as an extension of the Enlightenment, and as a commodity resulting from the collusion of ideology, industry and the market. The news as a construct may be unique but not universal. News structures and narratives are culture bound. Is the non-Occidental side of the divide bounded by its unthinking use without transforming its epistemology?

Hence, it is not only that the 99 percent of Muslims are traumatized through the portrayal, characterization, analysis and exposure of the violent one percent – media institutions in the West, the Muslim world, as well as in Malaysia have been and are still party to ‘Islam’ as a piece of traumatic news. One of the actions taken by newspapers in Malaysia to counter this problem was to organize a ‘Media Seminar on Islam in the Modern World’ in September 1987. The seminar, organized by the Malaysian Press Institute, was to help editors and journalists comprehend the phenomena of Islamic resurgence and Western media bias with particular focus on the role of the Malaysian journalistic fraternity. It was an effort to address that bias and comprehend the labels attached to Islam – such as ‘fundamentalist Islam’, ‘orthodox Islam’, ‘terrorist Islam’, ‘violent Islam’ and ‘militant Islam’. And over the last decade or so, we hear and see the popular usage of the terms ‘political Islam’ and ‘moderate Islam’.

Hence, there was a felt need to embrace news and other journalistic genres as being integral to the community that transmits, interprets and receives it. The news can be regarded as a culture – the dynamism that constructs and reconstructs reality, the entity that determines everyday life. And newspapers do not exist in isolation from the diverging forces shaping the culture and ethos of a society. The substance of news, therefore, needs to involve shared historical experiences and common structures of meaning. In this instance, religious ideas are part of the cosmic order, the nature of the material world, the nature and destiny of man and society, the past remembered, and the present as recorded. These are all part of the story system. What we experience today is a news culture that lacks philosophical insights and epistemological reflections. Hence, what is reflected is a product portraying bits and pieces of isolated and unconnected reality (Phillips, 1976). The coverage of Islam is epistemologically embedded in simplistic, stimulus-response explanations in the process of newsgathering and pursuing the ‘big story’.

In this sense, the techniques of journalism define what is considered to be real, what can be written about and how it can be understood from the standpoint of society. It also defines what society can and should think – the range of what is taken to be real on a given day. If something happens that cannot be packaged by that formula, then in a fundamental sense, it has not happened. In a sense, the notion that 99 percent of Muslims living in this world are a peace loving people does not exist because it was not brought to the attention of society. It

is only the one percent that receives media attention because it fits into the formula of newsworthiness, timeliness, novelty and deviance, to the extent of even conditioning the other 99 percent into shifting their perspectives on the religion.

Given the scenario, an ironic situation arises. Even to journalists (both Western and Malaysian) themselves, the definition of news (and other journalistic genres) is distinctly metaphysical and difficult to answer except in terms of their intuition, 'feel' and innate judgement. What we saw, at least over the last three decades of covering Islam, is that the news has been reduced to prove the exception, to be timely, perishable, saleable, superficial, simple and objective, human interest, knowledge, events and issues (Tuchman, 1978; Merican, 2001). McLuhan's global village has ironically divided us, making us strangers to one another, not bringing us together as neighbors, virtual or real. Even in Malaysia, the two English-language dailies project a different, at times opposing ethos altogether as compared to the two Malay-language dailies in their collective existence as a national newspaper. The former present a cosmopolitan outlook, more oriented toward a plural Islam, an Islam of human rights and civil liberties. The latter, on the other hand, present a Malay-Muslim ethos, always aware of the inconceivable separation between *Melayu* (being Malay) and Islam, but at the same time also aware of the diverse nature of Islam, and issues facing Muslims beyond Malaysia.

In the case of covering Islam by the Western media, as well as the English and the Malay-language dailies in Malaysia, we see in the widest sense, a variety of interpretation. One interpretation sees Islam as the Other, while another sees non-Muslims as the Other, and yet another echoes a sense of mutual co-existence and "all of them creating and revealing themselves and their interpretations as very central features of their existence" (Said, 1981:41). In this sense, Said cautions that no one lives in direct contact either with truth or reality. God does not descend upon our backyard and tell us what to do. We live in a world managed by human beings, in which such things as 'the nation' or 'Christianity' or 'Islam' is the result of agreed upon convention, historical processes, and above all, willed human labor, which was expended to give those things an identity we can recognize. The received interpretations are an integral part of living in society. C. Wright Mills says:

Every man, to be sure, observes nature, social events, and his own self: but he does not, he has never, observed most of that he takes to be fact, about nature, about society, or self. Every man interprets what he observes – as well as much of what he has not observed: but his terms of interpretation are not his own; he has not personally formulated or even tested them. Every man talks about observations and interpretations to others; but the terms of his *reports* are much more likely than not the phrases and images of other people which he has taken over as his own. For most of what he calls solid fact, sound interpretation and suitable presentations, every man is increasingly dependent upon the observation posts, the interpretation centres, the presentation depots, which in contemporary society are established by means of what I am going to call the cultural apparatus (Mills, 1967:406).

The newspaper as a branch of this cultural apparatus can be said to constitute a communal core of interpretations providing a certain picture of Islam and society, and reflecting a dominant ideology in the society that is served by the media.

## Historical Background of Journalism and Newspapers in Malaysia

The genesis and evolution of the press in Malaysia are determined by several factors, namely, (1) historical circumstances which saw the collision between European colonialism with the Malay-Muslim world; (2) the emigration of the Indians and Chinese into colonial Malaya; (3) the emergence of cultural and ethnic diversities; (4) the war against Communist insurgents (5) the contest over Islam among the Malays; (6) the formation of state institutions and legal instruments; and (7) public policies.

Historically, newspapers were initiated and sustained by members of overseas communities whose loyalties and ties were to a motherland other than Malaya. For instance, the first English language newspaper served a handful of East India Company officials and British missionaries. British missionaries were later responsible for the first Chinese language periodical in the then Malaya. They

were designed to proselytize for Protestantism in China and not in the Straits Settlements where they were published. The Malayan Chinese press in its later development operated primarily to propagate in China the reformist-revolutionary movements at the turn of the century and the Kuomintang-Communist campaigns just before and immediately after World War II.

Although a Tamil press existed in Malaya since the 1870s, it was not until the 1920s that those newspapers took up reformist causes for Indians that had settled in Malaya. They then campaigned for better immigration policies, working conditions for the laborers and political rights (Lent, 1977). Commenting on the Malay-language press, Roff (1974) remarks that it owes its origins very largely to locally born Indian Muslims in Singapore. Also, at the same time, the Arab-born community in the Straits Settlements, principally in Singapore, dominated the Malay-language press. Beginning with the *Jawi Peranakan* in 1876, through the World War II, the Arab and Indian Muslim-dominated Malay-language press played a critical role in providing public space for debates and polemics amongst the Malay-Muslim community. Initially, the Malay-language periodicals prior to the 1900 took a more social and cultural outlook in discussing issues like Malay customs, the Malay language, and the threat of Westernization and modernization. The periodicals (especially *Jawi Peranakan*) also took the responsibility of recording and documenting Malay life throughout the archipelago.

But since the early 1900s, the Malay-language newspaper *Utusan Melayu* (the Malay version of the Singapore Free Press), and a journal known as *al-Imam* (1906-1908), began to cover more serious issues 'rather than on the weather' in Malay discourses. The journal, led by Syed Shaikh al-Hady and Shaikh Tahir Jalaluddin (its first editor), was especially seen as a departure from the conventional mode of news coverage. Subsequently, other journals like *Saudara* and *al-Ikhwan* emerged, taking a radical turn by placing the religion of Islam in the forefront of social and political reforms. Subsequent newspapers such as *Lembaga*, *Majlis* and *Majallah Guru* took their cue from *al-Imam* in their critique of (Malay) society, which subsequently helped to fuel nationalistic sentiments.

The era after World War II saw the rapid growth of newspapers in Malaya. There were at least 13 English-language and 20 Malay-language newspapers. At that time, the Malay-language *Utusan Melayu* (founded in 1939) advocated the struggle for independence from the British. In its editorial in 1946, the newspaper

made a commitment to struggle for race, religion and UMNO (the United Malays National Organization). Such developments became the basis of many of the contemporary policies and regulation towards the press. Over the last four decades, two events – one domestic and the other foreign – have particularly configured and conditioned the thinking about religion and Islam in the Malaysian polity, as reflected in the journalistic media. These are the communal riots of 13 May 1969, and the Iranian Revolution of 1978/79.

The May 13 incident (over wealth distribution, and economic inequalities among the Malays and Chinese) was a culminating point in solidifying mass media policies. In their aftermath, the government instituted policies, altered laws and restructured society. The print and broadcast media were institutionalized as being integral to nation building and placed on the track of harnessing national integration as well as racial and religious harmony. The daily newspapers are ‘mainstreamed’ into assisting the government in implementing national objectives as spelt out in the New Economic Policy and other development plans. In the aftermath of the riots, the then deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak made the following comments:

The lesson of the recent disturbances is clear. This nation cannot afford to perpetuate a system that permits anybody to say or do anything, which would set one race against another. If the events of May 13 are not to occur again, if this Nation is to survive, we must make sure that subjects which are likely to engender racial tensions are not exploited by irresponsible opportunists. We can only guarantee this by placing such subjects beyond the reach of demagogues... and other subversives (National Operations Council, 1969).

## Ideas on Religion and the Search for Islam in the Press

There are two modes of covering religion in the Malaysian press – one sees religion in exclusive terms, existing in a particularly monolithic domain; and the other identifies religion as being diverse, pluralistic, and often embracing the dimension of human rights, dialogue and tolerance. In Malaysia’s two national English-language dailies, *The New Straits Times* and *The Star*, religions such

as Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism are presented as peaceful and compassionate. These religions are construed to be advocates of dialogue, as well as national and global harmony. On the other hand, their coverage of Islam and Muslim societies may not necessarily present the religion as being tolerant. In their coverage, four dimensions of discourse can be identified. One is a reinterpretation of Islam, by taking on the non-traditional, unorthodox meaning in its belief and practice; two, looking at Islam as a diverse religion that can give rise to conflicts, not at peace with itself, as well as enamored with theological and political schisms within and external to Malaysia; three, a tacit projection of Islam as an obstacle to religious and ethnic harmony (the photograph of UMNO Youth leader holding up a *kris* [a short Malay dagger] on the front page of the *Star*); and four, portraying Islam and Muslims as intolerant and violent (the *Star*'s 'Jihadist' headline).

On the other hand, in the Malay-language press, represented by *Utusan Malaysia* and *Berita Harian*, there is a noticeable absence of any discourse on religions other than Islam, stopping short of announcing themselves as 'Islamic' newspapers. Malay ideas about Islam as portrayed in the two dailies are largely confined to Malay society, in that Islam is viewed as monolithic, and the only legitimate faith in Malaysia and for the Malays. In the first instance, both dailies have mainstreamed Islam to be of the *Sunni* and *Shafie* school. Other sects such as Shiism, and other theological schools such as *Hanafi*, *Hambali* and *Maliki* are excluded from news coverage or commentaries. With Islam being the religion of the Malays, and that constitutionally defined, being a Malay is also being a Muslim, one finds a number of constructs on Islam in the two Malay dailies. First, the Islam portrayed is of the Sunni and Shafie School; secondly, Islam is exclusivist, and not equalled to other religions; thirdly, Islam is Malay and intertwined with Malay culture and customs; fourthly, Islam is compatible to modernization; fifthly, Islam is a religion of peace; sixthly, religion (read *agama* and not Islam) is separated from politics; seventhly, Islam is a total way of life (read *syumul*) in that it encompasses all aspects of life; and eighthly, there are constant reminders of the *akhirat* (the hereafter), especially in commentaries and essays.

As observed by some scholars in the 1980s (see for example Kessler, 1980), the concern with being Islam and the reassertion of Islamic identity was linked, *inter alia*, to the problem of Malays having to confront the issues of cultural,

economic, educational and political survival, and the conflict between two competing interpretations of Islam as projected by UMNO on the one hand, and PAS on the other. Latterly, UMNO had been induced to make some concessions (the latest being the propagation of Islam Hadhari), which serves to further enhance the importance of Islam in Malaysia. In addition, there is the continuous problem of the search for Malay identity and of that identity within Islam. Since being Malay is defined as one who practices Malay customs and is a Muslim, it has become inconceivable to be Malay but not Muslim at the same time. Malay identity is embedded in Islam. Hence, what we see in the Malay newspapers are daily discourses on Islam and Malay (read: Muslim) society with regards to their concerns for ritual practices, items on *ulamas*, the history of Islam in Malaysia and the Malay world, Qur'anic interpretations and the *hadith* (sayings of the prophet), as well as the understanding and use of science and technology in accordance to Islamic norms and values. In fact, the *Berita Harian* has a daily page (except Saturdays and Sundays) on *agama* (read: Islam) designed in an almost encyclopaedic manner. By implication, we cannot separate the Malay identity of the newspaper from its Islamic identity.

The last three decades had seen the significance of authority/bureaucratic-defined Islam competing with the popularly defined Islam. One such authority/bureaucratic institution that saw its expanded role was the *Bahagian Hal Ehwal Agama Islam* (Religious Affairs Division) in the Prime Minister's Office. Having evolved into what is now called the *Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia* (JAKIM) or the Department of Islamic Development, it is seen as strengthening the role of Islam in Malaysia. On the other hand, the popularly defined Islam can be seen through Islamic movements or *da'wah* groups, which have started to demand a greater role for Islam in public life, including a greater jurisdiction based on Islamic law. Thus, the increasing religious consciousness of the Malay population demands a more visible implementation of Islam in the context of redressing the economic imbalances among the three ethnic groups, and in countering the rise of materialism and permissiveness among the Malays.

Such a consciousness, finding itself in the pages of the newspapers, often takes an apologetic tone in that the newspaper editors reproduce in their own thoughts, the thinking of those whom they labelled as the modern, metropolitan West who 'have demonized Islam'. What we have here is the general problem of knowing and categorization. Reflecting (and believing) in the philosophy of nation

building, which much of the postcolonial world was deeply concerned with, Malaysian editors and journalists (including the Malay-Muslims) regard Islam as falling within the purview of ‘development perspectives’. It can be seen as another way of saying that, in this case, the Malays, who are Muslims, are in need of ‘modernization’. Hence, stories – news and commentaries – prescribing Islam as modern, developed and scientific, were published. However, unconsciously, the media injected the very doctrine of Social Darwinism into Islam so much so that the construction of Islam in evolutionist terms becomes the norm in Malay journalistic discourses.

Malay journalists in both the Malay-language dailies subscribe to established professional norms and conventions, and see themselves as part of the larger global journalistic fraternity. By way of practice and the routine of work, and although critical of how Islam is covered by the global media, Malay journalists have institutionalized the criteria for news selection much like their counterparts elsewhere in the West. These can be seen through the current nature, novelty, prominence and proximity of each event, issue or process. In deciding what is news, Malay journalists are much a product of a constructed reality – that of identity in its various dimensions, citizens of a nation-state, and regarding the West as the Other. An important dimension in determining news values as such is proximity, which can be divided into the physical and psychological; and further classified into geographical, cultural, historical, economic, political and religious states. And it is the factor of proximity that has been dominant in the West’s coverage of Islam – in this case, Islam as embedded in the Western consciousness, and manifested in various and differing ways. Taking the coverage of the 1978/79 Iranian Revolution as an example, the manifestations of Islam by the European and American media do vary. This, *inter alia*, has largely to do with proximity in all its aspects. Differences in manifestations were due to degrees of proximity – one particular example being that Europe has had historical links and colonial experiences with Islam, whereas the United States encountered Islam only during the last century. It should also be noted that the United States was never a colonial power to any Muslim community.

What is critical here is to look at proximity as a dominant criterion in the Malay newspapers’ selection of what should be covered. Much of it – except for the homogenous construction of Islam in Malaysia – parallels the Western media’s coverage, which is linked to its strategic interests. Stories in the Malay newspapers

regarding schisms of Islam outside Malaysia, religio-political sectarianisms, poverty and underdevelopment in Muslim countries, contribute to the negative image of Islam and its adherents. Much of such stories were constructed in the mode of the popular notion of Orientalism. The orientation of the Malay newspapers (*Berita Harian* and *Utusan Malaysia*) in covering Islam parallels that of the Western media's, especially in terms of economic and political proximity. The Malay press used the Western media as a reference in terms of its news values, which in turn means that they inevitably reproduce news about Islam as seen through the eyes of the West.

## From Islam as Reformation to Islam as Entertainment

The roots of covering Islam in the Malay press can be traced to the emergence of the journal *al-Imam* in 1906. The significance of *al-Imam* as the earliest periodical in colonial Malaya should not be under-estimated. *Al-Imam* became the platform for the *Kaum Muda* (Young Faction) in Malaysia to express the need for change and reform. The *Kaum Muda*, who were mainly graduates from universities in Egypt, were influenced by the reformist ideas of Muhammad Abduh who was the editor of *al-Manar* from 1905 onwards. They were critical and opposed to the *Kaum Tua* (Old Faction), who are made up of the traditional *ulama*. The coverage of Islam in *al-Imam* was induced by several factors, notably the European Reformation movement, the Islamic modernist movement, and the orthodoxy of the Malay *Kaum Tua*. The journal, carrying the banner of the modernist-reformist movement of Muhammad Abduh, Syed Jamaluddin al-Afghani and Rashid Ridda called for a transformation of Malay-Muslim society based on reason and rationality. Through their publications, scholar-journalist-writers such as Syed Shaikh al-Hady and Shaikh Tahir Jalaluddin played a leading role in advocating ideas about the religion, against the conservatism and docility of the traditionalists who dominated the official Islam of the colonial state. However, the *Kaum Muda* movement failed to dislodge the *Kaum Tua* from the state bureaucracy. The movement was rendered ineffective by the actions of the authorities that ranged from physical force to official *fatwas* (religious rulings) that described the *Kaum Muda*'s ideas as 'deviationist'. The *Kaum Muda*'s pan-Islamism failed to attract mass Malay support. Instead, its rejection of the Malay royalty, which symbolized Malay political claim on the now multi-ethnic society, exacerbated the feeling of insecurity among the Malays.

For all its failings, the modernist movement was seen to mark the beginning of organized Muslim politics among the Malays, drawing Islam into the mainstream of Malay politics. Public discourses saw the emergence of elements of synthesis and symbiosis in Malay-Muslim politics. By the 1950s, the outlook of Islam in Malay public discourses had become distinctly modernist as reflected in dominant key terms – reason, modern education, economic development, constitutional government, and Muslim unity (Syed Ahmad Hussein, 2002). And the official Islamic lexicon as extended to the popular media, especially in the Malay newspapers, have only recently embraced other terms such as knowledge, civilization, peace and entertainment.

But a new phenomenon is beginning to appear in the Malay dailies – that is, portraying Islam in terms that are related to pop entertainment. Hence, it seems that the Malay journalistic enterprise is ready to make adjustments, in order to fulfil the demand for what is in trend and popular – in this case, turning Islam into a form of popular entertainment. Is the Malay press in search of a politically conducive ideal Islam?

One example of this can be seen in a recent issue of the Malay-language daily *Utusan Malaysia* (August 18, 2005) which carried a story on the front page, regarding a suggestion that the annual *tilawah al-Quran* (Quran recital competition) should emulate the popular reality television series *Akademi Fantasia*. The story cited a *qari* (person who reads *Qur'an*) from the *tilawah*, who suggested that such a change might attract the younger generation to the event. The Malay press has always been protective of Islam as a religion, a way of life, an instrument for solving problems, and for salvation. But, in this instance, by publishing this particular story, it seems to allow the solemn ritual of reciting the Quran to be likened to an entertainment show and supported as a paradigm for popular culture – in short, identifying and labelling Islam as religious entertainment. Two days later, on August 20, both the Malay newspapers (*Berita Harian* and *Utusan Malaysia*) carried statements made by the Party of Islam (PAS) leader Nik Aziz Nik Mat, in which he allowed Asmawi bin Ani or popularly known as Mawi, the winner of *Akademi Fantasia*, to perform in Kelantan. By giving prominence to the PAS' agreement for Mawi to perform in their state, the newspapers seems to have chosen Mawi as an acceptable Malay Muslim icon, thus legitimizing the step to turn religion into an entertainment form.

## Some Conclusions

Recently, a group of scholars and researchers from Malaysia and the Nordic countries of Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Finland gathered for a joint research project on the relationship between Islam and the West. They suggested the categorization of Islam as ‘popular Islam’ in order to divert the perception and general negative paradigm inherent in the term ‘political Islam’. In terms of demography, the concept refers to the ways and lifestyles practiced by 99 percent of the Muslim population – based on peace, moderation, and ordinary behaviour. The concept seeks to manifest the diverse faces of Muslim life. It emphasizes that people who believe in Islam have aspirations and desires like any other adherents in this world. It also emphasizes that Muslims also need good education, a secured living standard, acceptable levels of health, and skills in all areas especially in economics, science and technology. In other words, 99 percent of the believers of Islam desired for prosperity and the accumulation of wealth. They are not divorced from the influence of consumerism. In their devotion to Islam, in their submission to the Will of God, these Muslims are not motivated by the greed for power, but by living a life sanctioned by God, fellow Muslims and fellow human beings. The measure for success is not in social status and the amount of money in the bank, but in piety and a peace-loving and God-fearing nature (Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, 2005).

Since our actions are based on religion, it is imperative for newspapers to play the role of mediator and peacemaker. The criteria and nature of news and opinions have to be structurally transformed. News needs to be intrinsically peace, and not war, oriented. It would seem to us that the culture of news, as a by-product of the Industrial Revolution, has been embedded in the context of various kinds of war – epistemological, semantic and economic. News should not be seen as a commodity, moving and detaching itself as an instrument of conflict and chaos. As such, news and other stories of the 99 percent of Muslims should be disclosed, not hidden, due to the antics of the one percent.

Hence, the task of journalists and journalism is to project the hidden potential of Muslim societies, and make sense of the environment necessary for the existence of Muslims, not one that alienates them from the scheme of things. Stories are viewed as the creation, disclosure and interpretation of ideas based on events and processes. It sees the underlying structures, movements and forces

shaping and determining social facts and meaning. Thus, the Muslim journalistic fraternity has to re-examine the nature of the news paradigm. For example, the news should emphasize on processes and contexts, instead of events in isolation. As such, reportage on Islam needs to be intellectualized and contextualized, which invariably defines our place biologically, socially and metaphysically. The ethos is the timeliness inherent in the timelessness; the contingent inherent in the transcendent; and the concrete inherent in the abstract. The transmission of information know-how should come second. The newspaper as a cultural apparatus and journalists as interpreters of life, need to carry the ethos of the needs for identity, legitimacy and community.

Hence, for dialogue to be established, the news about Islam and other religions need to involve shared historical experiences and a common structure of meaning. All are parts of a story-telling system. To the journalist covering Islam, and to the editor gate-keeping issues about Islam, the separation of facts from values are not to be held in abeyance. The Malay journalist is an interested observer and interpreter. This quality is seen in the Malay-language newspapers. However, the Malay-language newspapers must also provide space for other religions – if not as a platform for genuine dialogue, then for the sole purpose of tolerating, understanding and not ignoring the existence of other faiths and belief-systems in the national community. Apart from that, the Malay press must also come to terms with their already dismantled epistemological space, not only by internalizing Islam both from within and without, but also expanding that space for news and other journalistic pieces in light of transcendent values. News and the journalistic narrative as conceived and practiced in non-Western societies need to be reformed. Discourses for reforming the news and the journalistic enterprise must begin in the Malay journalistic fraternity.

As such, we may call for the undertaking of several inexhaustible tasks. First, the media, and newspapers in particular, should be reconceptualized as platforms for religious and civilizational dialogues; secondly, news and other journalistic genres as products of the profession and institution should be transformed in terms of its usage; and thirdly, the labelling of Islam should be withdrawn from policy, academic and popular usage.

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# Harnessing Inter-Religious Harmony through Media Agencies

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*Haidar Bagir*

**Abstract:** *In order to carry out its mission to harness inter-religious harmony, the media would first have to overcome its weaknesses : the tendency to be partial in its covering of conflicts understood as having a religious cause, and its lack of professionalism, that is, the lack of knowledge among journalists and the other power holders within the media, and the lack of journalistic techniques conducive to peace building efforts. There are at least 3 requisites to enable the media to play a positive role: first, the need to cultivate a positive attitude towards inter-religious tolerance that can only be genuinely developed if one believes in the brotherhood of religions. Secondly, the need to develop a comprehensive study into the roots of conflicts, that is, apart from deep psychological roots, conflicts that broke out due to political and economic factors as well. For example, the huge economic gap between the rich and poor. Thirdly, the need to develop a set of journalistic techniques. Here, the author of this paper was really impressed by the so-called Peace Journalism that has been developed over the last three decades as a response to the need for media agencies to play a positive role in conflict resolution. At the end of this paper, the author will suggest several steps to complement this positive practice.*

“In the old days before civilizations were wired up they had a lot more contact with each other than they do today with all these wires. I don't know if these wires are going to help create dialogue among civilizations.” (Nasr, 2001)

The media have long been bestowed with a very lofty role as the fourth estate of democracy. As lofty as it is, the media can also be a very powerful destructive force. It lies with the fact that they wield, in this so-called information or communication era, a very great force in the opinion making business, especially with regards to the audio-visual medium such as television. The media can be a double-edged sword. Friends and foes have the same risk of being wounded by the sword, at the mercy of the fighters. If the fighters are careless, let alone wicked, it is the friend who will become the sorry victim. In this case, the media will more likely be the most powerful tool of destruction rather than the fourth pillar of the very principle of a good socio-political ideology such as democracy. Sometimes impartiality – if it can be maintained at all – is the issue. At other times it is the lack of professionalism, that is, the lack of knowledge among journalists. Then, comes the reign of uncontrolled greed for short-term profit. So the dicta “if it bleeds, it leads” and “good news, is no news” rule. Ben H. Bagdikian, Dean of the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California in Berkeley, is even more critical of the state of news reporting. He believes owners’ insistence on the bottom line leaves the news media inadequately prepared for handling complicated religious, ethnic or racial issues simply because the only time such issues are dealt with is when they become “sexy”. Day-to-day coverage, which does not produce the same attention grabbing headlines but provides on-going information that enables the broader picture to emerge, is ignored in favor of “violence and melodrama, the circus of the moment” (Bagdikian, 1997).

But most of the time it is a problem of ignorance on the side of the power holder within the media, regardless if it involves the owner or editorial leadership. Certainly there is the government, the powerful rich and the influential lobbyists who try to deter the media from revealing their weaknesses. However, at the end of the day, it is still up to the media owners and editors to shape what the media conveys.

Inter-religious harmony has always been undermined by conflicts that are seen to be religiously motivated. Unfortunately, more often than not, the media has

played a negative role by aggravating the conflicts through their partial, biased and provocative news reporting as well as slanted opinions. Even worse than that, in their reporting, the media often take sides. They act as if they are partisans of one of the parties, which are in conflict.

Let's take the example of the coverage by the Indonesian media regarding the ethnic conflicts in the Moluccas (Maluku island). A Master thesis offered by an Indonesian scholar has found, not surprisingly, that the coverage of the conflicts by two prominent Indonesian newspapers had been strongly colored by the contesting ideological inclinations of the two media (Buni Yani, 2002). KOMPAS is a Catholic-affiliated newspaper while Republika is a Muslim one. It can almost easily be concluded that the two newspapers covered and published the same event according to their ideological inclinations. The thesis found that KOMPAS almost naturally tended to defend Christian interests while REPUBLIKA defended the Muslims.

Although not totally independent of this kind of ideological or religious inclinations, this negative attitude of the media resulted in a misunderstanding of the causes of a conflict. The media tend to immediately and carelessly attribute a religious cause to any conflict involving people from different religious denominations.

Still at other times, it is merely due to a lack of journalistic techniques. Thus, when it comes to inter-religious reporting, statements like the ones issued as part of the declaration from the two-day summit of the Asia-Europe Meeting (Asem) Bali Interfaith Dialogue in Bali on 21-22 July 2005, are typical:

“...to ensure the upholding of ethics in journalism in reporting interfaith issues, of the conscious distinction between news reports and commentaries as well as the upholding of media professionalism and social responsibility by overcoming tendencies towards negativism and avoiding news labeling which lead to stereotyping religion and believers”.<sup>1</sup>

But, how can this be achieved? Inter-religious harmony can be defined as the absence of conflict between religions. In short, peace. However, peace alone, when it is not based on a certain mental attitude, would prove to be fragile. As

said by Baruch Spinoza: “Peace is not an absence of war, it is a virtue, a state of mind, a disposition for benevolence” (Spinoza, 1937:110). Johan Galtung goes even further by introducing the concept of negative versus positive peace. That peace may be more than just the absence of overt violent conflicts (negative peace). Instead, it includes a range of relationships up to a state where nations (or any groupings in conflict) might have collaborative and supportive relationships (positive peace)(Galtung, 1969:183-186).

Therefore, before everything else, there are at least 3 requisites to enable the media to play a positive role with regards to a real inter-religious harmony: First, the need to cultivate a positive attitude towards inter-religious tolerance that, to my opinion, can only be genuinely developed if one believes in the brotherhood of religions, that religions have at least the same origin, that all of them are basically good or – if you like – originally good. Further than that, religions are believed to share the same (good) cause and plenty of common values. And this is not limited to the so-called “religion of the books” but also between those “worldly” religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, etcetera.

Therefore, if dialogue is meant to succeed, it has to involve an understanding between religions. However, the understanding has to transcend a mere formality and instead has to reach higher onto the spiritual infrastructure of all religions. It has to take into account the deeper dimensions and resonance of human experiences.

Needless to say, this is not necessarily an invitation to a religious relativism, nor even to pluralism, if pluralism is to be understood as the belief that all religions are essentially the same. The point here is that all religions and its followers can certainly develop mutual understanding, respect and tolerance with which they can build a common platform for a lasting inter-religious harmony. Secondly, there is the need to develop a comprehensive study into the roots of conflicts. Such a study of conflicts cannot be undertaken in isolation and without taking into account the present state of the world. Conflicts often have deep psychological roots as evident in the lengthy studies done by psychologists, social psychologists and psychoanalysts. However, sometimes conflicts break out due to political and economic factors as well. With the terrible gap between the rich and poor in various communities and countries of the world, how can

we naively call for peace and mutual understanding? How can we call for dialogue if this inequality persists and if no fundamental steps are taken to help the deprived peoples of the world? How can we talk of peace and security, and forget justice when in this third millennium, thirty percent of the world's population will continue to live in abject poverty? Even if a group of people decides to save its life and forget the fate of people other than itself, it is obliged to help others in order to protect its own security. For a number of social, political and technical reasons, all the people living in today's world find themselves aboard the same ship.

Thirdly, there is the need for the followers of a religion to possess sufficient knowledge about religion(s) other than theirs. Ignorance is always the enemy. Ignorance makes people afraid. Even worse than that, ignorance entails prejudice. And prejudice has been proven to be the source of not only conflicts but also cause the media to be impartial in its coverage of the conflicts. Hence, the attainment of an inter-religious tolerance is impossible without the knowledge of other religions.

Knowledge of sectarian groups or schools within a religion is no less important owing to the fact that these sects and schools have different – sometimes contrasting – opinions and stands toward issues. I am afraid that even a very senior – and otherwise very sympathetic, journalist, who has been exposed to covering Muslim countries, even to the extent of writing books about its people, can still have a slanted opinion about a group within the religion, due to the lack of sectarian knowledge. Indeed, when it comes to Western reporters' coverage of Muslims, they tend to get along better with the more modernist, progressive or liberal sections of the Muslim communities. This usually results in journalists being ignorant or misunderstanding the more fundamentalist faction within the community. Biased news or opinions that is, negative projections, about this group will, in turn, only aggravate the situation and result in the hardening of attitudes among the fundamentalists, since they will see it as a deliberate discredit, and hence, a form of oppression.

An understanding of sectarian groups or schools within a religion is important so that one would not make a sweeping generalization concerning a religious issue based on only a school or sect within the religion. Generalization has also

proven to aggravate misunderstanding and result in stereotyping. Thirdly, the need for better journalistic techniques. Without enough mastery of journalistic techniques in covering conflicts, even knowledgeable and religiously tolerant journalists can unconsciously aggravate the conflicts by projecting the conflicting parties as consisting of the good and bad guys. The so-called Peace Journalism that has been developed in the last three decades in response to the need for a positive role among media agencies in conflict resolutions is impressive. “Peace journalism” is a term first coined by Johan Galtung in the 1960s to describe a style of reporting which deliberately seeks to de-escalate a conflict through focusing on “conflict transformation”<sup>2</sup>. Peace journalists look at a conflict from a resolution point of view and ask questions such as “what are the deeper roots of the conflict?” and “what are the parties’ real goals?”<sup>3</sup>

The respond to the three requisites described above, apart from a training in peace journalism, would have to take the form of a multi-cultural and multi-religious education among the media. This is, certainly, easier said than done, especially since the media tend to be very egocentric as well as pedantic. This can happen even if there are some who are sufficiently exposed to the direct coverage of multi-cultural and multi-religious, even sectarian groups and, thus, sufficiently matured to see everything from a much more complex perspective. Let’s relate back to the example of the conflict in the Moluccas. Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick<sup>4</sup> – the two most important proponent of Peace Journalism, who led the Peace Journalism trip to the area, found that the ethnic conflict, seemingly spurred by religious hatred between the followers of Islam and Christianity, was triggered by factors other than religious issues. They found no inborn mutual loathing, which automatically sets devotees of the two religions at each other’s throats. So, how did the two communities lapse into a cycle of violence which has seen hundreds killed, three thousand houses burned down and perhaps as many as twenty thousand flee their homes? Here are their eye-opening findings<sup>5</sup>:

Everything starts with the road into Poso: a road which had been divided into numerous tiny roads used by both Muslims and Christians, separated by paramilitary (Brimob) observation posts at intervals of as short as fifty metres. The road itself holds a clue. It is part of the Trans-Sulawesi highway connecting the island’s main cities, a Suharto-era project, which had brought the benefits of increased commerce, as well as the problems associated with transmigration

and development. The Pamona people, who originally settled there, learned Christianity a century ago from Dutch missionaries. New arrivals, mainly Bugis people from Makassar, but also a sprinkling of Javanese, tended to be Muslims until the groups grew and attained roughly equal numbers.

By convention, the local government leader (*bupati*) would be chosen alternately from each section of the community. But the road and other developments made the office a valuable bauble in terms of kickbacks and patronage. With the fall of Suharto, the Muslim incumbent, Arif Patanga, challenged the convention by proposing his son Agfar to succeed him. The younger Patanga seems set to turn religious differences into a political weapon in order to stir up trouble in Poso. The objective was to prevent the Christian candidate from taking office. In the afternoon, the city was full of uniformed local police and Brimob, as well as a large number of civil servants making their way home from the office. As a main administrative centre, Poso's livelihood depends heavily on public sector jobs. Simultaneous upheavals in both national and local politics were bound to have an unsettling effect.

At around that time, in late 1998, a street brawl resulted in a Muslim man being cut in the arm with a knife. Instead of going to the police, he rushed into a nearby mosque and called on its occupants to rouse themselves against the Christians, whom he blamed for inflicting the wound. The first round of house-burnings, known later as 'Poso I', ensued.

That incident, against the background of political unrest, suggests an alternative explanation for the resulting violence. A conflict model began to take shape, in which both parties inhabit a number of shared problems. The *bupati* was appointed from Palu, not elected in Poso. This reflects a deficient political system that was bound to encourage personal rivalry and 'top-doggerly'.

Kickbacks from development projects were part of 'KKN', Corruption-Collusion-Nepotism, a flourishing culture under the New Order, with its lack of transparency and accountability. These conditions encouraged people to form and join groups to safeguard their interests, to stick together with those of their own kind. It was one of the factors that propelled the injured man into the arms of his co-religionists, instead of taking up his grievance with the authorities.

About an hour's drive inland from Poso lies the town of Tentena, a Christian stronghold in which the community blamed the Muslims squarely for 'starting it', thus justifying the act of vengeance on their part.

A version of the event came from a local Christian guide who confidently asserted that Agfar Patanga had gotten away with his role as provocateur, and was now enjoying the comforts of a sinecure in Palu's local administration. Elsewhere, Christian militiamen Domingus Soares and Cornelius Tibo languished in jail. It led the Christians to believe that the justice system could not be trusted, putting the onus on Christians to defend themselves.

It turned out to be a symptom of another shared problem – a deficient information system. No newspapers were on sale in Tentena. It is doubtful whether townsfolk knew that Patanga had been committed for trial in Palu.

In this situation, even instances in which people of different religions genuinely respect and cooperate with each other, naturally disappear from the scene as well. For example, before that, the local Moluccan Muslim and Christian clerics tried to promote a mutual understanding between their respective communities.

The conflict demonstrated clearly that good journalism is always needed in the coverage of conflicts, not only in terms of promoting an unbiased and fair reporting, but also to guarantee a reliable information system that can be accessed by members of the conflicting parties. Good journalism, as propounded by Peace Journalism, resists explanations for violence in terms of innate or essential enmities between parties, such as the 'ancient hatreds' theory that is so prevalent in the coverage of conflicts in the Middle East, the Balkans and Indonesia itself.<sup>6</sup>

One might think that the problem with Peace Journalism is that it would not allow journalists to fight for a cause, except for peace itself – a fight that would, in this situation, prove to be impossible to attain at all. This is because, normally a conflict involve a situation in which there is an instance of injustice or an act of injustice committed by a party against the other, even if it is done by only some members of a community, usually the leaders. Hence, a taking of sides cannot and should not be avoided, even if only initially, because peace is unimaginable without the eradication of oppression. However, upon careful analysis, one would discover that the principles of Peace Journalism still hold

in this particular situation. Here is when the first tip of Peace Journalism becomes relevant: **AVOID** portraying a conflict as consisting of only two parties contesting one goal. The logical outcome is for one to win and the other to lose. **INSTEAD**, a Peace Journalist would **DISAGGREGATE** the two parties into many smaller groups, pursuing many goals, opening up more creative potential for a range of outcomes. This principle allows us to single out a subgroup as far as, if necessary, identifying it with oppression without necessarily make a sweeping generalization that the whole group is the oppressor. Hence, tip no. 2: **AVOID** accepting stark distinctions between “self” and “other”. These can be used to build the sense that another party is a “threat” or “beyond the pale” of civilized behavior — both key justifications for violence. **INSTEAD**, seek the “other” in the “self” and vice versa. If a party is presenting itself as “the goodies”, ask questions about how different its behavior really is to that it ascribes to “the baddies”.

However, it has to be once again emphasized here: without the inter-religious tolerance and sufficient knowledge of religions as well as a correct understanding of the causes of conflicts, sophisticated techniques will prove to be ineffective, ruined by fanaticism and fear.

To ensure this, concrete steps have to be carried out through an ongoing multi-cultural and multi-religious, even multi-sectarian, education among the media. Other than holding conferences, seminars and workshops about the role of media agencies in harnessing inter-religious harmony, there is no better way for media agencies to adopt a multi-cultural and multi-religious perspective except to shape the make up of its editorial boards – the journalists and editors – as multi-cultural and multi-religious as possible. Secondly, media agencies have to penetrate deep into the hitherto terra incognita of the religious communities they report on. Indeed, there is no better way to understand a community than to mingle directly with the people. Thirdly, exchange programs between journalists across religions have to be designed and carried out as much as possible. Fourthly, libraries of resources related to inter-religious issues as well as to media coverage of such issues have to be built and made easily accessible for journalists and editors. This can be done in a digital format. Fifthly, plenty of newspaper and magazine spaces as well as audiovisual airtime have to be allocated for articles and programs which are designed to, as much as possible, accommodate materials that can create better understanding between religions.

## Appendix I:

### THE DECLARATION OF THE ASIA-EUROPE MEETING (ASEM) BALI INTERFAITH DIALOGUE INTERFAITH DIALOGUE IN 2005<sup>7</sup>

- Reaffirmed the importance of religious freedom in an international atmosphere of peace, tolerance, mutual understanding and respect
- Acknowledged the wisdom of the world's faiths and religions
- Acknowledged the various international initiatives promoting dialogue and cooperation among different religions
- Proclaimed that all the religions ... commonly advocate peace, compassion and tolerance among mankind
- Proclaimed that the right of individual to choose religion or faith can contribute to upholding respect for the diversity of faiths and religions, which is essential in combating ideologies based on extremism, intolerance, hatred and the use of violence
- Proclaimed the need for people of different religions and faiths to stand united against the use of violence to divide mankind; calling on all people to speak up against those who use religion to rationalize terrorism and murder
- Proclaimed that peace, justice, compassion and tolerance need to be cultivated and nurtured to help create an environment conducive to building harmony within the international community and people
- Called on their governments to continue to promote interfaith dialogue
- Encouraged governments to incorporate interfaith studies in curricula at the post-elementary level to promote understanding and respect for the various faiths and religions, giving due consideration to the specific circumstances of the respective countries
- Encouraged research through seminars/workshops and other activities to define educational curricula that promote and strengthen interfaith dialogue
- Called to strengthen cooperation on enhancing the capacity of human resources through exchanges of students, teachers and youth
- Called for educating society to accept and deal with diversity and to prevent the emergence of extremism and prejudice through activities at the grassroots, national and regional levels

- Called to prevent the marginalization of religion-based educational institutions by integrating them into national education systems and goals
- Acknowledged the linkages between religions and cultures, to promote shared values to strengthen harmony and understanding in society
- Called to promote exchanges for better understanding and appreciation of the diverse cultures, religions and faiths at all levels in Asia and Europe
- Called to promote cross cultural awareness and understanding at all levels of society, particularly among the young
- Called to strengthen and encourage freedom of expression as the cornerstone of the participation of the media in promoting interfaith harmony
- Called to ensure the upholding of ethics in journalism in reporting interfaith issues as well as conscious distinction between news reports and commentaries
- Called for the upholding media professionalism and social responsibility by overcoming tendencies towards negativism and avoiding news labelling which lead to stereotyping religion and believers
- Called to encourage religious/community groups to be more proactive in engaging the media to promote balanced coverage as a means of fostering greater understanding of religions and cultures
- Called to urge the media to provide more time and space to cover issues and developments relating to intra-faith and interfaith dialogue and cooperation
- Called for the promotion of exchange programs and scholarships to create networks among media personnel in Asia and Europe to share best practices and generate a greater pool of resources by involving media organizations, religious communities as well as governments
- Called to define and promote common values, such as the respect for human rights and the protection of environment

## Appendix II:

### 17 TIPS: WHAT A PEACE JOURNALIST WOULD TRY TO DO<sup>8</sup>

1. AVOID portraying a conflict as consisting of only two parties contesting one goal. The logical outcome is for one to win and the other to lose. INSTEAD, a Peace Journalist would DISAGGREGATE the two parties into many smaller

groups, pursuing many goals, opening up more creative potential for a range of outcomes.

2. AVOID accepting stark distinctions between “self” and “other”. These can be used to build the sense that another party is a “threat” or “beyond the pale” of civilized behavior — both key justifications for violence. INSTEAD, seek the “other” in the “self” and vice versa. If a party is presenting itself as “the goodies”, ask questions about how different its behavior really is to that it ascribes to “the baddies” — isn’t it ashamed of itself?

3. AVOID treating a conflict as if it is only going on in the place and at the time that violence is occurring. INSTEAD, try to trace the links and consequences for people in other places now and in the future. Ask:

- \* Who are all the people with a stake in the outcome?
- \* Ask yourself what will happen if ...?
- \* What lessons will people draw from watching these events unfold as part of a global audience? How will they enter the calculations of parties to future conflicts near and far?

4. AVOID assessing the merits of a violent action or policy of violence in terms of its visible effects only. INSTEAD, try to find ways of reporting on the invisible effects, for example, the long-term consequences of psychological damage and trauma, perhaps increasing the likelihood that those affected will be violent in future, either against other people or, as a group, against other groups or other countries.

5. AVOID letting parties define themselves by simply quoting their leaders’ restatement of familiar demands or positions. INSTEAD, inquire more deeply into goals:

- \* How are people on the ground affected by the conflict in everyday life?
- \* What do they want changed?
- \* Is the position stated by their leaders the only way or the best way to achieve the changes they want?

6. AVOID concentrating always on what divides the parties, the differences between what they say and they want. INSTEAD, try asking questions that may reveal areas of common ground and leading your report with answers which suggest some goals may be shared or at least compatible, after all.

7. AVOID only reporting the violent acts and describing “the horror”. If you exclude everything else, you may seem to suggest that the only explanation for violence is previous violence (revenge); the only remedy, is more violence (coercion/punishment). INSTEAD, show how people have been blocked and frustrated or deprived in everyday life as a way of explaining the violence.

8. AVOID blaming someone for starting it. INSTEAD, try looking at how shared problems and issues are leading to consequences that all the parties say they never intended.

9. AVOID focusing exclusively on the suffering, fears and grievances of only one party. This divides the parties into “villains” and “victims” and suggests that coercing or punishing the villains represents a solution. INSTEAD, treat as equally newsworthy the suffering, fears and grievance of all sides.

10. AVOID “victimizing” language such as “destitute”, “devastated”, “defenseless”, “pathetic” and “tragedy”, which only tells us what has been done to and could be done for a group of people. This disempowers them and limits the options for change. INSTEAD, report on what has been done and could be done by the people. Don’t just ask them how they feel, also ask them how they are coping and what do they think? Can they suggest any solutions? Remember refugees have surnames as well. You wouldn’t call President Clinton, “Bill”, in a news report.

11. AVOID imprecise use of emotive words to describe what has happened to people.

\* “Genocide” means the wiping out of an entire people.

\* “Decimated” (said of a population) means reducing it to a tenth of its former size.

\* “Tragedy” is a form of drama, originally Greek, in which someone’s fault or weakness proves his or her undoing.

\* “Assassination” is the murder of a head of state.

- \* “Massacre” is the deliberate killing of people known to be unarmed and defenseless. Are we sure? Or might these people have died in battle?
- \* “Systematic” for example, raping or forcing people from their homes. Has it really been organized in a deliberate pattern or have there been a number of unrelated, albeit extremely nasty incidents? INSTEAD, always be precise about what we know. Do not minimize suffering but reserve the strongest language for the gravest situations or you will beggar the language and help to justify disproportionate responses that escalate the violence.

12. AVOID demonizing adjectives like “vicious”, “cruel”, “brutal” and “barbaric”. These always describe one party’s view of what another party has done. To use them puts the journalist on that side and helps to justify an escalation of violence. INSTEAD, report what you know about the wrongdoing and give as much information as you can about the reliability of other people’s reports or descriptions of it.

13. AVOID demonizing labels like “terrorist”, “extremist”, “fanatic” and “fundamentalist”. These terms are always given by “us” to “them”. No one ever uses them to describe himself or herself, and so, for a journalist to use them is always to take sides. They mean to say that the person is unreasonable, so it seems to make less sense to reason (negotiate) with them. INSTEAD, try calling people by the names they give themselves. Or be more precise in your descriptions.

14. AVOID focusing exclusively on the human rights abuses, misdemeanors and wrongdoings of only one side. INSTEAD, try to name ALL wrongdoers and treat equally seriously allegations made by all sides in a conflict. Treating seriously does not mean taking at face value, but instead making equal efforts to establish whether any evidence exists to back them up, treating the victims with equal respect and the chances of finding and punishing the wrongdoers as being of equal importance.

15. AVOID making an opinion or claim seem like an established fact (“Eurico Guterres, said to be responsible for a massacre in East Timor ...”). INSTEAD, tell your readers or your audience who said what. (“Eurico Guterres, accused by a top U.N. official of ordering a massacre in East Timor ...”). That way you avoid signing yourself and your news service up to the allegations made by one party in the conflict against another.

16. AVOID greeting the signing of documents by leaders, which bring about military victory or cease fire, as necessarily creating peace. INSTEAD, try to report on the issues which remain and which may still lead people to commit further acts of violence in the future. Ask what is being done to strengthen means on the ground to handle and resolve conflict nonviolently, to address development or structural needs in the society and to create a culture of peace.

17. AVOID waiting for leaders on “our” side to suggest or offer solutions. INSTEAD, pick up and explore peace initiatives wherever they come from. Ask questions to ministers, for example, about ideas put forward by grassroots organizations. Assess peace perspectives against what you know about the issues the parties are really trying to address. Do not simply ignore them because they do not coincide with established positions.

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## Endnotes

- 1 For a more complete citation of the declaration, see Appendix.
- 2 Galtung, born 24 October 1930 in Oslo, Norway, is a Norwegian professor, working at the Transcend Institute. He is seen as the pioneer of peace and conflict research and founded the PRIO - International Peace Research Institute in Oslo. He is also one of the authors of an influential account of news values, the factors which determine coverage in the news media.
- 3 This theory of journalism is not without controversy. Many journalists view peace journalism as a departure from strict objectivity and believe that it is overstepping the bounds of journalism. Galtung and others argue that journalists can and ought to do more than report from a distance.
- 4 Jake Lynch is a correspondent for Sky News and The Independent, based in London and Sydney. He is a consultant to the POIESIS Conflict and Peace Forums and co-author of "The Peace Journalism Option" and "What Are Journalists For?" He also led the Peace Journalism Trip to the Moluccas. Annabel McGoldrick runs Reporting the World, a journalism think-tank, offering regular publications and a series of seminars for UK based journalists, which she also chairs in London. An experienced

radio and television reporter and producer, she has covered conflicts in Indonesia, Thailand, Burma and Yugoslavia.

- 5 “Peace journalism in Poso : When reporting ethnic conflict, journalists can make a difference,” <http://www.insideindonesia.org/edit66/peace1.htm>
- 6 For more on Peace Journalism, see Appendix: “17 Tips : What a Peace Journalist Would Try to Do”.
- 7 Quoted from the complete declaration, [www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-terrorism/bali\\_2720.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-terrorism/bali_2720.jsp)
- 8 Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick, “Peace Journalism — How To Do It”, taken from <http://www.mediachannel.org/originals/warandpeace2.shtml>.

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# Notes on Contributors

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His book, entitled *Democracy and Authoritarianism: The Rise of the Post-Colonial State in Indonesia and Malaysia*, is published by Macmillan (1997). He is also editor (together with Lim Teck Ghee) of *Asian Inter-Faith Dialogue*, published by the World Bank (2003). His recent articles include “The Study of the Social Sciences in Developing Societies: Towards an Adequate Conceptualization of Relevance”, *Current Sociology* 49(2), 2001: 1-19; (with Vineeta Sinha) “Teaching Classical Sociological Theory in Singapore: The Context of Eurocentrism”, *Teaching Sociology* 29(3), 2001: 316-331; “Islam, Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial dan Masyarakat Sipil”, *Antropologi Indonesia* 25(66), 2001: 13-22; “Eurocentrism and the Role of the Human Sciences in the Dialogue Among Civilizations”, *The European Legacy* 7(6), 2002: 759-770; and “Academic Dependency and the Global Division of Labour in the Social Sciences”, *Current Sociology* 51(6), 2003: 599-613. He is currently working on a second book in the area of the philosophy and sociology of social science, and on another project about Muslim ideologies and utopias.

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Sunni Khalid is a senior reporter with WYPR's News Department. A veteran journalist and former foreign correspondent, Mr. Khalid was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan. He attended Howard University in Washington D.C. and graduated cum laude, majoring in print journalism. He also attended the prestigious Johns Hopkins University's Nitze School for Advanced International Studies (SAIS) in Washington D.C., majoring in African studies and international economics.

Mr. Khalid had also worked as a journalist with *Time* magazine, the *Washington Times*, *USA TODAY*, the *Wilmington News-Journal*, the *Baltimore Sun*, the Voice of America, and National Public Radio. At NPR, Mr. Khalid was a diplomatic correspondent and the Cairo bureau chief.

Mr. Khalid has reported from Africa, Europe, the Middle East, Asia and the Caribbean on a number of breaking international stories, including Operation Restore Hope in Somalia, the U.S. military intervention in Haiti, and South Africa's first all-race elections in 1994. He is a past recipient of the Maryland-District of Columbia-Delaware Press Association honorable mention, Overseas Press Club's Ben Grauer Award, and the Columbia University School of Journalism's Silver Baton Award for his coverage of Haiti and South Africa, respectively.

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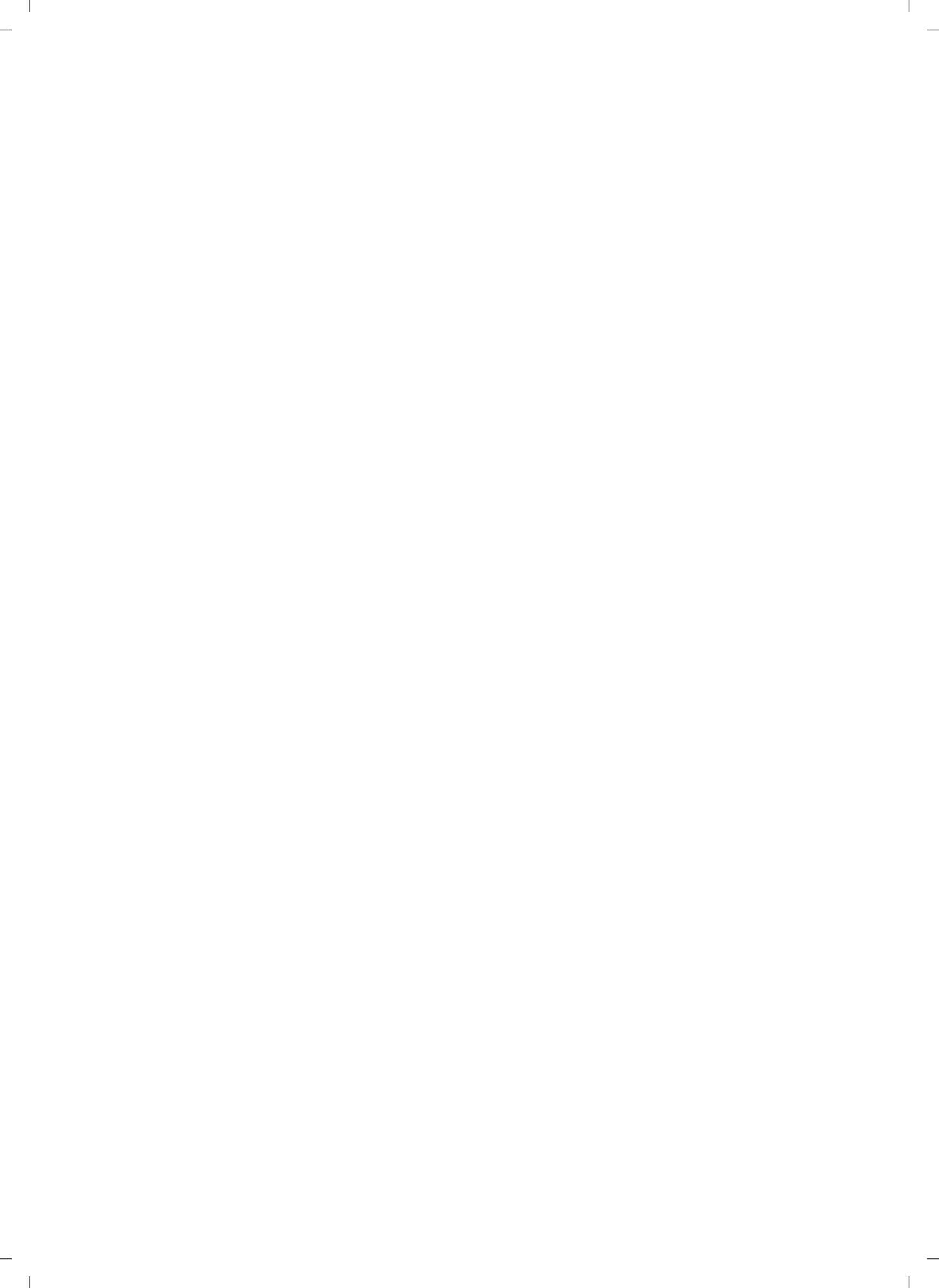
**Haidar Bagir** has been the president director of Mizan Publishing, an established publishing house in Indonesia, since 1982. Among his many other professional responsibilities include as a lecturer of the Islamic College for Advanced Studies (ICAS) London in Jakarta, chairman of the Lazuardi Hayati Foundation for Education, Founder of YASMIN (a foundation for philanthropic works on Community Education and Health), and Chairman of IIMaN Center for the Development of Positive Sufism. He has received several notable research grants from U.S. institutions, including a Fulbright Grant for Graduate Studies at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University and a Fulbright Grant for Doctoral Research in the Department of History and Philosophy of Science at Indiana University, as well as CTNS Award for Religion and Science Curriculum Development 2003. He has written numerous papers and articles on various topics – especially in the fields of (Islamic) Philosophy and Thought - and authored six books, including *Pocket Book of Islamic Philosophy*, *Pocket Book of Tasawuf* (Islamic Mysticism), *Al-Farabi*, and *Deciphering Mystical Experience: A Comparison between Heidegger and Mulla Sadra*.

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Frank Lemke is the Deputy Director of DW-AKADEMIE, Head of Deutsche Welle (DW) Training Centre. Before joining the Radio Training Centre (RTC), Frank Lemke had worked in senior positions in DW's English Department as well as in the Africa and the Near-Middle-East Department, which allowed him to get familiar with the target areas of the RTC.

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# Speech

by

**Dr Yaacob Ibrahim**

Minister for the Environment and Water Resources and  
Minister-In-Charge of Muslim Affairs

at RIMA's Seminar "COVERING ISLAM:  
CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR  
MEDIA IN THE GLOBAL VILLAGE"

on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2005, 9.30 am  
at Holiday Inn Parkview Hotel

Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Chairman of AMP

Mr Abdul Razak Chanbasha, Chairman of RIMA

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning to all, and to my Muslim friends, Assalamualaikum wr wb

Let me begin by thanking RIMA for inviting me to open this important seminar. Today's seminar brings together eminent speakers and also eminent chairpersons from the media. I am sure we will all enjoy the various sessions.

The title of the seminar reminded me of the late Prof Edward Said's book "Covering Islam". Even though the book was published nearly two decades ago, it remains required reading for serious journalists.

## Role of media in shaping society

The news media play an important role today – not just locally, but globally. The media not only report incidents, they interpret the events for readers, viewers

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and listeners. The incidents that the media highlight get amplified; and those that the media miss get left out of public consciousness. In this way, the media sets the agenda and shapes opinion. At best, media can bring together people and garner positive action that benefits mankind. At worst, they can divide and pull people apart.

Each day, in the newsroom, editors decide what the people should see and hear, about themselves and of others. Editors also decide the priorities that events and personalities should be given in the minds of the readers. With their choice of headlines and soundbites, photographs and captions, where the story should be placed, and what other stories are placed by the side, editors decide how much of the reader's, listener's or viewer's mindshare should go into the story, and also what they should feel about it. Gandhi's famous line "The pen is mightier than the sword" – probably applies to the media as well.

This is why it is important that editors, reporters, and journalists in general have to be men and women of high calibre, integrity and honour. The public have placed their faith in these few to search the land and find out for them news that will inform, educate, enlighten and sometimes entertain so as to make our lives more pleasant and meaningful. Media have a key role helping people make informed choices.

However, the job of an editor or a journalist is not easy. With a proliferation of media, journalists face stiff competition from other journalists and media. Radio made the life of newspaper reporters difficult. TV made the life of radio reporters difficult. And now we have the internet and 24 hour cable channels that whet the appetite of news junkies round-the-clock. This competition sometimes sees editors having to sacrifice accuracy in the interest of speed, or even pulling out whole stories because someone else reported it first.

The media are also run as businesses. They have to hold costs down - and this affects, for example, the decision on how many talented reporters they will have and how they will be deployed. And they have to keep sales up - and that means putting news that sound exclusive and excite the most number of people to buy a paper or tune in.

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## Contextualising media reports

Journalists are therefore under pressure of time and resources. I do not envy their job of having to provide reports in double-quick time, and at the same time taking into account the sensitivities and context of the story.

But context is important. Understanding the history, culture and politics of a people or country is critical to good analysis of an event - to help the audience make sense of what happened, why it happened, and what it means to them. It is indeed a challenge for editors and journalists who are unfamiliar with specifics of the subject, as they try to meet the rising demand. Sensitive tasks like reporting on the faith of a people requires tact and objectivity, not journalistic shorthand or sweeping statements. It is hardly a coincidence that well-regarded newspapers and news magazines carry weighty opinions that are well thought-through.

These stand in sharp contrast to what I would call ‘overnight experts’. In recent years, some academics, politicians, commentators have been emboldened to speak about Islam and Muslims even if they know little. And orientalist ideas which have been outmoded have been resurrected to justify underlying biases on Islam and Muslims today. Muslim anger is prescribed as something irrational and innate, conveniently overlooking 14 centuries of good work and scholarship that has benefited mankind, including inter-ethnic ties and inter-community relations.

Muslims, like any other faith group, feel aghast when their faith and practices are presented as retrogressive or sometimes barbaric. Take for example of how isolated stories of women who have been suppressed by their communities are strung together to make the headlines, giving the impression that this is justified and even promoted in Islam. But a clear look at the circumstances would reveal that historical, cultural and tribal variations are the influences rather than the religion itself. But these are the things that give media a field day. I am reminded of an episode in the popular BBC series “Goodness Gracious Me” where a journalist would approach a bearded Muslim father outside his home to ask him if he had stopped his daughter from going to school and from meeting her friends, and if he whips her frequently. The father is bewildered at the gross suggestion, but the journalist begs him to say he does these things. Doing so would protect the journalist’s livelihood and in turn the journalist promises to make sure that

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the father looks good on TV. With this the father comes around and agrees. It was humour, but it carried an important message.

And take the frequent description of Islam having been ‘spread by the sword’, as opposed to ‘spread by the word’. It does not take much to figure that people will not accept a religion forced upon them. Indeed, it is not the stories of violence that grate Muslims worldwide, it is that these incidents are used as a cover to promote biasness against Islam, just as the terrorists attempt to justify their criminal actions as acts against the enemies of Islam.

Equally irresponsible are the journalists on the other side of the coin, who claim every mishap to have been the work of American or Israeli intelligence or the enemies of Islam. Surely, the world deserves better.

## Being discerning and proactive

How should Muslims respond? When we feel that the reports or analyses are flawed, we should express our side and give the media and their audience the benefit of our knowledge and views. We must state our stand and tell others why. And on a general note, we must be able to express our opinions not only about Islam, but also on the many aspects of human endeavour that contribute to upholding the good society the world over. Just as we expect the media to have depth in reporting, we too must not be two-dimensional in our outlook.

Muslims must also learn not to be more concerned than necessary about media misreporting. There are many platforms in our real lives to feature Islam. A good Muslim is a good parent, a good spouse, a good sibling, a good child, a good neighbour, a good student, a good worker, a good citizen. We must choose to live by example to the best of our potential rather than shortchange ourselves and live as ‘victims’ of the media or of what we deem as public opinion. Prof Ingrid Mattson, who was interviewed over Suria Channel’s Detik programme mentioned that she was attracted to find out more about Islam because of the warmth, kindness and humility radiated by a group of Muslims whilst on campus in Canada. Thus, ordinary Muslims confident in their faith and their space can also be significant influencers. We must aim to be *Rahmatan-lil-aalamin* – or a blessing to the world.

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## Media that serves the people

Thankfully, in Singapore, Muslims are not under strain to marshal resources to defend themselves against inaccurate reporting. The media in Singapore is dedicated to being trustworthy and acutely aware of the context in which Muslims as well as people of all other faiths live here. This is why the media here have been able to strengthen bonds rather than pull people apart. Indeed there are many examples in the world, near and far, that make it obvious that a people divided is a nation divided.

But this is also because the people want to be together – to build a strong, open, multiracial, multireligious Singapore that rewards effort and promotes compassion. Having a media that is organically a part of society rather than inherently apart from society, will continue to be a reason why Singapore will flourish for many more decades to come.

With these remarks, it is my pleasure to declare this seminar open and allow the experts to discuss the various motions. Thank you.



Frank Lemke, Radio Training Centre, DW-Akademie

# Peace Journalism as a Tool of International Rapprochement

## — How Journalistic Training Can Help to Deescalate Conflicts.

Dear Chairperson, esteemed delegates and colleagues!

First of all let me thank you for inviting Deutsche Welle, Germany's International Broadcaster to contribute to this seminar.

“Challenges and Opportunities for the Media in the Global Village” is one of the captions this gathering has chosen for itself. Globalization tends, and that for quite some time now, to be either the excuse or explanation for developments in almost every field all over the world! Culture, Economy, Governance.

In German, where in two weeks' time, a new government will be voted for, one of the key issues is, how a nation should handle the drain of the capital and work-place to low-income areas of the world.

In theory everybody at home by now has embraced the idea that even a fairly rich and influential MIDDLE power like Germany is, in respect to the enormous volatility of international interaction, just one player of many.

So, why mention this in the context of this seminar?

It is because, despite this widely accepted internationalization of our world, that inter-cultural or inter-religious exchange remains rather weak or even neglected.

The European Union, and with it Germany, has a sizeable percentage of Muslims as permanent dwellers or citizens within its borders. Over 30 years or more, we just did not pay any attention to this group and its religious and, with that, cultural differences. We never really asked where do all these Moroccans, Tunisians, Bosnians and especially Turks go to, once their day's work was done. They were somehow there, but they did not really matter.

It was only after 9/11 that a bewildered German public learned that some of the young men involved in the attack on New York's twin towers had studied and worked, in our worlds, LIVED with us for years. Now, they are called dangerous sleepers, whose real numbers no one knew!

The media, always looking for a scoop, outdid each other to uncover every possible trace of radical or fundamentalist pocket in my country.

All of a sudden we learned about back-yard Mosques, Islamic educational institutions suspected to having spread anti-Western and anti-Christian ideologies, and we learnt, disturbingly, that some 4 million Muslims had long since decided to stay on permanently in Germany with no intention to return to their countries of origin!

The positive side of this was, that ever since then the Media in Germany have never stopped dealing with the Muslim question, not necessarily in the news only, but also in well-researched background articles.

The 9/11 event and the recent London events coincided with Turkey's, which is a Muslim state, efforts to become a full member of the EU.

While the outgoing German government is in favor to open such negotiations, the opposition, probably the winner in the forthcoming polls, is against it. Although there is a lot of beating around the bush, so to speak, about their real reasons of wanting to deny Turkey its membership, in essence those opposing it believe that a Muslim state, even if it is as secular as present-day Turkey, is a threat to the values of United Europe, which in their opinion is solely based on Christian and humanistic values. So Germany, and for that matter Europe, have their Muslim – Non-Muslim conflict right within their walls!

So we had to ask ourselves new questions:

- When Western societies decided to clamp down on a group of people, radicals, fanatics, are they violating their own values, and in a way let terrorists carry victory after all?
- Does our way of life in Germany change because of our changing attitudes towards security and civil liberties? Recent opinion polls show that, if asked, more and more citizens would favor tight security over civil liberties.
- Or, why do Muslims want to stay on in countries whose way of life apparently violates their ethical and moral beliefs?
- Or as V. S. Naipaul has put it once: “Is secularism a precondition of tolerance? Does one necessarily have to abandon one’s individual and cultural and religious identity to become part of the West?”

For Deutsche Welle, Germany’s International Broadcaster, this scenario is an extra challenge. Since it is our task to explain our nation in its entirety to our listeners and viewers around the globe, we had to develop a convincing strategy of how to deal with the issue.

We based our broadcast-philosophy on the commonly known ethical values of journalism. This we do in the belief that in a functionary democracy there must be room for a dialogue of culture in which the opinions of minorities are respected. Of course, journalists, like any other human being, have particular views of things and therefore also we cannot see such a thing as THE truth. We attempt to report as objectively as possible but we also clearly indicate where our personal opinions enter the picture.

Our admittedly rather high-handed aim, though, is to foster understanding between peoples and nations, cultures and religions!

As Kofi Annan put it, when visiting the United Nations University for Peace three years ago. And I may be forgiven in still thinking of the UN positively, in spite of what was said this morning.

Quote: K. Annan

“By giving voice and visibility to all people – including and especially the poor, the marginalized and members of minorities – the media can help remedy the inequalities, the ethnic tensions and the human rights abuses that form the root causes of so many conflicts.”

Kofi Annan, United Nations Secretary General  
(during his visit to the United University for Peace, 2002)

The refusal of Germany to be drawn into the US-led war-adventure in Iraq has given us an advantage in credibility when dealing with Muslim partners. In Deutsche Welle, we are happy to have many journalistic colleagues from the Islamic world to help us understand better the religious and cultural questions that are at stake.

Furthermore, Germany’s legacy of having started World War II has made us very sensitive of any policy of aggression or aggrandizement, and the racial extinction policy of Nazi-Germany has, thank God, immunized us against racial or religious mongering.

If “helping to create a better world” was not to remain a mere slogan, we had to find tools or ways to export our beliefs beyond our broadcasts on Radio, TV or lately On-line. One workable outlet is DW’s Training Academy. In the past 40 years we have trained some 40.000 colleagues from all over the world, both in Germany and abroad.

By the way, AMIC, based in Singapore is among our partners in this responsible job.

By avoiding the pitfalls of a purely-technical-craft-training of journalists, which does not necessarily promote awareness of the ethical dimension and by that, can easily lead to stabilize overtly unjust structures of rule, of prejudice or even of hatred. Training that aims at only a technical improvement of journalism can be used for manipulation of the public and of course, for government propaganda!

Yet, all this is much easier said than done, as everyone connected with the profession is aware of. Even assuming that our message has been fully understood and our colleagues share the same values, reality very often, and in many countries, makes an absurdity of the discussion of ethics, fair play and objectivity or as it was demanded this morning. Many of our colleagues who join our courses are so badly underpaid that, even if tried at their level best, they could not practice ethically clean journalism. If you have to fight for your daily bread, you are easily persuaded to forget your principles, to say the least.

As one of Germany's famous playwrights, Bertold Brecht in his "Three-Penny-Opera" expressed: "First comes fodder and then comes morality!" In our experience as media trainers, there are at least three decisive reasons that are against ethically clean journalism coming into being or being practiced:

- 1.) Inadequate consideration for ethics in journalism training
- 2.) The political situation in many countries or regions that make it impossible to follow ethically clean journalism
- 3.) The commercialization of the media and the pre-dominance of profit-motivation it entails, are pushing back aspects of ethics.

And connected with that is the lack of security for journalists, the absence of international press freedom and above all, the indifference of media owners to ethical issues.

I took the title of my contribution today, "Peace journalism as a tool of international rapprochement", from one of our most recent types of workshops.

The term "workshop" indicates clearly that we believe strongly in a participatory manner of training. Theoretical input and discussions are followed by practical exercises and group work. In the case of Peace Journalism, we present, for example, a number of news items in such a way, that first we bring the news in the often-practiced careless way, where intentional or unintentional language is being used. Then, we offer a re-written fair item, in which the harmful phraseology has been eliminated, but where the facts, of course, remained undistorted.

During such a workshop, we also discuss relevant issues, so allow me to cite the topics covered in our latest workshop conducted in Jakarta last July in cooperation with AIBD, the Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development, based in Kuala Lumpur.

Participants were: 12 radio journalists and reporters from state radio RRI and private, independent stations in Indonesia and other countries in the region. The participants are required to have at least three years' working experience in the field and to show proficiency in English as they are expected to actively take part in discussions and practical journalistic work.

We also tried to come to some basic definitions of our "trade".

- Samples of worksheets from Workshop Jakarta, DW Akademie:

### *What causes conflict?*

- Resources are scarce and not shared equally, or fairly, e.g. food, housing, jobs, land ...
- There is little or no communication between two groups
- The groups have incorrect ideas and beliefs about each other
- Unresolved grievances from the past
- Power is unevenly distributed

## Understanding conflict

### *What is conflict?*

- Conflict is a situation where two or more individuals, or groups, try to pursue goals or ambitions which they believe they cannot share
- Not all conflict is violent
- Conflict is normal when there is change, some want change, others disagree
- If disagreement or conflict is managed peacefully, it can be a positive process
- When conflict is not managed properly, it becomes violent
- In violent conflict, people fear for their safety and survival
- When we say conflict, we usually refer to violent conflict

## Understanding violence

- *Cultural violence (based on perceptions)*
  - *Hate speech*: Speaking badly about each other, blaming the other for difficulties or problems, violence encouraged to eliminate the blamed group
  - *Xenophobia*: Hatred or fear of other people / group / country creates misperceptions and encourages promoting conflict
  - *Myths and legends of war heroes*: Glorifying one side's ancient victories, battles in songs, poems, history books can build hatred for the other side

- *Religious justifications for war*: Extreme intolerance of other beliefs
- *Gender discrimination*: Allow practices and laws against women that are not accepted against men
- *Structural violence*
  - *Institutionalised racism or sexism*: Laws and practices which allow unequal treatment based on race or sex
  - *Colonialism*
  - *Extreme exploitation* e.g. slavery
  - *Poverty*: The world's leading cause of violent conflict
  - *Corruption and nepotism*: Government decisions are influenced or decided by bribery, favouritism, family or tribal connections
  - *Structural segregation*: laws which force people to live in separate groups or places against their will, e.g. apartheid

## Conflict sensitive journalism will always

- *Understand conflict*: How conflicts develop, how resolutions can emerge
- *Report fairly and balanced*: Complexities and opinions of all factions
- *Report background and causes of conflict*: Legitimate and perceived grievances of all parties; go beyond the news and events, do research, provide background and understanding

- *Present the human side:* Represent trauma and stories of all victims, in non-exploitative, non-sensationalist manner; tell their stories, give a voice to those otherwise unheard on radio (unseen on TV, unread in papers)
- *Report on peace efforts:* Efforts of those who are working on peace and reconciliation; look for sources outside the primary conflict parties, especially for those who break from simplistic interpretations
- *Be aware of the media's influence:* Our reporting will affect the conflict and the people. Be vigilant, avoid being used by either side

## Conflict sensitive journalists choose their words carefully

- *Avoid “victimising” language, such as:* destitute, devastated, defenceless, pathetic, tragedy ...
- *Avoid “demonising” adjectives such as:* vicious, cruel, brutal, barbaric ...
- *Avoid “demonising” labels such as:* terrorist, extremist, fanatic, fundamentalist  
Instead: try calling people by the names they give themselves
- *Avoid focusing exclusively on the suffering, fears and grievances – or human rights abuses and wrongdoings – of only one party*
- *Avoid imprecise use of emotive words to describe what has happened to people:* genocide means killing an entire people, decimate is reducing to one tenth, assassination is the murder of a head of state and no-one else, massacre is the deliberate killing of unarmed and defenceless civilians, systematic always means a deliberate and well-planned pattern
- *Avoid turning opinion into fact:* If someone claims something, state their name, so it is their opinion, and not your fact

And at the end we come back to the over-riding principles of “Good” Journalism:

## Good journalism –

### *Should not be:*

- *Defamatory:* Don't tell lies, don't twist truth about people
- *Derivative:* Don't simply repeat what has been reported elsewhere, copying may repeat false information
- *Malicious:* Don't (get used to) intentionally harm other people
- *Corrupt:* Don't accept bribes, no special favours for anyone, good journalism is not for sale

### *Should include:*

- *Accuracy:* Get your facts right, seek evidence, double check, seek confirmation. Be first, but first be right. Accuracy builds credibility
- *Impartiality, balance:* Give both sides of the story, don't mix it with politics. Having a reputation for impartial reporting builds credibility
- *Responsibility:* Journalists have obligations to the people they report about and they report to. Protect your sources and use only honest methods in newsgathering.

Accuracy, impartiality and responsibility together produce reliable journalism.

Good journalism will always try **to provide understanding and context**, good journalism will have to do more and **go beyond the news** and the bare facts, the events only. *Why has something happened? How does it affect whom? How can it be understood? How do people see it? What can be done to make this not happen again?*

This is especially true in conflicts: If journalists report the bare facts about violent conflicts, people will only understand the conflicts in those terms - the terms transported by the media.

Similar workshops have been organised in Iran, together with their State Radio and TV-Company, IRIB; in Sudan with the State Radio and TV Company; and also in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, actual focal points of racism and deep rooted distrust of the cohabitating ethnic groups and religions.

You may well ask from where do we draw our optimism that such workshops will help to de-escalate tension in the inflicted areas or regions.

A famous mountaineer, Reinhold Messner once said: "If you don't get out of bed in the morning, you will never climb Mount Everest."

So we hope that by taking modest first steps towards reconciling enemies, making them see the fellow human being in the other, we are actually contributing to the creation of a better world. From my own experience in the Balkans, I can say, that it is most rewarding and moving to witness those young people whom we invited coming together, slowly warming to each other, departing, if not as friends, at least as colleagues, ready to keep in touch!

We have made it a point in our projects in Bonn, where we train radio and on-line journalists from abroad and in Berlin, where we do the same for TV-staff, to invite participants from different camps. So, for example an Indian will meet a Pakistani, a Chinese will meet a Taiwanese, and an Albanian will meet a Serb.

We hope that the message will spread and that every one of our participants will desist in future from defaming or degrading the other side. And what would be better still, is to try and persuade their co-workers to act likewise.

We sincerely hope that we shall not be disappointed!

Thank you for your kind attention!





Seminar on

# Covering Islam: Challenges & Opportunities for Media in the Global Village

Organised by

Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs, Singapore  
(RIMA)

Sponsored by

Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Germany (KAF)

September 3<sup>rd</sup> - 4<sup>th</sup> 2005  
Holiday Inn Parkview Singapore, Level 2 (Crystal Suite)

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Programme

Day 1: Saturday, September 3<sup>rd</sup> 2005

## **Opening Ceremony**

8:30 a.m. - 9:00 a.m.      Registration of Participants

9:10 a.m.                      Participants to be seated

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9:15 a.m.

Arrival of Guest-of-Honour, Dr. Yaacob Ibrahim,  
Minister for the Environment & Water Resources  
and Minister-In-Charge of Muslim Affairs

Welcome Address

- Mr. Abdul Razak Chanbasha, Centre for Research  
on Islamic & Malay Affairs (RIMA)
- Mr. Werner vom Busch, Regional Representative  
of the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation, Singapore

Speech by Dr. Yaacob Ibrahim

9:40 am.

Keynote Address by Guest Speaker,  
Mr Stephen Schwartz  
**Covering Islam: Trends in Media Reporting &  
What We Can Do About It.**

**Chaired by:**

**Mr. Yang Razali Kassim**

Chairman, Association of Muslim Professionals  
and Senior Fellow Institute of Defence & Strategic  
Studies (IDSS)

10:15 a.m.

Tea Reception

10:45 a.m.

**Session 1: Globalisation of Media Ethics and  
Localisation of Media Values**

**Speaker**

**Mr. John Gee**

Middle East Expert & Singapore-based writer

**Chairperson**

**Syed Adha Aljunied**

RIMA Activist

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11:45 a.m.

**Session 2: Eurocentrism and How People View Islam**

**Speaker**

**Associate Professor Syed Farid Alatas**

Lecturer, Department of Sociology,  
National University of Singapore

**Chairperson**

**Mr. Tan Tarn How**

Fellow, Institute of Policy Studies (IPS)

12:45 p.m.

Lunch

2:00 p.m.

**Session 3: Right, Left & Wrong: A Comparison of East and West Coverage of Islam**

**Speaker**

**Mr. Sunni Khalid**

Senior Reporter & Assistant News Director  
WYPR 88.1FM (Public Radio Station, Baltimore)

**Chairperson**

**Mr. Idris Rashid Khan Surattee**

Head Librarian  
Information Resource Centre  
Singapore Press Holdings (SPH)

3:00 p.m.

TEA BREAK

3:30 p.m.

**Session 3: Harnessing Inter-religious Harmony through Media Agencies**

**Speaker**

**Dr. Haidar Al-Bagir**

President Director of Mizan Publishing,  
Indonesia

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**Chairperson**

**Mr. Puad Ibrahim**

Correspondent Berita Harian (BH)

4:30 p.m.

**Closing Session: Peace-Journalism as a Tool of  
International Rapprochement**

**Speaker**

**Mr. Frank Lemke**

Deputy Chief, DW-AKADEMIE

DEUTSCHE WELLE

5:00 p.m.

END

Day 2: Sunday, September 4<sup>th</sup> 2005

8:30 a.m. - 9:00 a.m.

Registration

9:00 a.m. - 10:00 a.m.

**Session 5: Religious Ideas: Islam & Other  
Religions in Malaysian Newspapers**

**Speaker**

**Associate Professor Ahmad Murad Merican**

Fellow and Chairman of the Centre for Intellectual  
History and Malay Thought at the Institute of  
Knowledge Advancement, University Teknologi  
Mara, Shah Alam

**Chairperson**

**Ms. Zuraidah Ibrahim**

Political Editor

Straits Times (ST)

10:30 a.m.

TEA BREAK

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11:00 a.m.

Session 6: Summary Session - Challenges and Opportunities for Media in the Global Village: Towards a More Accountable Approach

**Chairperson**

**Dr. Sharon Siddique**

Director, Sreekumar Siddique & Co. Pte. Ltd.

**Panellists**

- **Mr. Stephen Schwartz**

Author of “Two Faces of Islam: Saudi Fundamentalism & Its Role in Terrorism”

- **A/P Ahmad Murad Merican**

Fellow and Chairman of the Centre for Intellectual History and Malay Thought at the Institute of Knowledge Advancement, University Teknologi Mara, Shah Alam

- **Mr. John Gee**

Middle East Expert & Singapore-based writer

- **Dr. Haidar Al-Bagir**

President Director of Mizan Publishing

- **A/P Syed Farid Alatas**

Lecturer, Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore

- **Mr. Sunni Khalid**

Senior Reporter and Assistant News Director WYPR 88.1FM (Public Radio Station, Baltimore)

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12:45 p.m.

Closing Remarks

**Dr. Colin Duerkop**

KAS Regional Representative to Southeast Asia

**Mr. Yusof Sulaiman**

Centre Director, RIMA

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## About the Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA)

The Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA), Singapore is a research organisation wholly owned by the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP). It focuses its research and related activities on issues affecting Malay and Muslim societies, and Islam.

RIMA is governed by a Board of Directors and is strongly supported by a Steering Committee made up of Malay and Muslim community leaders, academics and professionals. An International Resource Panel comprising renowned academics from around the world is also in place to widen RIMA's efforts in networking within the research community.

RIMA's programmes and services include:

(a) *Research Programme*, which comprises both applied and issue-oriented research conducted on a regular basis or as specially commissioned projects;

(b) *Seminars Programme*, which comprises seminars, roundtable discussions, forums, lectures and focus group discussions, to serve as a formal as well as an informal meeting ground for researchers, academics and interested individuals to discuss and examine issues and developments pertaining to Malays and Muslims;

(c) *Publications Programme*, where the *Occasional Paper Series* and other forms of publications are produced to document research findings and discussion of issues relating to Malays/Muslims and Islam.

# Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

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**Konrad  
Adenauer  
Stiftung**

## Media Programme Asia of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation

Media Programme Asia, based in Singapore, was established in 1996 by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation to promote a free, responsible and ethical press in the South-East Asian region, in particular in the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN). This is achieved by ameliorating the dialogue among leading journalists in South-East Asia through regional conferences and meetings. The reach of the programme has since been extended to East-Asia (South Korea and Japan) as well as South-Asia (India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh).

The project also sponsors several programmes geared towards the training and education of Asian journalists. Conferences, workshops and training seminars are held throughout the year in Asian countries for media practitioners in order to facilitate the free-flow of information and to upgrade their skills.

The KAF Media Programme Asia consists of the following key initiatives:

- ***The founding and promotion of Asia News Network (ANN)***
- ***The founding of and co-operation with the Council of Asia Press Institutes (CAPI)***
- ***The founding and support of the Konrad Adenauer Center for Journalism at the Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines. As one of the first institutions in Asia, the Center offers a Master of Journalism degree programme online as a distance learning course.***

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The programme's annual highlight since 1998 is the Asian-German Editors' Forum where senior editors from ASEAN countries and Germany are invited to a dialogue with the leaders of an Asian country or Germany. The geographical area of the network was soon widened to include other Asian and European newspapers, thus the conference has been renamed the Asian-European Editors' Forum. The 5th Asian-European Editors' Forum, held in Bangkok, Thailand, in 2004 was inaugurated by Thailand's Prime Minister, Mr. Thaksin Shinawatra. This year's Asian-European Editors' Forum has taken place in Jakarta, August 28 – 30 with Indonesia's President, HE Dr. Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, as guest of honour.

