

Muslims and the Media since Post September 11

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In an article in the New Statesman, a prominent Muslim scholar, Ziauddin Sardar suggests that "the West's hatred of Islam stems from, more than anything else, the denial of its true lineage. The Western world as we understand it is a child of Islam. Without Islam, the west - however, we conceive it today - would not exist. And, without the West, Islam is incomplete and cannot survive the future." Consequently, a sizable number of people perceive Islam as a dangerous faith capable of destroying their social and individual lives. Concurrent to that is another recent development among journalists and media professionals towards understanding Islam that defines Islam not as an Arab religion, but an ethnically diverse one with local roots. For centuries, Islam has been perceived as a foreign, exotic religion, but more and more reporters are recognizing that Islam is indigenous to North America. The media in general have published several stories about Muslims in America and their existing cultural diversity. The media coverage of the 1992-95 war in Bosnia and the genocide in Kosova in 1999 demolished the myth of Muslims as Middle Eastern community.. These two conflicts shattered the myth of a monolithic Islamic world in the West. That war shocked people into realizing that there are blond haired, blue-eyed Muslims and European Muslims ... and that Muslims can be victims as well as perpetrators.

However, the perception about Islam and Muslims still resonate the only stereotypical images that were once part of the medieval Europe. A recent survey by the Pew Foundation found more Americans distrustful of Islam than every before. To them, Islam is not peace or humility; it is violence and bloodshed. Viewers and readers know what jihad is; they have watched it live on FOX. American audiences are "witnesses" to people who call themselves Muslims who fight and kill in the name of a religion they call Islam. They see "Muslims" killing in the name of a greater purpose on TV almost everyday. The fact is that what they see is not true. Rather, what they are witnessing is in fact the confusion, hatred and in some cases, ignorance, of terrorists/extremists.

Terrorists/extremists have turned Islam's ideal of peace and harmony on its head. Rarely does one hear experts in the media saying that such actions are not sanctioned by the religion and have no place within Islam. For instance, to most Americans, the term jihad means bloodshed and tyranny. Yet, to the majority of Muslims, the word jihad means the struggle to be good. Karen Armstrong explains that "the primary meaning of the word jihad is not 'holy war' but 'struggle.' It refers to the difficult effort that is needed to put God's will into practice at every level -- personal and social as well as political."

Islamic scholars have challenged those who openly convey their disgust at jihad to look to the Quran and find the term "holy war." The term does not exist. A quote rarely seen in the American media is of the Prophet Muhammad telling his companions as they return home after battle: "We are returning from the lesser jihad [the battle] to the greater jihad." This greater jihad refers to the far more vital and crucial task of extinguishing transgression from one's own society and one's own heart.

So, how did jihad evolve from its peaceful beginnings to what the American public sees on TV? The American public also sees Osama bin Laden and his cronies on TV and believe them to be ambassadors of Islam. The American media is awash with tales of terror and oppression by terrorists. In some cases, these tales are true but in others, they can be much too tall. The way Jihad is projected in the American media and expounded by some Muslim extremists has an immediate role in Islam's negative portrayal. The present manifestation of jihad by terrorists has great audience appeal. It involves a lot of public opinion and allows room for media twists and dramatic flourish that bode well for the ratings. The negative portrayal of Islam influences Muslims all over the world. Because of the actions of a handful of disillusioned if not powerful individuals, Islam as most Muslims know it is being viewed as a deadly disease and its followers as carriers about to infect the rest of the world. American audiences have a lot to discover about Islam before any sound opinion can be formed.

Such a discovery is possible, provided the media moves away from the stereotypical images of Islam. It is apparent that the current portrayal of Islam is deeply embedded in the conflicts and military confrontations between the West and Islam dating back to the seventh century and running through the Byzantine Empire, the Crusades, the Spanish Reconquista, the fall of Constantinople, the eras of colonialism and national independence. Many Westerners have tried to understand Islam in an analogical way to Christianity. Since Christ is the foundation of Christian faith, it was assumed – quite incorrectly – that Muhammad was to Islam as Christ was to Christianity. Hence, the polemic name "Mohammedanism" given to Islam and the automatic epithet "impostor" applied to Muhammad. According to this line of reasoning, Islam was just a misguided version of Christianity. A large body of literature appeared that intensified the Christian picture of Islam. In the *Chanson de Roland*, the worship of Saracens (Muslims) is portrayed as embracing "Mahomet" and Apollo! "Moametto" turns up in canto twenty-eight of Dante's *Inferno*. As an eternal punishment, Muhammad is endlessly being cleft in two from his chin to his anus like, Dante says, a cask whose staves are ripped apart. Islam and the Muslim world are always colored by this history of rancor and animosity.

The history is still a determining force in defining the image of Islam and Muslims in the Muslims. Experts on Islam tend to still rely on those images that were developed during the medieval Europe. The experts often view Muslims and the West in the context of an ongoing conflict between Islam and Judeo-Christian ideals. The realization has not dawned upon them the Muslims are now an integral part of the West as large number of Muslim communities live in Europe, Australia and the U.S. as citizens participating in decisions that affect their lives.

The vast majority of Western media rely on a limited number of "experts" in Islam and the Muslim world. The absence of diversified sources of information tends to lock the common people into a unique immutable mode of understanding Islam. Self-styled experts do their best to inculcate ordinary people's minds with their concern.

Several special interest groups regard Islam as a potential threat to Western ideals and Muslims as troublemakers. Despite the fact the many of them claim that the problem is

the so-called "Islamic fundamentalism," few of them are more direct in announcing Islam as a challenger civilization. Samuel Huntington, the famous Harvard professor, said, "The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power." These elites in the media advocate that the sudden emergence of a successful rival to the U.S. (not necessarily an Islamic one) would produce massive international instability and global anarchy. The sustained international primacy of the U.S. is central to the welfare and security of Americans and to the future of freedom, democracy, open economies, and international order in the world

These fears are regularly expressed in the media. However, since September 11, voices that counter these arguments and try to present a different perspective about Islam are also heard. Apparently, there is a move towards creating a dialogue between opposing views on Islam and Muslims. Apparently, there is more sensitivity to Islam and its ideals. Still, terms that appear to be inaccurate and that tend to generalize do appear in the media regularly, giving substance to Muslim fears that the media is also a culprit in damaging Islam's reputation.

Regardless the discourse that has been going on seems to be encouraging as, on one hand, it is giving Muslims a chance to understand the pluralistic diversity of America, while on the other the media an opportunity to explore the diversity of Muslim as well.

Some terms – Islamic terrorist, Muslim fundamentalist, Wahabi zealot, Shia extremist, Sunni bombers, Islamic Jihadi, Arab killer, Islamic suicide bomber – while used extensively in American media, are not as old as Islam or Muslims are. Relatively new, such terms are often used to describe a variety of violent actions or extremist statements attributed to people associated with Muslims. Since September 11, 2001, these terms have entered the popular vocabulary as both the print and broadcast media have increased their usage exponentially. The headlines on CNN, FOX, CBS, or MSNBC, and news reports or opinionated columns in The New York Times or The Los Angeles Times, have succeeded in creating a public perception of Islam that is directly contradicted by Muslim denunciations of terrorism and the reality prevalent in the Muslim world. No single region or religion has a monopoly on violence. In the absence of a universally accepted definition, the term "terrorism" can be applied loosely to almost every act of violence or killing. However, those who control sources of information have an edge over others as they often decide and determine the extent, nature, and scope of the coverage to be given to the perpetrators and victims of violence and terror.

Almost every religious community has produced its own terrorists, violence mongers, hate speech promoters, and extremists. Yet, disproportionate shares of epithets ascribing the source of such terror are lobbied against the Muslim community. During the last five decades, hundreds of thousands of acts of violence have occurred all over the world. These incidents involved Tamil Tigers professing Hinduism, Sinhale retaliators embracing Buddhism, Shiv Sena and Bhartiya Janata Party workers invoking Hinduism, the Irish Republic Army involving Catholics, Ulster Union followers practicing Protestantism, and Jewish Defense League members proclaiming Judaism as their faith.

In these cases, however, American media rarely used terms such as Hindu terrorist, Catholic killers, Protestant violent mongers or Jewish extremists to report events that involved the followers of these religions. One rarely found a discussion in the media about the relationship between violence and religion. One rarely noticed a debate on religious scriptures on terror. One rarely found scholars linking the Tamil Tiger's act of suicide bombing to early Hindu warriors who promoted violence against people belonging to low castes. One rarely found a scholar relating an act of terror committed by a Jewish extremist to early Biblical stories where prophets were reported to have been responsible for the massacres of innocent people.

For instance, Latin America has been witness to a long and sustained period of bloodshed and violence. In many of these incidents, religious clergy and institutions were involved in conflict; yet the term used to describe incidents of violence were not Christian or communist terrorism but liberation theology.

Violence or terror is not the only issue where Muslims and Islam have been designated as villains. On issues pertaining to women, human rights, child welfare, and relations with non-Muslims, patriotism, and democracy, the media has also given Islam and Muslims a disproportionate criticism, often-compromising objectivity and fairness. Since 9/11, Islam has been projected in the media as a faith that needs to be changed if it is to exist in the modern world. Neither Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism nor Buddhism has ever been exposed to such harsh criticism, even if the members of these communities were involved in violent acts directed against Americans or the Western world in general. Since September 11, the media has seemingly become more conscious of Muslim critiques to the media. Since then, the significant change, which took place in the media's coverage of Islam and Muslims, was the presence of diversity in which Muslims voiced issues that concern their religion. Since September 11, 2001, The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, The Boston Globe and The Washington Post have included more Muslim writers in their op-ed pages than ever before. Similarly, FOX, CBS, NBC, PBS, CNN and MSNBC have given space to voices representing Muslim centers and organizations on their shows. Since September 11, Muslims have become a dominant subject of books, conferences, media reports and analysis, as well as Ph.D. dissertations. In some newspapers, such as The Washington Post and The Los Angeles Times, there has been a good change in the coverage in the past two years. Now journalists in these papers are much more reluctant to label everyone a fundamentalist, extremist or make gross generalizations about Islam and the Muslim community. While it is not perfect, they are beginning to differentiate between the acts of individuals and the teachings of the religion itself. Monolithic misconceptions are subsiding as the nature of the Muslim community worldwide gains more attention.

Since September 11, the media also began to realize the presence of a diversified indigenous Muslim community that was as abhorrent to terrorism as any Christian or Jews. Stories about indigenous Muslim communities and their contribution to America in general have helped Muslims gain a degree of respect. However, due to the influence of special interest groups, there still exists an atmosphere charged with xenophobia and Muslims have, post September 11, been confronted with escalating degrees of hostile

suspicion - not only because of their 'different' appearance, but also as a consequence of their beliefs, which to many groups are synonymous with extremism and fundamentalism. Often American media, who have confused their readers with their imbalance reporting about Islam, has reinforced these notions. One cannot generalize about the media and its coverage of Islam. Each media outlet has presented Islam and Muslims in a diversified manner suited to its own interests.

In general, the media coverage of Islam and Muslims post-September 11 can be grouped in five categories: Informative, Appreciative, Accusative, Provocative, and Offensive. Every media outlet has published all five types post-September 11. Almost all American media have tried to develop an accurate understanding of Islam. The difference among them is in the scope and nature of the coverage. They have tried to inform their readers and viewers of what Islam is and what its tenets are. Several media outlets, such as The Washington Post, The New York Times, ABC, CNN and MSNBC, have used Muslim experts to explain Islam and Muslims. Others used Christian or Jewish scholars. Informative articles by and large were neutral. They presented a textbook-like description of Islam and Muslims.

Appreciative articles focused more on groups and institutions that were strong in their condemnation of terrorism or violence. The coverage ranged from small Muslim groups in Los Angeles to large organizations in Pakistan or Egypt. The media outlets gave several Muslim writers and intellectuals space to voice their concern over the problem and explain their version of Islamic teachings on the subject.

The accusative articles focused on raising doubts about the real intention of Islam and Muslims. Writers who belonged to a special interest group or whose hostility toward Muslims was well known contributed articles in this category. Most of these articles discussed Islam's vulnerability to violence. The provocative articles focused on intellectual challenges Muslims face in defining their religion in the modern world. Islam's so-called incompatibility with democracy, human rights, and equality of genders was the subject of articles in this category.

Offensive articles were totally off of the mark as they pronounced writers' judgment about Islam inherently capable to adopt modernity and civility. Articles in the last three categories proved more controversial and questionable. One must ask, Why were those offensive articles published and what was or is behind the poor, subjective, imbalance and often-unfair coverage?

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