As the dust settled and the casualties mounted on the morning of September 11, 2001, the American news media followed the government’s lead in attributing blame to Osama Bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda organization. Providing such a definitive enemy should have kept the media from demonizing the greater Muslim community and the principles of Islam. Unfortunately, the brutal murder of nearly 3,000 Americans—at the hands of a group in no way representative of mainstream Islamic culture—reawakened a time-honored tradition of the news media: the senseless dehumanization of Muslims.

The media’s misguided and often hostile portrayal of the Islamic religion and the Muslim people was not a new phenomenon in the years after the 9/11 terrorists attacks. As scholar Edward Said notes, it has long been a Western tradition to prejudge and devalue the distant cultures of the East. “The general basis of Orientalist thought is an imaginative and yet drastically polarized geography dividing the world into two unequal parts, the larger, ‘different’ one called the Orient, the other, also known as ‘our’ world, called the Occident or the West.”

Yet, at a time when the United States is engaged in two wars in the Middle East and the government has undertaken questionable steps in the name of security, an examination of the characterization of Muslim individuals in the media is essential. Many Americans go their entire life without interacting with members of foreign societies or spending significant time abroad. Media depiction, then, is a key component in the shaping of attitudes and public opinion on groups such as Muslims.
The goal of this paper is to document the decidedly anti-Islamic or anti-Muslim bias historically prevalent in the news media that includes newspapers, network television news, and weekly news magazines. For reference, this paper will use “anti-Islam” interchangeably with “anti-Muslim,” as both refer to the vitriol directed toward the principles of Islam or the greater Muslim community. Three major ideas (in this case media frames or depictions) are presented in pursuit of defining the bias. First, Muslims are violent extremists and America must be vigilant in the face of such a monolithic threat. Second, Islamic culture is a web of primitive lifestyles and archaic traditions. Finally, the Middle East, the Arab world, and the Islamic world have analogous boundaries and the people of this region lack diversity.

Background

Having led the Allied Forces to victory, the stature of the United States on the world stage had reached a new zenith at the conclusion of World War II. The country was poised to bypass the British and the French as the preeminent Western power and command its sphere of influence in international affairs. Part of this sphere included a relatively unknown and mysterious region to most Americans. Then regarded as the Near East, the area later referred to as the Middle East was exposed on a large scale to the American conscience and news media for the first time.² Americans could recall fuzzy stories of the Crusades and vaguely remember that “for most of the Middle Ages in Europe, Islam was believed to be a demonic religion of apostasy, blasphemy, and obscurity.”³ Over the course of the latter half of the 20th and early 21st centuries, however, numerous political, economic, and military factors combined to produce increasing contact between the United States and the Middle East and, more specifically, the Islamic world.
An array of events elevated the profile of the Middle East and its importance to the United States and, thus, the American news media. These developments helped to shed light on Muslims and their culture. The discovery of vast oil wells in the Persian Gulf put the surrounding states in a precarious position. While they held a newfound source of infinite wealth, the Gulf states had to bargain with the United States and other Western countries that displayed their ability to intervene in promotion of their own economic interests. Of course, the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis remains a flashpoint in the region; continual outbursts of violence among the combatants spark constant debate in the United States over religion and warfare. Moreover, America’s involvement in deposing the democratically elected government of Iran in the early 1950s, its direct aid to Islamist fighters (the early roots of Al-Qaeda) battling the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the late 1970s, and its botched humanitarian effort in Somalia in 1993 magnified the coverage of Muslims and Islam in the news media.4

More recently, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have propelled the discussion of Islamic culture to unprecedented levels. In 1991, the United States deployed combat troops to Saudi Arabia in advance of an Iraqi invasion of neighboring Kuwait. President George H.W. Bush was prepared to defend Kuwait, a Western ally, from Saddam Hussein’s army. That decision, coupled with the enduring presence of American troops on Islamic holy lands following the war, played a leading role in fomenting antagonism between the United States and the Muslim community.5 In addition, the military conflicts in the decade since the 9/11 attacks provide the latest form of dramatic events thrusting Muslims into the media spotlight. The impact of the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have brought to bare issues as diverse as the viability of democracy in Muslim-majority nations, the treatment of women in the educational and professional fields, and the importance of ethnic and tribal bonds in determining an individual’s loyalty.6
Often ignored or forgotten in the United States is the depth and composition of the Muslim world. In fact, Muslims represent one in every five people on Earth. Also, Islam is the dominant religion in roughly 50 countries and the fastest growing religion in the world. The Islamic community stretches from Morocco on the Atlantic through North and East Africa, across Southwest Asia, and southward into Indonesia. Within that area, Muslims are subdivided into regional cultures and ethnicities, including African, Arabian, Central Asian, Persian, South and Southeast Asian, and Turkish. Furthermore, Muslim populations exist in “growing and significant number” in China, France, Germany, India, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The influx of Muslims in Western Europe and the United States has added an important dynamic to the coverage of Islamic culture in the American news media.

Extensive opinion surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center since 2001 reveal public sentiment toward Muslim Americans, Islam, and the conflicts in the Middle East. In the wake of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, approximately 35% of Americans held an unfavorable view of Islam and 25% held an unfavorable view of Muslim Americans in particular. Nearly one-third (29%) of Americans believed the recent terrorist attacks in the United States and Europe signified a larger conflict between the West and Islam, rather than a skirmish with a militant group within the Islamic world. What is more, almost half (46%) of respondents thought that Islam was more likely than other religions to encourage violence as a means of social change. More alarming is the fact that the majority (66%) of Americans admitted to knowing “nothing at all” or “not very much” about Islam and its traditions—most could not identify the Islamic word for God (Allah) or the Islamic equivalent to the Bible (Koran or Qur’an).
On November 5, 2009, U.S. Army Major Nidal Malik Hasan opened fire in a building on the grounds of the Fort Hood military base, killing 13 people and wounding 30 more. Hasan is a Palestinian American and a practicing Muslim. As expected, media coverage focused on Hasan’s radical beliefs and apparent communication with terrorists. The Fort Hood shootings offered another opportunity for the news media to cast Muslims and their culture in a rigid and negative light.

Author Greg Noakes asserts, “American media coverage of Muslims and events in the Muslim world concentrates on the sensational. Standard media fare includes coverage of political upheavals, acts of violence carried out by extremist groups claiming to act in the name of Islam, and perceived threats to American interests.” One of the leading stereotypes in the news media’s portrayal of Muslims is the group’s supposed tendency toward violent extremism and terrorism. Muslims are presented as a monolithic menace to American interests abroad and the American way of life at home. Many descriptions, through words, images, and video, effectively dehumanize the Muslim as an instrument of religious aggression. It can be difficult to imagine normal and peaceful Muslims when the news media saturates coverage with reoccurring acts of warfare and bloodshed in the Islamic world.

In the days before the 24-hour news channels and instant blog updates, nightly television news programs such as “CBS Evening News” and “ABC Evening News” were the main source for commentary on international affairs. Anchors like Walter Cronkite of CBS and Frank Reynolds of ABC were among the most trusted men in America, having “shepherded the nation through many momentous events.” There was understandable dismay and foreboding in the tone of the anchors’ coverage after 53 Americans were taken hostage when Islamic students took over the American embassy in Tehran, Iran, on November 4, 1979. Yet, both anchors spoke
regularly of “Muslim hatred of this country.” Other major news sources such as the *The New York Times* and *The New Republic* reacted to the hostage crisis with headlines such as “Militant Islam: The Historic Whirlwind” and “Islam Amok.” The rhetoric generalized Muslim feelings toward the United States because it did not account for the difference between beliefs about American citizens and those held about their government’s foreign policy. Cronkite, Reynolds, the *Times*, and *The New Republic* were essentially equating the extreme actions of the hostage-takers with the larger atmosphere in the Islamic world.

Steven Emerson, a journalist who writes on matters related to national security and Islamic terrorism, was a frequent talking head in the immediate aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. His remarks, broadcast on the airwaves, in multiple newspapers, and on television appearances such as *Fox News*, pointed blame for the carnage at “Muslim terrorists.” Emerson’s accusations were proved wrong, however, when authorities detained and charged a non-Muslim white male, Timothy McVeigh, for carrying out the attack. The news media’s willingness to embrace the “expert” analysis of Emerson and others was yet another sign of its bias against Muslims. Similarly, author Greg Noakes contends that the media’s terminology relies on “ill-defined words both to convey certain concepts to an audience and to avoid closer scrutiny of groups, individuals, and events.” Words like terror and terrorism have morphed into semantic tools of news media. Terrorism is now defined as intimidation by the “systematic use of violence” against the established order; those who commit such acts are wantonly referred to as extremists, fanatics, fundamentalists, militants, or zealots. Indeed, in the days and weeks after the 9/11 attacks, terms such as Muslim fundamentalist, *Wahhabi* zealots, *Shia* extremist, *Sunni* bomber, *Islamic* Jihad, *Arab* killer, and *Islamic* suicide bomber appeared in excess in America’s newspapers and television broadcasts.
The concept of jihad is one of the new media’s most misunderstood aspects of Islam in media. Fida Mohammad argues, “…the expression ‘holy war’ translated into Arabic is Harb-ul-Muqqadas, which is meaningless in Islam. To reduce an all-encompassing world like jihad to holy war, as had been done in Western media, is an oversimplification.” In truth, jihad has multiple uses in Islamic culture, including jihad with words (speaking the truth) and jihad with a pen (writing the truth). One can execute jihad against evil desires or through personal wealth by helping the poor. Islamic moral guidelines restrict fighting to combatants in hopes of shielding women and the young from violence. As a typical example of the media’s jaded reporting, The New York Times published an article barely a month after the 9/11 tragedy entitled “The Deep Roots of Islamic Terror.” Two photos were featured with the article: “one of a street banner declaring ‘Jihad is our way,’ another of the Koran with Osama Bin Laden hovering in the background.” The author cited the holy book on violence, as if the Qur’an was a textbook of terrorism.

Other images utilized by the news media offer a glimpse at the widespread bias against Muslims. Pictures that are supposed to capture the essential moments of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict often depict Palestinian males as “defiant, militant, and threatening.” Authors Brigitte Nacos and Oscar Torres-Reyna found a disturbing tendency in Time magazine to publish pictures of Palestinian boys in “scenes and activities that demonstrated their early devotion to violence for the Palestinian cause.” One showed a young boy with a fake suicide vest around his chest, holding a cord as if he was ready to die for his fellow Palestinians. Unfortunately, such images are commonplace in the news media’s ongoing depiction of Muslims as violent and hostile to America.

Islamic Culture Is Archaic and Primitive
Coverage of violence and terrorism is not the only area where Muslims have been cast in a disparaging way. The news media has “labeled disproportionate criticism with a blend of biasness and bigotry” on issues from women’s rights to the role of government in an individual’s life in the Muslim world. The American news media presents the Islamic community as an environment of unbending tradition, archaic principles, and an unbreakable devotion to a marriage between the church and the state—images media outlets consistently counter with the ideals of the United States.

In 1992, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution published a special section, “Women of the Veil,” that explored how Islamic fundamentalists were holding women back, practically encouraging “official servitude.” The report was the culmination of research performed in a tour of Turkey, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Kuwait and was motivated by the striking contrast between empowered females in the American military and Muslim women like those kept from driving in Saudi Arabia. Sensational subheadings within the report included “Male Honor Costs Women’s Lives,” “Imprisoned for Love,” and “Using Rape to Settle Scores.” The report asserted that one of the main reasons for the furious opposition to America among Muslims was the “fear that the Western emphasis on individual rights is destroying Islamic family values.” While no one can deny that inexcusable violations of women’s rights have occurred in the Islamic world, the news media cannot gloss over the subject by substituting horrific stories in place of the predominant reality. Nonetheless, coverage continues to focus on “quirky and idiosyncratic features of Muslim society”—everything from women having to pose for passports under a veil to female circumcision, and the slave trade.

Group shots that show the less angry and humanistic side of Muslim life are rare. A staple of the coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is the footage of Israeli funerals, packed
with mourners, following a bombing. Yet, similar ceremonies in which Muslim families express
grief and loss—perhaps after an Israeli incursion into the West Bank or Lebanon—are usually
excluded from the evening newscast. Dehumanization and depersonalization are hallmarks of the
news media’s coverage of Muslims and Islam. Photographs of hundreds of anonymous Muslims
at prayer beneath a towering minaret or a Qur’an held aloft above the heads of an endless and
chanting crowd are central to coverage of the Middle East. In his article *Shaping the Islamic
Threat*, Erik Nisbet endorses the beliefs of scholar Edward Said by describing journalistic
Orientalism as the view that Muslims “are inscrutable, irrational savages whose behavior is
governed by an arcane yet primitive moral code, and who are incapable of feeling normal human
emotions.” Taken as a whole, news coverage reinforces the notion of the Muslim as the “other”
and the “idea that Islam subscribes to a different and…lower standard of humanity than does the
West.”

Many Americans point to the theocratic foundations of nations like Iran, Pakistan, and
Saudi Arabia when arguing that Islam has spoiled the chances for democracy in the Middle East.
The media’s reliance on simple explanations for political development in the Islamic world
creates such assumptions. Consider John Kifner’s commentary in *The New York Times* in 1980:

For the Western mind conditioned since the Reformation to historical and intellectual
developments which have steadily diminished the role of religion, it is difficult to grasp
the power exerted by Islam. Yet, for centuries it has been the central force in the life
of this region and, for the moment at least, its power seems on the upsurge. In Islam,
there is no separation between church and state. It is a total system not only of belief but
of action, with fixed rules for everyday life and a messianiac drive to combat or convert
the infidel.
Islam is portrayed as not only a leading force in the daily lives of Muslims, but as the singular and omnipresent power. This media frame is effective because Americans value individualism and decentralized power to guard against intrusions on personal liberties. What is left unsaid is the fact that the Founding Fathers were greatly inspired by Judeo-Christian principles and Bible teachings when they wrote the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. What is more, media outlets trying to explain the political structure of the Islamic world fail to examine nations, such as Egypt, that actively suppress organized Islamic political parties.32

Whether it is through terrifying tales of the state of women’s rights, the lack of visible displays of Muslims in humane and personable settings, or reporting on the supposedly totalitarian nature of Islam in public life, American media has constructed an elaborate narrative that depicts the Muslim world as backward and premodern. Muslim humanity is cast as a lesser version of its Western counterpart, and the values of Islam are employed as polar opposites of America’s cherished principles of equal rights, individualism, and secularism.

The Islamic World Lacks Diversity and Rests Entirely Within the Middle East

The media coverage of the war in Bosnia from 1992 to 1995 and the genocide in Kosovo in 1999 partially dismantled the myth that Muslims are restricted to the Middle East. Americans were exposed to images of “blond haired, blue eyed Muslims of European birth.”33 Unfortunately, such a balanced outlook is the exception, not the rule, in the media’s portrayal of Muslims and the Islamic world. From Iraq to Palestine, stories from the heart of the Middle East now dominate the news, reaffirming the stereotype that Muslims are intrinsically linked to a predetermined region.

In their examination, “The Negative Image of Islam and Muslims in the West,” W. Shadid and P.S. van Koningsveld demonstrate that media outlets subscribe to a view of a
“historically determined, essential Islam, which is supposedly able to account for all that Muslims say, do and should say and should do.”34 This narrow and simplistic characterization of Islam forces Americans to condense a fifth of mankind into a monolithic mold.35 Nisbet adds that the media uses the terms Muslim or Islam “in such a way that it gave the impression that the story referred to all Muslims, when actually referring only to a certain group of Muslims.” Homogenization of the Muslim world uniformly equates Islam with the Middle East, ignoring the fact that the largest Muslim populations reside in Bangladesh, India, and Indonesia.36

With the aid of media stereotypes and countless photographs, the American public often imagines the Islamic world as an endless expanse of desert, oil fields, and overcrowded cities surrounded by small villages. While the Sahara Desert dominates North Africa, oil fields prosper in the Persian Gulf region, and teeming urban areas like Baghdad and Cairo dot the map, the geography outlined in prominent media reports does not paint the entire picture.37 Millions of Muslims live among the mountains of Central Asia, along the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, and in the agricultural valleys adjacent to the Nile and Euphrates Rivers. The limited images of the Islamic world offered by the news media breed ignorance and an assumption that Muslim life is limited to the geographic gap between Egypt and Iraq.

The events of recent years have forced the news media to adapt to the diversity that exists in the Muslim world. With hundreds of thousands of American troops stationed in Muslim countries from Saudi Arabia to Afghanistan, newspaper and television reporters find themselves immersed in the daily lives of local civilians. The divide between the Sunni and Shiite sects of Islam, long ignored in the American news media, has drawn more attention as sectarian violence increased in Iraq. This development is important because it stands in contrast to the media’s usual deception of Muslims united under the unquestionable power of Islam. Media consumers
would be surprised to know that ancient disagreements spark intense debate in the Islamic world—not unlike the dynamic in Christian-dominated societies such as America.

Conclusion

Since the Allied victory in WWII, the United States has adopted an increasingly influential role in the Middle East and the greater Islamic world. From its mediation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, America has a complex history with Muslims and the Islamic faith. The news media, in its pursuit of simple frames for its audiences to handle, has portrayed Muslims in a decidedly negative light. From the *The New York Times* to the “CBS Evening News”, dehumanization strips Muslims of their individual spirit and casts them in the role of the “other.” They are violent extremists seeking to harm America and byproducts of an outdated and barbaric culture. Moreover, the news media insists that the Islamic world is restricted to the boundaries of the Middle East and that the region lacks diversity. Such reckless depictions often seek to contrast the supposedly threatening ideals of the Islamic world with an exalted view of Western society.

The tangible danger of anti-Muslim or anti-Islam bias in the media is more apparent when considering the extraordinary measures enacted by the federal government since 9/11. Sections of the United States Patriot Act, the detention center at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and multiple occurrences of detainee abuse on the part of American military personnel are alarming instances of abuses of power. When coupled with the lack of knowledge of Islamic culture among most Americans, such abuse may continue in the future because the public will not voice a dramatic outcry when Muslims are persecuted. Though it is undeniable that the men who carried out the 9/11 attacks and other despicable terrorist acts were partially inspired by a twisted
form of Islam, the news media has used its influence to expand blame and loathing to the entire Muslim world.
2 Said, 25.
3 Said, 4-5.
4 Said, 16.
9 Nisbet, 14.
12 Noakes, 364.
14 Said, 78.
15 Said, 79.
17 Noakes, 363.
19 Ali and Khalid, 7.
20 Mohammad, 304.
21 Mohammad, 303-04
22 Ali and Khalid, 7.
23 Nacos and Torres-Reyna, 42.
24 Nacos and Torres-Reyna, 42-43.
25 Ali and Khalid, 7.
27 Noakes, 364.
28 Noakes, 363.
29 Nisbet, 8.
30 Noakes, 364.
31 Said 10-11.
33 Ali and Khalid, 8.
35 Noakes, 365.
36 Nisbet, 9.
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