

NIEMAN REPORTS

THE NIEMAN FOUNDATION FOR JOURNALISM AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

VOL. 61 No. 2 SUMMER 2007

EMPRINT DIGITAL NEWSBOOK

ISLAM

Reporting in Context and With Complexity



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Cover photo: Palestinian women kick a ball at the beach in Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip. March 22, 2006. *Photo by Anja Niedringhaus.*

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Islam: Reporting in Context and With Complexity

Nieman Reports / Summer 2007 e4

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This Nieman Reports eMprint™ newsbook was produced in cooperation with the Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute at the Missouri School of Journalism. eMprint is a trademark of the Curators of the University of Missouri.

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“The blast had not been an attack at all,” writes Griff Witte, the Islamabad/Kabul bureau chief for The Washington Post, about a deadly blast in a gunpowder shop in the center of Kabul, which many assumed to be an intentional act by the Taliban. “In a place like Afghanistan, we’re accustomed to seeing violence through the lens of militant Islam,” Witte says. “That, after all, has been the story—a war fought along religious lines, with insurgents fired by their desire to wage jihad against infidel occupiers. But it’s not the only story, and it’s easy to miss the others if religious motivations are instantly ascribed every time something goes up in smoke.”

Witte’s words open our collection of articles exploring the challenges journalists encounter in their coverage of Islam in the wake of 9/11. Words and images that follow Witte’s observations speak to these difficulties but also address ways in which journalists—and scholars who study Islam—are striving to anchor their work in a knowledgeable context and imbue it with essential layers of complexity.

Fawaz A. Gerges, a scholar of Islam and author, speaks to the challenge of “disentangling myth from reality about the political Islamic movement ... [which] for journalists ... involves

Nieman Reports is indebted to Robert Azzi for proposing this topic and helping us to bring such an extraordinary array of insightful voices to our pages.

a willingness to recognize the complexity and diversity within this movement ... as they try to place their coverage of news and events (often involving violence and threats of violence) within a broader, more meaningful and accurate context.” In many years of working for and with Western journalists, Rami G. Khouri, a Beirut-based syndicated columnist, raises a profound professional challenge when he asks, “How do journalists make the lives and aspirations of Arab men and women who will not succumb to criminality or terror relevant to Western audiences?” Geneive Abdo, who reported extensively from the Middle East and Iran, observes that Western journalists demonstrate a tendency “to champion ‘secular’ or ‘moderate’ Muslims.” Yet, she writes, “for the vast majority of Muslims, such coverage is offensive not only because a small fringe is given massive exposure, but also because it is the media, not Muslims, who have the power to decide who speaks for Islam.”

Richard Engel, Beirut bureau chief for NBC News, describes several layers of complexity about the “many wars within the war” and how the various power struggles in Iraq intersect with the conventional U.S. narrative. When he was Jerusalem bureau chief for Time, Matt Beynon Rees grew “steadily disillusioned with

the ability of journalism to convey the depth of what I had learned about the Palestinians.” In writing a novel based on Palestinian characters, Rees found that “unlike journalism, it doesn’t depend on what characters say—its gets inside their heads.” Images and words by The Associated Press photographer Anja Niedringhaus display not only actions of war but convey the feelings of those affected, whether they are grieving parents or friends, frightened mothers with children, or girls who’ve found precious, rare moments of frivolity and joy.

At a time when Western coverage of the Muslim world is vast, Tariq Ramadan, a professor of Islamic Studies and an author, laments that “never has knowledge of Islam, of Muslims, and of their geographical, political and geostrategic circumstances been so superficial, partial and frequently confused—not only among the general public, but also among journalists and even in academic circles.” Since 1968 Robert Azzi has covered the Middle East as a photojournalist, and he provides ample reason to fault a lot of recent reporting on Muslims, as he contends that “Arab identities, positions and challenges need to be seen within their cultural context, not simply in relation to Israelis’ interests and narratives.” Bruce Lawrence, an Islamicist at

Duke University, observes that “what we encounter appears to be the steady transformation of Muslims into ‘the Other,’ a defining of Islam as evil, and an ignoring of differences among Muslims.”

In writing about the jailing of Arab bloggers, George Weyman, managing editor of Arab Media & Society, finds in Western news coverage a mistaken belief on the part of journalists that “only those sharing a Western vision of modern society can freely exchange ideas and take part in engaged debate online.” Working in a region that he says is “among the most misunderstood and misrepresented,” Greek photojournalist Iason Athanasiadis often finds that “simple images told the story more effectively than sentences encumbered by qualifications, complicated by parentheses, and clogged by background.”

Ali M. Ansari, reader in modern history and director of the Institute for Iranian Studies at the University of St Andrews, focuses on the British sailors’ hostage situation in Iran to observe that “media coverage in Britain and other Western countries was driven by a master narrative that contained within it a number of assumptions related to Western supremacy.” It is the news media’s “calculated misuse of words, resulting in a distorted and inaccurate picture of

a culture, a religion, and its people” that upsets Khaled Almaeena, editor in chief of Arab News based in Saudi Arabia, who writes that “reality gradually becomes subsumed by a new layer of misinformed belief ...” Marda Dunsky, who reported in the Middle East and now teaches “Reporting the Arab and Muslim Worlds” at DePaul University, believes that “journalism must not only give voice to Muslim attitudes but also probe and contextualize historical and political facts upon which they are based.” In her 15 years of traveling in the Middle East, German photographer Katharina Eglau has sought out the “often unnoticed details of daily life in a region best known for its turbulent politics,” and her images are found in her photo essay and interspersed through many stories.

Ray Close, who worked for the CIA for many years in the Middle East, explores the various threads that connect what good reporters and “successful spies” do. Working in Beirut, Daily Star reporter Iman Azzi witnessed last summer’s war with Israel; now with a paucity of international reporting about Lebanon, she writes that “when a major story erupts in Lebanon, Westerners don’t already have the dots by which they can make connections.” Photojournalist Alexandra Boulat’s collection of images of wom-

en and Islam, taken in Jordan, Gaza and Iran, “from refugee to pilgrim, from suicide bomber to teenager ... speak to these women’s beliefs, rituals and habits, and to the anger and joy they experience.”

Andrea Elliott, who covers Islam in America for The New York Times and whose three-part series, “An Imam in America” was awarded the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing, writes about how, as a non-Muslim who did not speak Arabic, she found pathways to take her readers inside Muslim communities. “I came to realize that unless I focused on a single Muslim enclave—one mosque, city block, or family’s home—I would never capture a fuller story.” Susan Moeller, who directs the International Center for Media and the Public Agenda at the University of Maryland in College Park, describes findings from her center’s report of a review of U.S. newspaper reporting and commentary in which women were characterized as the “good” Muslims. Jamie L. Hamilton teaches about Islam at Phillips Exeter Academy and, in doing so, she contends with a media environment outside the classroom in which “the message that it is a ‘bad religion’ is so clearly consistent they [the students] don’t know what to think.” A glossary ends this section. ■

Violence: Its Source Is Not Always What It Seems

‘... it’s rare when religion alone offers an adequate explanation for conflict.’

By Griff Witte

I had been dreading the call. It came just before 7 a.m., rousing me from a deep sleep. But my translator wasted no time getting my attention. There had been a massive blast in the center of Kabul, he said. Half a dozen bodies had been pulled from the rubble. More were expected. I had arrived in Kabul just two days earlier to report for *The Washington Post*, and I had immediately sensed something unsettling in the air. It was spring, after all, the traditional start of the fighting season in Afghanistan, and everyone was bracing themselves for the war to come to Kabul.

As I arrived at the scene of the explosion, I felt certain it just had. A six-foot-deep crater marked the blast site, and

all around was debris from a row of now-obliterated mud-brick shop stalls: rugs, nylon rope, laundry baskets, a dead dog. As rescue crews frantically dug for survivors, an old man silently wept. “This is the work of the enemies of Afghanistan,” a shopkeeper spat as he gazed at the wreckage of his stall.

There was no question about it, others agreed. It was the Taliban—that band of religious zealots who had imposed their rigid will on the country for five years and had now been terrorizing it through guerrilla attacks for nearly as long. The assumption was a reasonable one to make; insurgents spouting their twisted vision of Islam had killed or wounded more than 1,000 Afghan civilians in

2006. But it was wrong.

The blast had not been an attack at all. It had been an accident. A spark in a gunpowder shop had set off a chain reaction, with disastrous consequences. In a place like Afghanistan, we're accustomed to seeing violence through the lens of militant Islam. That, after all, has been the story—a war fought along religious lines, with insurgents fired by their desire to wage jihad against infidel occupiers. But it's not the only story, and it's easy to miss the others if religious motivations are instantly ascribed every time something goes up in smoke. Occasionally, accidents happen. More often, religion masquerades as the motivation, obscuring other factors that matter far more.

I first observed this phenomenon in early 2006 when Afghans began to pour into the streets in protest over several cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad that had been published in a Danish newspaper months earlier. The cartoons were perceived, correctly, as being offensive to

Islam. Demonstrations erupted around the world. But in Afghanistan, at least, they took on a strange character. Day after day, a pattern emerged. Thousands of people would demonstrate peacefully, chanting slogans as they marched. But near the end, a small group would begin to throw rocks. Then they would fire guns. Every now and then, they dropped a grenade or two. The police invariably met violence with violence, and the body count started to rise. The bloody nature of the protests was surprising to me, because the organizers I talked with said they had never intended their protests to be violent. All they wanted was to convey their deep sense of hurt at a grievous insult to their religion.

I dug deeper and soon found that those inciting the violence had other objectives in mind. The reason, it turned out, had little to do with religion. Instead, it was all about power. The protests had become a convenient way for some to flaunt their influence and for others to

undermine the authority of their rivals. In one case, for instance, a local strongman wanted to get even with the police chief, so he instructed his followers to use the protests over the cartoons as a cover for sowing chaos that would embarrass the chief.

It may well have had the desired effect locally. But to the outside world, it fell into a very different, though familiar story line: Islamic fundamentalists killing in the name of religion. Just as the protests over the cartoons were winding down, violence flared again. Again the spark appeared to be religion. Again I found that explanation misleading. This time, there had been a riot in the western city of Herat. By Afghan standards, Herat is peaceful. So it was unexpected when reports emerged that a mob of Sunni men had attacked groups of Shi'ite worshippers during their observation of the holiday Ashura.

When I flew into Herat days later, I found evidence of a massacre. I visited a Shi'ite mosque that had been nearly burned to

the ground, with four people killed and more than 100 injured in the ensuing clash. Survivors expressed shock; there had long been amicable relations between Sunnis and Shi'ites in Herat, and they did not understand why that had suddenly changed. Neither did I, until I began reporting on what had really happened. The former governor, it seemed, wanted to show that he was the only one capable of maintaining peace and stability in Herat. So he orchestrated a sectarian riot, just to remind residents how much they missed him. The move was purely political and had very little to do with Islam. "This is not the work of Sunnis or Shi'ahs," 35-year-old car dealer Ghulam Hussain told me as he surveyed the damaged mosque. "This is the work of people who have lost power and want to get it back."

It was a cynical, opportunistic ploy, to be sure, but one that played well into preconceived notions in the West of why conflict occurs in the Muslim world.

And yet it's rare when religion alone offers an adequate explanation for conflict. Even the Taliban—who for many epitomize a radical Islamic movement with violence at its core—cannot be properly understood without a strong grasp of its nonreligious features. It has, for instance, an important ethnic dimension, representing as it does a vision of Pashtun supremacy in Afghanistan. It also has geostrategic elements; it has received critical support from allies in Pakistan who favor the movement less for its religious orthodoxy than for its potential as a bulwark against India.

When the dateline reads Afghanistan or Pakistan—two countries I cover for the Post—we've almost come to expect conflict and religion to go hand in hand, to the point where it's surprising when one is present without the other. I spent much of March covering rallies in Pakistan by lawyers who were furious at President Pervez Musharraf's decision to suspend the nation's chief justice. The

lawyers were passionate in their objections, calling for an end to Musharraf's reign; the police were forceful in trying to quiet dissent, resorting to tear gas and baton charges. The result was a dramatic story. And yet, based on the comments I received from readers, the most unexpected element for many was the one not present: The protesters were clad in black suits, not wearing turbans, and they were shouting about the rule of law, not about Allah. That such a conflict could occur in a place like Pakistan caught many people off guard. But should it have been a shock that there's more to the Islamic world than Islam?

The point is not that religion doesn't matter. It certainly does. The point is that other factors matter, as well. As journalists, we owe it to the public to present a multidimensional portrait of the conflicts at the heart of our coverage. ■

Griff Witte is the Islamabad/Kabul bureau chief for The Washington Post.

Understanding the Many Faces of Islamism and Jihadism

A scholar of Islam shares insights to help journalists confront the challenges involved with reporting on the political Islamic movement.

By Fawaz A. Gerges

Since the September 11th terror attacks, Americans have come increasingly to believe that Islamism, not just jihadism, is a mortal threat to the West, an aggressive and totalitarian ideology dedicated to random destruction and global subjugation. Fueling American fears is the military debacle in Iraq and the ferocity of armed resistance and suicide attacks against U.S. troops and their Iraqi allies. Ratcheting the rhetoric, President Bush gathers all mainstream and militant Islamists together under the phrase “Islamofascists” and calls on Americans to be prepared for a long struggle. Some U.S. political leaders and pundits have gone further and called for an all-out war against all manifestations of



Lamp. Morocco. *Photo by Katharina Eglau.*

Islamism or political Islam.

Disentangling myth from reality about the political Islamic movement—whose goal is to establish governments based on shari'ah (Qur'anic law)—is a challenge fraught with difficulties. For journalists, this challenge involves a willingness to recognize the complexity and diversity within this movement, which encompasses a broad spectrum of mainstream and militant forces, as they try to place their coverage of news and events (often involving violence and threats of violence) within a broader, more meaningful and accurate context.

Mainstream Islamists—that is, Muslim Brothers and other independent activists—represent an overwhelming majority of religiously oriented groups (in the upper 90th percentile), whereas militants or jihadists are a tiny but critical minority. The mainstream Islamists accept the rules of the political game, claim to embrace democratic principles, and renounce violence.

From the 1940's through the

early 1970's, the Muslim Brotherhood—the most powerfully organized of all Islamists, with local branches in the Arab Middle East and Central and South and Southeast Asia—flirted with violence. Since then, however, they have increasingly moved to the political mainstream and aim to Islamize state and society through peaceful means. Although Muslim Brothers are often targeted and excluded from politics by ruling autocrats, they no longer use force to attain their goals.

Mainstream and enlightened Islamists also play an active role in expanding political debate in Muslim societies. They have forced existing secular dictatorships, such as those in Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Turkey, Jordan, Pakistan and even Saudi Arabia, to respond to their challenge to open up the closed political system and reform government institutions. Without such pressure, these authoritarian Muslim rulers would have no incentive to respond to demands for inclusion

and transparency.

Despite their historic opposition to Western-style democracy, Islamists have become unwitting harbingers of democratic transformation. They have formed alliances with their former sworn political opponents, including secularists and Marxists, in calling upon governments to respect human rights and the rule of law. Mainstream or traditional Islamists are not born-again democrats and never will be. They are deeply patriarchal, seeing themselves as the guardians of faith, tradition and authenticity. In Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, Islamists vehemently oppose efforts to give women the right to vote or to drive cars. In Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Tunisia, Algeria, Pakistan and other Muslim countries, they denounce any legislation that would enable women to divorce abusive husbands, travel without male permission, or achieve full representation in government.

Nevertheless, many Islamists are gradually becoming initiated

into the culture of political realism and the art of the possible. They are learning to make compromises with secular groups and rethink some of their absolutist positions. Events have forced them to come to grips with the complexity and diversity of Muslim societies, though they still lack a well-delineated vision to solve their countries' socioeconomic challenges. More and more, they recognize the primacy of politics over religion and the difficulty, even futility, of establishing Islamic states.

The Jihadists

The jihadist represents a tiny fraction of the larger mainstream Islamist movement, which dominates the social space in most Muslim societies. Although jihadism is lethal, it does not possess a viable broad social base like the Muslim Brotherhood. From the late 1960's until the mid-1990's, militant Islamists or jihadists were preoccupied with the fight against Al-Adou al-Qareeb (the "near enemy")

Muslim rulers. The primary goal of modern jihadism is and always has been the destruction of the atheist political and social order at home and its replacement with authentic Islamic states.

Until the second half of the 1990's, Al-Adou al-Baeed (the "far enemy") had not registered on jihadists' radar screen. It was then that a small fraction of jihadists—al-Qaeda and its affiliates—decided to target the United States and some of its Western allies and labeled them as the "far enemy." Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, his second in command, launched a campaign to hijack the jihadist movement. They changed its direction away from attacking the Muslim "apostates" and "renegades" and toward attacking

Israel and the Western powers, particularly the United States. As a result, an intense internal struggle ensued between local jihadists and their international counterparts led by bin Laden and Zawahiri. Waged for the soul of the jihadist enterprise, the reverberations of this internal struggle have been felt far beyond the region's borders—in New York, Washington, Madrid, London and Paris.

The vast majority of militant Islamists, whom I call local jihadists, did not join al-Qaeda jihadists or global jihadists. In fact, September 11th showed how deep the fissures within the jihadists were, and this internal struggle has escalated now into an open civil war. Many former jihadists, whom I interviewed in the late 1990's

... many Islamists are gradually becoming initiated into the culture of political realism and the art of the possible. They are learning to make compromises with secular groups and rethink some of their absolutist positions.

and after 9/11, said that while delighted at America's humiliation, they also feared that bin Laden and Zawahiri recklessly endangered survival of the Islamist movement. Instead of a river of recruits flowing to Afghanistan, only a trickle of volunteers signed up to defend the Taliban and al-Qaeda after the September 11th attacks.

Western Views of Islam

It is a pity that some Western commentators still perpetuate the myth that the September 11th attacks were widely embraced by all mainstream and militant Islamists and even the ummah (the worldwide Muslim community). Far from condoning the September 11th attacks, mainstream Islamists might serve as a counterweight to ultramilitants like al-Qaeda. Immediately after September 11th, leading mainstream Islamists—such as Hassan al-Turabi, formerly head of the National Islamic Front and now of People's Congress in Sudan who, in the

early 1990's, hosted Osama bin Laden and Sayyid Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah (spiritual founding father of Lebanon's Hizbullah)—condemned al-Qaeda's September 11th attacks on the United States as harmful to Islam and Muslims, not just to Americans.

Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an Egyptian-born conservative Islamic cleric based in Qatar, issued a fatwa denouncing al-Qaeda's "illegal jihad" and expressed sorrow and empathy with the American victims: "Our hearts bleed because of the attacks that have targeted the World Trade Center, as well as other institutions in the United States," wrote Qaradawi, who is widely listened to and read by a huge Muslim audience. He went on to write that the murders in New York could not be justified on any ground, including "the American biased policy toward Israel on the military, political and economic fronts." (It is little wonder why al-Qaeda's leaders, including bin Laden, Zawahiri, and the late Abu

Musab al-Zarqawi, often attack mainstream Islamists and accuse them of treachery.)

Since September 11th, some critical questions have not been fully addressed in the United States. They include:

- Why did bin Laden and his associates suddenly turn their guns on the “far enemy” after having been in the “far enemy” trenches with other Islamists during the 1980’s and 1990’s?
- Are Islamists and jihadists united over attacking the far enemy, or are they splintered and divided over tactics and strategy?
- What is the relative weight and influence of al-Qaeda jihadists within the Islamist movement and the jihadist at this time?
- Would it be more effective to try to internally encircle al-Qaeda instead of expanding the so-called “war on terror” and declaring an all-out war against real and imagined enemies?



Boys of a Qur’an school. Uzbekistan.
Photo by Katharina Eglau.

Rarely, it seems, do journalists approach their coverage of the so-called “war on terror” with any of these questions in mind. It is certainly possible that a political approach would have been more effective in combating extremism, and terrorism could have been reduced to an inconsequential phenomenon.

What has happened instead is that militarism has radicalized mainstream Muslim public opinion and provided ideological ammunition to militants. In particular, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and subsequent violations

of human rights have created a new generation of radicals who search for ways to join the jihad caravan. By exacerbating regional fault lines already shaking with tension, the militaristic responses may have caused irreparable damage, not just to U.S. global strategy, but also to international peace and security.

Reverberations of the Iraq War are heard and felt on European streets, and they could soon reach American shores if Iraq fractures and sinks into full-scale civil war. At the same time, a consensus is emerging within the European and U.S. intelligence communities that the Iraq War is strengthening global jihadists. Tragically, the Iraq War has given rise to a new generation of militants who use terrorism as a rule, not an exception. More youngsters are deeply affected by what they see as external aggression perpetrated against their community and religion. In my travels in the Arab world, I've met young Muslim teens, with no prior Islamist or jihadist background, desperately

trying to raise a meager sum of money to take a bus ride or an airline flight to the Syrian-Iraqi border and join the fight.

Instead of taking the easier, more simplistic approach of lumping all Islamists and jihadists together, journalists ought to adopt a more nuanced and constructive approach—one that draws distinctions among the many faces of political Islam. Acknowledging these complexities as a routine part of news coverage not only fulfills a professional responsibility but it also contributes to national security and a civil dialogue. ■

Fawaz A. Gerges, who holds the Christian Johnson Chair in Middle East and International Affairs at Sarah Lawrence College, is a Carnegie Scholar and visiting professor at the American University in Cairo. His most recent books are "Journey of the Jihadist: Inside Muslim Militancy" (Harcourt Press in 2006), and "The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global" (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

The Arab Story: The Big One Waiting to Be Told

'How do journalists make the lives and aspirations of Arab men and women who will not succumb to criminality or terror relevant to Western audiences?'

By Rami G. Khouri

Two things have dominated much of my professional and personal life during the 37 years since I graduated from journalism school in the United States: following American college sports and following Middle East politics, society and culture. Reading the U.S. mainstream press, especially in the early spring, I often have a hard time distinguishing between American media coverage of March Madness and Middle East Madness—both defined by intense emotions and extreme confrontation.

Through my professional lifetime of experience working for and with quality American and European journalists, and following their work daily, what

I regret most is their tendency to report on the Middle East almost exclusively as an arena of aberration and violence. This is only exacerbated (and at times mystified) by the shattering combination of ignorance and fear of alien cultures and faiths.

It is unfair and inaccurate to generalize too much, of course, but my critique of how this story has been mishandled stands the test of time. For the past half century, reporting about this region has been told primarily through the lens of conflict, extremism and violence; at the same time, the realities of hundreds of millions of ordinary Arabs, Iranians, Israelis, Turks and other small populations, whose



Mediterranean beach. Gaza Strip. *Photo by Katharina Eglau.*

daily lives are not defined by warfare or dominated by conflict, have been largely ignored. The prevalent news and imagery convey—and are defined by—emotionalism, exaggerated religiosity, and deep ethnic or religious prejudice, while the underlying human rhythms, prevailing moral norms, and routine cultural and political

values of the 300 million or so Arabs are not presented accurately, fully or at all. Between the intemperance and drama of Dubayy, Gaza, Fallujah and Hizbullah, the U.S. news media have very little appetite for stories about Arabs who don't carry knives, shoot machine guns, launch grenades, or talk on gold-plated cell phones.

It is not surprising, therefore, that what I see from office, home and car windows throughout the Middle East does not match the images I see on U.S. newscasts. The juxtaposition is extreme and deeply frustrating. Reporting by the written press is only slightly better. This circumstance is brought about, in part, by the nature of the news media. I know because for 40 years I, too, have written “newsworthy” leads and headlines. Tension trumps routine yet, for those, like me, who have worked to foster better communication, journalistic coverage, and understanding between Arabs and Americans, this creates two problems:

1. Journalists in the West are missing the most important story in the Arab world: the quest by millions of ordinary people to create a better political and socioeconomic order, anchored in decent values, open to the world, pluralistic and tolerant yet asserting indignant Arab-Islamic values. The

wholesale attempt to transform autocracies into democracies and corrupt and often incompetent police states into more satisfying and accountable polities is a saga of epic and often heroic proportions. Most of the U.S. news media refuse to acknowledge or cannot even see this because of a relentless focus on Islamist violence, Israel, Hizbullah, Iran, Syria, terrorism, oil and the American army in Iraq.

2. A high price is paid for covering the Arab world primarily in terms of its public and political deviance, rather than its human ordinariness and the rhythms of its many different neighborhoods. This price is denominated in three interlocking and dangerous currencies that create a cycle of disdain and death that serves to define us today: (a.) a one-dimensional and largely negative and usually fear-filled image of the Arab world set in the mind of ordinary Americans; (b.) emotional and political support for

the U.S. government in pursuit of its Middle East policies, with disastrous consequences for all concerned; (c.) the counterreaction from much of the Arab world, where a large majority of ordinary people and ruling elites are contemptuous of American policy; a very small band of criminal fanatics in al-Qaeda and associated groups goes a step further and wages war against Americans at home or abroad.

Such coverage of the Middle East—and Arab countries in it—is an integral element in perpetuating and exacerbating existing tensions and fear. (Arab coverage of Americans shares a lot of these same weaknesses.) All of this is made worse by the inherent bias—reflecting long-standing U.S. government policy and Israeli perspectives—embedded in most of this coverage. And when what is reported also stresses the Arab's anti-Israel and anti-U.S. sentiments of Arabs—and these are real—little space remains for

reporting on the defining reality of ordinary Arab lives. This reality is the heroic durability and epic stoicism as ordinary Arabs demand to be treated in their countries as citizens with rights instead of as subjects, victims and chattel of modern Arab authoritarianism.

This narrative is all too familiar to American reporters; they've told this story often and with eloquence and persistence when, for example, Russians and Poles fought against Communism, and Chinese students and black South Africans waged struggles against their oppressive systems, and girls and women in Afghanistan battled for their rights at great risk. But this story is rarely told in Arab lands, where instead death and hatreds take center stage in stories filed by Western reporters—stories routinely insinuating the inscrutability of exotic and alien values and an inherently violent faith.

A half-century ago many in the American media ignored entirely or provided a distorted,

incomplete and one-dimensional coverage of African Americans, then called Negroes. Reporters then, as now, accurately reflected prevalent values in much of American society. Journalists did not create this racism or oppression; they only reflected it in what they covered—and what they didn't report on—and, in doing so, aided in perpetuating its flaws and crime. Something similar is happening in reporting on the Arab world today, as prevailing political interests and norms, with a nod to crass commercialism, defeat what might otherwise be journalists' better instincts.

This is a difficult—and even profound—professional challenge. How do journalists make the lives and aspirations of Arab men and women who will not succumb to criminality or terror relevant to Western audiences? How do they



Hizbullah volunteers in a Shi'ite-majority village in the south tell a bereaved father that his missing son was a fighter martyred in action. *Photo by Iason Athanasiadis.*

do this when there is no iconic image of a solitary man standing before a tank, as happened in Tiananmen Square? The spirit of Arab defiance and self-assertion in the face of police states and foreign occupiers is the stuff of drama. It is also the force behind mass politics in the Arab world—a force that is increasingly being exploited and misused by extremist leaders far afield, such as Iran's president. Osama bin

Laden and his gang of criminals has also tried desperately and repeatedly to tap into this mountain of discontent, in most cases without success.

Masses of ordinary, discontented Arabs have refused to turn violent to express their angst as they also refuse foreign hegemony or occupation as an antidote to their domestic abuse of power. They cling to religion and traditional social values, while demanding more accountable and participatory governance. They adhere to their powerful religious dictates of charity and tolerance and, in most parts of the Arab world, they insist on living in pluralistic societies. And despite the West's perception, almost desperately they seek to engage meaningfully with Americans, Europeans and others abroad who would reciprocate the quest for mutually beneficial relations.

With policies and rhetoric seemingly locked in place, along with gun sights, it is perhaps too much to expect West-

ern political leaders to see this human reality beneath the surface of the political brutality of a regime such as Hosni Mubarak's in Egypt. Or to understand the mass anger tapped by Moktada al-Sadr in Iraq. I do, however, expect my journalist colleagues in the Western press to focus on this extraordinary human dynamic that defines this entire region.

It's a great story. It's also the most likely route to our mutual salvation and exit from the cycle of warfare and extremism that our incompetent leaders have fostered and that degrades us all. ■

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When the News Media Focus on Islam's Internal Struggles

Journalists highlight the secular Muslim vision 'because it reflects a Western outlook that Islam needs to transform and modernize.'

By Geneive Abdo

The blame for September 11th, at one time based on President George Bush's theory that everything happening in the Islamic world is a response to Muslim envy of Westernization and a longing for the glorious days of the Ottoman Empire, has now evolved into a new explanation: The root of the problem lies not in a clash between Islam and the West, but rather an internal struggle within Islam itself.

This notion, advanced by



American journalists here and abroad, is quite convenient not only for the U.S. government but for public morale. If the problem lies in Islam's conflicted identity as a 1,400-year-old religion trying to reconcile its doctrine with the modern world, then United

States' foreign policy over the last half-century in the Middle East and in some predominantly Muslim countries is not at fault. It is also convenient for another reason: The internal Muslim debate allows the media, and

by extension public opinion, to take sides in the struggle with the intention of influencing the outcome. There is no doubt that an intensive struggle exists within Islam that ranges from theological issues to the role of

gious “bad” Muslims, who wear headscarves on the streets of London and New York, should be shunned for their backwardness and unwillingness to adopt the fundamental principles of Western liberalism.

This ‘good’ Muslim ‘bad’ Muslim characterization is particularly evident with stories about Muslims living either in the United States or in Europe. In reporting the internal divides among Muslims, the ‘good’ Muslim is often described as ‘moderate.’

clerics in governing a state. But this should remain a Muslim issue, not one the West should decide.

In the early days of the Iraq War, for example, the Iraqi Sunnis were “good” Muslims who should prevail in governing the state over the Shi’ites. Similarly, in Western societies with increasing Muslim populations, it is the “secular” (good) Muslims who should be welcomed as full-fledged citizens while reli-

This “good” Muslim “bad” Muslim characterization is particularly evident with stories about Muslims living either in the United States or in Europe. In reporting the internal divides among Muslims, the “good” Muslim is often described as “moderate.” These are Muslims who take pride in their national identity as American, British or French, who at the very least are willing to compromise Islamic ideals in order to fully integrate

into a Western society and, at the most, publicly criticize other Muslims and Islamic doctrine.

One glaring example was coverage on CNN's neoconservative Glenn Beck show in March. Beck devoted an hour of live coverage to what was called "The Secular Islam Summit," held in St. Petersburg, Florida. Some of the organizers and speakers at the convention have received massive media attention in recent years. Irshad Manji, author of "The Trouble With Islam Today," and Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the former Dutch parliamentarian and author of the best-seller "Infidel," were but a few there claiming to have suffered personally at the hands of "radical" Islam. One participant, Wafa Sultan, declared on Glenn Beck's show that she does not "see any difference between radical Islam and regular Islam."

This secular Muslim vision is highlighted because it reflects a Western outlook that Islam needs to transform and modernize. But for the vast majority of Muslims, such coverage

is offensive not only because a small fringe is given massive exposure, but also because it is the media, not Muslims, who have the power to decide who speaks for Islam. Giving attention to the minority of "secularists" overshadows the views of the majority.

The tendency to champion "secular" or "moderate" Muslims is also apparent in journalists' coverage of the struggle within Islam over gender equality. Time and time again, Muslim women opposed to wearing headscarves are profiled as brazen activists who dare to challenge the great numbers of those wearing hijab, who say they do so out of devotion to the faith. According to typical portrayals, particularly reporting about Muslims living in the West, the headscarf is the litmus test; those who wear it are less interested in full integration than those who do not.

In the United States, a divisive issue within the Muslim community concerns where women should pray in a mosque. Across



Praying man in a mosque. Iran.

Photos by Katharina Eglau.



Shoes at the front door of a mosque. Morocco.

the country, the consensus is that women should pray in a different space, whether it is behind men, in an adjoining prayer hall, or even in a basement. In conservative mosques, the often male-dominated mosque governing boards require women to pray in a space isolated from the imam delivering the sermon and the male worshippers. As

part of this internal struggle, an African-American Muslim activist, Amina Wadud, in the spring of 2005 decided to bring the issue out into the open by leading a mixed congregation of Muslim men and women in prayer in New York City. The incident sparked a fierce debate that included religious scholars from the Middle East who denounced

her actions and declared her an apostate.

For the most part, the extensive news coverage of this incident sided with the female activist and dismissed criticism from Muslims who said her actions violated the principles of the faith. Sheik Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a scholar in Doha with a wide following, issued a fatwa in response to the prayer service, saying that all four schools of Islamic jurisprudence were clear: Women may lead prayers only before other women. Many Muslims expressed similar views on Islamic Web sites. "We need not judge Amina Wadud only by what she is doing this Friday," wrote one writer on the site of Al Jazeera, the Arabic-language cable network. "We need to judge her by the pending issues on the agenda of her sponsors and supporters. To us, they have crossed all limits. To them, they have just taken the first step towards transforming Islam into a 'progressive' and 'moderate' form according to the wishes of the enemies of Islam."

Muslims in the United States are trying to respond to this distorted media vision by gaining greater access to broadcast and print. More Muslims are appearing on television and writing opinion pieces in newspapers. But it has not been easy for several reasons. Until September 11th, the fractured Muslim leadership in the United States was unaccustomed to participating in either foreign policy debates or public discussions about their faith. Over the past six years, they have been compelled not only to become public figures but also to break through the walls of exclusion that showcase other voices. Muslims often tell me that there are certain top-tier newspapers in the United States that rarely accept op-eds reflecting mainstream Muslim opinion. This opinion ranges from Muslim views that the United States's foreign policy agenda is based upon Israel's interest in the Middle East to sentiment that Muslims should be allowed to be Muslims, irrespective of

Western conventions.

While Muslims have been successful in publishing more frequently in smaller and more localized publications, they have also arrived at another alternative, however limited. Muslims are creating their own media. An imam in Chicago created “Radio Islam” in the fall of 2004. Despite its mostly Muslim listeners and the frequency—an ethnic radio network broadcast only in the Chicago area—the daily show opens with the idea that everyone is talking about Muslims and Islam. “Now it is time for you to talk,” says the radio announcer. A leader from the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), an advocacy group with its headquarters in Washington, D.C., is host to an NPR program in Florida. And a Lebanese radio host broadcasts weekly from Pacifica radio in Los Angeles. These are only a few examples.

Is there a solution to enlightening those in the media and the public? Not in the near future. The generation of journal-

ists now covering Muslims in the East and the West are generally uneducated about contemporary Islam, and universities in the United States have been slow to establish new faculties since September 11th. And there is another, more profound, obstacle. Even if American reporters immersed themselves in courses on Islamic studies, the baggage they—and their editors—carry of viewing this religion and ideology through a Western prism, rather than on its terms, is likely to remain. What is required is a new intellectual enlightenment about an ideology and faith that is vastly different from anything Americans have encountered. ■

Geneive Abdo is a 2002 Nieman Fellow. For nearly a decade, she reported from the Middle East and in Iran. She is the author of three books on contemporary Islam, including “Mecca and Main Street: Muslim Life in America After 9/11,” published in 2006 by Oxford University Press.

Misperceptions of the ‘War’ in Iraq

An NBC News correspondent—with longtime experience in Iraq—describes many other visions of the war now being fought.

By Richard Engel

The war in Iraq is not what it seems. In fact, there is no “war” in Iraq—there are many wars, some centuries old, playing out on this ancient land. But this is not what Americans are often led to believe. The perception portrayed by the White House and Iraqi government in Baghdad—and commonly reflected in the news media—is that the violence in Iraq is a fundamental struggle between two opposing teams: Freedom Lovers and Freedom Haters.

In this Manichaeian and simplistic view of the fighting here, the tale of the tape is:

- **The Freedom Lovers:** The 12 million Iraqis who plunged their fingers into purple ink on Election Day in December 2005, choosing freedom, de-

mocracy and to shut forever the door on Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship. Their team captains are the Iraqi government, the White House, the U.S.-trained Iraq security services, and the roughly 150,000 American troops in Iraq.

- **The Freedom Haters:** Iraqi radicals, foreign jihadists, former Ba’ath Party members, and criminals supported by al-Qaeda, Syria and Iran, who have formed an alliance of convenience to reject the democratization of Iraq, each for its own motivation. The team’s captains are al-Qaeda in Iraq and other Sunni militant groups, Iranian and Syrian agents and, but not always, radical Shi’ite cleric Moktada al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army.

While there are certainly elements of truth to this narrative, the reality in this fractured country is much more complex.

The Other Wars

During a break in a diplomatic meeting in Baghdad in March, I was sitting in a smoke-filled waiting room of the foreign ministry watching Iraqiya, the state-sponsored television station. It was the final day of the Shi'ite festival of Ashura, and several hundred thousand, perhaps as many as two million, Shi'ite pilgrims were gathered in the holy city of Karbala, south of Baghdad. The television images showed the Shi'ite devotees flagellating their backs with zangeel (bundles of chains) and cutting their heads with swords to mourn the seventh century martyr Hussein and punish themselves for not having done more to save his life during a battle in Karbala in one of Islam's early civil wars.

The pictures showed a man

dressed as Hussein in ancient Islamic battle dress, with a sword, flowing headdress, and a colorful cape, reenacting the battle by single-handedly fighting off a crowd of attackers until he was overwhelmed and heroically slain. Hussein's martyrdom, many Shi'ites claim at the hands of early Sunnis, is one of the central themes of Shi'ite Islam in Iraq and establishes a basic premise that Hussein, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, and his Shi'ite descendants are the true heirs to Islam but were defeated by Sunni "usurpers."

But the footage on Iraqi state TV during Ashura didn't stop there. Interwoven with the images of Hussein's struggle and the mourning rituals was current news footage of the aftermath of car bombings in Baghdad, the Shi'ite al-Askari mosque in Samara destroyed by al-Qaeda militants in February 2006, and wounded Iraqi women and children. The message was clear: the attacks on markets, Shi'ite mosques, restau-

rants and university campuses, mostly carried out by Sunni radicals, are a continuation of Hussein's battle centuries ago.

As pilgrims marched by our Baghdad bureau on their way to Karbala, I could hear them chant: "Kul yom Ashura! Kul ard Karbala!" or "Every day is Ashura! All land is Karbala!" Simply put, they were saying, everyday

and everywhere in Iraq, Shi'ites are reliving Hussein's battles in Karbala. There was no talk of democracy or the Ba'ath Party, Saddam Hussein or the U.S. troop "surge," or other subjects that dominate the Iraq debate in the United States. Instead, it is apparent that many of Iraq's Shi'ites believe they are fighting a different war from the one many in the United States see their troops engaged in here, and for different reasons.

... it is apparent that many of Iraq's Shi'ites believe they are fighting a different war from the one many in the United States see their troops engaged in here, and for different reasons.

Many Sunni groups in Iraq are also fighting a war that seems to have little in common with the official U.S. and Iraqi characterization of the conflict. Al-Qaeda in Iraq and its allies recently formed an umbrella group they call Dowlit al-Islam, or the Islamic State in Iraq. After the group claimed responsibility for bombing the

Iraqi parliament building in Baghdad's Green Zone in April, the group issued an Internet statement explaining its motivation. The group said the suicide bomber who attacked parliament's cafeteria and killed one lawmaker was motivated to kill "the traitors and collaborators" who had sold out to a "Zionist-Persian" conspiracy to control Iraq. From what they wrote, they seem to believe they are fighting Israel, Iran and their

agents, not the U.S. mission to bring democracy to Iraq.

These visions of war are just two of the competing power struggles that U.S. troops in Iraq are trying to quell; the reality is there are many wars within the war. Others include:

- **Moktada al-Sadr:** The radical Shi'ite leader and commander of the Mahdi Army who wants to equal or surpass the influence of his father, one of Iraq's most revered Shi'ite leaders. Based primarily on his family's reputation, Sadr has tapped into the frustrations of Iraq's poor, uneducated and unemployed Shi'ite community, increasingly fed up with the continued presence of U.S. troops.
- **The Kurds:** Iraqi Kurds want independence and control of the oil rich city of Kirkuk. Thankful that U.S. troops rid them of Saddam's oppression, they now want to capitalize on their new freedom by establishing what they have
- **Abdul Aziz al-Hakim:** He is the leader of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq [now the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council] who wants to control southern Iraq and carve out a ministate allied with Iran. His party would rule this emirate, containing both the rich oil fields in Basra and access to the Persian Gulf. Al-Hakim's Iranian-backed militia, the Badr Brigade, renamed the Badr Organization in an attempt to make it seem more mainstream, has gained control of many of the local councils and police stations across southern Iraq.
- **Ayad Allawi:** The former prime minister and ex-Ba'ath Party member and western intelligence "asset," he wants

been denied for centuries, an autonomous, prosperous oil-rich state. For Kurds, the fighting in Iraq is not about democracy, but self-determination.

to return to power, overthrow Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, unite Sunnis and Shi'ites under his secular rule, and bring back divisions of the Iraqi army dissolved by then U.S. administrator Paul Bremer.

- **Nuri al-Maliki:** Prime Minister Maliki's goals are unclear. At times he sounds as though he is reading talking points from the White House, but he has been reluctant to stop Shi'ite militia groups and has overseen a Shi'ite-led government often accused of pursuing a sectarian agenda.

U.S. politicians and military commanders often complain that the Iraqi government "won't step up and do its job." The impression they give is that Iraqi officials are sitting around smoking hooka pipes and refusing to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, while U.S. troops are fighting and dying to "get the job done." Perhaps the question should be, "Which job?" American soldiers

often ask me when the Iraqis will "step up and fight for their own country." They are already fighting for their country. Iraqi officials, religious leaders, militia groups, Syria, Iran and al-Qaeda are struggling and dying to get a "job done" in Iraq, though it does not appear to be the job the White House would like them to be doing.

U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates warned during his April visit to Iraq that America's "patience is running out." If he's waiting for Iraqis and the wider Middle East to start fighting the war of Freedom Lovers against Freedom Haters, Americans might need to have considerably more patience in the years ahead. ■

Richard Engel is the senior Middle East correspondent and Beirut bureau chief for NBC News.

Fiction Can Be More Real Than Journalism

'In journalism, the color gray too often comes out a muddy brown.'

By Matt Beynon Rees

In a cabbage patch on the edge of Bethlehem, the wife of a Palestinian killed there the previous night described hearing the fatal shot from the rifle of an Israeli sniper. The dead man's mother raged and told me she had recognized his body in the dark by the denim jacket she recently bought him. I listened and thought: "This is great material—too good, in fact."

It was 2001, and I was Jerusalem bureau chief for Time magazine, covering the violence of the intifada. The dramatic story



of this family ended up as the kind of colorful lead you read frequently in a newsmagazine, followed by something along the lines of this: "To be sure, the Israelis say this and the State Department says that and the Palestinians—surprise—disagree."

As the winter wind came cold off the Judean Desert, I knew that with the insights I had gathered there I had to go beyond journalism. As it turns out, I based the opening murder in my mystery novel, "The Collaborator of Bethlehem," on this death.

Since the first time I set foot in the West Bank in 1996, I had grown steadily disillusioned with the ability of journalism to convey the depth of what I had learned about the Palestinians. Back then, I visited the family of a Nablus man tortured to death in one of Yasser Arafat's jails. The news article I wrote was a good one, uncovering the internal Palestinian violence so often overshadowed by the more spectacular conflict with Israel. But my impressions were much deeper. I was struck by the candor and dignity with which the dead youth's family spoke to me; the sheer alien nature of this place thrilled me. At the entrance to the family's house in the casbah, an old oil drum held black flags and palm fronds, symbols of Islamic mourning. Men sat around smoking under a dark awning. I felt a powerful sense of adven-



A family gathers at their home in Beit Hanoun in the Gaza Strip. *Photo by Alexandra Boulat.*

ture, as though I had uncovered an unknown culture.

Seeing the Middle East In Shades of Gray

I sometimes joke that I developed an early interest in the Middle East because my great-uncle had ridden with the British Imperial Camel Corps during World War I, been shot in the backside near Ramallah, and used to get drunk and drop his pants to show us the scar when I was a kid. But aside from those geriatric moments, I grew up in

Wales with no more concern for the Middle East than any other educated person. Then I fell in love, quit my job in New York, where I covered Wall Street, and joined my fiancée when she went to the Holy Land with *The Christian Science Monitor*. My fascination for her sadly faded and we divorced, but I remained rapt by this place and increasingly drawn to its ambiguity.

I'm frequently asked—both by journalists and others—what I “think” about the wall Israel built near the Green Line to separate itself from the Palestinians. People hold their heads slightly to the side when they ask this question. It's a posture of judgment: Is this guy on the right side? Well, the wall is gray, quite literally, because it's made of concrete. It has prevented Palestinian suicide bombers killing Israelis, but it also has deprived some Palestinian farmers of their land. It's gray because of what it's made of, and I can handle that. But journalism can't.

In news reports the wall comes out a muted shade of

gray not because of its color but because journalists don't want to offend those who see the wall as black or white. In the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, journalists have swapped objectivity for inoffensiveness. Editors are keen not to offend the zealots on both sides—a waste of time, since such readers are affronted by any hint of balance. In journalism, the color gray too often comes out a muddy brown.

Fiction is set up to handle gray areas because, unlike journalism, it doesn't depend on what characters say—it gets inside their heads. The gray matter in there isn't subject to self-censorship. It forces a writer to build a character who will seem real, for example a detective, whose every thought and concern marks him out as belonging to his own society, not a stereotyped journalistic sketch. I came across the man who would be the basis of my sleuth, Omar Yusef, in Bethlehem. This man, whom I don't name because it might endanger him, is an independent thinker in a world of fearful groupthink,

an honorable man in a dark reality. I believe readers will like Omar even at his most irascible, because they'll understand how frustrating it would be for a man of such integrity to face his dreadful, corrupt world—that's why I was drawn to the real Omar through the years.

The lawlessness of Palestinian life also gave me great characters for my fictionalized villains. Unfortunately there are many Palestinians who have strong motivations to kill each other. I've spent a lot of time over the years with some of these men, trying to learn why they take the path of violence—time that has led to a deeper characterization of the villains in my books.

Hearing the Voices, Knowing the Words

Of course, because I learned the local languages, I had an advantage over many other journalists in the Middle East—both in reporting and in developing a deep enough knowledge to be able to write fictional Palestinian char-

acters. The role of language is an oddity among Middle East reporters. Correspondents in Moscow, for example, seem uniformly to learn Russian and be rather proud of it. But few here learn Arabic. I speak Arabic, and it's a difficult language, but I don't imagine it's so much harder than Russian. I also speak Hebrew, but I've noticed that correspondents who do so are often seen as somewhat suspect, as though it makes one pro-Israeli—a taint of bias that adheres to Arabic speakers only if they speak the language particularly well.

I've always viewed language as a tool that carries with it no sense of commitment to the cause of the people who speak that language (I speak French, but that doesn't mean I think Britain should swap sterling for the Euro). I considered it important to learn Arabic and Hebrew, because I wanted access to places I'd never have imagined going and people whose perspectives seemed utterly unlike mine.

In the Middle East, I realized that at heart I was an anthropol-

ogist—whereas editors expect a correspondent to be a political scientist manqué. Every time I go to a Palestinian town, I feel alive and stimulated. And that sense of excitement led me as far inside Palestinian society as I could get, listening to ordinary Palestinians, no matter how bloodthirstily and lengthily they spoke to me. I also sought out the Palestinian military leaders who'd been passed over for promotion in favor of Arafat yes-men. They became my best sources about what really happened inside the Palestinian Authority.

I was able to write about the ways in which Arafat's regime of patronage undermined and divided Palestinian society at a time when the stories of most foreign correspondents could have been summarized as "today good/bad (delete one) for peace process." Looking askance at Arafat was seen as implying a pro-Israeli position back then. Most reporters continued to write their peace-process stories—and my editors persisted in asking for them, because they were still appearing in

The New York Times, which was setting their agenda—when long months of intifada had clearly buried any notion of peace in a deluge of death.

Ultimately it's the expression of the true feelings of the Palestinians I most admire that, for me, makes fiction a better measure of reality than journalism. They aren't official spokesmen; they aren't powerful, and they aren't even quotable because they would be in fear of their lives. But they've told me what's in their hearts, and none of them are the cartoon victims or one-dimensional villains found on the pages of newspapers. ■

Matt Beynon Rees is the author of "The Collaborator of Bethlehem," the first in a series of novels about Palestinian sleuth Omar Yusef. Rees was Jerusalem bureau chief for Time from 2000 to 2006 and previously was based in the Middle East for Newsweek and The Scotsman. He is a contributor to Time, blogs at www.mattbeynonrees.com, and lives in Jerusalem.

PHOTO ESSAY

Emotions Speak Through Images

Photos and words by Anja Niedringhaus



Iraqis seek cover as British tanks open fire on Iraqi Army positions in the outskirts of Basra. March 30, 2003.

During this 2003 battle for Basra, the second largest city in Iraq, the outskirts of the city saw heavy fighting. (Coalition troops eventually took the city on April 6th.) Even the International Red Cross wasn't allowed into the city's center. In a lull in the fighting, civilians sought refuge by leaving Basra. I

had crossed from Kuwait earlier that month, hidden in a Kuwaiti fire brigade truck that had been sent to help extinguish the burning oil fields around Basra. Once in Iraq, I covered the fall of the city with my Associated Press colleagues. I remember watching a fierce battle around the city's university. Shells started to



Marines from the 1st Division raid a house in the Abu Ghraib district of Baghdad, Iraq. November 2, 2004.

land nearby, and most journalists left the scene. I had just put on my bulletproof vest when another shell landed so close to me that it injured three of my colleagues. I escaped with bruises and was able to drive them to safety in our Jeep, even though it was also hit, and two of its four tires were flat. One of my colleagues, a Lebanese cameraman, had shrapnel close to his heart and was immediately operated on by a British Army doctor in a makeshift tent. We were flown out to Kuwait for further

treatment. Three days later I returned to Iraq in a rented Jeep from Kuwait. I called it “Toyota Sheraton,” and it became my home until I reached Baghdad six days later.

For the first time I was embedded when I joined a unit of Marines—Lima Company—weeks ahead of their major assault on Fallujah. The occupation of Iraq from a soldier’s point of view was very different. I had only worked with Iraqis before, getting to know their families,



A head of a child's doll is mounted on a stick at a checkpoint leading into the heavily guarded city of Fallujah, Iraq. February 6, 2005.

and tried to understand the situation through their eyes. What struck me most was how young the Marines were—just out of school, young boys. One day I joined them on a house raid in the Abu Ghraib district of Baghdad. It was the house of a local city council chairman. The Marines started to search for weapons while the women and children took refuge in the kitchen. I sensed that my presence during the raid—since I wasn't wearing a military uniform and being a

woman—helped the women and children feel safer. Perhaps they felt that a nonmilitary person, a journalist, would help keep them safe. I felt only sadness and embarrassment when the Marines found an old, rusty, small gun in the garden and arrested the city council chairman.

Two months after a major assault on Fallujah, civilians returned to the city. They faced several checkpoints set up by U.S. Marines and the Iraqi



Bosnian Muslim men attend a funeral ceremony at sunset to be more protected from sniper fire. Sarajevo. July 20, 1993.

Army. After covering the initial attack, I embedded again with Lima Company to see what had happened to the city. Very few civilians had returned. Troops surrounded the area, and heavy weaponry was still in place. Lima Company's base was a hospital on the outskirts of the city. I was glad to see the Marines I'd come to know again. The assault had been difficult and dangerous, and a bond had grown between us. I wouldn't say they were friends, but I cared about them.

Sarajevo was besieged for more than four years with sectarian violence dividing the city into Muslim and Serb-orthodox parts. Shelling and sniper fire from surrounding buildings became a kind of normality. Many times funeral ceremonies came under sniper fire with people taking cover in ditches next to coffins. At this funeral, three Muslim family members—two brothers and their mother—were to be buried. The men arrived at sunset



A Palestinian man reads the Qur'an during the last day of Ramadan at the beach outside Gaza City. December 4, 2002.

and placed the coffins on the street next to Sarajevo's Lion Cemetery since the surrounding buildings gave more cover against sniper fire. After the funeral ceremony, the coffins were buried in darkness.

Gaza is a narrow strip of land that hugs the coast. It's one of the most densely populated areas of the world. The refugee camps are so depressing and sad, but this

beach always held something special for me. It's like a refuge from surrounding chaos: quiet, with the bluest of blue water, and soft sand. Often I would go there in the morning to watch the young men fish as they balanced on boats not much bigger than surfboards, casting their nets deftly into the sea. This seemed one of the few signs of normal life in Gaza. It was on the last day of Ramadan that I saw this man saying his

midday prayers; he sat a little further up the beach where no one else was near.

I'd had a fruitless and boring morning at the Rafah border-crossing waiting for a fifth day to see whether it would open. It did not. On my way back to Gaza City, I saw a group of schoolgirls enjoying a ride at an amusement park. The machinery looked old and rusty, but they didn't care. And when this ride was over, they ran from ride to ride, laughing and giggling with one another.

I was traveling down the newly opened coast road near Rafah when I saw women and girls playing joyfully on the sand, something I'd never seen happen before. Palestinians had not been able



Palestinian girls enjoy a ride in an amusement park outside Gaza City. March 26, 2006.



Palestinian women kick a ball at the beach in Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip. March 22, 2006.

to use the beach because it was beyond the Gush Katif settlement. But in the summer of 2005 the 8,000 Israeli settlers had to leave as part of the disengagement plan, and Palestinians were able to visit this beach again. After watching these young women enjoying a peaceful early evening, I jumped out of my car and right away a soccer ball came in my direction. I kicked it back, and we played for a few moments before I started to take some pictures. It was such a beauti-

ful evening, and I stayed nearly an hour, chatting with the girls. They were so thrilled to test their English, which they had learned in school, and when I told them that I was from Germany they were eager to learn some German words.

I only learned her name, Emina, and age, six, after she died. I first spotted her while I was walking up a hill to get into an area in Sarajevo that had come under heavy attack the night before. She and some

of her friends were riding small wooden sleds down the hill, enjoying a quiet, sunny but cold winter morning. I passed the girls and was touched by how children can cope with war, how they can forget it for a few moments and pretend life is normal as they run and sled and play. When I was on top of the hill, a shell landed where the children were playing in the snow, and I ran down to see what happened. There was Emina lying next to her sled; shrapnel had hit her on the neck and cut the main artery. At this moment, she still looked alive. ■



Family members arrive to attend to Emina, a six-year-old Muslim girl, who died after a shell landed near her in Sarajevo. January 11, 1993.

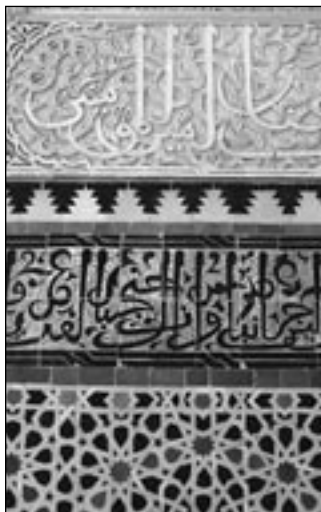
Anja Niedringhaus, a 2007 Nieman Fellow, is an Associated Press traveling photographer. In 2005 she received the International Women's Media Foundation's Courage Award. She has worked as a photojournalist in many areas of conflict and was part of the team that won the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for Breaking News Photography for their coverage of the war in Iraq.

Islam Today: The Need to Explore Its Complexities

A scholar finds in most coverage of Muslims ‘a striking lack of clarity and an atmosphere of incomprehension that can only generate suspicion and fear.’

By Tariq Ramadan

Never before have Islam and the Muslims been held up to such relentless scrutiny. Never before have journalists devoted so many articles, interviews and analyses to the “Muslim world” or to “Muslims in the West.” And yet never has knowledge of Islam, of Muslims, and of their geographical, political and geostrategic circumstances been so superficial, partial and frequently confused—not only among the general public, but



Ornaments. Morocco.

Photo by Katharina Eglau.

also among journalists and even in academic circles.

When confusion is widespread, the dominant note is suspicion. Terms of reference are rarely defined, nuances barely acknowledged, areas of research sketched out in the most desultory fashion. Far too often journalists or public intellectuals present their findings in research projects, articles, television or radio broadcasts with the assertion that they have taken pains to distinguish between

radicals and conservatives or average Muslims. But when we examine their offerings more closely, we note a striking lack of clarity and an atmosphere of incomprehension that can only generate suspicion and fear.

Let us begin with a simple proposition: The world of Islam is as complex as those of Buddhism, Judaism or Christianity, in terms of its intellectual, spiritual and religious currents. Conversely, we must not begin by classifying Muslims according to the schemas inherited from the colonial era, dividing them into “good” and “bad” Muslims, into “moderates” and “fundamentalists.” Not surprisingly, the former invariably seem to be those who share “our” values, leaving all others to be classified as dangerous, either outright or “potentially.”

Large numbers of politicians, intellectuals and journalists have adopted such a system, with a fine dusting of sophistication. It is a system as scientifically untenable and intellectually superficial as it is politically dangerous.

Drawn either from ignorance (a serious matter in and of itself) or derived from the ideological construct of a new Islamic enemy (a far more serious matter), it is in fact a projection.

The time has come to call upon intellectuals and journalists to broaden their frame of reference. The time has come to learn to apprehend the Islamic dynamic in its own terms, through its own terminology, internal categories, and intellectual structures. The time has come, as they enter into another referential universe, to make every effort to distinguish between that which gives that universe its unity and that which elucidates and makes possible its diversity.

Islam’s Levels of Diversity

In the broadest sense, there is only “one” Islam, as defined by the unity of its Credo (al-‘aqîda, the six pillars of faith), and by the unity of its practice (al-‘ibadât, the five pillars of Islam). This unity, in both Sunnite and Shi’ite traditions, draws on

shared recognition of two bodies of founding texts (the Qur'an and the Sunnah). There may be disagreement over the authenticity of certain texts, but common recognition of scripture-based sources and of the unity of faith and practice point to recognition of a single Islamic reference. At this level, the supreme level of unity with which all the world's Muslims can identify, Islam is one.

There exists, however, a first level of diversity as old as Islam itself. From the very beginnings, and particularly among two of the Companions, Abd Allah ibn Umar and Abd Allah ibn Mas'ûd, there were notable differences in reading and interpretation of the texts. Literalist, traditionalist, reformist, rationalist, mysti-

cal and strictly political readings and interpretations appeared early on—a reality that has continued down to the present day. Not only was the history of Islam to witness the rise of more than 18 legal schools (nearly 30 when counting the Shi'ite tradition), diverse ways of reading the texts also developed. Over the centuries, schools of thought emerged that reflected interpretations ranging from the literalist and traditionalist, to the mystical or reformist. Intellectual and often political confrontations accompanied and shaped the coexistence of these trends.

All of this understanding takes us far from the binary classification systems of “good” and “bad” Muslims. Religious outlook has, in fact, very little cor-

Religious outlook has, in fact, very little correlation with political posture: A rationalist or a liberal viewpoint in religious terms does not necessarily correspond with a democratic outlook in the political sense, just as all conservatives are by no means supporters of dictatorship.

relation with political posture: A rationalist or a liberal viewpoint in religious terms does not necessarily correspond with a democratic outlook in the political sense, just as all conservatives are by no means supporters of dictatorship. Western journalists have often been misled—and have misled their public—by reductionism of this kind (which would not be tolerated in reference to Judaism or Christianity, where the fine points of political orientation are better known and understood).

Moving beyond this first level of diversity, we must take into account the multiplicity of cultures that today influence the way Muslims express their belonging to Islam. Though grounded in a sole Credo and in the same practices, the world's Muslims naturally partake of a multitude of cultural environments. From West to North Africa, from Asia to Europe and North America, stretches a rich variety of cultures that make it possible for individuals to respect the principles of Islam while adopting

lifestyles, tastes, artistic expression, and feelings that belong quite specifically to one particular culture or another. Arab, African, Asian, North American, or European Muslims all share the same religion but belong to different cultures—a fact that wields a determining influence on their identities, their sense of belonging, and their vision of contemporary issues.

Islamism and the Perils of Reductionism

Many observers will easily recognize, in a broad sense, this elemental diversity in Islam. But they too hastily fall into another kind of reductionism, which can be equally nonfunctional and ultimately fraught with peril: the temptation to set Islam—with all the diversity we have outlined—against “Islamism” seen as an object of rejection or even opprobrium. Even though it is little more sophisticated than the first variant, this reductionism shifts perspectives. But it is ultimately



Tiles. Tunisia. *Photo by Katharina Eglau.*

founded on the same simplistic binary mode: “good” Muslims vs. “bad” Islamists.

The definition of “Islamism” is often vague, depending on the journalists, intellectuals and scholarly studies involved. We frequently hear of “political Islam” in the broad sense, of “Salafists” or “Wahhabis,” of “radical Islam” or even of al-Qaeda. The lines of demarcation between the different

trends are rarely elucidated. All available evidence points to the conclusion that there is such a thing as a single “political Islam,” that it constitutes a threat, that whatever distinctions exist are at best insignificant and, at worst, the result of manipulation by Islamists propagating the image of “moderate Islamism” to lull the West.

Analyses of this kind are legion in Europe, where “experts”

and journalists have generated a stream of reports and studies of the apparently monolithic universe of “political Islam.” Any scholar daring to apply such an approach to Christianity, Judaism or Buddhism would be immediately dismissed on grounds of superficiality and for the unscientific nature of his or her conclusions. Indeed, would it be possible to reduce political activity by Christians (political Christianity) to fundamentalism?

We know there are liberation theologians who reject a dogmatic reading of biblical scriptural sources who are deeply involved in politics on the left of the political spectrum. More toward the center, and sometimes quite to the right as well as to the left, we find Christian Democrats who are active in politics in the name of their Christian religious convictions. But who could possibly justify—in the analytical terms of the social and political sciences—relegating all these Christians to one single category, that of “funda-

mentalist—or even radical—political Christianity?” Who could claim that the most “moderate” of them are nothing but the objective, concealed allies of the “fundamentalists:” that the liberation theologian Leonardo Boff is nothing but the prettified face of Mgr. Marcel Lefebvre? One could only smile at such a fantasy-like approach to the Christian referential universe, but it seems that it can be quite easily accommodated—either through ignorance or ideological bias—when the subject is “political Islam.”

Political Islam’s Complexities

Yet the study of Islamism—of “political Islam”—reveals complexities equally as significant as the study of Islam itself. Between the positions of the promoters of political liberation through Islam, such as al-Afghani and Abduh in the 20th century and the extremist positions of the leaders of al-Qaeda today, lies an ocean of differ-

ence, both in terms of the understanding of Islam and of political action.

What holds true for the study of the historical timeline applies as well to the comparative study of the words and actions of the modern-day movements that are active in politics in the name of Islam. It is impossible to reduce the Turkish experience under Recep Tayyip Erdogan, or the 25 years of Islamic political power in Iran, or the 80 years of activity by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt to the same reading of the sources, to the same position on the political spectrum as that of al-Qaeda ideologue Ayman al-Zawahiri, who is quick to condemn both his predecessors and his contemporaries as traitors to the cause, even within the confines of political Islam.

Whether one agrees or not with the theses of these movements, systematic study and a serious effort to understand the forces at work within political Islam require a triple approach:

1. A study of the theological and legal underpinnings of the movements (literalist, reformist, mystical or other).
2. Knowledge of the historical depth of these manifestations; numerous movements and/or leaders, such as Erdogan in Turkey and Ghanoushi in Tunisia, have changed their positions in the course of their political involvement.
3. A detailed study of the national realities that have impinged on the growth and evolution of Islamist movements.

Only this kind of three-pronged examination can provide us with a proper framework for understanding the phenomenon of political Islam, far from ignorant reductionism or ideological manipulation of “the Islamist threat.” This inquiry is not about agreement or disagreement with this or that political-religious thesis, but of dealing scientifically with the matter under study.

Intellectuals, the general public, and journalists often find themselves pressed for time. Yet time, further study, greater effort, and intellectual humility are what are needed to understand the reality of Islam and of Muslims today, as well as the broad diversity of belongings and the demands expressed by political Islam. Our political simplifications may well reassure us, but they lead us only toward fear of the world. Reconciliation with the complexity of the Muslim world will, paradoxically, have the reverse effect.

Instead of seeing the “Other” as an emanation of “evil,” a goal that extremists pursue each day in the media, we must become aware of the existence of a multiplicity of views and of the millions upon millions of Muslims who, in their extraordinary political and religious diversity, daily turn their backs on violence, strive for democracy and freedom, and reject extremism. It is time for all of us to demonstrate humility, to appreciate the complexity that demands

greater study, and the suspension of hasty and thus risky judgments. The hallmark of respect for others is to recognize in them the complexity we find in ourselves, to acknowledge their thirst for human dignity, and to realize that it, like ours, asks only to be respected. ■

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Deconstructing ‘the Other’— And Ourselves

‘In American eyes, moderates are the ones most like us. Those who are not are the enemy.’

“... they came to a certain point and the mufti said, ‘Well, now I’m going to pray.’ And he was silent. And the pope clasped his hands sort of at his waist, and bowed his head, and even seemed to be moving his lips.

“... And later, I watched it on Turkish television, and the announcer said they prayed to the same God. Now, that may not be true; that is probably not true, except in a very cosmic sense. But it shows what impact the pope’s gestures have had here apparently on Turkish public opinion.”

—Margaret Warner, PBS

By Robert Azzi

When the Lehrer NewsHour’s correspondent Margaret Warner reported from Istanbul in November 2006 during the pope’s visit, she casually dismissed centuries of understanding about Abrahamic monotheism by suggesting that the pope was praying to a different God than was the grand mufti.

Such insensitivity to matters Islamic or Arab is not uncommon, whether at PBS or in a wider American press. In the wake of 9/11, America had a choice: either demonize and attempt to disenfranchise from the global community one-sixth of humanity known as Muslims, or respond, engage, educate and forge partnerships with



Young woman. Iran. *Photo by Katharina Eglau.*

peace-loving peoples in order to isolate, delegitimize and destroy the criminals that executed such violent acts.

The Bush administration chose the first path, and most Arabs and Muslims, like those Iranians who spontaneously held candlelit vigils in Tehran on 9/11 in sympathy with America's pain, were immediately marginalized, and battle lines were drawn.

The Fourth Estate followed. Succumbing to its own fears, intimidated by prewar rheto-

ric and patriotic spirit, and handicapped by its ignorance, the American press became nearly impotent. It took years to summon courage enough to challenge the reasons why the United States invaded Iraq, and momentum grew as deceit was exposed. Whether their watchdog reporting was motivated by "gotcha" journalism, or outrage over the deceptions, or by a combination of the two, is unknown, but the ignorance persists.

What the press has yet to

challenge, however, is the intellectual and academic basis for the declared “war on terror” and the concomitant prejudiced attacks on Islam, Muslims and Arabs. In April 2007, as news of the shooting at Virginia Tech spread, I prayed, “Please God, don’t let the shooter be a Muslim or Arab.” Surrounded by hate speech, xenophobic politicians, prejudice, bias and an incurious press, many American Muslims and Arabs feel isolated and vulnerable.

This isolation was recently spotlighted in the \$20 million PBS series “America at a Crossroads.” A magnificent Orientalist production conceived by Michael Pack, who had come to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to bring conservative voices to PBS, this 11-part series of documentaries purported to be a balanced examination of America in the years after 9/11.¹ Hosted by éminence grise Robert MacNeil, seen strolling through a mosque, its

vision of post-trauma America highlighted Western truths, Bush’s truths, neocon truths, but few insights. Its set-up had perfect bookends—to start, there was “Jihad: The Men and Ideas Behind al-Qaeda,” and to end, “The Brotherhood,” with a headline on its Web page posing the question: “Spreading fundamentalist Islam—but does the Muslim Brotherhood also support terrorism?” Implied, yes, but like much of the rest of the series it was an exploration short of facts and long on speculation.

From Fear to Terror

Tucked between these two programs were tales of valiant warriors, unrepentant neocons, and a schizophrenic episode on Indonesia. Its message: see, they have transvestites, so there must be some enlightened Muslims on this globe. By the end of this series, it is likely that most viewers found themselves

¹ www.pbs.org/weta/crossroads/



Father with baby. Iran. *Photo by Katharina Eglau.*

entertained but still singularly uninformed, with prejudices intact. After all, who could have imagined a scenario in which one of the architects of war, Richard Perle, gets to star in a self-serving piece justifying the war? Or another in which Irshad Manji, the author of “The Trouble with Islam Today: A Muslim’s Call for Reform in Her Faith,” becomes the voice of Islam?

In American eyes, moderates

are the ones most like us. Those who are not are the enemy.

Paul Wolfowitz, in an interview with *Vanity Fair*, perhaps inadvertently came closest to identifying the myopia that afflicts both the government and the press in its approach to the Middle East when he said, “I think the greatest mistake is assuming that people will behave, well it’s a version of mirror imaging, I guess. People will be rational according to our defi-

inition of what is rational.”

Manji’s program about Islam, “Faith Without Fear,” was particularly troubling. She is a Muslim, raised in the West and with few academic or intellectual credentials and no constituency within the Muslim community (even among “enlightened” Muslims). Yet she has parlayed her book—and its backlash—into a platform of visibility that led to her having a featured role in this documentary. She was likely chosen because she fits the Western notion of an unconventional, enlightened, liberated Muslim whom they would like to have as a neighbor. Her supporters are those Orientalists who would like her to be a poster child for Muslims, much like Ahmad Chalabi was an Iraqi poster boy for the neocons.

Absent from this discussion—or any other in this series—was the vigorous debate taking place within the ummah, the worldwide community of Islam, led by voices of women such as Ingrid Mattson, the first woman

ever to lead a national Muslim organization, and Ithaca University professor Asma Barlas, author of “Believing Women’ in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an.” Where was long-time journalist Geneive Abdo, author of “Mecca and Main Street: Muslim Life in America after 9/11”? And where were voices of influential Muslim men such as University of California at Los Angeles professor Khaled Abou El Fadl, author of “The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists” and “Islam and the Challenge of Democracy,” and Tariq Ramadan, turned away from his teaching position at the University of Notre Dame by U.S. Homeland Security, whose grandfather founded the Muslim Brotherhood? [See Abdo’s article on page 27 and Ramadan’s article on page 51.]

By limiting the range of experiences and scholarship, PBS limited the opportunity for a growth in insight and understanding. (I’ve heard enough by now of Fouad Ajami, Frank

Gaffney, Jr., and Richard Perle telling us what is wrong about the Middle East.) If this is the kind of reporting public television offers us, is there little wonder that cable outlets like Fox News and talk show hosts like Glenn Beck (among his favorite guests: Irshad Manji) feel free to attack using language that would not be tolerated if said about any other ethnic, racial or religious group? A press that rightly took Don Imus to task for his racism and sexism gives a pass to hate speech when applied to the Middle East.

And it was an act of journalistic negligence to avoid facing the Palestinians, since the Palestine-Israel conflict is central to peace in the Middle East. Since 2000, thousands of Palestinians and hundreds of Israelis have died, the victims of terrorist attacks, intifada uprising, Israeli reprisals, and the Israel-

Hizbullah war that destroyed Lebanon's infrastructure.

Words Rise and Fall

Conflate all of this with the frenzy that greeted the John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt essay, "The Israel Lobby,"² when the London Review of Books published it in March. Similar in their attempt to discredit the author were responses—often vicious, with anti-Semitic charges—to former President Jimmy Carter's book, "Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid." Dissent on some issues seems not to be tolerated.

More recently, when three disparate voices wrote about Middle East policy—Robert Novak in The Washington Post, Nicholas Kristof in The New York Times, and George Soros in The New York Review of Books—their words were

2 *The extraordinary volume and content of the response to their article led the London Review of Books to hold a debate called "The Israel Lobby: Does it have too much influence on American foreign policy?" at Cooper Union in New York City in September 2006. A video of this debate can be seen online at www.scribemedial.org/2006/10/11/israel-lobby/*

greeted with silence. Harder to attack these authors as anti-Semitic, their words sank to the bottom of the pond with barely a ripple. What could have engendered debate on issues critical to America's role in the Middle East died a quick death. So, too, once the conclusions of the Iraq Study Group were dismissed by the Bush administration, a full examination by the press of their geostrategic value vanished, as well.

With regard to Palestine, journalists need to learn to parse history. For example, for more than 40 years the West dismissed Arab narratives surrounding the formation of the State of Israel in 1948 as propaganda. It was not until Israeli historians like Tom Segev, Benny Morris, and Avi Shlaim challenged the Israeli narrative that Arab claims carried credence. Thus, while it was independence for Israel, it was al Nakba, catastrophe, for Palestinians.

Arab identities, positions and challenges need to be seen within their cultural context,

not simply in relation to Israelis' interests and narratives. To acknowledge the humanity of Palestinian people—their struggles and pain—would not diminish Israel in any way but might serve to make rapprochement between the parties possible.

These evident patterns in coverage—of this region, its people, and its conveyors of the narrative—demonstrate the limits of commitment by much of the Western press to seeking the necessary knowledge. This leads to a constraint of what gets discussed in public arenas and jeopardizes the American public's ability to make well-informed decisions about issues of national interest, policy and political leaders. In difficult times like ours, such constraint can be dangerous. ■

Robert Azzi, a 1977 Nieman Fellow, is a photojournalist who has covered the Middle East since 1968. He is working on a book of photographs of the Middle East.

Exposing Extremism— No Matter Where It Is Found

What happens when journalists fail to separate what is evil in people from what is good in those who share their religious tradition?

By Bruce B. Lawrence

Robert Benchley, the American humorist, once quipped that “there are two categories of people in the world, those who constantly divide the people of the world into two classes, and those who do not.” Less funny, but persistent is the reflex to divide all approaches to Islam into two categories. The first are those who seek the truth in Islam. They ask: What are the various forms of Islam? How can we determine which is the true form of Islamic belief, and how do we know what are authentic norms for Islamic conduct? In opposition, there are those who have already decided there is no truth in Islam. Instead, they regard Islam itself as the true

enemy—the enemy of global peace, the enemy of civil society and, above all, the enemy of Western civilization.

What both approaches ignore are Muslims—as individuals, families, groups and networks spanning the spectrum of possible identities. Those who self-identify as Muslims may be pious or mystical, high-minded or ritual bound, educated or illiterate, cosmopolitan or parochial. There is no single Islam and no essential, unchanging Muslim reflex. There can be, and probably are, more Muslim secularists than fundamentalists.

Muslim secularists may seem like a surprising concept, but suspend judgment and pick up the self-mocking autobiog-

raphy of the British public intellectual, Ziauddin Sardar. Titled “Desperately Seeking Paradise,” and carrying the subtitle, “Journeys of a Sceptical Muslim,” the 2004 book chronicles Sardar’s efforts to find true Islam (a) by looking at how young Muslims face real world challenges and (b) by

exposing the mirage of a top-down Islamic theocracy where the shari’ah, or Islamic law, becomes, in the words of one of Sardar’s fellow Muslims, “a bar of soap and the only way to apply it is to force people to scrub themselves silly with it!”

Why then do so many non-Muslims ignore the zestful sincerity of “secular” Muslims such as Sardar or not hear the voices of the many observant Muslims who condemned not just 9/11 but all violence committed in the name of Islam? Why does a diverse and permeable commu-



Destruction in the wake of war. Lebanon.

Photo by Katharina Eglau.

nity of more than 1.2 billion adherents continue to be viewed by many Americans as alien at best and violent at worst?

Questions Journalists Should Ask

While there are several answers as to why the view of Muslims and Islam appears to veer in a negative direction, a major one must be the reductive tendency of journalism. Not just reductive, but sensationalist (“If it bleeds, it leads.”), many stories about Muslims and/or

Islam are prone to a striking absence of context or nuance, often lacking a connection to the reality of the daily lives and apolitical beliefs of most Muslims.

Too often, these screaming headlines are mirrored in scholarly writing about Islam. The Crusades ended in the 12th century, yet the Crusader mentality still thrives in the 21st. Consider Bernard Lewis, a Princeton historian, pundit and advisor to President Bush who became a best-selling author after 9/11. The octogenarian Lewis supports the Crusader mentality, arguing that the main problem with the Crusades was that their duration—too short to be effective—did not achieve a “permanent” solution.

With writing such as his affecting policy decisions, one would expect to have some in the press scanning the scholarship and motives of advisors who advocate for war and occupation. It would be regrettable, but inconsequential, if Lewis acted or thought or

wrote alone; yet a host of Islamophobes supports his tendentious, binary and hostile approach to Islam. He is joined by ex-Muslims who have produced best-selling books of their own that lampoon their former faith; among such authors are Ibn Warraq, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and Irshad Manji.

In 2006 Wafa Sultan, an Arab-American psychologist from Los Angeles, was named by Time in a list of 100 influential people “whose power, talent or moral example is transforming the world.” Time stated that “Sultan’s influence flows from her willingness to express openly critical views on Islamic extremism that are widely shared but rarely aired by other Muslims.” That statement is untrue since Sultan, having renounced Islam, is not like “other Muslims;” she is an outsider to both the religion and its members in the current debate.

Lewis is also in the company of other like-minded scholars, such as Martin Kramer and Efraim Karsh. Both Kramer

and Karsh write about Islam as though it were a political scourge. In “Islamic Imperialism—a History,” published by Yale University Press in 2006, Karsh offers a thesis at once stark and simplistic: Islam is nothing but empire, or rather persistent yet failed imperial ambition. He excuses Christian empire building in a sentence: “Apart from the Third Reich, Christendom had lost its imperial ambitions by the mid-twentieth century.” Not so Islam. On the contrary, intones Karsh, “Islam has retained its imperialist ambition to this day.”

Just as journalists do stories in which they “follow the money” to analyze the influence of financial contributions to policy decisions, so investigations ought to try to follow the path of Islamophobic ideas—and how they travel. The Institute on Religion and Democracy, a neoconservative, Washington, D.C. think tank, has mailed out thousands of copies of “Islamic Imperialism” to mainstream Christian clergy, not just en-

dorsing but also spreading its hateful message.

The message is more than hateful, it is also inaccurate. Religions, onto themselves, are not and cannot be imperialist, since they possess neither a disposition nor attitude. It is the people—members of specific groups in actual places in recorded history—who nurture ambitions, some being imperialist, others democratic, but most apolitical. Ascribing motives or reflexes to abstract entities, such as religion, should not be done, yet under the guise of scholarship, authors, such as those mentioned above, present themselves as “detached” from their subject, at the same time that they are being supported by institutions headed by those with political agendas. In turn, these institutions nurture relationships with journalists, often generalists themselves, who too rarely question the motives of their sources or the factual basis in the argument put forward by the “scholar.”

Questioning such claims and motives of conflicting narra-

tives is the journalist's job. For example, among Muslims, the most extreme fundamentalists are the Wahhabis/Salafis. Relative upstarts in the long view of Islamic history, each of these groups grabbed headlines post-9/11 as representing the most combative version of Islam. Though the 9/11 hijackers primarily came from Saudi Arabia, even their presence there is recent, being less than a century old. Equally open to question is their place in the hierarchy of Islamic norms and values. Wahhabis/Salafis not only hate Jews and Christians, they are also takfiris, that is, they denounce other Muslims as apostates. If the takfiris are the true—and I would argue that they are the only true—Muslim terrorists of our time, they oppose not just Jews, Christians, and Shi'i Mus-

lims but also other Sunni Muslims. They hate and want to kill those most like them in creedal/ritual allegiance. Indeed, they advocate the overthrow of all current political rulers in majority Muslim countries. Their only political "heroes" are the deposed but increasingly active Taliban.

Opposing the Taliban, yet ironically mirroring them in their enemy-annihilating mindset, is what I now call "Christian Crusaders." Their "crusade" is wide-ranging. "Left Behind," coauthored by Tim LaHaye, asserts not as apocalyptic fiction but as fact that the end will come in the near future and be marked by a soul harvest. The few who survive the Tribulation, the Antichrist and Armageddon will be saved.¹ This crusade is abetted by a minis-

¹ *The ostensible goal is merely scriptural: to reclaim Jerusalem for the Jewish people. Yet, in this scenario, the Arabs who remain in Jerusalem and Palestine transform it into the territory of the Antichrist. It is Arabs who have to be killed in the Battle of Armageddon. Only with the removal of the Arab/Muslim beast can Jerusalem, together with the entire Land of Israel, be reclaimed for the People of God. However, like the Taliban, their goal is exclusivist and contrary to American interests.*

try, neocon speakers' bureaus, press releases, talk show hosts, video games, op-ed pieces, and appearances by politicians, such as former congressional leader Tom Delay and others.

If Delay and his ilk do not resemble most mainstream Christians, one might wonder what their views have to do with journalism and Islam. Ostensibly nothing. Arguably the Christian right are just Protestant sectarians who protest too loudly, but when a religiously based political agenda commits to establishing a Christian nation in America and supports Israel against "the Antichrist" by encouraging suspicion, intolerance and bigotry of "the Other," questions must be asked. So far, journalists have failed to do an adequate job in tracking this story and learning more about how these views affect the debate about and the security of America in a post 9/11 world. It is a story that deserves telling—when scholars such as Lewis, politicians such as Delay, and some neocon think tanks as-

sert that the Crusades need to be revived, perhaps with a new name and ideology but with the same intent of displacing Muslims not just from Jerusalem but from the entire Land of Israel (problematically also claimed by Palestinians, both Christian and Muslim). Their further goal is to force the Muslim world to submit to the will of Christian America; they want to vanquish the barbarians and keep them from Western portals.

Transforming Muslims Into 'the Other'

With each of these visions of extremists, dichotomy is intolerable; one group must win, the other must be eliminated. In a world in which religious freedom is cherished, dichotomous thinking stubbornly persists—within, as well as beyond, religious bodies. To counter impulses such as these, up-front in our dialogue it must be said that Islam is not evil, nor is there a single Muslim enemy. Instead, what we encounter appears to

be the steady transformation of Muslims into “the Other,” a defining of Islam as evil, and an ignoring of differences among Muslims. Islam and Muslims are more and more presented in monolithic ways—as timeless opponents at once intrinsically opposite and irreducibly oppositional, with a goal of justifying limitless warfare as divine mandate and political necessity.

There is a way beyond the deadly theater of righteous warfare. While competition and conflict might be necessary, warfare is not the sole or most desirable outcome of religious differences. Christianity differs from Judaism, just as each differs from Islam, and Islam, in turn, is neither reducible to a Hindu inclusiveness nor a Buddhist denial of being. Religious differences will endure, with competition between believers divinely sanctioned. As the Great One said to Abraham (Gen. 12:3), “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”—not unified or eliminated but “blessed” in their dis-

tinctive and differing states.

As much as journalists might resist engagement in this complex arena of difference and distinction, their voices—probing and striving for accuracy—are essential in representing Muslims and furthering a collective way forward beyond religious warfare. ■

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Western Journalists Report on Egyptian Bloggers

An observer of press coverage of cases involving Arab bloggers and government pressure notices some troubling trends in whether and how stories are told.

By George Weyman

Abdel Moneim had already boarded the plane when the police came for him. He was probably looking forward to some sleep ahead of his gruelling tour of seven Arab countries reporting on human rights for the British satellite channel, Al Hiwar. It was one o'clock in the morning, Sunday, April 15th. He thought he would be spending the next few hours before daybreak in the skies; instead, he spent them being interrogated in Cairo's notorious Mahkoun prison.

On hearing the news, fellow Egyptian bloggers rallied to his cause. "Bad news ... blogojournalist and friend Abdel Moneim

Mahmoud¹ was detained by Mubarak's Gestapo early Sunday 1 am," reported leading Egyptian activist blogger Hossam el-Hamalawy. Wary of the threats facing the country's nascent blogosphere after the sentencing of Abdel Kareem Nabil to four years in prison in February for extremely provocative posts deemed "anti-Islam" and insulting to Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak, democracy activists were learning fast how to draw international attention to state infringements on free speech.

Kareem's story was something of a test case for Egyptian bloggers. Never before had they succeeded in bringing a fellow

1 <http://ana-ikhwan.blogspot.com/>

blogger's plight to so wide a global audience. Articulate and well-connected, prominent Egyptian bloggers gave interviews and courted the Western press. At the top of the pile was Sandmonkey—a self-styled “snarky, pro-U.S., secular, libertarian”—who described Kareem's sentence as a “huge blow” to freedom of expression in Egypt in a Washington Post editorial. That expression was typical of the press response in the United States, riling at Egypt's “zero tolerance” for secular democratic dissent.

Elsewhere, the man who became famous when he blogged from prison, Alaa Abd El Fattah,² appeared on ABC News highlighting the threats faced by Egyptian bloggers in light of Kareem's sentence. Correspondent Wilf Dinnick concluded



An Egyptian blogger's Web page in support of fellow blogger Abdel Moneim.

his story by describing Fattah as a “young Egyptian willing to risk everything” to bring real democracy. The Financial Times published a feature on another dissident blogger, Mohammed al-Sharqawi, who feared the worst following the Kareem verdict. Even the Fox News Web site featured a story about Kareem.

2 Fattah's Web site can be found at www.manalaa.net/

Clearly the Kareem case had touched a nerve. How could the Egyptians be getting freer in the age of the Internet—as government officials in the West would assert that they are—when citizens are being thrown into jail on charges so contrary to international human rights norms?

Kareem's predicament is, indeed, shocking and totally unacceptable. But few of the many commentators and reporters covering his case even mentioned that his blogging "friends" and supporters were reviled by much of his commentary. For example Sandmonkey, who deplored Kareem's sentence, described his writing as "pretty much hate speech" in a debate he participated in with Arab Media & Society.³ Other Egyptian bloggers expressed distress that Kareem was hijacking their cause.

It certainly is the case that bloggers of all stripes are not the best team players around, and Egypt is no exception in this.

But they stand up for each other in times of trouble because each depends on the oxygen that is freedom of expression online. In the case of Kareem, I often heard it argued that he cynically aimed to get himself into trouble, knowing full well where the red lines were, as a justification for seeking asylum in the West. Others close to him questioned his psychological health; still others described him as naive. But almost all bloggers argued that by courting the regime's wrath so wantonly, Kareem had given the authorities a perfect excuse to set a dangerous precedent, one that could see many of the savvier, more politically engaged activist bloggers ending up in jail.

Of course, these arguments are fraught with problematic questions, which refuse to go away. Why should a blogger—with no history of violence, subversive political activity, or anything that would imply an imminent threat—be put in jail

3 *Egyptian blogger Sandmonkey was part of a debate called "Blogging Impact in Egypt," and the audio can be heard at www.arabmediasociety.org/audio/?item=6*

under any circumstance? Whether Kareem's posts were driven by cynical intentions or not, he surely did not deserve what he got. Liberal commentators from the West could claim, perhaps justifiably, that Kareem's sentence was enough to prove the failures of Western efforts to enhance democracy, pluralism and free speech in Arab countries. In fact, British political commentator Nick Cohen, writing in *The Observer*, argued that Kareem's case showed that Western liberals had turned away from their "allies in the poor world."

Western Reporting on Arab Blogging

But despite all this, there is a subtext to Western reporting of Kareem's case that needs to be acknowledged. It comprises two elements:

1. In all of the reporting about Kareem's case, there was virtually no rigorous analysis of the makeup of the Egyptian blogosphere. Why did reporters fail to spot that Kareem was a figure of distrust for his allies in the blogosphere, as much as for state security? While it is true that bloggers supported his right to express himself, few of them supported what he was saying. And if they did, they would not say it publicly. The omission of this insight from reporting on this case is crucial: It is another example of a situation when what does not fit the prescribed narrative does not make the final cut. The arc of the story seemed preconceived—a young free-thinker turns away from his traditional schooling at the Islamic Al Azhar University and becomes a democracy activist only to be jailed for his views.
2. This leads to the second element behind reporting of Kareem's case: Kareem was speaking out against what many Western commentators see as the twin roadblocks to reform in the Middle East—Islam and authoritarian states. Therefore, he could be neatly

pigeonholed as yet another independent liberal thinker who overstepped the line.

This brings us back to Abdel Moneim. He is also a blogger, a democracy activist, and a free-thinker. He was also detained without charge solely, we assume, for expressing himself. His story does not match the newsworthiness of Kareem's four-year prison sentence—at the time of this writing, Abdel Moneim has not been charged or sentenced—but it still relates very closely to the same issues of authoritarianism and freedom of speech. Yet reporting on Abdel Moneim had been very slow off the blocks, if nonexistent.

In late April, The Wall Street Journal published an excellent report by Mariam Fam about the emergence of Muslim Brothers bloggers that included a reference to Moneim roughly a week into his detention. But the issue of constraints on freedom of expression was certainly not the lead to this story. Nor was this issue the central theme to James

Traub's extended New York Times Magazine feature analyzing the Muslim Brotherhood's democratic credentials (Traub did not mention Moneim's detention or even bloggers). Elsewhere, Global Voices Online and the Committee to Protect Journalists have followed the story, but few other news outlets have taken it up.

Why did one blogger's jailing receive so much attention in the Western press while another's has not?

Abdel Moneim Mahmoud is at the forefront of the new generation of Muslim Brothers activists. I have interviewed him on several occasions, most recently with The Guardian's Timothy Garton Ash, and found him to be a committed reformer and supporter of democratic elections—in fact just the kind of person Western governments should be dealing with in the Middle East. That he supports Kareem's right to pursue his inflammatory “anti-Islam” blog shows that Abdel Moneim really does aspire to greater political openness in Egypt, not

just a greater role for Islam. But as a member of Egypt's largest opposition group—the Muslim Brothers—he faces a constant threat from Egypt's authoritarian regime with the quiet complicity of Western states.

Despite this, Abdel Moneim's dedication to the online debate of critical issues is hard to question. Writing in *Arab Media & Society*, Marc Lynch,⁴ a Williams College political science professor who blogs about Arab media, points to the incredible similarity between the “Free Kareem” campaign, which so caught the attention of the liberal West and the press, and the online efforts to free Brotherhood members, led by Abdel Moneim.

Blogs in the Arab Middle East have empowered pro-American liberal secular voices, and they have also empowered those whose primary political reference is Islam. Yet as these debates have emerged online, Western

reporters have tended to focus their reporting attention only on specific aspects of this debate and discussion. In reading their coverage, it is clear that many of them mistakenly think that only those sharing a Western vision of modern society can freely exchange ideas and take part in engaged debate online. Without reporting more broadly—and that means providing informed context for those who encounter their reporting—Western journalists will regurgitate the same skewed view of the Middle East as has often dominated in the past—blogs or no blogs. ■

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⁴ Lynch's book, “Voices of the New Arab Public: Iraq, al Jazeera, and Middle East Politics Today,” was published by Columbia University Press. He also blogs at <http://abuaardvark.typepad.com/>. His article, “Blogging the new Arab public,” can be read at www.arabmediasociety.org/index.php?article=10&p=0

AN ESSAY IN WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS

A Photojournalist Immerses Himself in the Story Being Told

By Iason Athanasiadis

My father introduced his seven-year-old son to international politics in the cosy environs of a provincial Greek pizza joint. It was the mid-1980's, and the Iran-Iraq War was in full swing. The mud-drenched battlefields of western Iran appeared impossibly faraway to my childish mind. They were Hobbesian landscapes, on which tens of thousands of people sacrificed themselves in epic offensives that seesawed a few meters back and forth over slowly decomposing bodies across a disputed border.

... simple images told the story more effectively than sentences encumbered by qualifications, complicated by parentheses, and clogged by background.

While the steaming slice of pizza on my plate appeared decidedly more captivating than relentless slaughter in the name of Islam or Arab nationalism, one of the things my father told me that day stuck. An evening news report about the war flickering in the background must have prompted him to introduce me to the concept of hypocrisy. The example he used was the just-erupted Iran-contra affair, in which Washington and Tel Aviv had armed both sides with low-tech weaponry designed to maximize the



A girl who returned to her house in the village of Aita Shaab, Lebanon, surveys the damage. *Photo by Iason Athanasiadis.* (More photos on pages 84-86)

slaughter and prolong the stalemate. I remember that not even the taste of the delicious pizza could obscure the shock I felt at this revelation.

More than 20 years have passed since then. I grew up, studied Arabic, and began covering the Middle East. The immediate consequence of this career choice was the loss of any vestigial traces of innocence. Now,

every time I return to Greece, I feel more disconnected to an ever wealthier, ever more care-free society that looks only Westwards as it drifts apart from the realities of its neighborhood.

“Don’t become a journalist,” one unmarried, 50-something British correspondent advised me on a Greek summer afternoon as I was just starting out on my career. “You’ll make no

money, have no stability, and a terrible personal life.”

He was right on all counts. But there are few more challenging or rewarding occupations than covering the Middle East as a freelance journalist. That the world's premier news-producing region is also among the most misunderstood and misrepresented is not so much a Western conspiracy, as public opinion would have it in the Arab or Persian street, but rather reflects its seemingly infinite layers of complexity. In an area whose cultural norms often appear diametrically opposed to the West and where the barriers of language and culture are almost insurmountable, I often found that simple images told the story more effectively than sentences encumbered by qualifications, complicated by parentheses, and clogged by background. My outsider's eye saw distinguishing details that local familiarity overlooked, while living in the region enabled me to recognize the images that count and capture them.

In the Middle East, the work

of Western journalists is further complicated by across-the-board official and popular suspicion. Much of the blame must be shouldered by Middle Eastern governments. An official in the press ministry of one of the region's most difficult-to-access countries minced no words in telling me that visiting Western journalists without fluency in Persian or a deep understanding of the culture are preferable to foreigners who have attained insider knowledge. The revelation was offered after that country's intelligence ministry vetoed my sixth application for a press residency, and the official took pity at my despair. At a dinner party, a local analyst for a Western embassy explained that the government feared the “cultural intelligence” that journalists provide on the societies they write for—exactly the charge on which Canadian-Iranian intellectual Ramin Jahanbegloo was jailed for after it was discovered that an American NGO commissioned him to create a map of his country's civil society.

Being Greek—In the Middle East

Ever since studying Arabic and making the region my beat, my focus has been to live within the societies I report on and express their peoples' realities, rather than cover the choreographed, sometimes delusional public relations ploys of some of the planet's more autocratic politicians. Being Greek makes me a quasi-insider: We have been present as a regional power from antiquity through to the Byzantine Empire. Later, as Christian subjects of the Muslim Ottoman Empire, the Greeks were its bankers, merchants and diplomats to the European West.

The switch of allegiances to the West only came in the 19th century, after the Great Powers helped Greece win its War of Independence. There is still residual mistrust over the Crusaders' sacking of Constantinople on their way to Jerusalem and the lack of help sent by Genoa as the Turks scaled the capital of Byzantium. After World

War II, Greece remained firmly within the Western orbit and became the first line of defense against the Soviet Union. In the post-9/11 world, Greek politicians have continued the tradition of the intermediary, most notably when former Greek foreign minister and Colin Powell confidante George Papandreou passed messages from the Bush administration to the Taliban prior to their overthrow. Greek construction companies were trusted by Arab leaders to construct much of the Gulf's infrastructure, build clandestine military bases in Libya, and erect palaces in Saudi Arabia complete with secret escape routes in case of an antimonarchical revolution.

A fine example of the "intermediary Greek" is that country's current ambassador to Baghdad. Panayiotis Makris was educated in Alexandria's Victoria College, speaks fluent Egyptian Arabic, packs a pistol in his leather briefcase, and lives resolutely outside the Green Zone. A 17th century tapestry depicting Al-

exander the Great's death in Babylon dominates his living room in the kidnapping-scarred diplomatic district of Mansour. His professional performance is likewise infused with an historical perspective. As he points out to visitors, Alexander died just 10 kilometers from Baghdad; "We're the only country that has the right to offer lessons in democracy around here," he quips in a barely concealed barb at the American mismanagement of their Iraq occupation.

Greece's man in Tehran similarly draws heavily upon history in his dealings with Iranian officials. His enthusiastic and repeated claims that Greece and Iran share 5,000 years of shared civilization may owe more to Athens' dependence on Iranian oil imports and an innate proclivity to exaggerate than to historical fact. But the excellent ties between Greece and Iran reveal how important a shared cultural background is to a bilateral relationship.

When I was a child in Athens, my mother would lull me to

sleep with stories from the "1001 Nights." Today I live in the territories that inspired these myths, and their politics are no less complicated or treacherous. Though the stories I contribute from the Middle East are decidedly less fairytale-like than the adventures of Sabah the Sailor, my work is well done if they go at least some way towards furthering mutual understanding. ■

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A Shi'ite youth plants the Hezbollah flag and rests the Shi'ite zolfaghr scimitar upon the rubble of the Shi'ite-majority al-Dahieh suburb of Beirut.

Photo and words by Iason Athanasiadis.



Kurdish
muhboland
(long-haired)
Sufis in mid-
zikr in Iranian
Kurdistan.



Bathed with
light from tall
stadium lights,
Casnazani Sufis
take a rest
after the zikr
ceremony in
their military
base-like
khaneqah in
Northern Iraq.

Photos and words by Iason Athanasiadis.



The African-like drum is pounded during the ceremony to create the mesmerizing rhythm of the zikr, a remembrance of Allah (God) through verbal and mental repetition of His divine attributes.



At the end of the zikr ceremony, Casnazani Sufis offer final obeisances.

Photos and words by Iason Athanasiadis.

A Master Narrative About Iran Emerges

‘... the surplus of news outlets has had the paradoxical effect of increasing our information and reducing our knowledge.’

By Ali M. Ansari

The mishandling by the British Ministry of Defense of the return of the captured British service personnel from Iran has been greeted with indignation and anger throughout the political establishment. Inept media management, in particular the seemingly abrupt decision to allow the personnel to sell their stories to the mass media, has been seen by many as having heaped insult upon injury and effectively handed a propaganda coup to the Iranians.

It is indeed remarkable, and perhaps a salutary lesson for our times, that without a shot being fired the Iranians succeeded in not only humiliating the British Armed Forces—ridicule from

allies proved particularly hard to stomach—but also brought a British Defense Secretary to the brink of resignation. But for all the talk of humiliation, the real lessons of this latest confrontation between Iran and the West have yet to be digested.

Among the most evident, and the least appreciated, is that this was an exchange in soft power, in which the media were the weapons of choice. Moreover, the greatest wounds were self-inflicted, and Iran effectively rebounded from what might have been a public relations disaster not through design but through the ineptitude of its opponents. This is not the only time this has occurred—similar experiences were had

The screenshot shows the BBC News homepage as of Wednesday, 4 April 2007. The main headline is "Iranians release British sailors". Below the headline is a photograph of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad with British sailors. The article text states that 15 British naval personnel captured in the Gulf are free to leave. It also mentions that the British Prime Minister Tony Blair said the news was a "profound relief" to the crew and their families. The page includes a navigation menu on the left, a search bar at the top right, and various news sections on the right side.

The BBC's online coverage of Iran's release of the British sailors.

during the war in Lebanon in 2006 and in the various bouts of nuclear negotiations—but this experience was explicit as much as it proved to be politically trivial.

Media coverage in Britain and the other Western countries was driven by a master narrative that contained within it a number of assumptions related to Western supremacy. (This

characterization does not hold for all media outlets; however, while some broadsheets might opine of diverse views on their opinion pages, the underlying narrative followed the same pattern expressed among the more sensationalist tabloids.) Moreover, with 24-hour news-gathering and dissemination, reflection and analysis is often replaced, if not determined, by

the need to provide rapid assessments and new information. What's happened is that the surplus of news outlets has had the paradoxical effect of increasing our information and reducing our knowledge.

Nuanced analysis—insofar as it exists—is replaced by stereotype, and among the most obvious is the Manichaeic division of the world into good guys and bad guys, with the Western alliance most definitely among the former. In the post 9/11 world, this is a view that has been enthusiastically endorsed by Western politicians, encouraging a “You’re either with us or against us” attitude, which was embraced to a great extent by the press.

An explicit example can be found in the relationship between Fox News and the Bush administration. While Fox rushed to explicitly condemn Iran as the chief protagonist during the war in Lebanon in the summer of 2006, more sober news outlets similarly bought the Bush narrative of

Iranian guilt. Indeed, at times the anti-Iran hysteria—bolstered by words appearing on the editorial and op-ed pages of news outlets—reached such a high volume that a distinguished Princeton academic such as Bernard Lewis could write an op-ed for *The Wall Street Journal* that declared—with no sense of irony—that Armageddon may be upon us. Certainly such an extreme view would not be published without some consideration of its authority and impact. And because it is well known that Lewis has been a close advisor to the White House and is considered an “authority” on issues Arab and Islamic, publication of these words sent a message that reverberated beyond the op-ed pages.

Lewis’s piece might be an extreme example of a narrative arc gone wild, but both the writer and the newspaper are of sufficient weight to alert readers as to the extraordinary social depth of this narrative. Yet nobody thought to query

such an extraordinary claim.¹ Furthermore, in developing this narrative through the war in Lebanon during the summer of 2006, it was remarkable that no Iranian official was approached to offer an opinion.

The British Sailors

A quite similar narrative construction could be seen with the recent experience involving the British sailors. This was particularly apparent among the British right-wing press although, more interestingly, some cracks could already be seen in the edifice. Implicit assumptions were made of the righteousness of the British cause and her actions, and they were juxtaposed against the obvious perfidy of the Iranians (a nice mirror image of the narrative in Iran); some commentators even began to question what they considered to

be British government timidity in the face of such a blatant affront. Indeed for some this was a paradox that could not be reconciled and demands were soon being issued for “action.”

Quite what this action might be was not obvious but clear, unsympathetic comparisons were being drawn between Blair and Thatcher—since by fortunate happenstance, Britain was commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Falklands War. Indeed as right-wing American commentators joined their British counterparts in berating Blair for his apparent weakness, the debate became curiously internal—with Blair contending with the image he’d created and Iran almost incidental to the whole process.

This sense of implicit righteousness drove the decision to allow the sailors to sell their stories. Once the truth was out, it

1 Bernard Lewis: “Does Iran Have Something in Store?” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 8, 2006 and, in a similar vein, William Kristol’s article in *The Weekly Standard*, July 24, 2006, “It’s Our War: Bush should go to Jerusalem—and the U.S. should confront Iran.”

was conjectured, the true extent of Iranian malevolence would be understood. The notion that the Iranians might be anything more than one-dimensional villains had clearly not crossed anyone's mind. Indeed, it would be fair to point out that but for a few tentative attempts to try to discern motive and understanding in the print media, real knowledge about Iran and its grievances barely grew.

Two interesting developments are illuminated by this crisis, and to a greater or lesser extent are reflected in the broader media confrontation. It is striking how the portrayal of Iran by much of the media is mirrored in Iran itself: There was and remains a widespread assumption in the duplicity and mendacity of the Iranians, as cunning and calculating to the core. In this narrative, there is no room for mistakes or incompetence. What happens has been planned and, while on occasion Iranians are

characterized as great "chess players," by and large any strategic aptitude is regarded as inherently malevolent.

This is, of course, precisely the image of the United States and Great Britain presented in the Iranian press, which never tires of reminding readers that

It is striking how the portrayal of Iran by much of the media is mirrored in Iran itself

it was an Anglo-American coup that overthrew the nationalist Prime Minister Mohammed Mosaddegh in 1953. It came as something of a revelation

to the British media, for instance, that Iranians considered them just as perfidious as they regarded the Iranians. And while Iranian historical recollections are undoubtedly simplified, people there nonetheless seem to have a better appreciation of Anglo-Iranian history than their counterparts, who seemed more preoccupied with imperial history.

The other development of note, and one that might hold

important lessons for the future, is the way in which the master narrative finds itself confronting an unreceptive audience. While during the war in Lebanon a few voices—from within the United Nations, from some politicians and commentators—were raised to oppose the call to war, there was little willingness to challenge the fundamental narrative of Iranian villainy. With the sailors' capture, however, the British public were polarized in their support or condemnation of the government, with some refusing to believe, post Iraq, that their government would tell the truth. This failure on the part of government to convince similarly played a significant role in ensuring that the sailors' stories were told.

The tragedy of this dynamic, however, is that it remains resolutely internal. Iran is almost incidental to the process as debate revolves around the efficacy of narratives propounded by the government. It was government failure, not Iran, which ultimately undid the Blair admin-

istration, and as such it should come as little surprise that few will have come away better informed or enlightened from the experience. After all, while some journalists have belatedly sought to reflect on their poor performance during the walk-up to the Iraq invasion, few lessons appear to have been absorbed. Signs abound that too many journalists are making similar mistakes in their coverage of Iran, as skepticism and hard questioning give way to a slippage back into worn-out narratives. ■

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Finding Ways to Bridge the Abyss of Misunderstanding

‘... to travel in ignorance when insight and understanding are possible is to drive a wedge between Islam and the West.’

By Khaled Almaeena

I am perplexed by much Western writing about Arabs and the Islamic world, whether by 18th and 19th century Orientalists or by modern “experts” and pundits. Include coverage by journalists today, in print or on the air, and my puzzlement only increases. There have been, of course, cogent, careful chroniclers in all four centuries—offering observations and commentary as nonjudgmental outsiders as they record and recount the routines and perspectives, the customs and traditions of the Muslim world. For the most part, interest of this sort was scholarly, and the readers were scholars, too. Each usually brought a high level of knowledge, informed insight, and understanding to their

writing even if, as an Arab who practices Islam, I might not always like what was written about me or my fellow Muslims.

Turn from the scholarly to “popular” writing on these topics and words inevitably start to bulge with the offensive language of stereotypes and generalizations, half-truths and inaccuracies. Most egregious are what appear often to be the media’s calculated misuse of words, resulting in a distorted and inaccurate picture of a culture, a religion, and its people. When such misuse happens regularly, over a sustained period of time and by a wide variety of media organizations, reality gradually becomes subsumed by a new layer of misinformed belief—and this

belief can be difficult to shake.

There was a time when I thought this was only a sin of omission, but regretfully I've come to believe that many who write on these subjects set out to create mischief and end up spreading distrust and suspicion. Disinformation and misinformation abound in what gets said in the press about those who practice Islam. This is less so, it seems to me, when Jewish or Christian subjects are discussed, since efforts are made not to offend adherents of these two great monotheistic religions. But when the subject is Islam, the tone of coverage can be mocking, an attempt, it can seem, to divest the third great monotheistic religion of the heritage it shares with Judaism and Christianity. Given that many readers are unaware of this shared heritage—and don't know what is common among the three religions—too many accept what is reported as being an accurate portrayal. Acceptance translates all too easily into bias and prejudice, in thought and sometimes deed.

Let me share a small—but relevant—example of why words matter from a story I read in a major American newspaper. In coverage of an embassy party, these words appeared: "The Indian ambassador's wife wore a green sari. The Colombian ambassador regaled the room with his diplomatic adventures, while the PLO representative was lurking around the corner." Lurking? The word carries connotations of something unsavory, illegal or even criminal. It's possible the PLO representative had heard the ambassador's tales before and was uninterested in hearing them again. The reader doesn't know why he wasn't a part of the regaled throng, but would the same word, "lurking," used without a modifying phrase or clause, have been used to describe the location of another diplomat?

Words as "savagery," "brutality" and "merciless" are regularly used when discussing Islamic tenets or teachings, and the religion is regularly portrayed as "violent." There are

violent Muslims, as well as savage, brutal and merciless ones, but similar claims can be offered about members of other groups and religions. Identify the individual, and offer evidence for the adjective chosen as a description, but to label an entire group based on the actions of a few is faulty logic and erroneous reasoning. To perpetuate this use of language and to travel in ignorance when insight and understanding are possible is to drive a wedge between Islam and the West.

Countering Misinformation

Arabs, despite their economic clout, have not done well in their efforts to counter such misinformation and untruths. Where is the Arab answer to The Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), which was founded by Israelis in 1998 to monitor news coverage published in Arabic, Persian and Turkish? Every day, MEMRI translates articles into English, German,

Hebrew, Italian, French, Spanish and Japanese, and provides “original analysis of political, ideological, intellectual, social, cultural and religious trends in the Middle East.”

MEMRI has virtually no competition in the Arab world. How many Saudis, I wonder, are fluent in Hebrew or any of these other languages, so they can know what is being written and said about issues that affect the region of the world in which they live? How many Arabs are paid to read foreign language newspapers and asked to translate them for an Arab readership? How many Arab governments want foreign language articles translated for their citizens?

After 9/11, voices hostile to Arabs and Muslims—many of them carried in news accounts—became deafening. And truth became an early casualty as experts (real and imagined) pontificated at length about the attack on America. Less widely heard from—and often not listened to—were specialists in Arabic and Middle Eastern at

universities. Actual knowledge they could provide was less appealing than stereotypes and generalizations that struck a chord in a time of anger and grief. Through the build-up to two wars—one in Afghanistan, one in Iraq—the demonizing of Arabs and Islam escalated, as can happen when the need for an identifiable enemy is great. But nearly six years later, ignorance is still being allowed to galvanize the ill-informed Americans, escalating the animosity for Arabs and Muslims.

I often ask what we, as Arabs and Muslims, are doing—or can do—to counter the tension and animosity. At times I fear that too often we counter it with our version of tension and animosity, creating a vicious circle offering either side little chance of escape. Neither side is blameless; on both sides, error and unfairness abound. To recognize the problem is a first step; to seek solutions to stopping what is a reckless and heedless descent toward an unimagined abyss must follow.

Minds must be opened—on both sides—and this means that preconceptions must be set aside. Every journalist arriving at a story brings to the coverage a certain set of cultural and societal perceptions. That seems inevitable. Yet to understand the need to attempt to set aside those preconceived ideas and approach reporting with an open mind would be a promising first step to finding a way to build bridges across the abyss. From that would come an increased awareness of how and why word choice matters, and this second step would draw us closer still. ■

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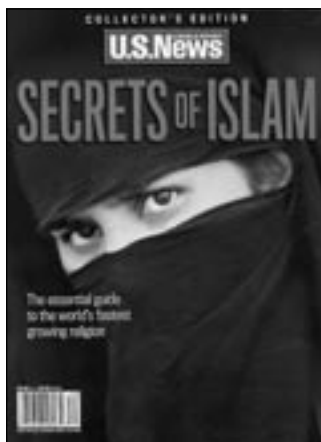
Reporting the Arab and Muslim Worlds

It is hard to see ‘ourselves—our actions and their consequences—in the picture.’

By Marda Dunsky

In the summer of 1989, following the annual season of pilgrimage to Mecca, I proposed to my editors at The Jerusalem Post a story about the meaning and lived experience of the hajj, the once-in-a-lifetime journey incumbent on all Muslims in good health and of sufficient means. I

was an Arab affairs reporter for the Post—in an era when the paper’s editorial outlook was a good deal more liberal than it is today—and my beat was the Palestinian minority in Israel, the



A special collection on Islam, published in 2005.

majority of whom are Muslim. My idea was to delve beyond the usual wire-service story details about the mass circumambulation of the ka’bah and the sheer logistical challenges of moving two million Muslims through the many pilgrimage sites. And so I set out for an Arab village to interview three returned hajjis.

A friend of mine who lived in the village had arranged the interview. Nonetheless, when I sat down with my interlocutors—two men and a woman—there

was tension in the air. I began by explaining that I aimed to write a story about the meaning that the hajj held for them, how they had interacted with Muslims from around the world, and how the rituals of the hajj served to connect them to Islamic history. But before I could get much further, one of the men spoke bluntly: "You're an American. So your image of Islam and Muslims must be negative."

I was taken aback but tried to maintain momentum. I explained that perhaps Americans were more in the dark about Islam than hostile to it; I offered that the perspectives of Islam to which I had been exposed while doing a master's in Middle Eastern studies had been anything but negative. Still, the hajjis remained skeptical and posed a pop quiz: Could I name the five pillars of Islam? The question was easy, and I answered it. By demonstrating that I knew something about my interview subjects' faith, which was at the root of the experience that I wanted them to share with my readers

and me, I earned the privilege of their trust.

I am often reminded of this vignette, because it foreshadowed the considerable journalistic challenges in reporting on Islam and the Arab and Muslim worlds that would emerge more than a decade later and that remain apparent today. The seminal events of September 11, 2001 have had a profound and lasting effect on the American public's exposure to and understanding of Islam and Muslims and, for most Americans, the conduit of information has been the mainstream media. For the past six years, reports on Islam and other aspects of the Arab and Muslim worlds have appeared on a near-daily basis in print and broadcast media as U.S. engagement in the Middle East and South Asia has broadened and deepened.

Immediately after September 11th, journalists faced a steep learning curve in covering Islam and Muslims at home and abroad. Beyond reporting on the core beliefs and practices that Muslims share, making journal-

istic sense of the sheer diversity of Islam and the Muslim world has proved much more challenging. The lack of a central clerical authority in Islam, the differences between Sunnis and Shi'ites, and various customs prevalent in some parts of the Arab and Muslim worlds that are dictated by patriarchal social structures rather than by religion, per se, combine to make reporting on "what Muslims believe" and "what Islam says" on a wide range of topics (from women's roles in society to jihad) a complex undertaking. At least two other factors further complicate this journalistic task. Prior to 9/11, Islam and Muslims were unknown to most Americans because Muslims have not been as visible in American politics and popular culture as other minority groups and, after 9/11, the spate of reportage on Islam and Muslims was generated by the wholly negative context of those horrific events—events that neither represented nor were condoned by the vast majority of Muslims at home or abroad.

By the time of September 11th,

I had moved from the realm of newsroom to that of academe, and the sheer volume of reporting on Islam and Muslims led me to create a seminar course called "Reporting the Arab and Muslim Worlds." In order to increase their media literacy and knowledge of topics including Islamic diversity, U.S. public diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim worlds, the concept of jihad, the role of women and the question of Palestine, students assess the strengths and weaknesses of U.S. mainstream reporting by juxtaposing journalism with academic writing while applying five criteria. These are:

- Balance: The range and mix of sources
- Point of view: From whose perspective/s the story is told?
- Voice: Who is quoted/who gets to speak?
- Context: Relevant historical, political and/or cultural factors
- Framing: Which issues are included and which are omitted?

The steady stream of U.S. mainstream media reporting on the Arab and Muslim worlds during the past six years has provided a wellspring of source material. It is a body of work that over time and across media has indicated mixed results—many of them positive—as several examples illustrate.

A masterful journalistic account of the Shi'ite majority in Iraq, which tackled historical complexities and diversity of perspectives from within that community, was reported by David Rieff in *The New York Times Magazine* in February 2004. In August 2004, the *Los Angeles Times* published "Muslims in Las Vegas," a five-part series by Peter H. King based on multiple reporting trips over a year's time that yielded an evocative portrait of a community whose members were rendered as three-dimensional human beings, secure in their Muslim identities against the backdrops of the quintessential American sin city and the often treacherous political climate in the wake of 9/11.

In the summer of 2005, U.S. News & World Report published a special collector's edition on Islam; its pieces on the tenets of the faith and its historical and cultural aspects were illuminating. However, its cover headline, "Secrets of Islam," and accompanying photograph (a woman's head peering out from behind a black veil) coupled with much of its interior photos and pieces on conflict between Muslim societies and the West, bore a distinct Orientalist tone. In April, *New York Times* reporter Andrea Elliott won the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for feature reporting for her three-part series "An Imam in America," a richly detailed portrait of an immigrant imam leading Muslim congregations based in and around New York City. [See Elliott's article on page 126.] Also this spring, the *Chicago Tribune* ran a front-page feature on Muslims' concerns over the certification of halal food, slaughtered and blessed according to Islamic law. Indeed, these examples show that in recent years, U.S. media coverage of the Arab

and Muslim worlds has given voice and three-dimensionality to Muslims, their history and lived experiences.

As a body of work over time and across platforms, however, the reporting still faces a major challenge of contextualizing the conflict between the Muslim world and the West (and in particular the United States). While this conflict is not only a function of Muslim actions and attitudes but also the result of U.S. policy and intervention in the Muslim world over the course of the last half-century, the reporting more often than not reflects the former while minimizing or excluding the latter.

This is evident in U.S. mainstream reporting from and/or about Iran, Israel/Palestine and Iraq (among other venues), which repeatedly imparts the details of conflict from a U.S. policy point of view but leaves important contextual questions unasked and unanswered. Reporting on the Iranian “nuclear crisis” tends to focus on potential threats posed by a nuclear Iran;

left unaddressed are Iran’s concerns for geostrategic parity in a region where the United States tolerates the nuclear capacities of its allies (India, Pakistan, Israel). Then there is the under-reported fact that the U.S.-Iranian relationship was originally strained not by the taking of American hostages in 1979 but by the CIA-backed overthrow of the country’s elected secular leader in 1953 and U.S. support for 25 years of oppressive rule by the shah.

Reporting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, whose 60th anniversary will be marked next year, rarely takes into account the pronounced effects that decades of U.S. military aid and diplomatic support for Israel have had on the trajectory of the conflict—in many ways making prospects for peace more distant (especially vis-à-vis Israeli settlements). The tragic and bungled U.S. war in Iraq is reported daily via accounts of the horrifying violence and instability there and the escalating political battle at home between Congress and the White

House; however, there is little if any attention paid to how a sustained American corporate and military presence in Iraq will affect its future long after most U.S. troops are withdrawn.

Incorporating balanced, critical treatment of these sensitive but crucial issues is the key challenge in reporting on the Arab and Muslim worlds today. The metaphor of my experience with the Palestinian hajjis more than a decade ago is instructive but cautionary. Getting the easy details right is important, but it is only the first step; seeing ourselves—our actions and their consequences—in the picture is much harder.

This means that the American public, and American journalists acting on its behalf in reporting on the Arab and Muslim worlds, must understand that the history of U.S. policy and intervention in these regions—from the beginning of the cold war until today—is intimately connected to how Muslims throughout the world regard and react to us. We need to understand that

these policies are carried out in our name, and they shape Muslim perceptions not only of our government, but also of us (as citizens who freely elect it). Toward this end, the journalism must not only give voice to Muslim attitudes but also probe and contextualize historical and political facts upon which they are based.

Without this perspective, the reporting will remain incomplete and along with it Americans' understanding of a part of the world that is increasingly tied to our own interests and well being. ■

Marda Dunsky is a scholar and writer. She has worked as an editor and reporter at four newspapers, including the Chicago Tribune. She teaches "Reporting the Arab and Muslim Worlds" at DePaul University. Her book, "Pens and Swords: How the American Mainstream Media Report the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," will be published by Columbia University Press in the fall.

AN ESSAY IN WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS

Visual Contours of Middle Eastern Life

By Katharina Eglau

The Middle East is a place of a thousand facets and many contradictions: it is the cradle of civilization, the lynchpin of the global energy network, site of humankind's oldest empires, the birthplace of Judaism, Christianity and Islam as well as of the alphabet. It is also, of course, one of the world's greatest geopolitical trouble spots, a region of political instability, religious fanaticism, social tension, and ethnic violence.

I traveled there for the first time 15 years ago and, since then, my photographer's instinct has compelled me to return many times, attracted by the challenge of capturing on film the quiet, often unnoticed details of daily life in a region



Coffee with milk in a coffeehouse. Morocco. More photos by Katharina Eglau on pages 105-108.

best known for its turbulent politics. Three aspects of Middle East culture have drawn my eye closer to them: the stark separation between private and public spheres; the lavish traditions of abstract art that finesse the Islamic prohibition on human imagery, and the surprising diversity and opulence of the region's landscapes.

The rift between "indoor" and "outdoor" life marks many aspects of Middle Eastern culture—from its architectural forms to its religious practices and to the starkly divergent roles of men and women and the relationship between them. Men often dominate public life, unabashedly occupying most of the public space in the streets and in cafés. Women usually dominate the domestic space. There are exceptions to this, of course: In Iran, for example, women comprise 60 percent of the student population at universities.

Religion is unavoidable in public life, most notably through the traditional Islamic

calls to prayer, broadcast five times a day, starting at dawn, over loudspeakers in most city streets. At the same time, though, Islam has a very intimate and personal side. Devout believers routinely attend mosque to quietly pray and read the Qur'an. Equally surprising is the rich tradition of abstract ornament and calligraphy in the region. The Islamic prohibition on human imagery has not hindered the blossoming of a rich visual culture, though it has spurred concentration and creativity. Indeed, artists have often turned to nature for inspiration, as Middle Eastern art has long drawn upon the opulence of the region's nature and the natural products—spices, fruits and vegetables—that are proudly displayed in the area's plentiful and busy markets. ■

Katharina Eglau is a freelance photographer with the German agency Joker. Her photographs can be found at www.katharina-eglau.de



Family on a motorbike. Iran.



Children stand nearby as women pray. Iran.

Photos and words by Katharina Eglau.

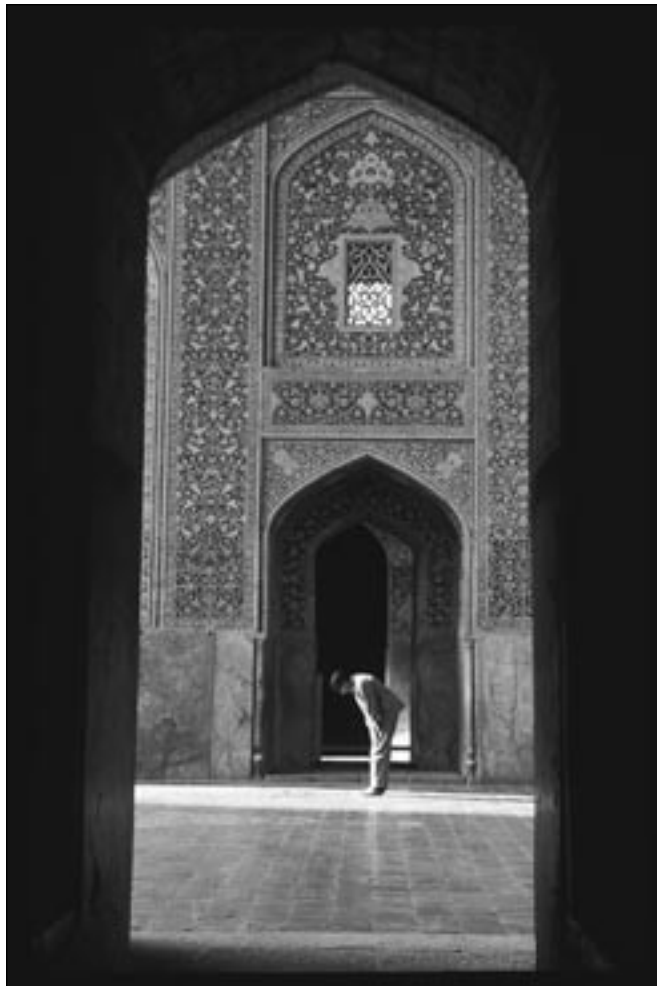


Wall between Jerusalem and Bethlehem in the occupied territories. Palestine.



Man in a teahouse. Syria.

Photos and words by Katharina Eglau.



A man bows in prayer. Iran.

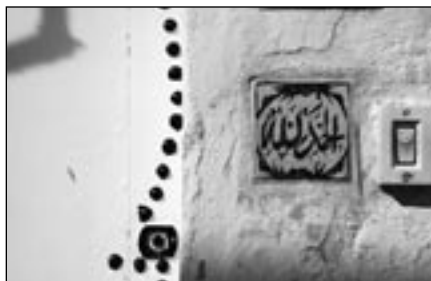
Photo and words by Katharina Eglau.



Window grille
with satellite
dishes. Morocco.



Door handle and the hand of
Fatima. Morocco.



Details of a door with doorbell.
Tunisia.

Photos and words by Katharina Eglau.

Swamp Speak: Then and Now

A former CIA officer draws on journalist Walt Kelly's experience to illustrate the value of objective, in-depth analysis in intelligence reporting and journalism.

By Ray Close

Today I search for lessons gained from 55 years of personal involvement in the Middle East, including 37 years during which I lived in predominantly Muslim countries. Throughout this half century and more I've been, as I remain, an avid consumer of information and analysis produced by a consistently excellent corps of international journalists reporting from this part of the world. Because I was for 26 years a producer of intelligence about the Middle East for the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) Clandestine Service, I have a special appreciation of the extraordinary challenges that confront those in both occupations who strive to understand and explain to others the complexity of developments—special-

ly their underlying causes and long-term effects—throughout this fascinating region.

In looking back, I am often struck by the similarities, rather than the differences, between these two otherwise strictly compartmented professions of intelligence collection and news reporting. I therefore hope to give no offense to my many valued friends in the Fourth Estate if I make the observation that successful spies and successful news hawks often impress me as being products of the same gene pool—individuals who are by nature inquisitive and persistent, with keen powers of observation and analysis—all dedicated to mastering the art of persuasive communication.

Being cousins of a sort, intelligence officers and journalists

share a critical responsibility to convey to readers the meaning behind events that they observe and report. This calls for the special qualities of sensitivity to nuance, clarity of vision, objectivity and, ever more important these days, intellectual honesty in the face of constant temptations to tailor the message to reinforce the preconceptions and satisfy the prejudices of our respective “customer bases.”

Failure to See What Needs to Be Seen

With these observations in mind, I will now speak strictly from the perspective of a loyal but deeply concerned alumnus of the CIA. Let me start by emphasizing my view that the most dangerous threat facing the United States early in this new century is the difficulty Americans seem to have, individually and collectively, in hearing and understanding viewpoints different from our own. As a result, we experience persistent failure either in appreciating or taking adequately into

consideration the fundamental social and political realities that motivate people of other nationalities and cultures whose actions and policies we presume to judge and whose destinies we sometimes arrogantly undertake to control directly.

Nowhere is that unfortunate proclivity more evident than in our dealings with the Arab and Muslim worlds, where imprecise technical terms like “covert action,” “regime change,” and “preventive war” are casually tossed about nowadays. These phrases are used to describe activities that have, by some perverted process of logic, come to be accepted as legitimate instruments of U.S. national policy, even as the same practices continue to be regarded as unacceptable behavior under international law.

Often I’ve observed and deplored the shallow limits of official Washington’s institutional memory, and so I would like to illustrate my point by briefly recalling an event that occurred five decades ago. It was a time when, in my view, failure of in-

telligence reporters (of which I was one) to appreciate and convey to Washington the human dimension of a particular Middle East situation led to the employment of unwarranted and illegitimate methods of covert intervention; these actions sowed the seeds of future political instability and violence in this specific country and throughout the region.

Today many analogous situations have developed with similar causes and results. In all of these cases—from Iraq to Iran, Palestine and Lebanon—I have felt that much of the responsibility for incompetent and unwise policymaking falls on the shoulders of those who have failed adequately to inform and educate in depth the people who need to know. And these people include not only policymakers

and legislative representatives but the American general public. We are the ones who must be well informed about the true causes and subtle complications of the critical situations when we expect our leaders to resolve them wisely and with minimum harm to all concerned.

Professional ethics and discipline strictly prohibit both intelligence professionals and journalists from attempting consciously and deliberately to influence governmental policy through their reporting. However, both can and should contribute to a better understanding on the part of all citizens of the underlying political conditions and social attitudes affecting motivations on all sides of an international controversy. It is in this spirit that I invite journalists to consider the example

...much of the responsibility for incompetent and unwise policymaking falls on the shoulders of those who have failed adequately to inform and educate in depth the people who need to know.

I've chosen to share as a way of offering them a tool for evaluating the effectiveness of their reporting and analysis today.

Lebanon's Lessons for Journalists Today

For those who remember and revere Walt Kelly, the cartoonist who became one of the icons of political journalism, this historical anecdote will have particular appeal. This circumstance involved Kelly during the 1957-58 internal and violent conflict in Lebanon, which was, in essence, an incipient civil war that culminated in the intervention of about 20,000 U.S. Marines and soldiers in the summer of 1958.

A vocal and violence-prone minority faction of Lebanese was infected by Gamal Abd-al-Nasser's radical Arab nationalism, which was then at the zenith of its popularity in the region. Another minority, dominated by diehard right-wing Christian elements, was equally in favor of public alignment with Washington's anticommu-

nist and anti-Nasser Eisenhower Doctrine. It was this latter "pro-American" group, firmly in power at the time, with which Washington was openly aligned. And the CIA supported this Lebanese group through a covert action program consisting of large secret subventions of cash to individual political candidates during a critical parliamentary election and the provision of lethal weaponry to private paramilitary forces loyal to these pro-American political factions. (As a direct participant in both activities, I can speak with authority on the subject.)

As it happened, however, the majority of Lebanese wanted their government carefully to maintain the country's uncommitted status—essential, they felt, to preserving peace and prosperity among the society's diverse ethnic and religious communities. Most people recognized that unless Lebanon's traditional balance was delicately preserved, its unique climate of political and religious tolerance, as well as its extraor-

dinary commercial vigor, could turn into chaos very quickly.

This was indeed a situation that is in many ways analogous to the political impasse facing Lebanon today. Unfortunately, the United States was deeply imbued at this time with cold war attitudes—although the term “neocon” had not yet been invented. Anyone exhibiting outward signs of not being openly “with us” was automatically accused of being “against us.” And so it became America’s self-appointed task to teach Lebanon that “good guys” should feel obligated in the name of freedom and democracy to confront and defeat “bad guys,” by hook or by crook. (Is this beginning to sound familiar?)

As the conflict was nearing its height, the U.S. Embassy in Beirut received a semiofficial visit from Walt Kelly, creator of the memorable “Pogo” cartoon strip. Kelly was not there to draw funny pictures, however. He was there in his capacity as a political journalist, a serious investigator, who wanted to

observe first hand the fascinating complexities of Lebanese politics. With that purpose, he asked to meet a spokesman of the “opposition.” Embassy officials, however, declined to oblige, presumably out of concern for diplomatic propriety.

A gentleman named Saeb Salam, a family acquaintance whom I admired as a friend and respected as a national leader in Lebanese politics, was then a prominent spokesman for the group in opposition to open alignment with the United States. In these cold war times, this meant he was regarded by Washington as a dangerous adversary. A former student of my father’s at the American University of Beirut, a Sunni Muslim and a former prime minister, Salam was the right person to explain the contrarian point of view to our American visitor.

I took Kelly to meet Salam, and we were treated to a remarkably sensible, balanced and constructive explanation of why it was neither in Lebanon’s interest nor in the interests of the

United States that Lebanon be pushed off the fence and forced to become, for all practical purposes, a belligerent in both the cold war and the potentially explosive ideological conflicts looming within and among the Arab states. Kelly was deeply impressed, as was I. Unfortunately, the crisis only worsened, leading to the landing of U.S. military forces on the beaches near Beirut in July 1958.

Following this precedent-setting American military intervention in the Middle East, Washington soon began looking desperately for an appropriate "exit strategy" by which to extricate our troops and the residue of our national honor from what was rapidly becoming a quagmire. (Sounds more and more familiar, doesn't it?)

The only acceptable option finally available to the U.S. government was to acquiesce in the appointment of a compromise government whose make-up satisfied both the opposition parties and the rest of the concerned citizens of Lebanon.

At this point, they were grateful just to see foreign military forces leave them alone to settle their country's problems by themselves. No surprise to anyone: The prime minister who emerged to lead the new government was America's erstwhile demon, Saeb Salam.

A decade and more later, of course, at the height of the Vietnam War, Kelly's swamp critter, the much-beloved character Pogo, paraphrased Admiral Oliver Hazard Perry's famous naval battle report to Washington in 1812, and in the process invented what was to become the mantra of the Vietnam era: "We have met the enemy and he is us."

This is advice that should never have been ignored half a century ago; and it is wisdom that should not be forgotten today. ■

Ray Close is a member of the fourth generation of his family to live and work in the Arab world. For 26 years he worked in the Middle East for the Central Intelligence Agency's Clandestine Service.

History, Memory and Context

‘... when a major story erupts in Lebanon, Westerners don’t already have the dots by which they can make connections.’

By Iman Azzi

In the absence of the war in the summer of 2006, Lebanon is no longer front-page news in the Western press—politically motivated assassinations, car bombs, and deadly street clashes exempted. Yet in a nation with a history that dates back 7,000 years, fierce political battles with regional, and potentially global, consequences are being waged. Six pro-opposition ministers resigned in November, followed by the assassination of Minister Pierre Gemayel, and the opposition movement has engaged in an open-ended sit-in outside government buildings. The two sides have stalemated over the formation of a court to try the murderers of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

Briefly describing these recent events doesn’t come close

to explaining the situation. Understanding resides in the details and interwoven threads of these developing stories, even though news of Hariri’s assassination was reported internationally, for most Westerners the story ended there. Yet nothing in the Middle East is isolated; it’s all context and history. When an event happens, the instinct is to ask where coverage of it should begin—with the 2006 Summer War, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the creation of Israel in 1948, independence from Mandate rule, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Crusades, or perhaps with the rise of Islam? The memory of these events is in the blood and genes, stones and pathways, monuments and fields of these people and their

lands. After the fall of Jerusalem to General Allenby in 1917, many in Great Britain saw the capture of the city as a fulfillment of the Crusades. A cartoon in *Punch* showed Richard the Lion-Hearted saying, “at last my dream comes true.” People here don’t forget such words.

How much context is needed

to understand an issue in the Middle East? It is impractical to demand full coverage of a nation smaller than Connecticut, but it should not be unreasonable to expect contextualized and accurate coverage of events whose significance ought to be more widely understood. Yet, too often when coverage



Two men smoke narghileh under faded posters depicting assassinated former Lebanese Premier Rafik Hariri and his son Saad in the port city of Tyre a few days after the end of the 2006 Summer War.

Photo by Iason Athanasiadis.

occurs, the words Western reporters use—resistance fighter or terrorist, political party or militia, settlement or neighborhood—can rankle Arabs whose history and perspective tell them otherwise. Frustration rises, too, when people here see which stories Western reporters decide to cover, such as when numerous articles stress the detention of two Israeli soldiers by Hizbullah, but the same news organizations overlook the hundreds of Palestinians, Lebanese, Syrian and Jordanian prisoners held in Israel indefinitely, most without charges.

News that matters in Lebanon rarely makes it to America. When the former commander of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) said in February that Israel was violating Lebanese airspace on a daily basis, it was front-page news in Beirut, but in the United States the story didn't even appear in online editions. When an international group of nearly 250 women, including Iranians, Syrians, Palestinians, Europeans

and Americans, recently embarked on a bike tour of Middle Eastern countries, their ride barely received coverage outside the region, in spite of the fact that such political acts of emancipation counter Western perceptions of Middle Eastern women.

Because the West misses these day-to-day developments—like the rise of AK-47 sales, the formation of Sunni neighborhood watch groups (an emerging and worrying phenomenon) or the detention of Lebanese shepherds by the Israeli Army—when a major story erupts in Lebanon, Westerners don't already have the dots by which they can make connections. Nor are these dots often provided in the coverage of breaking news they do receive.

Compared to the rest of the Middle East, Lebanon allows a high level of press freedom, but the press here has slowly been transformed into tools of political mobilization. The same rally could be depicted by different news organizations as being a

crowd of tens of thousands on Page One or several hundred on page two. Often with humor, the Lebanese understand the ways in which this kind of bias sways coverage; for Americans, deciphering such discrepancies can be more difficult.

Nothing happens in a vacuum in the Levant; crisis in Lebanon or Iraq has repercussions in the region—and sometimes outside the region—often with unanticipated results. The assassination of Hariri, not far from the doors of Beirut's Hotel St. George's, led to the removal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, isolated the regime in Damascus, strengthened its support of Hizbullah, and reinforced an alliance between Syria and Iran.

The first time I came to Beirut I was 13. My father, who hadn't visited since the Civil War ended in 1991, took me to the fabled Hotel St. George's, at its heyday a luxury hotel that served as home base for journalists, writers and spies. John le Carre, Kim Philby, Peter Jennings, and others frequented its famous

bar, and Jonathan Randal of The Washington Post was the hotel's last paying guest before it closed, under siege, in 1975. When I got there in the mid-1990's, it was a beach resort and restaurant, but the hotel itself bore a thousand scars of bullets and shells from the Civil War.

After a lunch of grilled chicken and garlic sandwiches washed down with lemonade flavored with rose water, I happily dove into the lavish, sparkling pool, expecting a cool, somewhat chlorinated, but refreshing swim. I surfaced with salt water from the nearby Mediterranean stinging my eyes. I was young then, when, temporarily blinded by the salt, I learned that not everything about the Middle East is as it appears to be. That lesson now serves me well as a journalist in Beirut. ■

Iman Azzi began a summer internship at The Daily Star, Lebanon's English-language newspaper, in June 2006 and is now working as a reporter at that newspaper.

AN ESSAY IN WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS

Women and Islam: Bearing Witness to Their Daily Lives

By Alexandra Boulat

The lives of women in Muslim countries are buffeted by cultural trends, religious systems, political movements, and varying degrees of oppression and emancipation. Much of my photographic work illuminates these women's daily lives and the choices they make as part of a political and economic struggle woven with the obligations of their religious observance.

I bring the sensibility of a painter to my work, since that is how I began my visual career. Each woman who accepts my camera with grace or naivety,



Armaghan, 24, rehearses with her pop-music band, Orkideh, in Tehran. The band's 10 women are allowed to play only for female audiences and cannot sing individually. October 2004.

or often with the approval of a man, has her story to tell, and my role is to convey her story in expressive language of how it can be shown. From refugee to pilgrim, from suicide bomber to teenager, visual images

speak to these women's beliefs, rituals and habits, and to the anger and joy they experience.

In many places women are expected to follow a strict code of modesty. But changes are taking place: In some large cities, headscarves are lighter and loosely draped, makeup is heavier, and designer labels are occasionally on display. In 1994, Iranian women were given the right to wear sunglasses and, more recently, to straddle a motorcycle, and today the majority of women under the age of 40, especially in urban areas like Tehran, claim a more liberal lifestyle at home.

"If you think we're different from you because of this piece of clothing, if you think we're more hidden, you don't know Iranian women," one woman told me, referring to the veil many Arab women wear today. In the Middle East, emancipation of women does not necessarily mean acceptance of Western values, nor should it. Most women in Islamic countries learn about Western "modern

life" on television, Al Jazeera, and other satellite networks, and many do not like what they see. While Islam is, in a sense, the armature around which tradition and culture grow, it is societies, probably more than the religion, which make women second-class citizens. Domestic violence, for example, is a tragic but all too common occurrence in this region, stemming not from religious dogma so much as from an entrenched patriarchy that has been allowed to develop over a period of generations.

Muslim women enjoyed rights of marriage, divorce and property for centuries before Western women did. At the beginning of the 20th century, many Middle Eastern women enjoyed a status that Western women would have envied. Yet in recent decades, with the spread of Islamic radicalism, a stricter Muslim practice has been emerging. In Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon and Turkey, nominally secular, large factions of the populations—men and women—have been turning



Students at a university in Amman, Jordan.

More photos by Alexandra Boulat on pages 122-125.

back to traditions of Islam. And when religious fundamentalism assumes societal power, women's rights are among the first things to be sacrificed.

Many in the West believe Islam and women's rights must be mutually exclusive. Yet the choices women make each day to sustain themselves and their families and contribute to their societies attest to their determination and faith. To bear witness, and then to convey through my photographs these women's acts of courage, is my privilege, and

I do so with the hope that someday their lives will be emancipated, not as a reflection of our Western sense of what this means, but within their own cultural experience. ■

Alexandra Boulat, a photojournalist, cofounded VII photo agency in 2001. She has received many awards, including a 2006 Best Woman Photographer award from Italy and a 2003 Overseas Press Club citation for her work in Afghanistan. Her photos follow.



Women in a Tehran shopping mall. October 2004.



Myriam Yelda, left, a Christian, and her friend Lilian Far, a Muslim refugee from Iraq, both 7 years old, in a cosmetic shop at Mecca Mall in Amman, Jordan.

Photos and words by Alexandra Boulat.



Huda Ghalia watches as workers build her family graves in Beit Lahiya, Gaza. Huda, 12, became a media icon when seven members of her family, including her stepmother, father and three of her brothers, died after being hit by an Israeli missile on a beach in Gaza in June 2006.



Fatma Omar an-Najar, a 68-year-old grandmother, became the oldest Palestinian suicide bomber when she blew herself up in Gaza on November 23, 2006, wounding two Israeli soldiers.

Photos and words by Alexandra Boulat.



Jamila Shanti, (front, kneeling) meets with her pupils at her home in Jabaliya, Gaza. Shanti led a women's march to Beit Hanoun in an attempt to stop the Israeli military operation that left 65 dead during a weeklong siege. As the women entered Beit Hanoun, the Israeli Army shot and killed two of the women.

Photos and words by Alexandra Boulat.



Women walk outside of the training building for shooting at the Women's Police Academy of Tehran. November 2004.

Photos and words by Alexandra Boulat.

Muslims in America: Creating a New Beat

A New York Times reporter—a non-Muslim—looked for pathways into the Muslim experience and, once found, she immersed herself to tell the story.

By **Andrea Elliott**

On a sticky summer night, Sheik Reda Shata walked into a crowded ballroom in Staten Island. Bare-shouldered Palestinian girls shook their hips and clapped to the beat of Arab pop music, as boys in coats and ties orbited around them. Older women in sequined headscarves stood watchfully to the side as video cameras beamed images of the wedding onto giant flat-screen monitors.

Sheik Reda, an Egyptian imam who had arrived in America three years earlier, took his seat and closed his eyes. His lips moved in silent prayer. Every so often he glanced up at the screens, as if seeking a filter between himself and the

guests. Dueling expressions of amazement and consternation crossed his face.

“Every centimeter of a woman’s dress is part of her faith,” he said, frowning. As for the dancing, he added, Muslim women should only do this alone or with their husbands.

At that moment, the emcee announced, “We’re going to have open dancing all night long!” But first, he said, “a blessing from Sheik Reda Shata.”

I sat with the imam that evening in August 2005, two months after I began reporting on him for a series of New York Times articles. To watch Sheik Reda interact with Muslims in the United States was, at times, like watching a man

size up his teenaged grandson. He was both put off and thrilled by what he saw, curious about yet scared of what he might learn. He wanted to understand this new world but also to rein it in. He had come here to teach American Muslims, yet he wondered what they might teach him.

When I set out to write about Muslims in America earlier that year, I, too, found myself in unfamiliar territory. Few news organizations had reported deeply on the “Muslim community,” a phrase I learned to avoid. It was, in fact, a constellation of communities, complicated, diverse and exceedingly difficult for non-Muslims to penetrate. [See accompanying box on page 131.]

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 changed life dramatically for Muslims in the United States. Their businesses, homes and mosques came under surveillance by the authorities, and their status in American society became uncertain. Researchers at Columbia University who

studied the impact of 9/11 on American Muslims found two striking patterns: Many Muslims took refuge in their faith, growing more devout. Others distanced themselves from Islam, avoiding their mosques and even changing their names. Men named Mohammed became “Moe;” Osama became “Sam.” Some women stopped veiling, while others began covering themselves for the first time.

Gaining Access

As I began my reporting, I found that many Muslims had retreated into their private lives. In the New York area, I could find few who would talk with me. Again and again I heard the same complaints: that Muslims had suffered needlessly in America, and the press was to blame; that reporters had distorted Islam by exploring it only through the prism of terrorism.

As a non-Muslim American who did not speak Arabic, I

came to this story with few natural advantages. I learned by trial and error. Early on, for example, I noticed my temptation to describe Muslim women by their headscarves, as Western reporters so often do. But with time, I began wondering what it would be like for non-Muslim women to always be described by, say, their hair. So I tried to unearth more revealing observations.

As my stories appeared in the paper, doors began to open. But I came to realize that unless I focused on a single Muslim enclave—one mosque, city block, or family's home—I would never capture a fuller story. I wanted a subject whose own story revealed the challenges of Islam in America, but who could also transport me to the hidden corners of Muslim

life. The idea of writing about an imam seemed promising.

In Muslim countries, imams lead the five daily prayers and deliver the Friday sermon. When they are recruited to American mosques—for their Islamic expertise—they end up filling many unfamiliar roles. They become marriage counselors, Islamic judges, matchmakers and Qur'an school principals. They broker business disputes, grant divorces, and often deal with the FBI. For none of this are they prepared. And as they take on these new roles,

they often find themselves rethinking Islamic law in the context of American needs.

I interviewed about a dozen imams before I found Sheik Reda, who was then the leader of the Islamic Society of Bay

As my stories appeared in the paper, doors began to open. But I came to realize that unless I focused on a single Muslim enclave—one mosque, city block, or family's home—I would never capture a fuller story.

Ridge, a thriving mosque in Brooklyn. But he and the directors of the mosque's board were extremely reluctant to be written about. They felt they had nothing to gain; that my reporting would simply repeat the negative, one-dimensional image of Islam they'd seen in newspapers before. I tried to persuade them that our readers' understanding of Muslims would never deepen unless reporters were allowed greater access to their community. I promised to be fair in my reporting. After some weeks of deliberation, they agreed to let me try.

For six months, Times photographer James Estrin and I immersed ourselves in Sheik Reda's life. We watched him chaperon dates with single Muslims and steer quarreling couples away from divorce. We saw him lecture Brooklyn police officers in Islamic mores and explain American traditions to newly landed immigrants. We followed him in the morning as he walked his

children to the bus and stood near him as he put them to bed at night.

I spent hours in his cramped office at the mosque, where interviews felt more like conversations. We were strangers in each other's worlds. The questions moved both ways. When I asked him about memorizing the Qur'an as a child, he asked me about my Catholic upbringing. "Why do American women wait so long to get married?" he wanted to know when he found out I was engaged at 33.

I think it was only because we spent so much time together that Sheik Reda was finally willing to share his views on such controversial topics as suicide bombings and the tactics used by U.S. law-enforcement authorities to investigate Muslims. He opened up about his personal transformation in America; about how he'd become "flexible," now believing that Muslim women could remove their headscarves if they felt threatened in public and that Muslim waiters could

serve alcohol if they could find no other job.

Coverage Sparks Debate

The reaction to this series, which was published in March 2006, overwhelmed Sheik Reda. His phone rang continuously. Hundreds of letters and e-mails arrived—from rabbis and priests interested in interfaith projects, from prison inmates seeking his guidance, from Muslim professionals who wanted help in finding a spouse. The articles also sparked considerable debate, around the United States and in the Middle East. Some deemed Sheik Reda an extremist; others saw him as a liberal sellout. Flyers appeared on the streets of Bay Ridge declaring him “a devil.”

Sheik Reda finally decided he had no choice but to leave Brooklyn. His new job at a mosque in the New Jersey suburbs has brought him a world of new experiences, which I have continued to report on. But his life will never be the

same. Despite the criticism he has endured, Sheik Reda said he does not regret his decision to let us tell his story. In a recent interview with the American Society of Newspaper Editors, he explained it this way: “When the astronaut Neil Armstrong landed on the moon he said, ‘That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.’ These were the words that moved me in the beginning to get involved with this story. I knew that I was somehow like Armstrong, making a small step on a personal level, yet a giant leap that would benefit the Muslim community and, in turn, humanity. It was a step that I believe was bigger than our differences.” ■

Andrea Elliott covers Islam in America, a beat she created in 2005 for The New York Times. Her three-part series, “An Imam in America,” won the 2007 Pulitzer for Feature Writing. She is learning Arabic.

About American Muslims ►►

American Muslims

By some estimates, as many as six million Muslims live in the United States. They have roots around the globe, from Albania to Senegal, Guyana to Pakistan. Some 34 percent of American Muslims are of South Asian descent, another 26 percent are of Arab extraction, and roughly a quarter of them are African-American, according to the pollster John Zogby.

The rich texture of American Islam draws not only from that mix of race, ethnicity and national origin, but also from a spectrum of religious expression—secular and devout, Sunni and Shi'ite, flexibly modern and rigidly literal. Only 10 percent of American Muslims regularly attend the nation's estimated 1,200 mosques, which range from crumbling, inner city storefronts to palatial Islamic centers in the suburbs. Many Muslims worship at home; others don't observe the daily prayers, identifying themselves as "cultural Muslims."

One thing binding many American Muslims together is their relative prosperity. Muslims began arriving in large numbers in the 1960's, after immigration reforms granted entry to thousands of skilled workers from the Middle East and South Asia. A larger percentage of immigrants from Muslim countries have graduate degrees than other U.S. residents, and their average salary is about 20 percent higher, according to census data. —A.E.

Newspapers Portray Women in Pakistan as the ‘Good’ Muslims

An analysis of news reporting and commentary in the wake of 9/11 reveals a pattern in which women’s circumstances and lives served as a vehicle for a desired narrative.

By Susan Moeller

Remember in the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon when it seemed like every talking head and every media outlet was asking plaintively “Why do they hate us?”—where the “they” meant Muslims?

The question prompted a media search for allies in an Islamic world that seemed universally hostile. But who were these sympathetic faces? A study that came out in April, entitled “The ‘Good’ Muslims: U.S. Newspaper Coverage of Pakistan,” discovered that newspapers identified women as the West’s best allies; it was through their intercession



Gender identification plate. Iran.
Photo by Katharina Eglau.

that the West—and especially the United States—would find the solution to terrorism at the family, the tribal or ethnic, and the national level. In commentary and reporting, women were portrayed as the “good” Muslims who wanted peace and freedom.

The study¹—released by the International Center for Media and the Public Agenda (ICMPA) at the University of Maryland, College Park—analyzed news coverage and commentary published on op-ed pages about Pakistan and Afghanistan by 13 major U.S. newspapers.² Two time periods were examined: September 11, 2001 to December 31, 2002 and January 1, 2006 to January 15, 2007.

Like all studies of coverage of international affairs, the ICMPA study noted the limitations on what journalists are able to report. They don't cover all news; in fact, they can't cover all the news. So they triage, reporting news they think is important to their audience. In the case of U.S. reporting on global events that typically means news with a strong, direct link to American interests, usually security

or economic, but at times humanitarian. They cover stories they can physically get to—where visas are available, plane flights possible, and costs in time and money not exorbitant—and still or video images can be taken. They cover major international breaking news but usually only in those places of long-term or specific interest to Americans: a hostage-taking in Iran and the British response, nuclear disarmament talks in North Korea, massive protests against the United States in Iraq, stark evidence of global warming in the Bay of Bengal. They cover global trends and issues—terrorism, nuclear weapons, cataclysmic disasters—especially those that have received attention by the White House or Congress or by some other significant political player.

1 www.icmpa.umd.edu/pages/studies/pakistan_study_susan.html

2 *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, The Boston Globe, the Chicago Tribune, The Christian Science Monitor, The Dallas Morning News, the Los Angeles Times, The Miami Herald, The New York Times, The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Seattle Times, USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, and The Washington Post.*

Knowing that, this study analyzed how major American newspapers covered and characterized (through their selection of op-eds to publish) Pakistan, an essential staging

ground in the U.S. war in Afghanistan, a staunch Muslim ally (the government, if not the people), a frontline in the “war on terror,” a critical player in nuclear politics, a key conduit in the narcotics trade, and a major recipient of American aid. Of course, the

study also noted what potential aspects of this story remained uncovered, as well.

This examination of newspaper coverage and commentary revealed that during the time period just after 9/11, the role of women in Pakistan was regarded as essential. Although there was the occasional story from Pakistan that involved a woman or

women, what strikingly emerged in the post-9/11 coverage was the insertion of women into stories that did not affect women specifically or predominately. Of course, it is common in main-

...what strikingly emerged in the post-9/11 coverage was the insertion of women into stories that did not affect women specifically or predominately.

stream news coverage of international affairs for entire countries (and even regions) to be tarred with a wide brush; often, for example, few distinctions are made among even very active political opposition groups within a country.

Far too often, for example, much of the reporting and commentary about the Palestinians and the Iranians suffers from this problem.

In other situations, especially when reporters are stationed on the ground and there is ongoing interest in a region, nuances do emerge in coverage; politics and people are not represented so monolithically.

cally. In such reporting (and commentary)—coverage of the Balkans is a case in point—one distinct group is identified as holding the moral high ground. Sometimes that group is represented as the victims of another group. Sometimes that group is identified as potential “saviors”—indicating that if only that group held the reins of power the situation would be ameliorated, at the very least.

Women: Portrayed as ‘Saviors’

“The ‘Good’ Muslims” report documented how in the year following 9/11, in many articles and in commentary published in newspapers women were characterized as the “group” favoring peace and freedom. Women were bluntly seen as “saviors.” It was through their intercession, courage and energy that religious extremism—equated with terrorism—could be moderated. In an interview published in *The Boston Globe* magazine the following words conveyed

this point: “Terrorist ideology and women’s leadership are not compatible, so one way to attack terrorism is to advance the role of women.” A columnist at *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* described the potential power of political groups headed by women: “... there is a little-known but vigorous grass-roots movement within Pakistan of non-governmental organizations—mostly headed by women—that is attracting moderate, educated people to push for government reform.”

Journalists wrote about Pakistani and Afghan women struggling to gain an education or about their efforts to facilitate the education; the key message of these stories was the transformative power of women’s education. A front-page story in the *Los Angeles Times*, for instance, traced the extraordinary impact of just one school:

“When the Jalal family went door to door 20 years ago urging parents to let their daughters attend a new girls school,

people in this desert outpost branded them heretics But a few dozen brave parents, particularly those working as servants, enrolled their girls anyway. And that has made all the difference in their lives.

"A decade after the first class graduated, this isolated desert region near the Iranian border has been affected in ways both simple and profound.

"The school, which now hums with the voices of nearly 1,000 girls, has brought jobs here. It has tilted the economic balance in favor of the graduates, who have emerged as their families' breadwinners and hold the best-paying jobs in town.

"The school also has brought colorful clothing, confidence and even condoms here. Girls as young as 10 have learned to just say 'no' if they don't like the men their parents have picked out for them to marry. Several have gone on to college, living in hostels a three-hour drive from home—independence inconceivable just a few years ago."

Reporters and commentators also wrote about women's victimization at the hands of Muslim men through either extra-legal means or the Hudood Ordinance and the Qisas and Diyat Ordinances. Women's "victim" status at the hands of men validated the binary idea that Muslim women are "good" and Muslim men are "cruel," perhaps even "terrorists." Women's clothing also drew great scrutiny, and once again the act of "taking off the veil" was treated as a metaphorical statement; women's freedom was measured by how "uncovered" they were and how close their clothing matched Western notions of female attire.

In such presentations of information, there often appeared to be a moral beyond the obvious one of confirming the second-class status of women; in this case, it was confirming the evil of what were considered aggressively male Muslim institutions. The Seattle Times, for example, took note of the treatment of women in local

politics: “Pakistan’s leading human-rights group said yesterday it was shocked at the public humiliation of an elected female official beaten and paraded naked through a village on the orders of a powerful landlord Kamila Hyat, director of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, said the incident was not the first of its kind. ‘At least four similar cases have been reported this year,’ she said, adding the incident was indicative of the low status of women in Muslim, male-dominated Pakistan.”

While each article or commentary touched on incidents and circumstances involving women’s lives, patterns revealed in our look at all of this coverage indicated that women’s lives—and what was happening to them—were often

Coverage and commentary about men in Pakistan contrasted greatly with that of women. Men, and even boys, were characterized as people to be feared.

being used as a synecdoche for what was happening to the country as a whole. An op-ed in *The New York Times*, written a month after 9/11, included the following words: “When radical Muslim movements are on the rise, women are the canaries in the mines. The very visible repression of forced veiling and loss of hard-won freedoms coexists naturally with a general disrespect for human rights. This repression of women is not about religion; it is a political tool for achieving and consolidating power.”

Coverage and commentary about men in Pakistan contrasted greatly with that of women. Men, and even boys, were characterized as people to be feared. Boys, even very young boys, were part of the terrorist matrix, identified as “Islamic

religious schools,” known as madrassas. In a February 2002 op-ed in *The Boston Globe*, a commentator observed:

“History and current demographic trends give us a new warning: Beware the wrath of boys.”

“Journalists who covered the fleeing Taliban in Afghanistan commented on how young they were. ‘They all look about 12 years old,’ one reporter said. But boys can be deadlier than men, with no life experience to temper their impulses, especially if those impulses are manipulated by older people with a violent agenda”

“Chaos and instability in society and young men who lack access to good jobs make an incendiary mixture—especially when you throw in messianic ideology or fundamentalist religion. And this may be the forecast for much of the world: boys who inculcate rage against the West, against their own societies, and against women at a very early age.”

“For example, the religious schools that are springing up all over Pakistan create societies in which young boys are indoctrinated in a fundamentalist brand of Islam that teaches hatred of the West and of Jews. The schools are all-male societies in which the boys have no contact with girls or women—except maybe a mother or an aunt. They develop few social skills and come to regard the opposite sex as alien, the source of sin, uncleanness and a temptation to male virtue.”

In the months following 9/11, numerous articles explained the education system, emphasizing that the boys who went to such schools were distanced from the softening “influence” of women, as in this story in *The New York Times*: “Boys, raised without fathers, were sent to religious schools, or madrassas, taken away from daily village life and away from the influence of women.” And these words come from an op-ed in the *Los Angeles*

Times: “Hence, perhaps, the all-male madrassas in Pakistan, where boys as young as six are trained for jihad, far from the potentially softening influence of mothers and sisters.”

Those were some of the findings from the ICMPA study’s examination of news coverage in 2001 and 2002. In the period following 9/11, there was an eager—if naive—hope that the fall of the Taliban would bring new opportunities for women and, through them, for the entire region. The Muslim women of Pakistan and Afghanistan were not just victims whose stories would gain readers’ sympathy; they were saviors who would change their communities and their countries. Women’s lives were not just the human-interest anecdotes shared as part of stories about larger concerns; women, in this period of time, were portrayed as being pivotal players.

Five years later, this was clearly not the case. By 2006, it was no longer considered news that the difficult situations of

most women’s lives had not changed—and that women did not have the power to reverse decades of war, corruption and discrimination. An unchanging circumstance is never considered worth reporting. And as a result, in 2006 reporters wrote far fewer stories on women in Pakistan—and far fewer stories on Pakistan in general. The compelling narrative now became whether (and even how) America had become the “bad guys;” not only was the enemy acting reprehensibly, but it was the Bush administration’s prosecution of the “war on terror” that was now characterized as the “moral burden.” ■

Susan Moeller is director of the International Center for Media and the Public Agenda at the University of Maryland in College Park and author of numerous major media studies, including “The ‘Good’ Muslims: U.S. Newspaper Coverage of Pakistan.”

The Consequences of Uninformed Reporting

‘Most Americans think that since Muslims believe that the Qur’an is the literal word of God, they must read the Qur’an literally ...’

By **Jamie L. Hamilton**

“Have you read any books about Islam?”

“No.”

“Do you have any Muslim friends?”

“No.”

“Have you taken any other course on Islam?”

“No.”

“Tell me what you think you know about Islam.”

The responses are immediate: “Islam is a violent religion that oppresses women.” “It conquers by the sword.” “It opposes the pursuit of happiness, liberty and justice.” “It wants to obliterate free speech and free-thinking.” “The prophet they worship is a pedophile.” “Islam wants to take over the world.”

“If you have never taken a

course on Islam, or know any Muslims or read any books on Islam, how have you learned all of this?

“From the media,” many of my students reply.

I teach about Islam to high school sophomores. On our first day together, I ask the students why they enrolled in the course. They tell me they are ignorant about Islam. Islam couldn’t be as bad as it is portrayed, and yet the message that it is a “bad religion” is so clearly consistent they don’t know what to think.

I can turn to many examples to support the students’ views, like the U.S. News and World Report special issue on the “Secrets of Islam,” an in-depth look at the “mysteries” of Islam,

and at too many articles written by journalists who present Islam as simplistic, monolithic and foreign and who assume that “moderate” Muslims have escaped the inherent perversity of Islam. The reporting of world events through the lens of this ignorance is dangerous, as I see just some of the consequences in the microcosm of my classroom.

Religious illiteracy of this sort is harming us. Let me address just three words related to this coverage that have become a part of our national dialogue about Muslims and Islam—violence, Qur’an and women.

Violence

The term Islam derives from the three-letter Arabic root, s-l-m, which generates words with connected meanings, including surrender, submission, commitment, peace, wholeness and security. Muslims believe that by practicing their faith, through submission to God alone, they can achieve peace and security



Detail of a male wedding jacket. Tunisia. Photo by Katharina Eglau.

in their lives and for the sake of humanity.

Muslims who are violent are not representing Islam. Rather, they are criminals, even if they proclaim their actions to be taken in the name of Islam. Holy war does not exist in Islam, nor will Islam allow its followers to be involved in a holy war. Jihad is not another word for holy war; it is an Arabic word, the

root of which is jahada, which means to strive for a better way of life, to endeavor, to strain, to exert, to put forth effort, to be diligent, alert and open to possibilities. The effort put forth with jihad assists Muslims to move out of a life mired in meeting others' obligations to a life filled with desire, integrity, curiosity and commitment.

Jihad also means to be willing to fight to defend the dignity of life, which allows one to choose faith and freedom. When can one fight? When is it just to take up arms? Islam has defined what a just war is and, under its parameters, America's participation in World War II constituted a just war, not a holy war. When one fights to protect one's nation from attack, Islam prohibits—as all just war theories do—terrorism, kidnapping, hijacking, killing civilians, and other horrendous acts. Whoever commits such violations is considered a murderer.

How to overcome misconceptions? With my students, I refer to American history. How

many, I ask them, would assert that the KKK is a form of Christianity? Members of the Klan set forth the look and feel of a Christian witness with crosses, prayer meetings, biblical mandates, and committed fellowship. Yet we don't think of the Klan as some "violent" form of Christianity; in fact, since we know the basic precepts of Christianity, the Klan is not conflated with Christianity at all. Still, Klan members used Christian rhetoric to advance their political agenda. Terrorists do the same with Islam.

Qur'an

Most Americans think that because Muslims believe the Qur'an is the literal word of God, they must read the Qur'an literally, just as Christian literalists do. Since there are Christians who think the world was created in seven days because the Bible describes creation as happening in that way, then Muslims must read the Qur'an with the same certainty. They don't.

The Qur'an warns its readers that there is danger in taking the words literally: "This divine writ contains messages that are clear in and by themselves as well as others that are allegorical." (3:7) Verses continue to admonish the reader to take advantage of that which is unclear and make it clear by their arbitrary nature because, "None save God knows its final meaning." To assume that one knows with certainty how every word is to be interpreted would be blasphemous.

For Muslims, the Qur'an is the gift of revelation to the world, as Jesus Christ is the revelation to the world for Christians. The Qur'an is treated with the same awe and respect as Christians treat Jesus Christ. No Christian would say they know with 100 percent certainty that they know who Jesus Christ was and is. The experience of knowing Jesus—through faith, prayer, the Bible and tradition—informs them of how Jesus Christ blesses their lives. For Muslims, the experience of the Qur'an—through faith, prayer, recitation and tradition—informs

them of how the Qur'an blesses their lives. For Christians, Christ is the sacred presence. For Muslims, the Prophet Muhammad delivered the sacred presence. Neither Christians nor Muslims embrace monolithic definitions of their faith.

To overcome students' misconceptions, I use the Qur'an. Throughout the Qur'an, allegory and symbolism describe the majesty of God's grace and the privilege and the choice humanity has to embrace God's gift of life. Such grace extends to all Ahl al Kitab, People of the Book, which includes Jews and Christians.

Journalists can help Americans understand how Muslims live within Islam. Such reporting can illustrate how those who commit criminal acts in the name of Islam are outside of the religion. Report, of course, about Muslims who commit heinous acts, but also tell of Muslim individuals and institutions that work against perception, such as al Fatih Academy in Virginia, started by Afeefa Syeed to "raise children who can bal-

ance their Islamic values with their American identity.” At this academy, children learn Muslim traditions and read the Qur’an along with their study of American traditions and values.

Women

Throughout history women have been struggling to free themselves from misogyny, abuse and mistreatment. Christianity and the West, until recently, did not provide women sanctuary from these prejudices, nor did pre-Islamic Arabia. Women were treated as slaves. Infanticide was practiced, and girls were sold or traded. Muhammad’s reform brought equality to his people through Islam. Throughout the Qur’an, the verses state that men and women have equal rights and obligations because “women are the shaqa’iq (the exact equal) of men.

How can journalists help readers, viewers and listeners overcome the misconception that Islam abuses women?

Learn, and then incorporate into your reporting, that shari’ah (Islamic) law entitles women to education, work, businesses, ownership and inheritance, even if political leaders in the name of Islam, such as the Taliban, smolder these rights. In an Islamic marriage, too, a woman keeps her name, retains full rights of her own, and can keep or dispose of her property without any interference.

Journalists have the obligation to familiarize themselves with Islam—possibly to overcome their own wrong assumptions—so consumers of news will come to know it not as a foreign religion, but as part of a great monotheistic tradition. This will help Americans distinguish between those who abuse religion and those who strive to live up to its ideals. Thoughtful reporting, involving nuance, is essential, especially at a time when deadly sectarian violence is so frequently portrayed in the news.

I take my students to observe Friday prayers held here on



Sweets. Algeria. *Photo by Katharina Eglau.*

campus. One student wrote in his final paper, “While attending Muslim prayers, I underwent a great paradigmatic shift, discovering something that watching CNN (where Muslims are portrayed as terrorists first, humans second) for nearly my whole life had shielded from my eyes: Islam is not something to be scared of; its adherents will not be the end of the line for Jews in Israel, nor will they cause worldwide catastrophe. In fact, my sentiments towards the religion became complete-

ly opposite to those presented by the media. I am no longer scared of their tradition”

His words offered a potent reminder that only through confronting our ignorance—and working to overcome it—will we have the ability to live in a pluralistic society with respect for each other. ■

Jamie L. Hamilton is a teacher of religion at Phillips Exeter Academy and is an Episcopal priest with a summer parish in Dublin, New Hampshire.

Glossary

Allah: Literally, “The God.” Arabic speaking Jews, Christians and Muslims use this term as the proper name for God. Muslims view Allah as the Creator and Sustainer of everything in the universe, Who is transcendent, has no physical form, and has no associates Who share in His divinity. In the Qur’an, God is described as having at least 99 Divine Names, which describe His attributes.

Ba’ath: Arabic for “renaissance.” A secular Arab nationalist movement, which had rival branches in Iraq and Syria. They were pan-Arabist, socialist and anticolonialist. The Ba’ath party still rules Syria.

Binladen: One word, with no space between “bin” and “laden,” is the correct spelling of the family name. The company is the Saudi Binladen Group. Members of the family do not

spell their name in two words in English, although some prefer the variant spelling Binladin. Spelling of Binladen in two words, bin Laden, is a Western affectation.

Fatah: Reverse acronym for Harakat al-Tahrir al-Falistiniya, literally, “Palestinian Liberation Movement.” Primarily secular and nationalist major Palestinian political party.

Fatwa: A legal ruling in shari’ah (Islamic Law), made by a learned and qualified scholar, usually in response to an unprecedented situation or to address a novel issue.

Five Pillars of Islam: A term referring to the five core religious practices incumbent upon all Muslims. They are as follows: Shahadah (declaration of faith), Salah (formal worship), Zakah (mandatory alms-giving tax),

Sawm (fasting during Ramadan), and Hajj (pilgrimage to Makkah [Mecca]).

Hamas: Harakat Muqama al-Islamiyya, meaning the Movement of Islamic Resistance, which has called for the creation of an Islamic state in all of historic Palestine. Democratically elected into leadership of the Palestinian legislature in 2006.

Hizbullah: “The party of God.” Shi’ite group formed in Lebanon around 1982 with the original aim of ending the Israeli occupation of Lebanon.

Intifada: “Insurrection” or “uprising” in Palestine. The first Intifada broke out in December 1987 and ended in 1993 with the signing of the Oslo Accords. The Second Intifada (or al-Aqsa Intifada) began in September 2000 in response to a visit to the Temple Mount and Al-Aqsa by Ariel Sharon.

Jesus: An eminent prophet in Islam. Muslims believe that

Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a chaste and pious woman, and that God miraculously created Jesus in her womb. After his birth, he began his mission as a sign to humankind and a prophet of God, calling people to righteousness and worship of God alone. Muslims do not believe Jesus was crucified but rather that God spared him such a fate and ascended him to Heaven.

Jihad: Jihad is an Arabic word that derives from the three-letter root j-h-d and means “to exert oneself” or “to strive.” Other meanings include endeavor, strain, effort, diligence, struggle. Usually understood in terms of personal betterment, jihad may also mean fighting to defend one’s (or another’s) life, property and faith.

Makkah: This is the correct spelling of the city known in the West as Mecca. Makkah was officially adopted by the Government of Saudi Arabia in the 1980’s, both to make it more

phonetically correct and to differentiate the Holy City from the more common and generic Western usage of the word.

Muhammad: The prophet and righteous person believed by Muslims to be the final messenger of God, whose predecessors are believed to include the Prophets Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus and others. Born in 570 C.E., Muhammad grew up to become a well-respected member of Makkan society. In 610 C.E., he received the first of many revelations that would eventually form the content of the Qur'an. Soon after this initial event, he was conferred prophethood and began calling people to righteousness and belief in One God. Muhammad died in 632 C.E.

Muslim: Literally the term means "one who submits to God." More commonly, the term describes any person who accepts the creed and the teachings of Islam.

The Muslim Brotherhood: Founded in Egypt by Hassan al-Banna in 1928, it is the largest and best-organized political movement in the Middle East. They currently are the largest opposition political bloc in the Egyptian parliament, having won a decisive victory in the last election.

Orientalism: As defined by Edward Said, it refers to Europeans and Westerners who portray Middle Easterners as somehow inferior, with less intelligence and culture and unable to manage their own affairs.

Qur'an: The word Qur'an means "the recitation" or "the reading" and refers to the divinely revealed scripture of Islam. It consists of 114 surahs (chapters) revealed by God to Muhammad over a period of 23 years.

Shari'ah: Commonly referred to as Islamic law, it refers to guidance from God to be used by Muslims to regulate their societal and personal affairs.

Shi'ism: A branch of Islam comprising about 10 percent of the total Muslim population. In Shi'i Islam, Shi'ahs believe that Ali, the fourth Caliph and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, was granted a unique spiritual authority, which was passed on to certain of his descendants given the title of imam (leader).

Sufism: A particular spiritual approach and lifestyle adopted by some Muslims (known as Sufis), rather than a distinct branch of Islam. Sufism holds that direct and intimate knowledge of God can be achieved through spiritual discipline, exertion and austerity.

Sunni: A term designating those Muslims who recognize the first four successors of Prophet Muhammad as the "Rightly-Guided" caliphs. Sunnis hold that any pious, just and qualified Muslim may be elected Caliph. Sunnis comprise the majority of Muslims, about 90 percent of the total.

Wahhabi: Muslim Sunni reform movement founded mid-18th century by Muhammed Abdul-Wahhab and revived by Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud in the early 20th century. Wahabi is the name used for them by others. Wahhabis, who believe in a narrow, literalist understanding of scripture, dominate Saudi Arabia.

Zikr: Remembrance of Allah (God) through verbal or mental repetition of His divine attributes. Zikr is a common practice among all Muslims, but is especially emphasized by Sufis. ■

Islamic terms used are excerpted with permission from "Teaching About Islam and Muslims in the Public School Classroom" (3rd edition), published by the Council on Islamic Education, now known as the Institute on Religion and Civic Values. The link to the full glossary can be found at www.cie.org/glossary.htm. Additional definitions provided by Robert Azzi.