American Orientalism: How the Media Define What Average Americans Know about Islam and Muslims in the USA

Hajer Ben Hadj Salem
University of Tunis, El-Manar, Tunisia

Abstract

On September 11, 2001, Americans awoke to the nightmare of a well-coordinated and devastating terrorist attack conducted on their soil. Given the unprecedented magnitude of the event, there was an especially strong need among average Americans for information to know about the identity of the perpetrator(s) of the attacks and the reasons behind them. They relied heavily on the media, mainly TV and the press, for information. Unprepared for such a public information crisis, the media had to rush to the American Muslim communities to get much-needed answers to pressing questions about the teachings of Islam and Muslims. For the first time in American history, American Muslims were allowed to speak directly to Americans nationwide about themselves and their religion.

This paper studies the extent to which increased media reporting on Islam and Muslims in the US after 9/11 represents a step forward in combating century-long Orientalist stereotypes and segmented narratives about this world religion and its followers by analyzing the news and newspaper transcripts of Fox News, CNN, the New York Times, the San Francisco Chronicle and the Chicago Sun-Times covering Islam and American Muslims during the first two years of America's war on terrorism.

Keywords: American Muslims, Orientalism, US media, September 11, war on terrorism, stereotypes.

Introduction

On September 11, 2001, Americans awoke to the nightmare of a well-coordinated and devastating terrorist attack conducted on their soil. The loss of life that resulted from the 9/11 attacks was a severe jolt to all Americans, who were mesmerized in front of their TV sets to understand the causes of the attacks and the identity of the perpetrators. As bin Laden emerged as the primary suspect, the shadow of the Middle East fell once again on the 9/11 atrocities, reviving century-long stereotypical images of Arabs and Muslims as perpetrators of terrorism and violence. The identity of the perpetrators and the scales of the attacks forced the media's hand to rush to the Muslim communities for information about Islam and the Muslim world to help Americans find a way out of their information maze. For the first time in American history, American Muslims were allowed to speak directly to the American people and served as sources of information about Islam, Muslims and the Muslim world in the mainstream media.

This paper studies how the American Muslim communities faced this challenge during the first two years of the war on terrorism by tracing patterns of change and continuity in the mass-mediated image of Islam in America before and after 9/11. First, relying on the literature on Arab and Muslim stereotyping in the media (the works of J. Shaheen and E. Said), it traces major stages in the development of "American Orientalism," a discourse premised on the silence of the native in the news and film industry. Second, it presents the findings of the content analysis of the news and newspaper transcripts of Fox News, CNN, the *New York Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *Chicago Sun-Times* during the two years that followed 9/11. The transcripts were gathered through the Nexis-lexis academic electronic database.

What is American Orientalism?

In looking back at the intellectual history of the last quarter of the twentieth century, Edward Said`s *Orientalism* will certainly be identified as very influential. According to many scholars, it revolutionized the study of the Middle East. It also influenced disciplines as diverse as cultural studies, history, and anthropology. My interest in *Orientalism* in studying the perception of Islam and Muslims in the US after 9/11 stems from the fact that some of the tenets on which the book was founded in 1978 still apply today.

Said's contribution to how we can understand the process of stereotyping is immense. *Orientalism* (1978) tries to show the reasons why when a Westerner, who might have never been to the Middle East, thinks about that area and its people, he/she already has a preconceived image of what they look like, how they behave, and what they believe. Said accounts for this by arguing that there is a lens through which the West looks at the Orient. This lens distorts the reality of that place and its people. It is neither neutral nor innocent, and serves certain interests. He calls that lens "Orientalism."

Said's *Orientalism* is not just an intellectual endeavor to examine the content of Orientalism; it also offers an analysis of the historical, cultural and institutional context in which it was constructed.

Said locates Orientalism, as a discourse, within the general history of imperialism. As leading imperial powers, mainly the French and the British, spread throughout the globe, Orientalism provided the ideological arsenal of conquest. It made it easier to subdue "the other" by fixing him in abstract categories. In the light of these ideas, one may wonder what the USA had to do with all this. It had almost no direct experience of occupation in the Orient. Is it groundless from this perspective to speak about "American Orientalism"?

Even though Said's first book cannot be of much help in tracing the historical origins of "American Orientalism," his book *Covering Islam* (1981) seems to offer a tenable account of how "American Orientalism" operates. *Orientalism* was conceived after the 1973 Arab-Israeli War that was preceded by a media campaign portraying the Arabs as unable to fight and not modern (1). *Covering Islam,* however, was born in the throes of the Iranian Revolution, where America's involvement with the barbarian "other" was direct. The book can be considered in many respects as *Orientalism* applied to the study of the coverage of Islam in the popular media. The overall image is that of Islam embodied in the frightening and mysterious leaders of the Islamic Revolution, and of Muslims plotting to kill Americans. It is almost the same arsenal that has for long furnished the armory of Orientalism.

In a new introduction to the second edition of *Covering Islam,* written in 1996, Said did not see any change in the coverage of Islam and the Orient in the American media. As he puts it most constructively:

> In the fifteen years since *Covering Islam* appeared there has been an intense focus on Muslims and Islam in the American and Western media, most of it characterized by a more highly exaggerated stereotyping and belligerent hostility than what I had previously described in my book. Indeed, Islam's role in hijackings and terrorism, descriptions of the role in which overtly Muslim countries like Iran threaten "us" and our way of life, and speculations about the latest conspiracy to blow up buildings, sabotage commercial airliners, and poison water supplies seem to play increasingly on Western consciousness. A corps of "experts" on the Islamic world has grown to prominence, and during a crisis they are brought out to pontificate on formulaic ideas about Islam on news programs or talk shows .... Malicious generalizations about Islam have become the last acceptable form of denigration of foreign culture in the West; what is said about the Muslim mind, or character, or religion, or culture as a whole cannot now be said in mainstream discussion about Africans, Jews, other Orientals, or Asians. (2)

One could argue that the many changes that have taken place in the region since he published *Covering Islam* might have occasioned a change in the perception of "the other." Yet as shown in the foregoing quotation, the image got even worse. A much more threatening image came to the surface. In this phase of the coverage, the mysterious "terrorist other" was no longer in the mysterious Orient; he was in America. This deictic proximity was occasioned by developments that took place in the early 1990`s, when terrorist attacks were perpetrated on American soil. The actors of the 1993 bombings of the World Trade Center were Muslims.

The concept of "holy war" was frequently used to identify this invasion by "the other" in his attempt to strike back. This mood was captured in Steven Emerson's *Jihad in America. (3)* Emerson defines Jihad as "a holy war, an armed struggle to defeat nonbelievers or infidels." The ultimate goal of Islamic militants, according to Emerson, is to establish an Islamic Empire. He goes on to assert to his viewers that the gatherings of Islamic militants filmed in his documentary did not happen in the Middle East but in America and that his conclusions were based on a close investigation of Islamic networks in the US. As Said succinctly put it in *Covering Islam*

> Although *Jihad in America* makes a gesture toward responsibility and careful discrimination in talk about Islam, and despite a few explicit statements in the film that most Muslims are peace-loving and "like us," the purport of the film is to agitate against Islam as a sinister breed of cruel, insensate killers, plotters and lustfully violent men. In scene after scene--all of them isolated from any real context--we are regaled with fulminating, bearded imams, raging against the West and Jews most especially, threatening genocide and unending warfare against the West. By the film's end the viewer is convinced that the United States contains a vast, intricate web of secret bases, conspiratorial plotting centers, and bomb factories, all of them intended for use against innocent, unsuspecting citizens.(4)

So powerful was Emerson's documentary, that after the Oklahoma City bombings media networks relied heavily on his expertise and that of like-minded experts in the middle East to speculate about the perpetrators of the act. Though the perpetrator of the attack was not a Muslim, the media attributed it to the Middle East and Islam. This was not surprising as by then it had become an axiomatic fact that the teaching of Islam was synonymous with terrorism.

The coverage of the Oklahoma City bombing proved that media reporting was irresponsible. It was not based on an investigation but on allegations. Said's study of the media coverage of the 1995 bombings shows that media outlets were, rather, repeating the line of the government and law enforcement agencies.

When the media and American society came to realize that the perpetrator of the bombing was an American Christian, there were no generalizations made about Christianity and its teachings as being synonymous with terrorism. Even worse, the 1995 fiasco, did not deter the media from repeating their allegations, albeit on a smaller scale, after the TWA Flight 800 disaster in July 1996. So pervasive had the image of the Muslim threat become after the above-mentioned news media events that it set the tone for an adjunct elaborate campaign in the commercial film Industry.

Islam in the Commercial Film Industry: The Construction of the Terrorist Threat at Home

Even though the image of Arabs/Muslims in the American cinema did not escape Said's meticulous analysis of the image of Arabs (almost always Muslims) in the US media, when it comes to the study of the representation of Islam and Muslims in the American movie industry, the name of Professor Jack G. Shaheen (5) figures prominently as perhaps the world's foremost authority on the subject. In his book *Reel Bad Arabs* (2001), based on a comprehensive study of nearly one thousand films, Shaheen dissects the slanderous history of Hollywood's ongoing egregious smearing of Arabs.

The author's introduction to the book, which precedes the film reviews, is in my opinion, a frightening testimony to what might be lurking in the minds of filmmakers, and to what deleterious effects they consciously or unconsciously really incur. As Shaheen puts it,

> For more than a century Hollywood ... has used repetition as a   teaching tool, tutoring movie audiences by repeating over and over, in film after film, insidious images of the Arab people. I ask the reader to study in these pages the persistence of this defamation, from earlier times to the present day, and to consider how these slanderous stereotypes have affected honest discourse and public policy .... From 1896 until today, filmmakers have collectively indicted all Arabs as Public Enemy #1 - brutal, heartless, uncivilized religious fanatics and money-mad cultural "others" bent on terrorizing civilized Westerners, especially Christians and Jews .... What is an Arab? In countless films, Hollywood alleges the answer: Arabs are brutal murderers, sleazy rapists, religious fanatics, oil-rich dimwits, and abusers of women …. Decades later, nothing had changed. Quips the US Ambassador in *Hostage* (1986), "I can't tell one [Arab] from another. Wrapped in those bed sheets they all look the same to me." In Hollywood's films, they certainly do. (6)

There is no doubt that the stereotypes attributed to Arabs/Muslims remained stagnant throughout the period covered by Shaheen's study in the sense that insidious images persisted. (7) Yet within this perennial virulence a pattern of change can be traced. If we focus on the identity of the villain, in general, and person deixis, in particular, the way we did earlier with US news media, we can identify a parallel pattern of change in the commercial film industry that is at the core of "American Orientalism." As we have seen earlier, Americans inherited Europe's pre-existing stereotypes. Prior to the Iranian Revolution, "the other" was, as had been the case in the European tradition, "Arab" ("the other" was perceived in racial terms). With the Iranian Revolution, "the other" became "Muslim" (the other was perceived in religious terms). At both stages, he was far in the distant Orient. Since, the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993, however, "the other" has also been identified within the precincts of the US as an "Islamic terrorist" posing a serious security threat to the US and its allies.

If we reshuffle the films reviewed by Shaheen and study them chronologically, (8) we can delineate a similar pattern. For almost a century American cinema's relationship to the Orient has reflected an ever-changing evolution. It has adopted the narrative and visual conventions, as well as the cultural assumptions, on which Orientalism was founded. At an early stage (from early 1900 to the mid-20th century) the Orient was seen as mysteriously mythical. Films embellished on the images of Arab caricatures written about by Europeans. In mythic Arabia, bearded sheiks rode camels in the desert, waved swords, killed each other and coveted Western heroines. Women were kept in harems and belly danced in revealing clothes. These were recurring images in such films as *Barbary Sheep* (1917), *Bound in Morocco* (1918), *A Daughter of the Gods* (1916), *The Barbarian* (1933), *The Crusades* (1935), *Algiers* (1938), *Thief of Damascus* (1952), and *Abdullah the Great* (1956). Setting these tell-tale signs of backwardness against the values of the civilized West becomes an allegory for the Western requirement to civilize the barbarian Orient. This made it dramatically legitimate to end up the film with a huge number of Arab bodies. The moral is clear: Arabs are a lesser breed and need Western knowledge and domination; the only language they understand is that of force. In *Bound in*

Morocco (1918), for example, the American protagonist escapes, "scattering Arabs all over the sandy soil," and frees the US heroines from the ruler's harem; and in *Abdullah the Great* (1956), a European model brings down an Arab monarch. (9)

After WWII, these old stereotypes were gradually replaced with new ones. The sheiks and lusty despots slowly disappeared, leaving room for hijackers, kidnappers and terrorists. Muslim women disappeared behind the chador and burka.The image of the Arab as a dangerous threat to the Western world has been accentuated by recent US involvement in conflicts with the (Islamic) Middle East, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Suez Crisis, the 1973 energy crisis, the Iranian hostage crisis, and the Gulf War.

At this stage, the "Arab," was countlessly depicted as a murderer, rapist, religious fanatic, oil-rich and ignorant, and abuser of women. This stage was also marked by a semiotic change. Such labels as "Arab," "Egyptian," "Palestinian,""Iranian," and "Muslim" became used interchangeably to refer to the "other". Produced after US involvement in the Middle East during WWII, *Action in Arabia* (1944), equated Muslims with Nazis, the then Western world's enemy. In one of the scenes, Damascus was described by the narrator as a breeding place for espionage and intrigue. Yvonne, the Western heroine tells Gordon, an American journalist, "'I'd give anything to be out of the Middle East, anything." Sighs Gordon, "Damascus is certainly mysterious and intriguing." Fearing Germany has placed undercover agents in Syria, he quips: "The new saviors of Islam – the Nazis." Gordon Says, "the Arabs could play devil with the Allied armies." He tags an Arab, "You murderous little snake." (10)

After the Iranian hostage crisis, the Arab Israeli-Conflict provided a major theme for the commercial film industry. Of the three national identities, Egyptian, Iranian, and Palestinian, that "the other" took in the post-world war phase, the Palestinian was the most recurring villain in American films. Since 1948, Israel has been portrayed in the US media as a helpless victim surrounded by barbarian regimes. This prelapsarian image was shaken after the Israeli invasion of Southern Lebanon in 1982. Israel was portrayed for the first time in the US media as an aggressor. The Sabra and Chatila massacres of 1982 could have exacerbated the image of Israel in the US had they been covered accurately.

To maintain American "passionate attachment" to Israel, the supporters of Israel needed to preserve Israel's image as a victim in the wilderness of the Middle East, and that of the US as its only savior. (11) The film industry was one of the avenues that were exploited to influence American public opinion and achieve this end. The mid-1980s saw a remarkable and sudden increase in the number of movies filmed in Israel and/or financed by Israeli governments. The films are meant to convey the "reality" of developments in the Arab-Israeli conflict to the average viewer in the West/US. These include to mention a few, *Iron Eagle* (1986), (12) *Iron Eagle II* (1988), (13) *The Ambassador* (1984), *Deadline* (1986), *The Delta Force* (1986), and *Hostage* (1986). Film after film, especially the Golan-Globus films of the 1980s and 1990s, was made in Israel and featured Israeli performers as Palestinian terrorists.

Events where Islamic extremists were involved and where Israeli and/or US interests were targeted stoked the anti-Palestinian, increasingly anti-Muslim world fires in the US. The June 1985 hijacking of the TWA 847 airplane, the first Gulf War, which rejuvenated the image of Israel as a helpless victim of Saddam Hussein's missiles, the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, the bombing of US embassies in 1998, and many other events helped open another phase in Arab and Muslim stereotyping in the US/Western media (14). In this phase "the other" became a "Muslim fanatic" waging a war without end on the West. What is interesting at this stage is that the war territory is no longer the far-distant Middle East; Islamic warriors had made their incisive entry into the West and formed strongholds in the US. In many of these films, the message is clear: Western/Christian powers (led by the US) should stand with the Jews in a war against the infidel Muslim fanatics.

Through such movies as *Navy SEALs* (1990), *Delta Force 3: The Killing Game* (1991), *American Ninja 4: the Annihilation* (1991), *True Lies* (1994), *Executive Decision* (1996), *Air Force One* (1997), *The Siege* (1998), *Three Kings* (1999), and *Rules of Engagement*[i] (2000) the culmination of the stereotype of Islam as the embodiment of evil, tyranny and oppression, in comparison to the good, righteous, and democratic United States becomes manifest (15). These movies take American viewers one step closer to visualizing the "Islamic threat" attempting to invade the American space and therefore heighten their anxiety.

However, in the rare instances where Muslims step outside their conventional roles as terrorists, they are either educated in a Western country or influenced by Western morality. One of these figures can be found in the movie *Three Kings*. The one Arab Muslim who is the leader of the rebels, and whose wife is executed for speaking out to Americans for help, helps the American soldiers. We learn in the movie that he was educated at Bowling Green in America. In *The Siege,* a positive portrayal of Muslims is found in the character of the Americanized Muslim Frank Haddad. We learn that Frank is a Shi'ite Muslim from Lebanon, but he has also been an American citizen for 20 years and a member of the FBI for 10 years.

Why Did the Stereotype Persist?

The culmination of the stereotype of Islam as the embodiment of evil, tyranny and oppression, in comparison to the good, righteous, and democratic United States (West) was made possible by three main factors: First, as was the case with European orientalism, American "Orientalism"/ Orientalist research has served, consciously or unconsciously, the aim of domination of the Arab world and has provided the ideological arsenal of conquest. With the dismemberment of the Soviet Union, the foreign evil # 1 of the US following WWII through 1990, the emerging new world order was founded on a tendency to consider the whole world as one country's *imperium* led by the US, the "last remaining superpower." A corps of geopolitical strategists and liberal intellectuals have been bent on delineating the outlines of the post-red menace world order. Filling a supposed intellectual vacuum, the theories they proffered revived prevalent age-old views of Islam as an acceptable competitor to the Christian West. Bernard Lewis ("the Roots of Muslim Rage" (1990)), Judith Miller, Samuel Huntington (*The*

Clash of Civilizations (1993)), Francis Fukuyama (*The End of History and the Last Man* (1992)) Daniel Pipes, Fouad Ajami, Martin Kramer, and other Orientalists were fully accredited consultants for a gigantic military establishment badly in need of a new enemy to maintain its might. They reduced the complexity and diversity of the Muslim world to political Islam.

Second, the absence of a countervailing system of knowledge emanating from the Orient to help mount a critique of Orientalism. Distortions and misrepresentations committed in the portrayal of Islam are demonstrated by facts. Orientalist scholars (Israeli and Western) are well-informed about the Arab world, at least factually. On the other hand, almost complete ignorance about Israel and to a lesser extent the West prevails in the 22 Arab countries (no serious and comprehensive survey of Western media (16) nor of the Hebrew Press in the Arab world).

That this should be so is hardly surprising since Arabs have participated in and continue to allow themselves to be represented in an Orientalist way. In the 22 Arab countries no information policy tries to give a different picture of what the Arab world is like, as Arab countries have not chosen to engage in dialogue with the US. They thereby unwittingly keep themselves inferior to the West, which fulfills the kind of representation Westerners have about the Arabs.

Third, I believe that much the same might be said about the Muslim communities in the US. Despite the institutional advances that the Muslim communities have made since the mid-1990s, they have not succeeded, in my opinion, in addressing the issue of the degrading and misleading general knowledge about Islam and the Muslim world. Even though combating stereotypes has been set as one of the priorities of some renowned national Muslim organizations such as CAIR and MPAC, there has not been any nationwide attempt to coordinate a campaign addressed to the average American to educate him/her about Islam and the Muslim world. This is due mainly to the fact that most Muslim organizations in the US are ideologically diverse and have different loyalties to and affinities with foreign countries ("the abode of Islam") and consider the US/West "the abode of war" since it is not ruled according to Shari'a law. This resulted in a self-inflicted ostracism.

Unlike Jewish Americans, Catholic Americans, African Americans, and Asian Americans, who acted relentlessly to hunt down stereotypes, Muslims in the US were very slow to mobilize. Arab American organizations' occasional protests were rarely heard, and even when heard, they were heard too faintly to lead their offenders to revise their attitudes. The Internet has not been effective in providing a powerful counternarrative to the impressive Orientalist discourse. This is due mainly to the fact that the many sites one can visit to learn about Islam are for and by Muslims; are not sites that attempt to introduce, explain, or interpret Islam to non-Muslims. Most of them are not dialogue sites and are in Arabic. The same applies to magazines and newspapers. Most newspapers which are sold in the Muslim communities' neighborhoods either come from Muslim countries or are written in Arabic, Urdu or other national languages.

What makes the situation even worse is the absence of a public information policy on Islam and Muslims sponsored by the estimated 6 million Muslims in America despite the intricate network of

community development organizations and multi-million dollar mosques they have constructed around the US. As was confirmed by Diana Eck's *A New Religious America,* prior to 9/11, there had been little publicly available information in America about Muslims and their communities in the US. The American Muslim communities' remarkable organizational growth did not go beyond the ethnoreligious cocoon to reach society at large. However, on September 11, 2001, many Americans, who had hardly invested in outreach to their Muslim neighbors, were violently awakened to the fact that they had Muslim citizens in their neighborhoods with whom they shared a common destiny. On the same day, American Muslims were alarmingly awakened to a sheer failure in public relations due to the absence of nationwide Muslim-owned TV networks and a well-developed communication strategy. Their messages had to go through the distorting filters of the mainstream media.

Recovering Islam in the Wake of 9/11

Like many major news events which took place in the US in the last decade of the twentieth century, and by which the Muslim communities were directly affected, mainly the 1993 World Trade Center bombing and the Oklahoma City bombing, the 9/11 attacks of 2001 received wide media coverage. In the preceding events, the villain was captured and the coverage lessened. Yet 9/11 was as different as it was long-lasting. Given the unprecedented magnitude of the event, there was an especially strong need among Americans for information. The perceived public information crisis on Islam and Muslims in the wake of 9/11 forced the mainstream media's hand to rush to the American Muslim communities for Information. For the first time in American history, American Muslims were given the opportunity to speak directly to the American public nationwide. For these reasons I tried to analyze the content of the news transcripts of mainstream news and newspaper channels: CNN, Fox News, the *New York Times, the San Francisco Chronicle, and the Chicago Sun-Times (17)* during the two years that followed 9/11.

One motive in doing this study is to provide a chronicle of media coverage of responses to a unique and horrible event. Based on previous studies, content analyses of news events would be more meaningful if they spanned a longer time period. Two years of coverage will be studied. The coverage will be divided into two stages related to two major phases in the war on terrorism. The first phase covers the first 12 months after 9/11, it was marked by the military campaign in Afghanistan and a national concern about the possibilities of recurring terrorism. News announcements from President Bush, Vice-President Cheney, and the head of homeland security kept warning Americans that thinking the attack would remain unique in U.S. history would be a serious mistake. Worry indices kept increasing with each new colored alert or alarm. Even though the horror attribute continues to ring true, such concerns declined sharply after the first anniversary of 9/11 as no actual terrorist attack took place. After all, a nation cannot maintain an emotional state of emergency for a period of months. The corporate scandals (fall 2002), eclipsed the attacks of 9/11 for a while. Yet, the Iraqi war campaign that gained momentum during the summer of 2002 contributed to maintain tension and increasingly led the American public into a situation where the lines are blurred between patriotism and war propaganda.

By merging qualitative and quantitative approaches to study media coverage during these two major stages of the war on terrorism, it is possible to develop a richer understanding of both the meaning of media messages and their effects. A total of 846 stories were identified from the first 12 month coverage of the networks and newspapers, including 131 stories from CNN, 100 stories from Fox News, 334 stories from the *New York Times,* 142 stories from the *San Francisco Chronicle* and 139 stories from the *Chicago Sun-Times*. As for the second stage, 426 stories were identified, including 65 stories from CNN, and 46 stories from Fox News, 167 stories from the *New York Times,* 76 stories from the *San Francisco Chronicle* and 72 stories from the *Chicago Sun-Times*.

The study aims to answer two central research questions. First, did the media provide a forum for debate that introduced Americans to Islam and Muslims or did it lead them to generalize from the villain to a minority religion? Second, to what extent did the newly included Muslims manage to acquire equal opportunity to share in the exercise of cultural authority and provide average American citizens with an alternative (to "American Orientalism") balanced discourse on Islam and the Muslim world?

The content anlysis of the *New York Times,* the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Fox News, and CNN,* in light of previous studies of media coverage of Islam, Muslims/Arabs, and American Muslims/Arabs prior to 9/11, shows clearly a marked increase in media reporting interest on the Arab American and American Muslim communities after 9/11. This surge was the natural result of unprecedented attacks that killed more than 3,000 civilians on American soil and perpetrated by Arabs and Muslims who share with the American Muslim communities and part of the Arab American communities the same religion. It was also meant to answer a public information need and to help the American public make sense of these attacks and understand a religion in the name of which the mass-killing of innocent civilians can be justified. This interest was not peculiar to Muslims and news sources in the New York area (although the *New York Times* published the largest number of stories of our corpus) but was shared across the country, as reflected in the other two newspapers, representing distant geographic areas.

As had been the case with anti-American acts of terror, including the Iranian Hostage Crisis (1979-81), the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993, and the bombing of US embassies in 1998, the 9/11 events triggered interest in Islam and Muslims. But as none of these events came close to the 9/11 attacks, the latter required reliance on more sources that are familiar with the world from which the terrorists came and about which the media and the public knew little. General context and analysis were required to help news consumers get more comprehensive information and make their judgments on a more educated basis. To meet this sheer public information crisis and to overcome gaps in previous coverage of Islam and the Muslim world, the media reached out to leaders of Muslim organizations and scholars of Islam, visited mosques, and provided American Muslims and Arabs with unprecedented and perhaps unexpected opportunities to 'speak their minds.'

This marked presence of Arab and Muslim sources occasioned measurable changes in media reporting about Islam and Muslims. Not only were news consumers introduced to religious

communities that had for long been part of the American pluralistic landscape, but apart from the American public communal parameters, they were also provided with a clearer, and more humane picture about many aspects of their lives and their religion than those cliches bandied about by orientalist media experts during previous crises.

Taken as a whole, media sources reported on the ordinary life of American Muslims to their American neighbors. They portrayed their identity dilemmas, presented the viewer/ reader with facts about hate crime incidents and the erosion of the civil liberties of American Muslims, and opened debates reflecting concern over and sympathy with them. Most of the newspapers and news networks analysed in this study featured special stories about Ramadan, Prophet Mohammad, and the history of Islam, its tenets and teaching, were highly professional, analytical and informative. This trend is to be commended, and probably has done much to dispel stereotypes, lies, slander, and misunderstanding about Islam and Muslims after 9/11. Yet it is problematic in the context of international news reporting. The apologetic discourse on Islam fostered by the new spokespeople of Islam provided the American viewer/reader with a monolythic, idyllic, ahistorical image of Islam, detached from the current history of and diversity within the modern Islamic world. They did not provide him/her with a deep analysis of the roots of extremism in some parts of the Muslim world. This gap was filled by the traditional battery of Orientalist scholars and journalists, such as Lewis, Emerson and Pipes, who featured out prominently on TV channels, mainly Fox news and to provide their audience with a more elaborate discourse on Muslim actions, beliefs and present concerns (half-truths).

Known for being apologetic for Israel within American Muslim circles, Fox News, which was one of the most sought after channels to answer American public viewers' need for information, followed a purely Orientalist approach to Muslim presence in the US, perpetuating the perception that American Muslims represent a threat to national security. These messages created a discrepancy in media reporting about Islam and American Muslims, which was problematic and added to the confusion of the average American, who was looking for black-and-white answers to his questions.

As the war on terrorism took a wider scope with America`s tilt towards Israel during the Israeli-Palestinian crisis in April 2002 and with the Iraqi war propaganda which gained momentum since summer 2002, the American media adopted special contextualization of their narratives, one where Arab and Muslim actions were interpreted within a rather general and sweeping overview of Islam as a world religion followed by faceless and timeless masses. Attempts to place Arab and Muslim actions, beliefs, concerns and goals in specific historical, political and moral contexts were not very common because they would require a deeper critical analysis of US political history since WWII, and US foreign policy, how is shaped and executed, and its repercussions. Such critical and thoughtful analysis was not encouraged after 9/11; such attempts were considered lacking in patriotism.

The media`s focus on American war propaganda influenced their reporting on American Muslims and Arabs both in terms of frequency and themes. The marked drop in news stories about American Muslims and Arabs, media focus on the Iraqi American communities and their support for the Bush administration campaign "to liberate Iraq," and their intensive reporting on sleeper cells

uncovered by American law-enforcement officials, which served to manipulate the American public into supporting the Bush administration counterterrorism campaign abroad by reporting on its seeming success stories on the domestic front, clearly show that the mass-mediated image of the American Muslim communities, despite its stark improvement in the aftermath of 9/11, remains fragile and deeply influenced by oscillations in American foreign policy in the Middle East and changing American national interests. This is best reflected in media justification of the government curtailment of the civil liberties of American Muslims in the name of national security prior to the Iraqi war and its adoption of a counterterrorism policy based on preemptive strikes against foreign (mainly Muslim) countries, turning the Middle East into its battleground.

What made the situation worse is Hoolywood`s Hollywood`s renewal of its ties with the American military establishment since the beginning of the Iraqi war campaign through a series of action and war movies, excoriating Islam for its violence, despotism and terror. Jack, J. Shaheen`s recent book *Guilty? Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11,* which studies the image of Arabs and Muslims in about one hundred films produced by Hollywood after 9/11, shows compellingly that despite stark improvements in some recent hits, such as *Syriana* and *Babel*, Hollywood has perpetuated its timeline of Arab/Muslim villainy and that television – with popular shows such as *24* and *Sleeper Cell.* Shaheen`s findings are summarized in the following passage from his book`s Prologue:

> In my detailed review of post-9/11 films I found that 22 movies (1 in 4) that otherwise have nothing whatsoever to do with Arabs or the Middle East contain gratuitous slurs and scenes that demean Arabs. Arab villains do dastardly things in 37 films (mostly gunning down and blowing up innocent people; ugly Sheikhs pop up as dense, evil, over-sexed caricatures in 12 films; 3 of 5 films display unsavory Egyptian characters, 6 of 15 films project not-so-respectable images of maidens; and 6 out of 11 movies offer stereotypical portraits of Palestinians ... Refreshingly, about a third of the post-9/11 films discussed here, a total of 29, projected worthy Arabs and decent Arab Americans: Arab champions-men and women-are displayed in 19 movies; Arab Americans appear as decent folks in 10 of 11 films ... Disturbingly, I found new vicious, violent stereotypes polluting TV screens. I came across more than 50 post-9/11 TV shows that vilify Arab Americans and Muslim Americans.(18)

That this should be so is hardly surprising since the American Muslim communities and the 22 Arab countries, most of whom maintained sound diplomatic ties with the US in its war on terrorism, failed to develop an independent Arab/Muslim information policy that tried to provide average American citizens with an alternative balanced discourse on Islam and the Muslim world. This was the case because they had not developed their own nationwide media channels prior to 9/11 (despite their organizational growth) through which they could have diffused their views to the larger American audience without having to go through the distorting filter of mainstream media channels.

This situation was compounded by ambivalent messages sent by the Bush administration through a domestic counter-terrorism policy based on Arab and Muslim profiling. This left the American Muslim communities in no doubt that the few positive portrayals of Islam and Muslims in the media after 9/11 could not provide a balanced and humane image to that of the villain and

homegrown terrorists, and that such a balance could not be reached by advocating a politically correct scrubbing of all portrayals of Arab Americans and American Muslims, even as terrorists. It could be approximated by channeling an equally powerful public information campaign to educate Americans about the realities of wars in the Middle East, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the cultural richness and diversity of the Muslim world and Muslim communities.

Conclusion

In this paper, I tried to study patterns of change and continuity in the perceptions of Islam and Muslims in the US before and after 9/11. I focused on the construction of Islam and Muslims as categories in the American media and tried to dig into their ideological underpinnings through a review of the post-colonial literature on Arab and Muslim stereotyping in the American media prior to 9/11, and through the analysis of the content of news transcripts and newspaper articles covering Islam and Muslims during the first two years of America's war on terrorism from 9/11, 2001 to 9/11, 2003.

This study has shown that even though 9/11 gave American Muslims the opportunity to speak directly to the American people and educate them about Islam and Muslims through the mainstream media, their messages had to go through the distorting filter of these mass-mediated forums of debate. The latter, swimming with the tide of the government sent to the poorly-educated Americans mixed messages about Islam and the Muslim world. The American Muslim frustration with their inability to make themselves heard pushed them to seek alternative non-mediated communication channels to take part in an ongoing educational engagement at the grassroots level. Moving from the macro-perspective of the nationwide media and government policy to the micro-perspective of the grass-roots responses on the interfaith forum and the grassroots civic public forum, there is much to inspire a new birth of pluralism and the opening up of new vistas of ongoing educational engagement between American Muslims and their fellow Americans, which will shape the future of Islam and Muslims in the US.

End Notes

1-The second impetus that made Said write *Orientalism* was another discrepancy between his experience as an Arab and the representations of Arabs by great artists and novelists such as Flaubert and Gerard de Nerval.

2-Said, Edward W., *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, Vintage Books, New York, 1997, pp. xi-xii.

3-Emerson's documentary was released after the 1993 bombings (Shown on PBS in 1995) and turned into a book after 9/11. See Steven Emerson, *American Jihad: The Terrorists Living Among Us*. New York: The Free Press, 2002.

4- Said, Edward W., *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, Vintage Books, New York, 1997, pp. 76 –77.

 5-Jack G. Shaheen, Professor Emeritus of Mass Communications at Southern Illinois University, is a former CBS News consultant on Middle East affairs, and perhaps the world's foremost authority on media images of Arabs. He is the author of *Reel Bad Arabs, The TV Arab, Nuclear War Films,* and *Arab and Muslim Stereotyping in American Popular Culture.*

6- Shaheen, Jack G., *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, Olive Branch Press, Brooklyn, New York, 2001, pp.1-2.

 7-Out of more than 900 films examined by Jack Shaheen, only 5% of all the movies (approximately 50 movies) debunked the barbaric image of Islam. The most famous Arabs to be depicted were characters that tried to help the oppressed: Aladdin, Ali Baba and Sinbad.

 8-In Shaheen's book the film reviews were presented to the reader in alphabetical order.

 9-In *Algiers* (1938) Algeria's French police tells the newly arrived inspector from Paris: 'The reality of the Casbah is something stranger than anything you could've dreamed." It's like "entering another world, melting pot for the sins of the earth." (Shaheen: 58)

 10- Shaheen, Jack G., *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, Olive Branch Press, Brooklyn, New York, 2001, 42.

11-It goes without saying that the scars of the Iranian Revolution and the subsequent hostage crisis were still itching in US society. It reinforced the repeated mantra that the US and Israel are facing common enemies and share common interests.

 12-Filmed in Israel in cooperation with the Israeli government and the Israeli military.

13-This film was "financed by Israeli producers and shot on location in Israel with the cooperation of the Israeli minister of defense.

14-During the last two decades there have been many provocations by Muslims and such Islamic countries as Iran, Sudan, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya. In 1983 about 240 United States Marines were killed in Lebanon by a bomb that was taken credit for by a Muslim group, and the United States embassy in Beirut was blown up by Muslim suicide bombers with considerable loss of life. In the 1980s many American hostages were taken by Shi'a groups in Lebanon and held for long periods of time. The 1980s also witnessed a number of plane hijackings, the most notorious of which was the TWA flight that was held in Beirut between the 14th and 30th of June, 1985, and was claimed by Muslim groups. The 1988 explosion of Pan Am flight 109 over Lockerbie, Scotland, was carried out by Islamic terrorists.

15-These films were widely screened and earned their companies millions of dollars. Consider this abbreviated list. *Navy SEALs*, directed by Lewis Teague, made $24.8 million at the box office; *Air Force One*, directed by Wolfgang Peterson, made over $172 million; *True Lies*, directed by James Cameron, made over $146 million at the box office in the United States; *Executive Decision*, directed by Stuart Baird, earned more than $56.6 million dollars at the box office in the United States; *Rules of Engagement,* directed by William Friedkin, made over $61 million at the box office in the United States; and *The Siege*, directed by Edward Zwick, earned over $40 million dollars at the box office.

16-Attempts to study stereotypes in US films, for example, have been made by Western scholars. Much as some of them denounced stereotyping of minorities in the US, they ignored Arab stereotyping. A case in point was Andrew Dowdy's *The Films of the Fifties: The American State of Mind.* According to Shaheen,

> [The text] offers a detailed examination of the "movie culture of the fifties." More than 100 films released during the fifties featured Arab caricatures. Yet, Dowdy does not mention a single Arab scenario." In the same vein he adds: "From 1930-1934 Hollywood released more than 40 fiction films featuring Arabs. Thomas Doherty writes about this period in his 1999 *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality and Insurrection in American Cinema 1930-34.* He points out that "racism [propelled] a hefty percentage of the escapist fantasies of pre-code Hollywood." To support his thesis, Doherty cites stereotypical portraits of American Indians, Africans and African-Americans, Asians and Asian-Americans, Jews and Jewish-Americans, Irish and Irish-Americans and Italians and Italian Americans. But Doherty does not mention Arabs and Arab-Americans at all." (*Reel Bad Arabs*: 9)

17-The key words that were used for the search were "Arab Americans" and "American Muslims," where a Muslim or an Arab American voice is more likely to be found. 1272 stories were analyzed.

18- Shaheen, Jack G., *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11,* Olive Branch Press, Northampton, Massachusetts, 2008, pp. xiv-xv.

References

-Alali, A. Odasuo, and Eke K. Kelvin (eds.), *Media Coverage of Terrorism,* Sage Publications, Newbury Park, CA, 1991.

-Chiasson JR., Lloyd (ed.), *The Press in Times of Crisis*, Praeger, Westport, Connecticut, 1995.

-Chomsky, Noam, *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda,* Seven Stories Press, 2nd edition, New York, 2002.

-Combs, James (ed.), *Movies and Politics: The Dynamic Relationship,* Garland Pub, New York, 1993.

-Cook, Timothy E., *Governing With the News: The News Media as a Political Institution,* The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1998.

-Dobkin, Bethami A., *Tales of Terror: Television News and the Construction of the Terrorist Threat,* Praeger, New York, 1992.

-Dixon, W. Winston (ed.) *Film and Television after 9/11,* Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, USA, 2004.

-Eck, Diana, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*, Harper Collins, New York, 2001.

-Emerson, Steven, *American Jihad: the Terrorists Living among us,* the Free Press, New York, 2002.

-Findley, Paul, *Silent No More: Confronting America's False Images of Islam*, Amana Publications, Beltsville, Maryland, 2001.
-Noor, Farish, *Terrorizing the Truth: The Shaping of Contemporary Images of Islam and Muslims in Media, Politics and Culture,* Just World Trust, Penang, 1997.

-Norris, P., Kern, M., and Just, M., *Framing Terrorism: The News Media, the Government and the Public,* Routledge, New York, 2003.

-Patel, Eboo, and Brodeur, Patrice, *Building the Interfaith Youth Movement: Beyond Dialogue to Action,* Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., Lanham, Maryland, 2006.

-Pipes, Daniel, *Militant Islam Reaches America,* W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., New York, 2002.

-Said, Edward W., *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, Vintage Books, New York, 1997.

-Shaheen, Jack G., *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, Olive Branch Press, Brooklyn, New York, 2001.

-------, *Arab and Muslim Stereotyping in American Popular Culture*, Georgetown University, Washington, DC: Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, 1997.

------, *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11,* Olive Branch Press, Northampton, Massachusetts, 2008.

-Smith, Joel, *Understanding the Media: A Sociology of Mass Communication,* Hampton Press, Cresskill, N. J., 1994.

-Toplin, Robert Brent, *Hollywood as Mirror: Changing Views of "Outsiders" and "Enemies" in American Movies,* Greenwood Press, Westport, Conn., 1993.

-Zelizer, Barbie, and Allan, Stuart (eds.), *Journalism after September 11,* Routledge, New York, 2002.