

Media image of the Middle East

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What image of the Middle East do we find in the Western and Middle Eastern media? Is it an objective one or a biased one based on a preconceived ideological position? What difference is there in the features of the image here and there? If the image reflected by the media here and there does not coincide with objective reality, what are the reasons and motives of this incongruence? Is it true that only the Middle East can understand the Middle East? These are questions that demand long and documented research. In this article we shall try to answer them as best we can.

The Western media image of the Middle East is based on many factors: some relate to the past but may be still lingering in the collective memory of people, some are recent.

The deep rooted factors that we will not deal with here are associated with the relationship between Islam and the West, from the Islamic Conquests that reached Europe to the European colonization of Middle Eastern countries. The more recent factors which we believe have exerted an enormous influence in shaping the image of the Middle East in Western media are many. The four most important follow.

Globalization

Globalization has many positive aspects. However, many of its outcomes have negative effects on the peoples of the Middle East and the South. Globalization, on all its levels: economic ? specifically ? political, and cultural, is the imposition of what is specific on to what is general and subduing it. It is a universalistic system primarily devised by the most advanced industrial nations, spearheaded by the USA. The latter has become the foremost superpower in the world, since the fall of the USSR in 1991, and transformed bipolarity into unipolarity. As a result, the Third World is forced to ingest globalization with its positive as well as its negative aspects.

Of special interest here are the negative aspects associated with the weakening of the nation state and its sovereignty, politically and economically, the splintering of national identities and legacies, and the dissemination of new values contradicting local cultures. In this respect, it is worth emphasizing the role of mass media in exporting values and ideas and transforming cultural patterns and public opinion.

The new ideologues and the clash of civilizations

In conjunction with globalization and maybe to support it in validating its policies, some theoreticians or new ideologues revived the old justifications of the Crusades, colonization, and hegemony, in the guise of new theories that thrive in the field of the clash of civilizations and cultures. Western scholars such as Bernard Lewis, Michel Foucault, Michael Bakhtin, Francis Fukuyama, Jürgen Habermas, Hans George Gadamer took an interest in the issue of the dialogue of civilizations.

However, the writings of two of them stand out: Francis Fukuyama, in his theory of the end of history, when he considered that this end was brought about by the triumph of the capitalist system; and Samuel Huntington, who classified the existing civilizations and considered that the conflict will break out between Western civilization and Islamic civilization. These theories, especially the last two, may have provided the ideological cover for the so called ?war on terror?.

9/11 events and their repercussions

The 9/11 events created a new historic watershed, with the beginning of the Third Millennium, in the wars and struggles between the West and the Orient under the pretext of world security and

the suppression of terror.

The 9/11 terrorist events were perpetrated by the al-Qaeda Islamic terrorist organization, or an organization that pretends to be Islamic. Thereafter, Islam and Muslims became, by force, the exporters of terrorist actions. The war in Afghanistan and Iraq are the direct outcomes of these events.

However, the war on Iraq (which is still raging, and the outcome of which cannot be anticipated), has become of exceptional weight in the balance of the relationship between the West, more specifically the USA, and the Middle East. It was launched under the pretext of destroying the weapons of mass destruction possessed, allegedly, by the Saddam Hussein regime. In addition, the war was fought without a UN Security Council Resolution. We, therefore, believe that the image of the Middle East in the media is perceived in the context of the monumental influence of what is taking place in Iraq and other countries of the Middle East.

The struggle for the Middle East

A fourth important factor in shaping the image of the Middle East is the struggle for the Middle East as a strategic region. The Middle East was and still is a strategic zone in which the superpowers seek to have a foothold, hegemony, partnership, or influence. Its fossil oil reserves are as vital for economic Western interests as is its geopolitical location.

In the same context comes the implanting, in 1948, of the State of Israel in the heart of the Middle East, as a time-bomb that explodes and is then replaced by another, in a series of wars and struggles called the Arab-Israeli Conflict. As long as this conflict is not settled in a radical, comprehensive, stable and just way for both the Arab and Israeli parties, the Middle East will stay ablaze, and its fire will not be restricted to Israelis and Palestinians only, but will affect many states and peoples.

That is why we believe that it is not possible to talk about the image of the Middle East in Western media without mentioning the issue of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Aspects of Western media images of the Middle East

What we have mentioned above about some elements controlling the image of the Middle East in Western public opinion is also true of Western mass media. These elements are almost a steady source for media images. However, both are shaped by occasional elements linked to new events and developments, and also by the relationships between this or that country and Middle Eastern countries, and by the ideological orientation of this news media or that.

It is hard to describe the various traits of this image without providing objective evidence, vivid examples, and reliable references. However, by means of our readings and lived experience in this field we can point to some of the prevailing patterns of Western news media behaviour towards the Middle East.

1. One of the predominant practices in Western media coverage of Middle Eastern news is to allocate a small and narrow space for them compared to the space allocated to other topics. Often enough, when these news media cover an event related to the Middle East, they very briefly mention what happened, where, and how, neglecting the causal explanation of the event through question such as: why, and more specifically what is the background, the impact, and repercussions.

2. There is a tacit complicity between the media people and their audience on the widespread idea that the situation in the Middle East is too complex and can not be understood, nor can it be

extensively and exactly expounded. Ignorance of the Middle East, along with its Islam and Muslims, and even its Christians. A wide sector of Westerners are really or intentionally unaware that there is, in the Middle East, an oriental Christianity that has been deeply rooted there since the birth of Christianity, and that it is not due to grandchildren of the crusaders! Such ignorance is not confined to ordinary people but it also includes the educated layers and even some news media people.

3. There is a constant focus on Middle Eastern crises, wars, catastrophes, poverty, and similar negative features, and rarely anything is said about its positive experiences, in terms of politics, development, or society; a focus on the empty half of the glass.

4. After the dramatic shock that befell the US as a result of 9/11, and the other terrorist actions in many places in Europe, the issue of terrorism and its curtailment by any means became the chief concern of public opinion and consequently the mass media. That is natural and legitimate. It is even required.

But the deplorable thing is, first, the fight against terrorism is taking place at the security/military level only; second, there is an absence of any attempt at understanding (and making people understand through the media) the causes of the terrorist phenomenon; third, the failure to expose the policies of some powers who utilized Terrorist Islamic Fundamentalist movements to achieve certain political goals then turned against them; fourth, and this is the most dangerous, attributing terrorism to Islam as a religion, and to Muslims no matter who they are.

What is even more deplorable is that little coverage is given to the other face of Islamic terrorism, which is that it targets Muslims themselves as much as it targets Western people. No mention is ever made about it being denounced by Muslims as much as it is condemned by Westerners. Still less is the fact mentioned that violent Islamic Fundamentalism is not a real return to the basics of Islamic religion, as much as it is a radical political movement using its weapons against Islamic regimes as much as it does against Western powers.

It is worth noting here that no distinction is made in this coverage between random unjustified terrorist action and resistance against occupation, knowing that Europe experienced violent resistance against the occupier, and never labelled this liberating action as terror.

Finally, Fundamentalism as covered in the Western media is almost exclusively restricted to Islamic Fundamentalism, and rarely mentions other fundamentalisms such as the Jewish, the Christian, especially the one represented by Christian Zionism which plays a crucial role in determining the policies of the US Administration, in President G. W. Bush who fights under its banner; and in distorting Christianity, and more specifically Evangelical Christianity.

5. Perhaps the most distorted image disseminated by Western media is the one about the central issue in the Middle East, i.e. the Arab-Israeli conflict. We know very well that talking about this issue is delicate and may touch on some historic trauma with some Western peoples, and moral considerations, and the like. But the truth of this matter must prevail over all other considerations, especially that this issue is about two peoples struggling over their co-existence and destiny for more than half a century.

In this particular issue the Western news media are completely biased in favour of one side, which is the State of Israel. The media in some European nations are controlled by the Zionist lobby, to say nothing about the US which considers Israel a fundamental and permanent ally, or even the only one, so much so that Israel has been labelled the 51st State of America.

A lot can be said about the media bias in favour of Israel, but we shall content ourselves here, with what the French writer and journalist Bernard Langlois, the editor of *Politis* magazine wrote on what he called the eleven rules that must be respected by the journalist when talking about the Middle East.

These 'rules' are written in the form of a pamphlet that is sometimes sarcastic; but they express an objective reality. We shall mention five of them:

1. In the Middle East, the Arabs are always those who attack first. Israel is always defending herself.
2. Palestinians or Lebanese have no right to kill civilians on the other side of the borders. This is called terrorism.
3. Israel has the right to kill civilian Arabs. This is called legitimate defence.
4. Israelis speak better French than the Arabs. This explains why they and their supporters get the largest chance of expression in the news media. This is called 'Media Neutrality'.
5. If you disagree with these rules, and if you think that they are biased in favour of one party against the other, then you certainly are a dangerous anti-Semite!

The image of the Middle East in its own mass media

If these are the features of the Western media image of the Middle East, what then is this image in Middle Eastern news media?

This image is supposed to be clear and to express an objective reality. However, this is not the case, for many reasons. One reason is that the media in the Middle East are driven to take a defensive attitude because they always feel that their region is wronged, denied its right, and exposed to the schemes of others, especially that the 'external conspiracy' theory is always the alibi through which all crises and internecine wars are explained.

On the other hand, and with some exceptions, the scope of media freedom in the Middle East is a narrow one. News media are in many cases state-owned, or rather regime-owned. Other states (and there are few) enjoy a certain formal media freedom: that is they allow the privatization of a number of media, while pre- or post-censorship plays a role in keeping media freedom in check.

Hence we can say that Middle Eastern news media communicate an image of Middle Eastern issues conforming to the image spun by the ruling regimes. The latter

spin many different images changing with the circumstances, narrow interests, and regional and international shifting alliances.

Notwithstanding, it is safe to say that the image of the central issue in the Middle East, the Arab-Israeli conflict, remains the most stable and the one that can command unanimity, theoretically, rhetorically, and publicly, at least.

Apart from that, news reports, stories, political conferences, newspaper analyses, which deal with the situation in the Middle East 'and with the sole exception that we mentioned' are variously subjected to official, financial, religious, confessional, tribal, partisan pressures.

There are a few bold attempts here and there (such as the Qatari Al-Jazeera TV, and the Lebanese media). But, despite their importance, these cases remain bound to crises and the ideological trends that accompany those crises.

Thus, to the question of whether only the Middle East can understand the Middle East and represent it objectively: we believe that the answer is neither a categorical yes nor a categorical no.

Conclusion

For the media image of the Middle East to be objective and unbiased, it must be created by impartial news media. Impartial news media in a matter like this cannot be found in the West nor in the East, because the vested interests of the West in the East are vast and vital at the present moment (let alone the sequels of the past) so that objectivity becomes hard to achieve, and because the East needs a certain distance to view itself dispassionately and objectively. It is difficult to take this distance for many reasons: narcissism, inferiority or superiority complex, fear of expressing truth, fear of distorting the cultural and religious image that one has grown accustomed to, and the like.

At the end of an article written for WACC's Media Development, and as members of WACC fully committed to its objectives, we wish to draw attention to an issue that is of utmost concern to us as Christians living in a world whose overwhelming majority is Muslim. It is an appeal: an appeal to Western news media and the organizations dealing with the media, especially those who are eager to question their media through their Christian faith, and to question their Christian faith through their media. Do not forget, or feign to forget, that there are in the Middle East Oriental Christians who are exposed today, more than at any time in the past, to the danger of emigration until complete depletion.

The existence and continuity of Oriental Christianity is a fundamental human right, it also is one of the requirements of Christian ministry, especially in an age of clashing civilizations and religions.

Is not the continuance of a Christian presence in the East, in deep, committed coexistence with all other religions, a proof of the possibility, and even the necessity of the dialogue of civilizations, cultures, and religions?

How could Western and Middle Eastern news media contribute to intensifying and deepening this dialogue of civilizations, cultures, and religions? That is the question and that is the challenge.

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