

RECENZJE

Yahya R. Kamalipour (ed.), *The US-Media and the Middle East Image and Perception*, Westport, Connecticut 1995, 242 p.

The Middle East is perhaps one of the most misunderstood, misperceived and stereotyped regions in the World. The two main reasons for this huge misunderstanding are oil and Islam. The mass media, assisted with such technological marvels as satellites, computers, fax machines, camcorders and video recorders/players, have now extended their reach to practically every corner of the globe, yet they have not bridged the communication gap between the United States and the Middle East. To know the pathetic reasons, though this is not a comprehensive yet it is a readable account of the Middle East in US media. Eighteen qualified academicians working in different American universities have presented their contributions and eight of these contributors have their origins in Asia, and the Middle East. The editor of the volume in his very brief introduction says: "The American public often has very little knowledge of the Middle East, hence the constant barrage of disasters, coups, uprisings, conflicts, terrorist activities reported routinely by the US media, fosters a gross misimpression of the Middle Eastern peoples and cultures."

The media images of the Middle East to a great extent have their root in the media's image of Islam. First, media images are distorted because of the nature of the polity is not understood by those reporting it. This results in the transmission of contradictory images both within and outside the Middle East. Second, media coverage of the Middle East reports images within the worldview of primarily western audiences. Therefore, the presentation and subsequent analysis of Middle Eastern and Islamic events are conducted from a paradigm of secularism and cold war/post-cold war ideological agendas. On the other hand, Islam has been the major force in the world that has resisted western modernization. Freed from the inhabitation of the communist threat, the wants to have a totally monolithic view of international developments, where its globalizing mission under the

free market hopes to grab all the areas. Here Islam comes up as roadblock-er for western agenda.

Apart from a crisis of political legitimacy there are also a whole host of communicative and cultural barriers between Islam and the West. For most of the Middle Ages and during the early part of the Renaissance in Europe, Islam was believed to be a demonic religion of apostasy, blasphemy and obscurity (p. 18). The European image of the Arabs came over to the e American shores as well. For example Americans used a literal interpretation of the Bible that portrayed the Arabs as “nomadic Bedouins, wily politicians, and lurking mercenaries.”

Every culture is likely to have a different hierarchy of values in terms of its salience, but, people will try to defend the primary values of a culture even at a very high price. Needless to say historically Arabs have paid a heavy price and since 1978 Iranians have been included to share the costs as they too have been branded in the category of “trouble-makers” for the United States.

To maintain and sustain their world power, the currency of public deliberation in the United States is news, and news is first and foremost a commodity subject to the forces of a market. News style which has developed of late, has embraced objectivity not to improve public discourse but to increase market potential for the information product. In the name of “the best obtainable version of the truth”, most of US reporters are in a sense prisoners of the mechanics of their craft. The news coverage of foreign policy is thus particularly vulnerable to manipulation by elite news sources. Elites concerned with foreign affairs tend to agree on goals, to disagree intermittently only on tactics. (p. 28).

Of all Arabs, the Palestinians hold a classical example in US media, because they had been fighting to be recognized by Israel-the most formidable ally of the United States in the Middle East. How the Palestinians have gone from faceless victims to faces of violence, to now, faces of peace tells as such about the Palestinians as it does about, the American media that covered them. The Arab-villain scenario established during the period 1948-1967 set the tone for the emergence of the Palestinian leadership. Where as the displaced Arab refugees garnered sympathy, any organized Arab leadership on behalf of the Arab cause was seen as a threat to Israel. This conflicting image of the Arab as both victim and aggressor became a split image for the Palestinians. Later on, the Palestinians became a synonym of terrorists skyjackers, commandos and guerrillas. The term fedayeen (freedom fighters) was often used but rarely translated. Only after 1987 or during Intifāda in the West Bank and Gaza changed perceptions and American reporters started painting the Palestinians as “ill-armed victims of Israeli truncheons

and gunfire". The conventional wisdom about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was called into question; the news reports presented a serious challenge to the predominant conception of Israel as a tiny democracy surrounded by hostile forces and constantly threatened by Palestinian terrorists (p. 62).

By 1978 US media's main focus had shifted from the Arab-Israeli conflict to the Iranian Revolution under āyatollah Khomeini and its aftermath. Before that a general American knew little of anything about Iran under Shah Reza Pahlavi and the Revolution of 1978 came as a big surprise, to the policy-makers as well as the general public. Iran under the Shah had become the most important client state in US history and seldom was described as a dictator in the media. The United States had trained Iran's notorious secret police, Savak and American advisor and technicians comprised one of the largest minorities in Iran. That no one American in a hundred knew what language the Iranians spoke. Or what the Ayatollah meant or implied? Or what was the difference between Shi'ite Islam or Sunni Islam?

During the hostage crisis the US failure led to demonize Khomeini as he became the symbolic violence of graphic image who fulfilled an important cathartic function for a frustrated US public that could not punish its opponent. Further, anti-Iranian American films hammered home the notion that Iranians were terrifying, alien, cruel, barbarian who threatened US national economy and the very safety of the United States was under threat. Even comedic portrayals of Iranians contained an undercurrent of violence (p. 178).

The war against Ṣaddām's Iraq from January to March 1991 was a colossal waste of resources and caused tremendous human suffering. The Gulf War was estimated to have cost the Arab World more than 600 bn dollars. In addition to the destruction of Iraq and Kuwait from the war, thousands were killed or maimed. Millions of people were displaced yet the US media presented the Gulf War as a great triumph for the US military and the Bush Administration. The Gulf War was a spectacle constructed for the media to prove the superiority of US weapon systems and to promote their sales by the military-technological complex; to establish the United States as the number one super power and super cop of the world; to present George Bush as a heroic president and to save his already failing presidency; and to gain leverage over control of the flow of oil, petrodollars, and other aspects of the economics and politics of the Middle East. But only tailor made issues were raised in the media and other aspects of the war were just ignored. Mainstream media accepted and then perfected the official line. It engaged in a process of "enemy-making" via the construction of verbal and visual images that dehumanized others, thereby making it easier for Americans to kill its self-created enemies. Iraq's political and economic understanding

with the United States during the Iraq-Iran war of the 1980s went virtually unmentioned. Iraqi history and culture were irrelevant and the Iraqi people were invisible. Thus Şaddām metonymically stood for Iraq. In no time he was branded as a barbarian and his irrational behaviour as an Arab was highlighted. The laughter, sarcasm and anger directed at Şaddām through political cartoons helped US public to digest the killing of over hundred thousand people of Iraq.

It is no exaggeration to state that political cartoonists are often among “the greatest sinners against the Arabs”. Given the tendentious history of US newspaper editorial cartooning, it is no surprising that cartoonist show generally little mercy to their subjects racial and ethnic identity. Regardless of its target, biting cartoon, humour success at its victims expense. The essential problem for Arabs has less to do with the shifting images in the US media than for the turmoil of its own resurgence. In a sense, the Arab crisis more internal than external. The challenge of US media and cultural bias is only part of the demand by Arabs for change and for legitimate. Further US television programmes tend to perpetuate four basic myths about Arabs, “They are all fabulously wealthy; they are barbaric and uncultured; they are sex-maniacs with a penchant for white slavery; and they revel, in acts of terrorism” (p. 189).

Among all the Middle Eastern states, Turkey is the only country which receives “positive” coverage in US media. Turkey comes out as a coup punctuated democracy whose road to westernization is strewn with conflicts between the nation and democratically elected government’s trying to cope with domestic instability in politics, economy and terrorism. Historian Feroz Ahmad aptly put it. “Ankara’s two principal options remain Europe and America. If she manages to join Europe, there is a good chance of creating a liberal democratic regime which respects human rights and the rule of law. Europe has tended to encourage such a regime, America, on the other hand, has been willing to tolerate harsh dictatorship in the interest of what is sometimes cynically described as stability.” However, this chapter of the book was mainly addressed to US media tolerance of “harsh dictatorships” in Turkey and was dominated by imagery of Turkey as a dependable ally for the West in containment the erstwhile Soviet Union. Thus democracy and human rights issue were not necessarily desirable. This was the message sent to US audience by the three US magazines (“Time”, “Newsweek” and “U. S. News and World Report”) in repetitive imagery covering a 35-year period. Further because of incomplete and erroneous reports most of Americans remained confused about Turkey. In sum it was a story where US national interests subsumed objective analyses.

Of all the chapters, Abbas Malik and Krista Wiegand's essay *Islam and the West* is a real masterpiece. They maintain that "the clash of cultural components has allowed self-proclaimed experts of Islamic culture to validate their view that the Islamic World represents a polar opposite from the West. As a result, crude misunderstanding between the people of the substantial regions of the world has evolved, leading the West into a vicious circle of misperception that is difficult to break (p. 202)." Once a negative image of a culture is formed it becomes rigid, enduring and difficult to rectify. The key problem is a lack of cultural relativity which allows one to judge another culture by its standards rather than by using Western standards. Result is obvious and it is assumed that most Muslims are or will soon become fanatics, fundamentalists extremists or militants (p. 205). Another relevant point, which the authors have made that throughout the last few decades, the western media have created convenient working relationships with the ruling classes of most Islamic-populated states. When information is obtained about the social behaviour of the Islamic masses from the secular westernized elite, it is often biased because in most cases, the ruling classes do not support or promote Islamic doctrine or revivalism. Bias further slants the portrayal of Islamic culture in the direction most beneficial to both the ruling classes of Islamic states and those of the sympathetic West.

It is a curious irony that the editor has not found any contributor to write on the hold of Jewish finances on US media. Seventy percent of US media is controlled by the Jews. Or the editor has purposely left out the most sensitive issue so that he could get his book published in the United States! Fact of the matter is one cannot play the Hamlet without king of Denmark. In the whole book there is not a single paragraph which is critical of Israel or Jews. Despite of its main lacuna, the book in patches is highly valuable and the editor has to be commended for highlighting a few sensitive issues which are equally significant on their own merits.

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