Western Media from the Viewpoint of the Islamic World

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The media has a fundamental role in shaping and directing public opinion and is the most influential means of communication available to individuals. In light of the importance of this role, all countries and political and social forces are directly dependent on the media to deliver their message and ideas to the public.

Since the nature of human life is based on interaction between people and among nations, the media readily contributes to such exchange due to its relatively low financial cost and the ability of many people to obtain technology that allows them to receive media broadcasts. The enormous technological progress in modern communications in general, and the Internet in particular, has made the media available round the clock and allows people to follow up on what is happening in the world moment by moment. Therefore, the great powers that enjoy influence in the world, and those that seek to have influence on world public opinion, realized very early on the importance of the media in achieving their goals. Those countries have targeted certain areas to broadcast what they deem as useful in order to achieve their policy aims. In the Arab region, for example, we find that the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) has operated its Arabic section since 1938. The BBC broadcasts in the languages of many Muslim nations including Farsi, Pashto, Somali, Hausa, Uzbek, among others. Not only the British, but also the German Nazis were keen to make their voice heard in the Arab World through

their Radio Berlin service. Later during the Cold War foreign media characterized the international scene for four decades (1945–1990) through Radio Free Europe, established by the United States.[1]

Following the increase in the pace of world events over the past two decades there has become an urgent need to develop, diversify and increase the means of media output. Thus, the well-known international network CNN emerged, which has spared no effort in reaching Arab and Muslim viewers by broadcasting to the Middle East and a number of other Islamic countries. After the events of 9/11 the battle between Western powers and the forces of extremism in the Arab and Islamic worlds became a media battle *par excellence*. The militants used the Internet to access their supporters and the Western response was the establishment of new Western news networks. Thus, there appeared Al Hurra TV channel and Radio Sawa, which were directly funded by the US Congress, followed by the BBC Arabic channel in 2007, Radio France 24, as well as German, Dutch, Chinese and even Korean stations. These satellite TV and radio stations were not only meant to convey the Western viewpoint about current events but also political and cultural influence on Arab public opinion. This media development was not limited to broadcasting news bulletins, but also offered a variety of cultural, scientific and recreational programs where the main objective was to win the hearts and minds of Arabs and Muslims.[2]

The Historical Relationship Between Islam and the West

We cannot talk about the image of Islam and Muslims in Western media without considering the historical relationship between the two parties. The relationship between the Islamic world and the West began with the entry of the Muslim armies into Spanish territories in the 8th century AD. The Islamic presence in Andalusia lasted for nearly seven centuries (until 1452), a long period during which the events that took place created an historic milestone for Muslim Arabs and the Spanish in particular, and for Europe in general. During that long period, Europe witnessed wars

between the Muslims and the Spanish followed by the end of the Arab presence in Spain. At the same time, the Catholic Church mobilized Christians to invade the Near East in order to rid the tomb of Christ from the hands of Muslims in what was called the Crusades, which lasted from 1096 until 1291. Those wars, which also carried a history of violence and tragedy, ended with the departure of the Crusaders from Islamic Arab lands.

The Ottoman Empire, on the other hand, played an important role in relations between Muslims and the West through the conquest of Constantinople in 1453, and then in the wars with Western countries which led to the occupation of a number of European states and the spread of Islam, which reached the Balkans for the first time. The image of the Muslim wielding his sword in the face of the Christian West during the Ottoman Empire (1299–1923) was no less influential in the Western mindset than those images displayed today by the media of dead and wounded civilians in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq. This was followed by the colonial wars, which lasted until the middle of the 20th century, when many countries in the Arab and Islamic world gained their independence. This period extending over several centuries has colored the relationship between the two sides with hostility and antagonism and has created a stark divide between the West and the Muslim world. Historical interaction has cast a shadow on relations today, making the past difficult to forget and allowing certain parties to recall historical memory in order to justify certain acts. President Bush named his campaign against Iraq a "crusade", ignorant of exactly how much ammunition such statement would provide for some Arabs and Muslims. Thus, Bush's words became a powerful incentive for resistance to the US occupation of Iraq. Osama bin Laden was no different from President Bush when he declared the Islamic coalition against the crusading West in 1996.

These historical images were recalled by Muslim extremists to justify their terrorism against civilians in the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington, and the subsequent bombings in London and Madrid. But the question is: why is this Islamic history? Why do they insist on recalling

those historical periods and leave out other historical events that were models of Islamic tolerance? The clearest evidence of this was when the Prophet Mohammed declared a general amnesty just after he had entered Mecca; and Omar bin Al-Khattab, the second Caliph, did likewise when assuring the Christians of Jerusalem of the security of their churches and property. These models of tolerance did not stop at these two examples, but continued centuries later when Saladin showed utmost tolerance at the conquest of Jerusalem. These enlightened models in our history are neglected by Muslim hardliners and also overlooked by the Western media when talking about Islam.

The International Changes in the 1990s

It is not easy to talk about the Muslim World as distinct from the developments that have taken and are taking place globally. In the late 1980s and early 1990s the world witnessed major strategic shifts. The defeat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan had a significant impact on the Soviet Union itself and the Eastern bloc. Not only the communist world, but also many Islamic countries were affected by this major event. Some Muslim countries had had strategic relations with the former Soviet Union and were in alliance with it.

The fall of the Soviet Union, the traditional opponent of the United States, led some to look to the Muslim world as a potential enemy of the West, where a new world order emerged with a single superpower—the United States of America. Hans Kong says, "Hostility to Islam and Muslims appeared just after the fall of communism and it seemed that many in the West consider Islam as the new enemy, despite the many differences and controversies among Westerners themselves."[3] This has resulted in the distorted image of Muslims in the Western mindset and deepened the traditional stereotype. Kong says, "The Western media likes to portray Muslims as hard-liner lawyers with beards, terrorists, rich oil sheiks, and veiled women. The image of Islam has undoubtedly become even grimmer in the West."[4]

The representation of Islam and Muslims in the West, says Kong, is "that Muslims are not tolerant, since their religion – Islam – is irrational, extremist and hysterical, and that the Christian minorities are subjected to injustice at the hands of Muslims which amounted to physical elimination. The same happened to certain sects, such as Bahaism and Ahmadiyya. In addition, Muslims' relationship with the West is shaped by armed confrontation. Islam, the religion that launched 'holy wars', is determined to conquer the world, which has fallen under the tutelage of the West. Finally, there is backwardness, as Islam is associated with the Middle Ages, contemptuous of women, and does not believe in dialogue."[5]

The First Gulf War, which ensued after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, had a significant effect on Arab and Islamic relations with the United States at both the public and official levels. It became clear that Muslims felt that the West is targeting the Islamic World in order to control its natural resources and maintain the state of economic and social under-development in it.

Huntington and the Theory
of the Clash of Civilizations

When talking about international changes we cannot overlook the intellectual and philosophical theorizing of the relationship between Islam and the West. What Samuel Huntington stated in his article about the conflict between civilizations has had great impact on the two parties and inflamed the debate. The picture described by Huntington about the future of relations between Islam and the West confirms what some Muslims say about the fatalism (inevitability) of the adversarial relationship between Islam and the West.[6] Huntington states in the introduction to his article that, "My hypothesis is based on the fact that the main source of conflict in the New World will not be ideological or economical. The significant differences between human beings and the largest source of conflict will be cultural. Nation-states will remain the most influential players in international affairs, but the main source of international conflict will be

between nations and groups of different civilizations. Conflict between civilizations will dominate the international political scene."[7]

Despite the fact that Islam is a religion that prefers peace to war and dialogue to rivalry, there are hardliners on both sides – Muslims and Westerners – who refuse to adopt a civilized dialogue when exploring many aspects of religious and cultural interaction between both sides. Here lies the responsibility of wise people from both parties. Such responsibility entails the demolition of the walls set up by history between the sides and bridging the gap that may seem profound at first glance. This is what former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami did in introducing the theory of dialogue among civilizations, later adopted by the United Nations in 2001 as the "Year of Dialogue among Civilizations".[8]

Western Media: Neutral or Biased?

The observer of the US media, in particular, and the European media in general, will find that there are multifarious intellectual, ideological and political trends. This is due to the nature of Western society, which allows political, religious and social pluralism in such a way as to make it impossible to color the community with unilateralism. Due to the existence of this extensive freedom its exploitation by certain individuals or groups is not surprising, for they have the opportunity to express freely their opinions and ideas at the expense of objective truth. What makes readers, politicians and media analysts in the Islamic World doubt the objectivity of the media is the dependence of those means on information from sources looked at suspiciously by many Arabs and Muslims. For instance, some Western media have reported arguments and adopted ideas about the Islamic World from the radical Christian Right and the Israeli lobby. When generalizing about Muslims we find that those forces reduce the Islamic world to a handful of Islamic extremists without any serious attempt to distinguish between the Muslim majority, which adopts a moderate understanding of Islam, and marginal categories of loud-spoken, bloody-minded people who consider others only as enemies with whom there is no room for dialogue.

Right-wing Western powers look at Islam only through those hard-line addresses delivered by extremists from the Al-Qaeda leadership such as Ayman Al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden, Anwar Al-Awlaki and other militants. Had those forces and media institutions exerted some effort and searched sincerely for the truth, they would have found that those addresses in fact only represent a small segment of the Muslim World. Notable Islamic religious institutions that enjoy value and credibility among the Muslim public such as Al-Azhar, the Islamic Fiqh Academy in Mecca, the Organization of Islamic Conference and the Muslim World League, are the ones that are respected in Islamic circles in general and do not hesitate to provide the true Islamic attitude towards such issues as terrorism and extremism practiced by some individuals and organizations.[9] Such right-wing forces do not understand the nature of the multicultural, political and social structure of the Muslim World; they speak about Muslims in Indonesia as if they were part of the Arab Muslim world or speak about Turks without understanding the nature of the demographics and ethnic and cultural pluralism in Turkish society. Right-wing forces consider Arabs as extremist Muslims in general as well as hostile to modernization, democracy and the West. These ready-made charges do not require them to think much. When you listen to Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hunte or *Depka*, you cannot but describe them and their programs as superficial and naive. They take advantage of the Americans' poor cultural knowledge of Arabs and Muslims in general in order to pass views and ideas that aims only to distort the facts.[10]

The Israeli lobby is in fact more experienced and knowledgeable about the Islamic World because its media and research centers are run by Middle East experts. If we take, for example, American Jewish researchers like Daniel Pipes or Steven Emerson we find ourselves in front of people who are more knowledgeable about Arab and Islamic affairs than their counterparts in the Christian Right. However, despite that experience and knowledge, they commit the same errors made by those in the Christian Right. They do not hesitate to prosecute every Arab or Muslim activist who tries to present a true picture of Islam. They also stand up to anyone who criticizes Israel, its policies and crimes. They are

a shield and top-notch defender in the United States of the Israeli occupation. They also keep tabs on newspapers, magazines and websites, translate news and put it on their sites, and do not hesitate to provide one-dimensional explanations for such news in order to influence the reader.[11]

It is important to note that minorities in general are facing major challenges in exploiting the media, especially those ethnic and religious minorities whose economic, social and even professional status do not enable them to compete in this field. This leads to priority being given to particular trends and opinions that are not friendly to minorities. Given the presence of large Arab and Muslim communities in the West, they may sometimes be a victim of a Western media that is armed with huge professional, scientific and financial capabilities. Such Arab and Muslim minorities are supposed to play an important role in bridging the gap between the Islamic World and the West.

Determinants of American Discourse

Supreme Interests of the United States

American supreme interests, namely the preservation of US citizens and the economic and political interests of the United States, are important determinants in US media. American media outlets in general play an active role in alerting the public opinion to the threats to US interests in the world. It also provides information and guidance that enable US citizens to be aware of dangers and those countries where political situations constitute a potential threat to US individuals and interests. In the midst of this, we sometimes find ourselves confronted by exaggeration when describing the situation in certain countries, which leads to adverse feelings and negative attitudes toward that country and its citizens.

Israel's Security

The relationship between Israel and the United States – including governments, civic institutions and political parties – is one of the most important determinants of the American discourse towards the Muslim

world. On an official level the United States believes that the existence of Israel is vital to US interests in the region, that Israel's existence is indisputable, and that the Middle East cannot be seen without Israel. Therefore, successive US administrations since the recognition of Israel in 1948 have not hesitated to give absolute support to it financially and morally. It should be noted that there have been some differences between certain US administrations and some Israeli governments, especially the hard-line Israeli right-wing administrations.[12] In order to ensure more sympathy for Israel its supporters in the United States present it as a model of excellence in the Middle East. It is a country that shares with the West, in general, the practice of democracy and respect for human rights as well as other aspects that fill US media space, both radical and moderate. Therefore, we can say that the US media focuses in its analysis of the situation in the Middle East on the following:

- Common values between the United States and Israel: the values of democracy, human rights and modernization.
- The growing Islamic currents working to destroy Israel.
- The Iranian nuclear project and its implications for the existence of Israel.
- The importance of Israel to US interests in the Arab and Islamic region.

The populist media is focused on the so-called common values between the United States and Israel. These values – with democracy at their top – are especially heeded by many Americans, particularly when Israel is compared with those Arab countries that lack democracy. Therefore, the task of Israel in the Arab region – according to Israel's President Shimon Peres in a populist entertainment program – is the reformation of the Arabs and doing everything in its power to modernize and democratize them.

We cannot, however, deny the fact that there are voices – albeit muted – in the US media and certain US politicians that are trying to show how the problems in the Middle East are inseparable from the issue of Israeli occupation. In an article published on the website of the National Interests

Council, we find that those in charge of the Council refuse the United States' absolute and unconditional support for Israel and that they believe the basic problem in the Middle East is the Israeli occupation. These voices are often faced by a sharp attack from the American Right and the Israeli lobby in an attempt to silence them. The militarization of the second intifada and the incorporation of a new factor into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, i.e. suicide operations, had an important role in providing new excuses for the Right and the Israeli lobby to discredit Arabs and Muslims.[13]

The operations that were carried out by Palestinian organizations in Israel during the 1990s were important material for the US media. After the Palestinians had won significant sympathy within the United States during their first intifada in the 1980s, that sympathy began to fade after the manifestation of suicide attacks carried out against Israeli civilian targets. The news of those operations headed news bulletins as well as political comments and analyses. The media focused on the dramatic photographs of the dead and injured Israelis without really trying to show the suffering of the Palestinians, which should have been the case if they had wanted to be objective in conveying the news and images. Therefore, we find that such media organizations refuse to listen to any other opinion that analyzes this phenomenon in an objective or even semi-objective manner. The Israeli occupation and subsequent settlement and systematic destruction of the Arab identity of Jerusalem, the attempts to eliminate the Arab presence or the daily suffering of Palestinians under occupation are all issues that do not find a strong echo in the US media. When analyses are introduced then such broadcasting stations evidently host pro-Israeli analysts. Even when they host Arab or Muslim thinkers, like Dr. Rashid Khalidi, the Arab-American thinker, or the political analyst Dr. Shibley Telhami, or even Americans sympathetic to Arabs and Muslims, such as Noam Chomsky or Prof. Flankstein, they are subjected to a fierce attack from organizations loyal to Israel through the radio and TV stations dominated by the American Right. Right-wing media does not tolerate an opinion which disagrees with it.

Arab Oil and the Relationship with the West

1973 was a distinctive year in the relationship between the Arab World and the West. In that year, following the October War between Israel, Egypt and Syria, a number of Arab countries imposed a ban on the sale of oil to the United States and various European countries. This resulted in the subsequent rise in oil prices that affected relations between the Arab world and the West. The higher the oil price, the fiercer the pace of attack on the Arabs. Oil is a basic commodity for Western society; it is the lifeline of industrial life. Given the extreme ignorance that is prevalent among a large number of workers in the US media, especially the populist media, we find that charges are directed, without evidence, against the Arab oil states which, in their opinion, control this strategic asset. This is not limited to the charges of raising prices or control the supply of oil to the Western world but includes the demands to occupy Arab oil states.

Aspects of Bias in the Western Media

"Islamic" Terrorism is a Threat to Human Civilization

The Western media characterizes the Islamic World from an important standpoint, namely that Islam is a real threat to the West. Huntington's hypothesis has probably contributed significantly to providing suitable ground for this. Shortly after the fall of the Soviet empire and the end of the Cold War between East and West, i.e. the decline of the traditional enemy of the West, the idea of hostility between the West and Islam emerged through Huntington's hypothesis, who also did not have a competent knowledge of the Arab and Islamic world.[14] Hence, there began the talk about opposing values between Islamic and Western cultures to justify this state of hostility although recent history has witnessed a strategic alliance between Muslim forces (states and parties) and the West against the Soviet Union. The US media in general focuses on the phenomenon of international terrorism but it allots the lion's share of coverage to Muslims. After every failed attempt at terrorism, we find that the US media portraying them creatively, weaving stories and giving

dramatic narratives about what could have taken place if these attempts had been successful.

Given the relationship between the West and the Muslim World after the Iraqi occupation and liberation of Kuwait, followed by the imposition of sanctions on Iraq, such a situation led to the emergence of groups in the Muslim World demanding retribution against the West through armed military action. The "Al-Qaeda" organization, founded by Osama bin Laden and Ayman Al-Zawahri, was the most active armed group in this area. The attack against the United States Navy destroyer *USS Cole* in Yemen in the late 1990s and the bombing of US embassies in Dar Es Salaam and Nairobi were a real declaration of war between Al Qaeda and the United States. These two incidents led to an attack by the Western media on Islam and Muslims, linking Al-Qaida terror operations with Islam to the extent that it became difficult to distinguish between a faction or group that adopts armed violence and the general Muslim public. The Western media had an important role in this connection, whereby Islam has become synonymous with violence and terrorism. This new situation has granted organizations hostile to Arabs and Muslims a big opportunity to eliminate the chances of co-existence between the West and Islam, despite the fact that ordinary Muslims do not accept the idea of armed violence.

Muslim Hostility to Freedom and Women

To make the story more acceptable to citizens of the West generally, we find that the media focuses on a number of issues that merit discussion such as freedom, democracy and women's issues. Perhaps the freedom issue in its Western form is not acceptable to the majority of Muslims because of their belief that this form is contrary to Islamic teachings. Almost absolute freedom, as represented by Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*, the libelous cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed, and the desperate defense by the West of the freedom of expression, have made Muslims look with suspicion on that model. The reaction to the cartoons that swept many countries of the Islamic World has received great coverage in Western media, which would like to send the message to the

Western world that Muslims in general are against modernity and freedom of the press. These cases resonated with the Western public and officials. President Bush often used to say that Muslims, especially those radical among them, are the real enemies of freedom as seen in the Arab revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Libya and Syria where young people have got together in search of freedom and rejection of tyranny and corruption.

The Western media shows Muslim women in traditional hijab and niqab and reiterates arguments that show a real ignorance of the successes made by Arab and Muslim women. The focus on these traditional images has made the West look at Muslim women as if they were living in a prison while we find that Muslim women have surpassed men in terms of university enrollment in a number of countries in the Muslim world. Nothing is left in the quiver of the Western media except to highlight the Taliban model and those who follow their example by denying the right of women to education, employment and access to the highest official positions as witnessed in Turkey, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia.

In her recent study on Islamophobia and Muslim women in the Western media in general, and the Spanish media in particular, the researcher Laura Navarro reached important conclusions on this issue. She believes that "the Western press tends to build a picture of Muslim women using a discourse dominated by negative opinion and depicting Muslim women as victims of their society." She adds: "The samples of Western journalism I have studied are pervaded by the idea of the reduction of Muslim women to the status of victims under the authoritarian Muslim male or Islamic fundamentalism. This common picture in the Western media hinders the idea of accepting the other and does not help us Westerners to understand the idea of freedom in choosing the traditional Islamic dress, namely the veil, for example."[15] In her book on the imperialistic narrative and European myths about the Levant, Rana Kabbani says that the famous American magazine *Vanity Fair* distorted her commissioned article so that it become a model for the negative stereotypes of Muslim women. Therefore, she concludes that the US

media coverage and the debate in the West about Muslim women are not reliable.[16]

The media certainly has the right to analyze terrorist operations and alert the public to their risks and the type of individuals who may try to implement them. Terrorism does not distinguish between one citizen and another. Thus, a number of Muslim-Americans have also died as a result of those operations. But the coverage practiced by right-wing or extremist media has led to the emergence of societal problems facing Arab and Muslim communities, which we will explain later, and has contributed to the negative stereotyping of Arabs and Muslims.

Hostility to Modernity and Modernization

A number of Western thinkers believe that there is a fundamental conflict between Islam and modernity.[17] In their opinion, Islam is a religion that imposes certain patterns of behavior on people in conflict with modernization, development and with the progress and evolution achieved by Mankind, especially with regard to human rights and women in particular. Certain movements, such as the Taliban during their rule of Afghanistan, had discriminatory practices against women in education, employment, clothing and personal freedom and imposed certain practices on men. All these negative practices led to non-objective generalizations in the Western media. When discussing the causes of this phenomenon, we notice that they are misunderstood. Afghan society, for example, is a tribal society and what might be called the Islamic appearances are nothing more than the customs and traditions handed down through generations and acquiring the status of religion although in fact they often have nothing to do with Islam. This also applies to Somali society, which is not much different in its tribal structure from Afghan society. Therefore, the conflict between moderates and extremists is primarily a tribal conflict but extremists claim that their demands and practices belong to Islam in order to justify the crimes they commit against the Somali people. Therefore, lack of experience and knowledge of Islamic societies, and the cultural and social diversity in them, explain the prejudice in some

Western media. Therefore, blaming Islam for these problems is in fact the very problem. The superficiality of Western media coverage is reflected by the adoption of the idea that the problem lies not only in Muslims but also in Islam.[18]

Adverse to Democracy

Many Western media professionals believe that Arabs in particular are a tribal nation that does not know the meaning of democracy and good governance. A number of those concerned with Muslim affairs in the West have indicated the seriousness of the charges over the relationship between East and West. The former Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, stated that, "Some claim that Islam does not coincide with democracy and that it is the enemy of modernity and women. Such claims pass without control or review, which boosts prejudice against Muslims." Annan added that, "Nobody should underestimate the sense of injustice felt by the members of one of the greatest religions and global cultures because of the failure to resolve the problem of the Middle East and Chechnya, and the crimes committed against Muslims in the former Yugoslavia."[19]

Sources of Negative Thoughts about Islam and Muslims in Western Media

Western Orientalist Heritage

Early Orientalists played a prominent role in the introduction of Arabic and Islamic heritage to the West. A number of Orientalists performed this role efficiently but others were not as concerned with telling the truth as with conveying a negative image of Arabs and Muslims, especially in periods of stagnation of Arab intellectual and cultural life. Thus, their writings have become the main source in Western universities for students and academics involved in studies on Arabs and Muslims. Theodore Lothrop Stoddard states that, "Islam is inherently incapable of reform, progress and adaptation to the human scientific revolution of humanity."[20]

Israeli Campaigns to Tarnish the Image of Arabs

Images play a vital role in having an individual or a nation stereotype another. The West has known this tool for a long time, especially in the United States. Certainly, the repetition of a negative image continuously will lead the viewer to develop a negative attitude towards that image. A stereotypical image, according to Jack Shaheen, is "harmful because innocent people suffer when the media consistently portrays any ethnic group as inferior."[21] Israelis conduct regular campaigns through their excellent relationships with the US media to tarnish the image of Arabs and Muslims. Thus, an Arab at his/her best is an insatiable consumer of Western products, and at his worst is a terrorist looking for innocent victims in Tel Aviv, Washington, Madrid and London. Hollywood has had the greatest role in the promotion of this negative image through the films it has produced since the 1950s until today. Such campaigns intensified after 9/11; there is hardly an action film without Western or Israeli blood shed by Arab Muslim hands. Kenneth Turan, the film critic for the *Los Angeles Times* newspaper, noted that, "The fabricated Hollywood legends are embedded so deep in our souls that they are changing our minds politically and shaping the way in which in which we see the world … When politics penetrates entertainment it becomes highly counterproductive and more influential."[22]

Right-wing Research Institutions

The United States now has a significant number of institutions and think tanks that provide detailed studies about life in Arab and Islamic countries. These numerous institutions and centers are promoting the negative image of Arabs and Muslims in the United States in particular, and the West in general. The institutions that adopt a clear rightist line have played a prominent role in this campaign. the Lebanese journalist, Jihad Al-Khazen, has monitored a number of those institutions that play this role. Hudson Center, the New American Century Foundation, the Near East Center for Middle East Studies among others, continue to provide a succession of studies about the Arab-Muslim reality. They are

often aimed at policy-makers who rely heavily on these studies in making decisions relating to affairs in the Arab and Muslim world and not to the average reader.

Western Media Professionals' Ignorance about the Islamic World

One cannot underestimate the role of knowledge for the media professional; the information provided by education programs at the university level in particular will be an important factor in the nature of the reports and news stories the media professional or journalist will provide later. Media professionals do not specialize in the study of specific cultures or regions, which helps to provide an incomplete or confused picture when talking about those countries or cultures. If you make a quick review of the subjects studied by students of journalism and media in three American universities that are rated as the best in the country in the field of the media, you will not find any courses that deal, for example, with US international relations or about the history of other nations or cultures up to the present day.[23] This lack of knowledge cannot be compensated through a quick read up or rapid visit to a country. The media professional often speaks on vital subjects of the Islamic World although he/she does not have any in-depth knowledge about it, often mixing up facts with opinions and myths.

Western writings on Islam and Muslims have generally increased in the last decade, given the importance of the Islamic World to the West. The United States and a number of other Western countries exist as military forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. Moreover, they have unique economic, political and cultural ties with a large number of Islamic countries. These forces have a clear impact these days because of the rapid political developments in the Arab World termed the "Arab Spring", represented by the uprisings and revolutions that have succeeded in changing the political equation entirely, as in the case of Tunisia and Egypt, while others are still in a state of conflict with existing systems such as in Libya, Syria and Yemen. We should not fail to note that a significant proportion of Western commentators and journalists are not graduates of colleges specialized in media; rather, they belong to some

party or other. The most famous right-wing commentator in the United States, Rush Limbaugh, is an example. This media professional, whose loud and audible voice is heard frequently in the United States, did not graduate from college himself. In fact, he often scoffs at universities and graduates because he considers universities to be the "stronghold of the American left and liberalism". Thus, in his opinion, they are places devoted to the liberal ideology which he antagonizes.[24]

One can sense this lack of knowledge when reading the writings of many journalists and media professionals in the West. One may find some talking about the Muslim World as a single cultural unit, which is a major misunderstanding. The Muslim World is rich in cultural, ethnic and doctrinal groups—Asian, African, Arab and non-Arab, Sunni and Shiite. Many media professionals miss the fact that the problems and challenges facing the Muslim world are diverse. Some countries have economic challenges while others have political difficulties such as those facing rebellions or protests from ethnic minorities or religious sects, while others have challenges related to political tyranny and economic corruption. Edward Said states that, "My concern is that [the] use of the word "Islam", whether for clarification only or to condemn, usually ends in the form of an attack. Islam is defined in a way far less than what is happening in the Muslim World, whose population is about a billion people, and includes a large number of countries, communities, traditions, languages and experiences."[25]

These differences cannot be ignored since they often determine the policies, trends and economic and social plans of those countries. Lack of, or distortion of information in Western media makes adds to the confusion when talking about the Muslim World. The journalists who visit the Islamic world, especially the Arab region, often cannot speak Arabic and they depend on translators who convey the reality to them in the language of the journalist. This relationship between the translator and the journalist is limited. The image of Islam and Muslims in Western media, according to Dalia Youssuf, needs to be clarified for a deeper understanding of the reasons for such unbalanced coverage. "There must be an explanation, namely that the unfavorable portrayal of Muslims in Western media is not

due to hatred; it may be due to ignorance or other reasons related to the structure of media organizations, in addition to the lack of Muslims skilled to deal with the media."[26]

Effect on the Spread of Islamophobia

Certain Arab and Islamic centers and organizations in the West observed a number of manifestations of Islamophobia prevalent in their communities, including the report prepared by the Muslim Association of Britain, which highlighted the following:

- Verbal and physical attacks against Muslims.
- Attacks on mosques and desecration of Islamic cemeteries.
- A prevalence of hate speech against Muslims in the media, using the expressions that would be unacceptable in case they were used against other groups such as Africans or Jews.
- Speeches by certain political leaders which sometimes contain statements that underestimate the commitment of Muslims in the West in general to democracy and acceptance of integration into Western societies.
- Racial discrimination in employment.
- Delay in the approval of Muslims' demands for amendment or adoption of laws guaranteeing the rights of Muslims in public life, particularly with regard to acts of worship and dress.
- Non-recognition of Muslims and Islam in the laws of many Western countries.[27]

Muslims' View of Media Coverage in the United States

A study by Farrukh Salim on the US media and Muslims aimed "to discuss the US media coverage and how it is dealing with Muslims following the events of September 11th." The study was a follow-up to what had been published for one week in two important media outlets, namely the *New York Times* and CNN about Islam and Muslims. The study has concluded that there is an element of bias in their coverage.[28]

Some believe that the biased discourse can be linked to a change in the American public opinion of Islam and Muslims. In a poll conducted by the Pew Research Center,[29] it has been found that the percentage of those who think that Islam incites violence rose from 25 percent in March 2002 to 40 percent in March 2011, while the proportion of those who believe that Islam does not incite violence fell from 51 percent in March 2001 to 42 percent in March 2011. These percentages are higher among Republicans and whites in particular, and are much lower among blacks and the citizens of Latin American origin. A study by John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed analyzing the results of a survey conducted by the Gallup Poll shows the following:[30]

- 44 percent of Americans say that Muslims are very radical.
- Less than half of Americans believe in the sincerity and loyalty of American Muslims to their country.
- 22 percent of Americans refused to have a Muslim neighbor.
- When asked their level of admiration for the Muslim World, 32 percent of Americans do not believe that it is impressive, and 25 percent do not know anything about the Muslim World.

Such a biased discourse against Islam and Muslims in the media could have led to the results mentioned above and therefore it reduces the chances of developing a truly civilized dialogue between the West and the Muslim World. Despite many serious attempts by respectable Arab and American institutions to develop a civilized dialogue between the two sides, the picture is still bleak and misleading. The right-wing anti-Arab and anti-Muslim media used the events of 9/11 to demonize Islam and Muslims. Through the repetition of images, comments and various demonstrations that depicted the Islamic world as happy with the attacks, a negative stereotype of Islam and Muslims has been carved in the minds of Americans and that many feel Muslims to be the true enemies of the United States. Thus, the presence of a Muslim on a plane upsets the average citizen. Not only that, but a large number of Muslims had been made to disembark from the aircraft just because they recited verses from the Quran before takeoff.[31]

Muslims' Vision of the Media Coverage in Britain

Many Muslims believe that the British media does not provide a true and fair picture of them. Naturally, an unfair coverage may help to promote negative stereotypes about Islam and Muslims, which may turn into promote negative behavior towards Muslims.[32] This negative behavior is reflected in practice by certain types of ill-treatment, racial discrimination and less employment opportunities or integration into society. A number of human rights organizations have recorded an increase in the frequency of racist attacks on Muslims in Britain, especially when terrorist incidents take place in the country or elsewhere in the West.[33] Many British universities and institutions have been active in an attempt to monitor media coverage of Muslims and the implications of such coverage on Islamic reality in Britain in particular and the West in general. In a report by the organization *The search for Common Grounds* concerning Muslims in Britain, it reached a set of results relating to media coverage on Muslims in Britain, the most important of which are as follows:

- The dominant view is that there is no common ground between Islam and the West and that conflict is inevitable according to the Muslim point of view.
- Muslims, according to the British media, are a threat to the traditional values and way of life in Britain.
- Views, opinions and concepts do not receive fair coverage in the media.
- The facts are often simplified or presented in a confused manner.
- The nature of the language is dominated by abuse, extremism and warning.
- The coverage can lead to increased feelings of doubt, insecurity and anxiety among Muslims, as well as a sense of alienation and vulnerability to attacks, which reduces the chances of success for government measures to reduce/eliminate extremism.
- The coverage reduces the chances of a genuine and fruitful dialogue between the parties.
- The coverage does not reduce the chances of eliminating hate crimes.

In 2008 the School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies at the University of Cardiff, United Kingdom, conducted a study on the image of Islam and Muslims in the British media. The study provided an analysis of 974 articles published about Muslims in Britain between 2000 and 2008 along with an analysis of the images that accompanied articles published between 2007 and 2008. The study found the following:

- There is a marked increase in the volume of media coverage of Muslims in Britain since 2000 and the situation has remained as such up until 2007 and 2008. The study attributed this marked increase to a rise in media coverage of "terrorism". After the terrorist attacks in 2001 and 2005 in the United States and Britain, 36 percent of articles discussed terrorism.

- In recent years, coverage has focused on cultural and religious differences between Islamic and British society. The study concluded that the majority of articles (two thirds of the articles) focused on Muslims as a (terrorist) threat, or a threat to British cultural values.[34]

Models of Positive Coverage

The American and Western media in general does include some articles, interviews or reports that give a positive impression about Islam and Muslims in the West, although this coverage does not represent more than 2 percent of what is published on these topics. In the aftermath of 9/11 the fever of press coverage of Muslims living in the West included positive coverage by focusing on Muslim centers and figures that had a positive role in building a balanced relationship with the surrounding community. The US commentator and broadcaster Charlie Rose, for example, has spared no effort in providing a positive image of Islam and Muslims. He conducted numerous interviews with Arab and Muslim intellectuals and leaders to clarify their views on the relationship between Muslims and the United States. He conducted an interview with the Swiss Muslim intellectual Tariq Ramadan, and also many interviews with activists, artists and the imams of mosques in the West, as in the case of Yusuf

Islam and even Khaled Meshaal of the Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas, in the wake of the election of President Barack Obama.

The *New York Times* has published numerous articles on Islam and Muslims in the West. In June 2010 it published an article about Muslims in the state of Mexico through the story of Muslim women of Latin origin. It also published an interview in October 2010 with Imam Abdullah and highlighted his role in spreading the culture of dialogue between religions. PBS station, a radio station with a wide reception in the United States and originally supported by funds directly from citizens, has introduced to the American public several documentary films about Muslims such as the *Empire of Faith*, a film produced by an American Muslim and tells the story of Islam from its early times. It also published interviews with Imam Muhammad Farooq about the mosque to be constructed at the World Trade Center, which was destroyed on 9/11. Moreover, it published a report on the efforts of the Muslim-American community in the fight against terrorism and the attempts by some terrorists to recruit young Arabs and Muslims under the banner of Al-Qaeda. As for the language used to describe Islam, 26 percent of literature stigmatized Islam as backward, dangerous, and an irrational religion. It often described Muslims as terrorists, extremists, fanatics and suicidal. Each positive word about Muslims was offset by 17 negative ones. Only 2 percent of articles contained a positive description of Muslims.

Aggravation or Breakthrough?

Mainstream American discourse at the general and academic levels will not be in the interest of any cultural dialogue; rather, it enhances the negative discourse and leads to a crisis in the relationship between the Islamic World and the West. If this discourse is to change from a negative to a positive one, a more cross-cultural and civilizational communication is needed between the two sides for a deeper understanding of the relationship between them. The United States in particular, and the West in general, is looking at the Muslim World in a way that is a continuation of the traditional colonial mindset but with more modern and advanced

tools. This situation gives extremists on both sides ammunition to continue and promote their aims. Muslim and Western radicals would not fail to find enough support from events, literature and trends to feed the state of hostility between the two sides. Therefore, the task becomes more difficult for the moderates of both parties who actively seek to build a system of positive relations through a serious and constructive dialogue in which both parties recognize the existence of this crisis; work on dismantling the reasons leading to it; and studying ways to develop a positive discourse that reinforces what is common between the two cultures and removes from extremists the chances to cause tensions in relations.

Recommendations and Suggestions

We think that there are many ways to help both parties build a positive relationship, including:

- Intensify intellectual and cultural relations between both sides for a deeper and more influential dialogue.
- Arab and Islamic organizations and governments should host Western journalists, especially those in media institutions known for their bias against Arabs, Muslims and the existence of Islam in the West, and those that are trying to tarnish the image of Muslims. They should introduce them – through extended visits to certain Arab countries, particularly the wealthy ones – to Arab Islamic culture and the changing reality on the ground, and give them opportunities to meet intellectuals, politicians and the general public in order to listen to them and discuss. These opportunities will be an additional factor in enabling Western journalists to correct their notions about the Arab and Islamic world, namely:
  - Build joint work institutions from both sides based on mutual respect and appreciation.
  - Work with official institutions in the Islamic World and the West to promote positive relationships that are not merely based on immediate economic interests.

[104]

- ○ Enhance moderate attitudes and support institutions working in this direction.
- ○ Recognize the existence of political and cultural moderating-oriented forces and work to develop productive working relationships among them.
- ○ Support Muslim media organizations in the West in order to help them clarify the image of moderate Islam and the economic and cultural development in the Muslim World.