

The New York Times Coverage of Islam in the Arab Spring

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ABSTRACT: This paper is intended to discuss the image of Islam and Muslims in the representational discourse of the New York Times during the Arab Spring. It is predicated on the premise that news reports in the media are both biased and less objective. Certainly, the wave of demonstrations in Muslim majority countries like Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and even Syria were a raw material for the New York Times' writers to report if not rethink their views and perceptions of Islam and Muslims. In this journalistic discourse, Muslim women are delineated as being both alien and different; they do not cherish a good representation, given the bad images that turn linked to them many decades ago. As for the Arab leaderships, they are in turn not safe from the propagandistic tendencies of this print media form as they become equated with and synonymous to evil, despotism and dictatorship. While it adopts the content analysis method, this paper aims at casting some light on the way the New York Times render Islam and Muslims in its columns. It, therefore, makes no distinction between news reports, be they articles, Op-Eds or Editorials.

KEYWORDS: New York Times, Islam, Arab Spring, misrepresentation, bias.

INTRODUCTION

Along history the media has played an important role in shaping the beliefs and the opinions of people. It has been so influential in determining the course of human history, hence affecting faiths and beliefs negatively. The result was serious battles over images, stereotypes and wrong ideas. Alan Gitelson informs us that

The media influence foreign and defense policymaking in several way. In their search for stories that will stir the interest of their readers and listeners..., news reporters constantly monitor American involvement in world affairs. News reports from Vietnam, for example, greatly affected public attitudes toward that war.¹

The same view was reiterated by Barbara A. Bardes et Al, who believed that

The media...serve as information sifters, deciding which stories are discussed and which are ignored. Some Americans even argue that the growth of media monopolies in recent years has created a collusive environment in which corporate interests dictate which information will be disseminated to Americans.²

In his notable book, *Covering Islam*, Edward Said has already captured public attention on how the media, journalists and experts determine how the world sees Islam, questioning the objectivity of the media, and discussing the relations between

¹Gitelson, Alan, et al. *American Government. USA: Wadsworth, 2009. 447.*

²Bardes, Barbara A, et al. *American Government and Politics Today: The Essentials. USA: Wadsworth, 2008, 195.*

knowledge, power and the media. The Runnymede Trust in the United Kingdom echoed the same idea in which "Islamophobia" is defined as an "Unfounded hostility towards Muslims."³

After the 9/11, the Americans have started to study Islam and all the Islamic groups. Such interest is due mainly to the handfuls of stereotypes and misconceptions about Islam that the Mass Media is propagating. People, then, would question the role of the media in [mis]representing Islam and whether the former was able to provide a just and balanced reporting of Islam.⁴ In many cases, the image of Islam is distorted and proven incorrect as Islam is often looked at as an "extremist," or "fundamental" religion wherein terrorism and radicalism are at issue.

Pope Benedict XVI delivered a speech in September 2006 at the University of Regensburg in Germany in which he made references to Islam and "holy war." In his speech entitled, "Faith, Reason and the University-Memories and Reflections," he quoted the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus as saying, "Show me just what Muhammed brought that was new and there you will find things only evil and inhuman such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached" (Libreiria Edifice Vaticana, 2006).⁵

Angry reactions went on throughout the Muslim populations of the world. The Organization of the Islamic Conference released a statement in reference to the Pope's speech that stated, "The Attribution of the spread of Islam around the world to the shedding of blood and violence...is a complete distortion of facts" ("Press Release," 2006)⁶. The Pope, however, would issue an apology to the Muslim world and explain that "The Byzantine emperor's quote did not reflect his personal opinion and it in fact it was an invitation for interfaith dialogue."⁷

Adding to this, the recent declaration of a Florida Pastor Terry Jones for burning the Holy Qur'an on the anniversary of the 11th of September and the bad mainstream reaction of Americans against Barack Obama's authorization for Muslims to set up a mosque few meters far away from the Manhattan site, are all factors that show how the state of Islam is conceived and perceived in the U.S media.

With all these pieces of information in mind, this paper seeks to explore the actual image of Islam in *The New York Times* (NYT) daily newspaper during the Arab Spring. I shall meanwhile contend that all misconceptions and all forms of misrepresentation lie in the perception of the Muslim-other who is reduced to a mere object and commodity that must be controlled as E. Said has already advocated in his ground-breaking books *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*. The theoretical framework for this enquiry is articulated within the multidisciplinary scholarship of discourse analysis, a field of study that fascinated theorists of media and cultural studies for so many years.

1 ISLAM, A THREAT OR NOT?

Islam is represented as a threat to America and to the Christian West. Some people claim that it is the new threat to replace the communist fears from the Cold War. Human history bears witness that military conflicts and the bloody confrontations between Islam and the Christian West hark back to the advent of Islam in the Seventh century and continues with the Byzantine empire, the crusades, the fall of the Muslim Spain and Constantinople, the colonial eras, the cold war and the post cold war and, and above all, the tragic events of 9/11.

Because of this, Islam becomes a widely misunderstood religion. America has many stereotypically-based views about Islam owing to the bad intervention of the U.S. print media, whose reports about Islam are inaccurate, incorrect and they lack much credibility in terms of facts. The American audience is invariably misinformed about Muslims through the wrong images they read about in newspaper articles and watch in Hollywood movies. This palpable reality urged some to call for a new invasion into the land of Muslims and, henceforth, bring all Muslim subjects under America's sway. "We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity."⁸ Reporters on Islam often contend that Muslims are sub-

³ Shryock, Andrew. *Islamophobia: Beyond the politics of Enemy and Friend*. USA: Indiana University, 2010. 4.

⁴ Koujali, Jamal. "Islam in the US press." *Middle Ground*. Issue N° 1. Morocco: Manibel, 2007. 68.

⁵ Samovar, Larry, et al. *Intercultural Communication: A Reader*. USA: Wadsworth, 2006. 165.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ O'Shaughnessy, Nicholas J. *Politics and Propaganda: Weapons of Mass Seduction*. UK: Manchester University Press, 2004. 126.

humans almost like animals or even worse, and that the Arab world is a world of contradictions wherein only the fittest can survive.

The Arab World is where innocent people are kidnapped, blindfolded, tied up, tortured and beheaded, and then videotape of all of this is released to the world as though they're somehow proud of their barbarism.⁹

Even Muslim's God is mysteriously depicted, exoticized and viewed as different. "The God of Islam is not the same God. He's not the son of God of the Christian or Judeo-Christian Faith. It's a different God, and I believe it is a very evil and wicked religion."¹⁰ According to Yvonne Haddad, a specialist on Islam in the West, Muslims have an image problem:

For Muslims...discrimination has been aggravated as a consequence of growing hostility towards Islam in the West, sometimes called 'Islamophobia.' Recently, the religion factor has been especially significant. The stereotyping that has come from media responses to international events usually has repercussions on Muslims living in minority communities in the West. They [Muslims] become the focus of attention and scapegoating.¹¹

In his Op-Ed column headlined "Is Islam the Problem?" published on March 5, 2011, Nicholas D. Kristof delves into the Muslim world's backwardness; he criticizes the assumption that Western colonialism could be the reason for the state of chaos pervading in the lands of Muslims, and sides with Professor Kuran, who persuasively contends that

What held the Middle East back wasn't Islam as such, or colonialism, but rather various secondary Islamic legal practices that are no longer relevant today.¹²

Apologists of this claim assume that Islam is a traditional religion and it cannot fulfill the demands of the progressive modern-day world. Many years ago, the Muslim culture put Europe in the shade thanks to many great achievements in astronomy, mathematics, and medicine, but such glory has boiled down due to many reasons which Islam is not accountable for. Consider the following abstract taken from the same Op-Ed.

Many Arabs blame outsiders for their backwardness, and cope by rejecting modernity and the outside world. It's a disgrace that an area that once produced outstanding science and culture (giving us worlds like algebra) now is an educational underachiever, especially for girls.¹³

Nicholas Kristof presumes that the Prophet Muhammed was a successful merchant, much more sympathetic to the wealthy than Jesus was. He believes that the revolts of the Arab Spring called for a democracy, and strongly confutes the idea that the Arab world's backwardness can be traced up to Islam. This is clearly manifest in the following excerpt.

Yet after 1200, the Middle East took a long break: it stagnated economically, and today it is marked by high levels of illiteracy and autocracy. So as the region erupts in protests seeking democracy, a basic question arises: What took so long? And, a politically incorrect question: Could the reason for the Middle East's backwardness be Islam?¹⁴

Nicholas Kristof, who exposed the chaos in Darfur and Egypt and led a call to action for the world community to take steps to end several outbursts in many areas boiling with military conflicts, admits that in his career, he attempted to remain impartial while reporting news, but the story of the student democracy movement in China and its subsequent suppression, forced him to take sides,

⁹Jack Cafferty, host of CNN's American Morning show, 17 Nov. 2004.

¹⁰Mark, Allman J. *Who Would Jesus Kill? USA: The Confraternity of Christian Doctrine*, 2008. 150.

¹¹Margret, Nydell K. *Understanding Arabs: A Guide for Modern Times. USA: Intercultural Press*, 2006. 137.

¹²Nicholas, Kristof D. "Is Islam the Problem?" *The New York Times on the Web*. 5 Mar. 2011. 27 Feb. 2012 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/06/opinion/06kristof.html>>.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid.*

How could I not stand with the students in the face of government troops that were murdering these young people simply for expressing their opinions.¹⁵

Among all Muslim countries, Iran is reported every now and then as having conflicts with America. Lots of sanctions and inducements could not persuade her from giving up its nuclear ambitions. America, on behalf of the international community, demanded that Iran stop enriching uranium, but Iran alleged that it only wanted access to nuclear technology for electricity and peaceful purposes. An editorial appearing on January 13, 2012 of the NYT sheds light on this problem:

With tensions rising over Iran's nuclear program, the Obama administration has now warned the country's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, that Iran's threat to close the strait of Hormuz would provoke an American response.¹⁶

According to the latest report from the UN inspectors, Iran was able to conduct experiments on nuclear triggers, has created computer models of nuclear explosions, and completed advanced research on a warhead that could be delivered by a medium-range missile. America and Europe have been imposing their own penalties on Iran, yet the latter's recent threat to shut the Strait of Hormuz, gateway to one-fifth of the world's oil trade, is, according to the editorial, "an obvious sign of its growing economic desperation."¹⁷

Though subjected to an accelerating campaign of assassinations, bombings, cyber-attacks and defections, Iran is held guilty for plotting to kill foreign diplomats and bomb a Saudi embassy on American soil.

Abdullah Alshamri, a Saudi official in Riyadh...said the plot that the Justice Department said it had broken up was only the latest Iranian attempt to attack Saudi diplomats. "This is their hobby," he said. "Iran has no respect for international law."¹⁸

In another column featuring on September 2, 2011, Elyahu Stern assures the NYT readers worldwide not to fear Shariah and the Islamic law. He believes that the crusade against Shariah law undermines American democracy, ignores America's rich history of religious tolerance and assimilation, and worse, creates a large gap between America and its fastest-growing Muslim minority.

The suggestion that Shariah threatens American security is disturbingly reminiscent of the accusation, in 19th-century Europe, that Jewish religious law was seditious. In 1807, Napoleon convened an assembly of rabbinic authorities to address the question of whether Jewish law prevented Jews from being loyal citizens of the republic. (They said that it did not)¹⁹

Like all religious minorities, American Muslims feel obliged to adjust their legal and theological traditions to conform to the American values. A recent Pew Research Center Poll found that

Muslim Americans exhibit the highest level of integration among major American religious groups, expressing greater degrees of tolerance toward people of other faiths than do Protestants, Catholics or Jews.²⁰

Yet, those who assume that "Shariah is a mortal threat to the survival of freedom in the United States and in the world,"²¹ are totally wrong. They forget to remember in this respect that America, once the dreamland, was a shelter for many people of different races and faiths. This was possible because America itself was capable of transforming itself culturally and even religiously. An Abrahamic ethic embracing Islam is now needed into the religious tapestry of American life. The

¹⁵Melissa, Steffan. "Nicholas Kristof: How a New York Times columnist rewrote opinion Journalism." *The Washington Post on the Web*. 29 Nov. 2011. 25 Feb. 2012 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-leadership/nicholas-kristof-how-a-new-york-times-columnist-rewrote-opinion-journalism/2010/11/28/gIQA7PHY8N_story.html>.

¹⁶Editorial. "Dangerous Tension With Iran." *The New York Times on the Web*. 12 Jan. 2012. 25 Feb. 2012 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/13/opinion/dangerous-tension-with-iran.html>>.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹Elyahu, Stern. "Don't Fear Islamic Law in America." *The New York Times on the Web*. 2 Sep. 2011. 24 Feb. 2012 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/03/opinion/dont-fear-islamic-law-in-america.html>>.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹Shane, Scott. "In Islamic Law, Gingrich Sees a Mortal Threat to U.S." *The New York Times on the Web*. 21 Dec. 2011. 24 Feb. 2012 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/22/us/politics/in-shariah-gingrich-sees-mortal-threat-tous.html>>.

commonalities among Muslims, Jews and Christians must be accentuated to allow peace to take its course and American laws should protect the rights of Muslims and other religious minorities.

2 THE BURQA AND THE BIKINI?

Many columnists in the NYT papers have negatively portrayed Muslim women, insisting that Islam oppresses them, deprive them of their freedoms.

The burqa worn by Afghan women was widely viewed in the West as symbolic of Muslim's subjugation and oppression and Islam's inability to co-exist alongside Western concepts of modernity and democracy.²²

In a pre-9/11 diatribe against Islam and Muslims, Julie Birchill, a reporter in *The Guardian*, described Islam as "shit" and "burqa" as "mobile prisons"²³. Muslim scholars agree that the 9/11 has given US journalists and commentators an opportunity to ridicule Islam and Muslim women. The NYT continues to show typical images of Muslim women wearing black clothes and looking both oppressed and different.

Veiled in black from head to toe, Muslim women are represented as a strong threat to American liberal values. These females rendered in black are underscored at the expense of others. On January 23, 2012, Neil MacFarquhar wrote a column about an Iranian teen girl aged 14 called Zahra Noorbakhsh who would defy the family ban on mingling with boys. Misunderstanding within the Muslim family, and between the daughter and her Iranian immigrant mother is highlighted:

'Zahra, you have a hole,' her mother started. 'For the rest of your life, men will want to put their penis in your hole. It doesn't matter who you are, what you like, who is your friend'. Young Zahra staggered from the car thinking: 'I have a what?! A hole? Where? Was that what I had missed in sex ed the one day I had the flu?'²⁴

The following exchange, recounted in a new anthology of essays about flirting, dating and sex published under the title "Love, InshaAllah: The Secret Love Lives of American Muslim Women," sought to dispel the stereotype of Muslim women as mute and oppressed. "InshAllah", the Arabic word for "God willing," was included in the title to proffer the book an exotic dimension. The pitfalls of converts are rendered to justify whatever contradiction that is more likely to inhere in Islam.

Angela Collins Telles, a convert, aged 36, described the almost unbelievable twists of fate that she overcame in finding her Brazilian husband, including all manner of un-Islamic behavior, starting with their first chance encounter in a bar and proceeding through a platonic night in a hotel room.

'I know my story will be looked on with a frown by people who know me, but that is O.K.,' said Ms. Collins Telles, a former elementary school principal, particularly since her husband also converted, and they now have two small sons.²⁵

In a sarcastic tone, some issues are raised in the NYT, as what to do when a Muslim girl's date surprises her with a bottle of Champagne and how Muslim families would react to the question of premarital sex.

It is doubly hard for Muslim women, because we want to complain about our men without everyone turning around to say, 'See, I knew they were all crazy terrorists,' said Ms. Noorbakhsh, a 31-year-old comedian, who after describing her sex education talk goes on to detail losing her virginity in college. "You leave yourself vulnerable to people using your voice to attack your community, so we kind of censor our voices."²⁶

Women, especially in Saudi Arabia are brought into focus. They are denied some rights: the right to vote in elections, to drive a car and to practise their daily tasks more freely. They are sometimes perceived as an object that is voiceless and

²²Shirazi, Faegheh. *Muslim Women in War and Crisis: Representation and Reality*. USA: The University of Texas Press, 2010. 255.

²³Ibid.

²⁴MacFarquhar, Neil. "Lifting Veil on Love and Islam." *The New York Times on the Web*. 23 Jan. 2012. 19 Feb. 2012 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/24/books/in-love-inshallah-american-muslim-women-reveal-lives.html>>.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

unable to have a say in family affairs, and at other times depicted as rebels against their patriarchal regimes. Neil MacFarquhar and Dina Salah Amer reported on June 12, 2011 the following:

Several dozen women drive in defiance of the law in major cities of Saudi Arabia on Friday, according to reports on social media and by an informal network of activists in the country. There appeared to be few confrontations reported with the traffic or morals police, and at least half a dozen women who were stopped were escorted home and admonished not to drive, said activists reached by telephone.²⁷

Some pertinent questions need to be asked such as: what are the sources from which the NYT columnists get their news? Do these columnists know the Arabic language and its complex varieties to write upon issues of this kind? Or do they simply rely on local freelance translators to get at the news dish?

“Women in Saudi Arabia see other women in the Middle East making revolutions, women in Yemen and Egypt at the forefront of revolutions, being so bold, toppling entire governments,” said Waleed Abu Alkhair, whose wife drove around Jidda. “The women of Saudi Arabia looked at themselves and they realized, “Wow! We can’t even drive!”²⁸

The choice of themes is not gratuitous in the NYT daily; it backs up the claim that the US media is concerned mainly and only with some exotic and bizarre aspects of the Muslim culture. Dwight Garner has examined the lives of what he called two “warriors” of militant Islam. He, not much different from other reporters, would introduce his column with a hypothesis to trigger off suspense on the NYT readership. Consider the if-clause below as well as the third personal pronoun “you,” implicitly involving the reader to take a stance somewhere in the column:

If you were the Franklin mint and wanted to issue a set of four collectible dinner plates devoted to “The Women of the War on Terror,” whose faces would appear on them? Condoleeza Rice, George W. Bush’s national security adviser during 9/11, would surely smile up from one. As would Lynndie England, “The lady with the leash,” as Mick Jagger sang on the 2005 Rolling Stones song “Dangerous Beauty.” Plates 3 and 4? They would almost certainly depict Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Aafia Siddiqui, the subjects of Deborah Scroggins’s sober provocative new book, “Wanted Women.”²⁹

The stories of these dissimilar Muslim women have been intricately composed by Ms. Scroggins in a dual biography. Seen as veritable opposites, the author memorably notes, these Muslim women are like

The bikini and the burka or the virgin and the whore, you couldn’t quite understand one without understanding the other.³⁰

If one is wondering who is the bikini (and consequently the whore) in that quote, Ms. Scroggins leaves little suspicion that it is Ms. Hirsi Ali, whom her book relentlessly attacks, sometimes persuasively and tendentiously. Ms. Hirsi Ali is a Somalian-born former member of the Dutch Parliament. She wrote the best-selling memoir “Infidel” (2007).

Raised as a devout Muslim, Hirsi Ali, renounced her faith after arriving in Holland and now calls herself a “Muslim” atheist.” She says she fled to Holland to escape a forced marriage to a distant relative in Canada...As a youth, she says, she supported calls by Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini for the murder of Salmane Rushdie, author of *The Satanic Verses*.³¹

In the words of the British journalist, Andrew Anthony, a news reporter for *The Guardian* and *The Observer*, Hirsi Ali looks almost “Like a fashion model and [she] talks like a public intellectual.”³² She was brought up as a Muslim fundamentalist in Kenya, where she was subjected to genital cutting, yet she would escape to the West and emerge as an inflammatory critic of Islam, notably on issues related to women.

²⁷MacFarquhar, Neil. “In a Scattered Protest, Saudi Women Take the Wheel.” *The New York Times on the Web*. 17 June 2011. 19 Feb. 2012 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/18/world/middleeast/18saudi.html>>.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Dwight, Garner. “Warriors on 2 Sides of Militant Islam.” *The New York Times on the Web*. 15 Jan. 2012. 19 Feb. 2012 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/16/books/wanted-women-faith-lies-the-war-on-terror-review.html>>.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Israeli, Raphael. *The Islamic Challenge in Europe*. USA: Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 2008: 81-82.

³²Garner, Dwight. “Warriors on 2 Sides of Militant Islam.” *The New York Times on the Web*. 15 Jan. 2012. 19 Feb. 2012 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/16/books/wanted-women-faith-lies-the-war-on-terror-review.html>>.

A 2008 NYT article comparing Hirsi Ali and Manji concludes that, despite their stark differences, these two women share many points. Whereas Hirsi Ali seeks to change Islam from outside, Manji tries that from inside. Yet, both women could be seen as staunch feminists:

No element more thoroughly informs the work of both women than feminism; its influence on their thinking can hardly be overstated, and in this sense they might be considered crown jewels in the history of the modern women's movements. ...As feminists, Ms. Hirsi Ali and Ms. Manji are demanding more than equality; they are very self-consciously challenging the foundations of an entire way of life.³³

Aayan Hirsi Ali and Irshad Manji are the most known authors who would regularly appear in such widely circulated outlets as *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *USA today*, and *The Washington Post*. Much has been written about them and the significant congruence between them, more precisely their "escape" experiences from the house of Islam to that of Christians. While Manji fled an Islamic school in a Vancouver suburb that suppressed her ability to ask critical questions, Hirsi fled a forced marriage to the Netherlands.

The other woman who embodies the burqa, again Ms. Scroggins leaves no doubt, is Ms. Siddiqui. She is a Pakistani-born Muslim woman, who left for America to study neuroscience and earned degrees from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Brandeis University. Married to a Pakistani doctor who was accepted to study for a master's degree at Harvard, and with whom she had three children, Ms. Siddiqui had indeed been in the U.S. news. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* hit the street with an alarming story, announcing with a four-column banner headline across the front page:

"U.S. Seeks 7 in Terror Alert." Above the headline the paper displayed small mug shots of seven Middle Easterners, six men and a woman, collectively described as "armed and dangerous"-a characterization taken from comments made by Attorney General John Ashcroft. Siddiqui was one of the seven.³⁴

Stephan Salisbury gave the following portrait of her,

She is a Pakistani woman with an MIT doctoral degree with large, round eyes, wide mouth, and curving, Picasso-esque lips.³⁵

According to Dwight Garner, Ms. Siddiqui became a nearly psychotic anti-Semite, and began dabbling in pro-jihad organizations in America. In 2003 the F.B.A. named her the only known female operative of Al Qaeda. Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry spoke of her arrest:

In 2008, she was arrested in Afghanistan with bomb-making materials, instructions, and a list of New York landmarks in her possessions. At the scene of the arrest, she managed to shoot at the agents before being shot herself. In February 2010, she was found guilty of attempted murder.³⁶

Ms. Scroggins, a veteran reporter, whose very first book, "Emma's War" (2002), was about a young British aid worker and tarnished idealism in the Sudan, drew an analogy between Ms. Ali Hirsi and Ms. Aafia Siddiqui. She concluded:

They were both in their early 30s...They were both fiercely intelligent. They both came from politically ambitious families. They had both been tossed about among Africa, Asia, Europe and the United States ever since childhood...They shared a kind of warrior mentality. Both prized fearlessness. They were both rebels.³⁷

Interestingly enough, one can note that each woman epitomized a complicated intellectual Muslim background; this evinces clearly in the different directions they have gone, one becoming a Westernized feminist and the other a militant Islamist. Dwight Garner argues for the very beguiling aspect of Hirsi's personality:

³³ Butler, Judith & Weed, Elisabeth. *The Question of Gender: Joan W. Scott's Critical Feminism*. USA: Indiana University press, 2011. 121.

³⁴ Salisbury, Stephan. *Mohammed Ghosts: An American Story of Love and Fear in the Homeland*. New York: Nation Books, 2010. 7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Sjoberg, Laura & Gentry, Caron E. *Women, Gender, and Terrorism . USA: The University of Georgia Press. 2011, 181.*

³⁷ Garner, Dwight. "Warriors on 2 Sides of Militant Islam." *The New York Times on the Web*. 15 Jan. 2012. 19 Feb. 2012 < <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/16/books/wanted-women-faith-lies-the-war-on-terror-review.html>>.

It is possible to appreciate both burkas and bikinis and still wonder why [Scroggins] book's sympathies seem to be with the woman who hoped to speak through the most destructive weaponry available.³⁸

While some Muslim women were severely criticized in The NYT publication, few of them had been positively portrayed. In his report launched on December 27, 2010, Brian Knowlton opted for an unprecedented headline, "Muslim Women Gain Higher profile in U.S.," perhaps to deracinate the monotonous Hollywood images about Muslim women from the American intellect:

These women have achieved a level of success and visibility unmatched elsewhere. They say they are molded by the freedoms of the United States-indeed, many unabashedly sing its praises-and by the intellectual ferment stirred when American-born and immigrant Muslims mix.³⁹

Though they had been the object of abusive letters, racist e-mails and humiliating blog posts, Muslim women tried to get integrated into the American society by breaking some outmoded stereotypes and correcting American people's views regarding Islam and Muslim women. According to a Gallup survey in March 2009, Muslim women are better educated than their counterparts in Western Europe, and also than the Average American. The Gallup also found that Muslim American women are entrepreneurial, coming so closer than women of other faith to earning what their menfolk do.

Historically speaking, Muslim women have wielded power and worked from behind the scenes. Another survey conducted in 2009 by Georgetown University and the Royal Islamic Strategic Center of the world's most influential Muslims, listed just 2 women in the top of 50: a Syrian religious leader and Queen Rania, wife to the Jordanian king. Mr. Knowlton mentions three successful Muslim female figures who managed to outperform their American peers: Ms. Soumaya Khalifa, Ms. Mattson and Ms. Taylor.

The first was born in Egypt and raised in Texas. She is heading a consultancy working with students, executives, soldiers and even the F.B.I. Her sole aim is to do away with all stereotypes and prejudices that target Muslims in America and elsewhere.

Ms. Khalifa, who has degrees in chemistry and human resources, began wearing a headscarf in her mid-30s, about 15 years ago. At first, she said, people looked at her "like I was different, Muslim, un-American, stupid."⁴⁰

This Muslim woman was delineated as being defiant, persistent and strongly determined to reach her professional purposes. So, when a small-town newspaper declined her idea to run ad listing the hours of a nearby mosque, Ms. Khalifa was capable of organizing a successful boycott by local churchmen.

The second Muslim woman who caught Knowlton's attention is the American Ms. Ingrid Mattson. She is seen as being a fabulous and a highly noticed figure among American Muslim women probably thanks to her religious and political charisma.

In a bright-red jumper and multicolored head scarf, she stood out among the gray-haired clerics in black who gathered in Washington in September to try and defuse the anger over the planned mosque near the World Trade Center site in New York.⁴¹

Ms. Mattson was the first woman to head the Islamic Society of North America, one of the largest Muslim associations on the continent. She is 47 years old and lectures at the Hartford Seminary in Connecticut. Knowlton lists Ms. Mattson achievements and, meanwhile, focuses on the limitations that encircle Muslim women practices:

"The only area where there is a limitation is religious leadership-the imam," she added, predicting that "we will have some communities in the future that have female imams."⁴²

³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹Knowlton, Brian. "Muslim Women Gain Higher Profile in U.S." *The New York Times on the Web*. 27 Dec. 2010. 19 Feb. 2012 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/28/world/middleeast/28iht-muslim28.html>>.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹*Ibid.*

⁴²*Ibid.*

The news report, presented in the form of interviews, stresses that Muslim women in the United States reflect the country's diversity: white converts like Ms. Mattson, women from the Middle East like Ms. Khalifa, or Tayyibah Taylor, a convert of Caribbean background in Atlanta, have all struggled for an Islamic identity in America.

"I did not see Islam as taking my freedoms as a woman," said Ms. Taylor, who is 57 and studied the Koran in Jidda for six years." It really opened up worlds for me."⁴³

Gender separation at prayer times is also at issue, an issue that is imposed to reflect what Knowlton has named notions of "modesty," bringing to the fore the very antiquated slogan "The best rows for women are the back rows and the worst are the front rows." While deeply concerned to consolidate some negative and discriminatory images about Muslim women, the NYT often repeatedly fails to remind the American public that in Islam many women have had the opportunity to serve as chairs to political parties, advisors to kings, MPs and that they managed to climb the summit of the whole pyramid in their societies.

3 THE ARAB SPRING LEADERSHIP

Some years ago, Ron Carlson (1973), the president of Christian Ministries International, wrote the following words:

Muhammed took the political laws which governed seventeenth century Arabian tribes and literally made the laws of Allah, their God. In such tribes, the sheikh or chief of the nomadic tribes had absolute authority. There were no concepts of civil or personal rights in seventh-century Arabia. This is why Islamic countries are inevitably ruled by dictators or strong men who rule as despots. There are 21 Arab nations today, and not one of them is a democracy. Democracy cannot flourish in Islam.⁴⁴

This Islamophobic attitude has been negated by Jean-Marie Guéhenno, a former United Nations under-secretary general for peacekeeping operations and a professor of professional practice at the Saltzman Institute of Columbia University, who saw public social media networks as the motor of change in the Arab world. He pointed up,

The Arab revolutions are beginning to destroy the cliché of an Arab world incapable of democratic transformation. But another caricature is replacing it: according to the new narrative, the crowds in Cairo, Benghazi or Damascus, mobilized by Facebook and Twitter, are the latest illustration of the spread of Western democratic ideals; and while the "rise of the rest" may challenge the economic dominance of Western nations, the West will continue to define the political agenda of the world."⁴⁵

The columnist argues that the movements that destabilized the Arab world are profoundly different from the revolutions that toppled down the Soviet empire. 1989 and 2011 could be seen as two facets of the same coin, connecting in a self-congratulatory way the political appeal of democracy, the transformative power of new technologies in media and social networking.

The Arab Spring is about justice and equity as much as it is about democracy, because societies in which millions of young men and women have no jobs-and millions live with less than two dollars a day-crave justice as much as democracy.

Vali Nasr, the author of *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*, preferred to tackle the same issue from another angle. His column, "If the Arab Spring Turns Ugly," appearing on August 27, 2011 grapples with sectarian divisions in the Middle East between Shiite and Sunnis, conflicts and instability in the region, is worthwhile mentioning.

The Arab Spring is a hopeful chapter in Middle Eastern politics, but the region's history points to darker outcomes. There are no recent examples of extended power-sharing or peaceful transitions to democracy in the Arab world. When dictatorships crack, budding democracies are more than likely to be

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Carlson, Ron & Decker, Ed. *Fast Facts on False Teachings*. USA: Harvest House Publishers, 1994. 104.

⁴⁵ Guéhenno, Jean-Marie. "The Arab Spring is 2011, Not 1989." *The New York Times on the Web*. 21 Apr. 2011. 19 Feb. 2012 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/22/opinion/22iht-edguehenno22.html>>.

greeted by violence and paralysis. Sectarian divisions—the bane of many Middle Eastern societies—will then emerge, as competing groups settle old scores and vie for power.⁴⁶

Nasr reminds us of the brutality of Bashar al-Assad's regime, which, in his view, had opened a hazardous fissure between the Alawite minority, which rules the country, and the majority Sunni population.

After Mr. Assad's butchery in the largely Sunni city of Hama on July 31, on the eve of the holy month of Ramadan, the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni group, accused the regime of conducting "a war of sectarian cleansing." It is now clear that Mr. Assad's strategy is to divide the opposition by stoking sectarian conflict.⁴⁷

In a thoughtful op-ed, Nicholas Noe makes the case for negotiating with Bashar al-Assad—for "bargaining with the devil."⁴⁸ In his words,

MR. ASSAD is a brutally repressive and dangerous leader who is responsible for most of the death and destruction that has plagued Syria in recent months,⁴⁹

The Syrian leader is definitely so different from King Abdullah of Transjordan, who annexed the West Bank in 1948, and was viewed by *The Time* as "The little man... [with] an impish smile... [who] had waited long to become cock of the Arab walk" (*Time*, May 24, 1948, p.33)⁵⁰. He is neither Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, whom Ronald Reagan once famously called the "Mad dog of the Middle East,"⁵¹ nor Mr. Ben Ali, "The ousted [Tunisian] president"⁵² nor even the Egyptian leader Mr. Hosni Mubarak whom a NYT editorial preferred to dub as "The all-powerful pharaoh...now powerless and facing justice,"⁵³ nor the "Fourth Arab autocrat forced from power in the wave of popular uprisings,"⁵⁴ the Yemeni leader Abdullah Saleh, who was granted an immunity from being prosecuted and allowed entry into U.S after a landmark deal approved by the Yemeni Parliament.

Admittedly, the NYT agency tends to deploy metaphors in its portrayal of the Muslim/Arab leaders in pre/post-Arab Spring. These metaphors are meant to trigger off particular images in the minds of Americans; hence bolstering the old-fashioned stereotypes that Arabs/Muslims are like animals, and this is why they are lagging behind. Drawing a comparison between Muslim/Arab leaders and other creatures and finding similarities between the two is something pervasive in the NYT pages.

Ben Laden, the ex-spiritual leader of al-Qaeda Organization, who was elevated to the realm of evil in the American imagination once reserved for dictators like Hitler and Stalin, is pictured in the NYT and other outlets as "The monster,"⁵⁵ the source of terror. He has doubtless inspired the Taliban fighters reported as the "Taliban Guerrillas."⁵⁶ Muslim intellectuals are also made uneasy by the appellation "axis of evil,"⁵⁷ a denomination initially used by the former U.S. President George W.

⁴⁶ Nasr, Vali. "If the Arab Spring Turns Ugly." *The New York Times on the Web*. 27 Aug. 2011. 20 Feb. 2012 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/28/opinion/sunday/the-dangers-lurking-in-the-arab-spring.html>>.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Noe, Nicholas. "In Syria, We need to Bargain With the Devil." *The New York Times on the Web*. 6 Feb. 2012. 20 Feb. 2012 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/07/opinion/in-syria-we-need-to-bargain-with-the-devil.html>>.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Kamalipour, Yahya R. *The U.S. Media and the Middle East: Image and Perception*. USA: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc, 1995. 41.

⁵¹ Lbiya, "the Most Soreal Country on Earth." *The New York Times on the Web*. 7 Oct. 2011. 20 Feb. 2012 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/09/magazine/reply-all-libya.html>>.

⁵² Kirkpatrick, David K. "Ex-Tunisian President Found Guilty in Absentia." *The New York Times on the Web*. June 20, 2011. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/21/world/middleeast/21tunisia.html>>.

⁵³ Editorial. "Mr. Mubarak on Trial." *The New York Times on the Web*. August 5, 2011. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/06/opinion/mr-mubarak-on-trial.html>>.

⁵⁴ Kasinof, Laura. "Yemen's Election Ensures Leader's Exit." *The New York Times on the Web*. February 21, 2012. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/22/world/middleeast/yemen-votes-to-remove-ali-abdullahsaleh.saleh.html>>.

⁵⁵ Zernike, Kate & Kaufman, Michael T. "The Most Wante Face of Terrorism." *The New York Times on the Web*. 2 May 2011. 22 Feb. 2012 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/02/world/02osama-bin-laden-obituary.html>>.

⁵⁶ Filkins, Dexter. "Afghan Tribe, Vowing to Fight Taliban, to Get U.S. Aid in Return." *The New York Times on the Web*. 27 Jan. 2010. 22 Feb. 2012 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/28/world/asia/28tribe.html>>.

⁵⁷ Clemens, Walter C. "Listening to the Axis of Evil." *The New York Times on the Web*. 4 Nov. 2011. 22 Feb. 2012 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/04/opinion/listening-to-the-axis-of-evil.html>>.

Bush describing governments that he accused of supporting terrorism and seeking weapons of mass destruction. Mr. Bush would label Iran, Iraq and North Korea as the axis of evil often throughout his presidency.

It is believed that Islam has no problem with America; rather, the Judeo-Christian world has a problem with some aspects of Islam. Lawrence Cunningham, a U.S. scholar and a significant expert in law and accounting, talks about this never-ending conflict. He claims that,

“The Antagonism between the Christian West and the world of Islam has a long and bitter history.”⁵⁸

It is an antagonism that reflects itself today in the persecution of Muslims and their portrayal as fundamentalist and backward terrorists. Laurie Goodstein confessed that Evangelicals sought converts and saw Islam as an “Evil” Faith.

On a recent Saturday in a church fellowship hall here, evangelical Christians from several states gathered for an all-day seminar on how to woo Muslims away from Islam. The teacher urged a kindly approach: always show Muslims love, charity and hospitality, he said, and carry copies of the *New Testament* to give as gifts. The students, scribbling notes, included to pastors, a school secretary and college students who said they hoped to convert Muslims in the United States, or on mission trips abroad.⁵⁹

In evangelical seminaries and churches, books and lectures criticizing Islam and vilifying Muslims and promoting strategies for Muslim conversions are gaining currency across America. Throughout history, evangelical scholars believed that all other religions are wrong. Yet, they would cite a wide range of reasons for their quickening interest in Islam:

The American defeat of a major nation, Iraq, which may open it to Christian missionaries, while other Muslim nations remain closed; The 2001 terrorist attacks, which led many Americans to see Islam as a global threat; The great numbers and visibility of Muslims in the United States; The demise of Communism, once public enemy No.1 for many evangelical organizations.⁶⁰

The evangelical teacher quoted above, has provided the would-be-missionaries with some snippets of advice on what to do to convert Muslim subjects with no problems. Don't approach them in groups. Don't bring them to your church, because they will mishear the singing and clapping as a party. Instead, do invite them home for a meal. Do bring them chocolate chip cookies. Do talk about how, in order to get saved, they must accept Jesus.

“Our job,” he said, “is not to make the Muslim a Christian, our job is to show them the love of Christ.”⁶¹

As we mentioned somewhere above, historians observe that the enmity between Christianity and Islam dates as far back the Crusades, the fall of Byzantium and the reconquest of Spain. The news reporter fairly advocated that the evangelical teacher previously cited,

Intermingled accepted facts with negative accounts of Islamic teaching, history and traditions. The pilgrimage to Mecca, he said, “is a dangerous event at which people are killed every year”. Communal prayers each Friday are “a day of rage,” he said.⁶²

Despite the falsified and very-often-magnified images which the NYW propagates about Islam/Arabs, it should be made clear that Muslims fought to preserve American independence in the War of 1812 and for the Union of the Civil War. Also, thousand of them were involved on active duty in the American armed forces working side by side their American compatriots to fight “Terrorism.” What is more, the U.S. Supreme Court building contains a likeness of the Prophet of Islam, whose vision of justice is cited as an important precedent to the U.S. Constitution.

CONCLUSION

⁵⁸ Cunningham, Lawrence S & Reich, John J. *Culture and Values: A Survey of the Humanities*. USA: Wardsworth, 2010. 184.

⁵⁹ Goodstein, Laurie. “Seeing Islam as ‘Evil’ Faith, Evangelicals Seek Converts.” *The New York Times on the Web*. 27 May 2003. 20 Feb. 2012 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/27/us/seeing-islam-as-evil-faith-evangelicals-see-converts.html>>.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

In a nutshell, stereotypes targeting Islam/Arabs would never help in any eventual interfaith or intercultural dialogue between America and the world of Islam. It is then high time for the Muslim and the American academia to work collaboratively to sensitize the world public of the great hazard in dehumanizing, or stereotyping a human being of whatever racial, religious or cultural background. The NYT, being the most widely-circulating publication, ought to in turn contribute to this dialogue via minimizing these stereotypes in its columns.

It is thus to be hoped that the American mass media, and the NYT in particular, must work to acknowledge the other's "right to be different" on the common understanding of universal human values shared by everybody, and the threats menacing these values. This, I do believe, may gradually evolve towards a real alliance between America and the world of Islam.

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