

Chapter Two

Images of the Middle East and Islam in German Media: A Reappraisal

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In 1981, three years after the publication of *Orientalism*, Edward Said wrote another work exploring Western perceptions of the Middle East and the Muslim world, called *Covering Islam. How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. Once again, it demonstrated Said's impressive ability to dismantle the systematic misconceptions of the 'Orient'¹, stereotypical concepts of the Muslim 'Other', and the longevity of the Orient-Occident dichotomy in Western culture. This time, however, it was also somewhat prophetic, as it is fair to say that after the dissolution of the communist bloc, culturalist views of Islam began to fill the ideological vacuum that had opened up in Western societies. A milestone in this process was Samuel Huntington's paradigmatic thesis on the 'Clash of Civilisations', published in 1993. Its popularity revealed the striking ease with which an artificial mainstream perception of a dualism based on religion, or on a neighbouring 'race', can be constructed today that is quite similar to the thinking prevalent in the Middle Ages or in colonial times. The challenge this presents to the scholar, then, is to try to understand the communicative

¹ The 'Orient' is a concept that different authors have used for various regions of the world. In Said's work it is mostly confined to the Muslim world, or, even more precisely, to North Africa and the Middle East. In this text the same notion is applied, with the precision that the 'Middle East' includes Turkey, Arab countries, Israel, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran, and 'North Africa' contains the Arab countries and Mauritania and Djibouti. Both definitions are according to the systematisation of the German 'Institute for Middle East Studies' (Institut für Nahostforschung, former Deutsches Orient-Institut, Hamburg).

character of this hegemonic paternalist thinking in the mainstream media and public spheres of both the 'West'² and the 'Orient'.

Unfortunately, except for Said, few scholars have studied the constructive mechanism behind popular images of the Islam-West divide. Addressing this issue here, and taking Said's thesis as a departure point, the first observation to be made is that there is a certain structural similarity between Said and Huntington: both treated the 'Other' - 'Islam' from Huntington's perspective, and the 'West' from Said's - as some kind of cultural monolith. For Said, it was 'the media' and 'the West' that were simplifying a much more complex Middle East and calling it the hotbed of fanaticism and ignorance. It seems that Said himself failed to understand the very logic behind the construction of media discourses. On the one hand, Said's critique of the Western mass media's disparaging image of the Middle East and Islam is sound: after ten years of media research in the field of German, US and British media coverage of Islam and the Middle East, I am convinced that the mainstream media's image contains systematic defamation. On the other hand, media coverage in Europe is not made up only of stereotypes.

My critique of Said is based on the assumption that media texts produced for audiences in European and North American countries certainly do contain numerous stereotypes about the Middle East, but that there is much more to those texts than this. I argue that media content analysis should not be based merely on the socio-psychological concept of stereotypes or 'bias', because that method runs the risk of becoming self-referential. If one is searching for stereotypes, one will surely find them, but may not find the rest - the facts that are reported and the stories that are told - because of a basic analytical approach that is too limited in scope. Such an attitude allows an understanding of part of the media coverage, but not of the fabric of news, and how certain

² Huntington confines the 'West' to Europe and North America.

events make it into the news while others do not. Nor is it then possible to understand the strange coexistence of high-quality journalism with what I would call the 'boulevardisation' of the Orient in the mainstream media of Europe and North America.

Moreover, text-centred media analysis based on concepts like stereotypes is merely speculative when it comes to the causes and effects of media coverage, because the news making process itself is not observed. Societies and cultures as a whole seem responsible for media coverage, while individual actors in the news making process such as journalists, news organisations, politicians, governments and consumers, as well as wider political cultures of course, remain obscure. The analysis of media texts without theoretical allusion to the news making process lends itself to conspiratorial thinking about the alleged influence of Western governments or Jewish lobbies and the like on Western media - an influence that can exist occasionally, but is surely not the whole story.

Systems theory of the media: the primacy of the national

To avoid such an analytical trap, I employ a theoretical framework inspired by different strands of systems theory. Here, media output is determined by a multitude of processes that are both autonomous and open to interaction with other sub-systems and social environments surrounding them.³ Examples include the politico-economic system or the psychological system of the journalist, who is both a part of the media's professional role as well as his

³ For a more detailed outline of the theoretical approach in English see: Kai Hafez, 'The Middle East and Islam in Western Media: Towards a Comprehensive Theory of Foreign Reporting', in Kai Hafez ed., *Islam and the West in the Mass Media. Fragmented Images in a Globalizing World* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2000), pp. 27-66. The long version of my studies on foreign reporting and the Middle East in Germany has been published in German. The first volume is an elaboration of my theoretical approach, the second volume a documentation of my analysis of Middle East coverage of German national newspapers and weekly magazines (Kai Hafez, *Die politische Dimension der Auslandsberichts-erstattung*, Vol. 1: *Theoretische Grundlagen*, Vol. 2: *Das Nahost- und Islambild in der deutschen überregionalen Presse* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2002).

own environment. The national and international media are also important reference points for journalism. Finally, audiences are factors to be reckoned with, although they exert the most disparate influences, since only small parts, such as 'lobby groups', are organised, while most of the audience is dispersed and cannot be considered a single 'actor'.

In my view, the structural deficits in Western media coverage of the Middle East and the Muslim world are mostly based on the fact that even in today's seemingly globalised world, foreign reporting is, by and large, determined by national (and sometimes regional) interactions between the media system and other sub-systems and social environments. This pre-eminence of national over international interaction manifests itself in various ways. *Firstly*, there is a hegemony of national language communities creating their own long-term narratives of the world, and those discourses establish their own cultures and problems of intercultural understanding. *Secondly*, domestic political problems and issues often overlap with international issues or, worse, interfere with the way the world is interpreted and distort the original story. *Thirdly*, a primacy of national over international political influences can often be observed in wartime, when pluralist and very open coverage of conflicts in the Middle East and the Muslim world alternates with very narrow coverage that has the potential to reinforce international crises. *Fourthly*, since, in most cases, foreign reporting is predominantly directed at domestic audiences, national markets prevail over international markets and therefore foreign reporting often reproduces local concerns by selecting news that the local audience wants to hear and can understand. *Fifthly*, probably as a result of the insulation of markets, financial resources are often very scarce in foreign reporting: news agencies tend to be financially ill-equipped and newsrooms have little personnel, especially in the Middle East many Western media have to cover forty or so countries; low budgets in foreign reporting make the

media susceptible to the public relations of governments and to propaganda. *Sixthly*, many journalists are badly educated and in most countries there are a very small number of Middle East and other area specialists in the main newsrooms of television, press and radio.

National media systems might be interconnected in the sense that foreign correspondents and news agencies in particular provide each national media system with the raw material of information. However, national media systems are not *interdependent*, since the way in which events are covered is not judged by those about whom the media systems report - in this case the people living in the Middle East and the Islamic world - but by domestic audiences. These people, due to their own distance from the matters reported, have hardly any means of judging the quality of the foreign news to which they are exposed. This is why domestic narratives, stereotypes, poor resources, bad education, and political interests are so often allowed to prevail over balanced information.

What at first seems to be a cultural problem is in fact an interaction between various national subsystems of the nation-state. These processes are almost universal, in the sense that language communities and nation states all over the world are communicative entities whose internal forces generate highly distinctive news output. This news has the potential to reinforce perceptions of conflict, which can easily lead to more tension in international relations. In specific environments, however, like in the contemporary European Union, national system dominance can start to give way to integrated regional structures and perceptions, as was perhaps the case during the British media coverage of the war in Iraq 2003 (see below).

If I hesitate to call these mechanisms of news making 'cultural stereotypes' or 'biases', it is because I consider the latter to be parts of the process: they do not completely determine the news content. The difference between other

theoretical approaches and the one presented here is not simply a difference in terminology. It is far more significant, because viewing media coverage from the perspective of systems theory allows us to understand that national influences on news coverage are strong while global interdependence remains weak, although occasional learning processes in the media are possible. The dangers of a lack of interdependence in news making are tremendous. Nevertheless, the relative autonomy of national media systems in Western democracies does allow for occasional changes and flexibility in internal constellations. While problematic interactions between media systems and societal forces can lead to the distortion of media images, 'truthful' and 'neutral' information is also possible. *Firstly*, Western media systems are not so 'watertight' as not to allow any truthful facts on Middle East developments to enter the news. *Secondly*, at certain times, the dynamics of public controversy allow for Middle Eastern studies and other kinds of expertise to find their way into the mainstream media in order to clarify public misconceptions. *Thirdly*, a country's relative distance from involvement in a heated international crisis or even in war can liberalise public debates. *Fourthly*, overcoming the preoccupation of the public with certain domestic issues that interfere with foreign coverage, even though they have nothing to do with the Middle East, can also change perceptions.⁴ *Fifthly*, stereotypes can be activated, but they can also be altered, depending on the kind of stereotype and how durable they are - some biases survive decades, others centuries or even millennia.⁵

To sum up, the images that Western mass media portray of the Middle East and Islam are often problematic, as Edward Said has rightly argued. Yet the 'image of the image' is very often also simplistic, because it underestimates

⁴ See below, for instance, on the case of the German media debating the separation of the issues, 'Holocaust' and the 'Israel-Palestine conflict'.

⁵ Franz W. Dröge, *Publizistik und Vorurteil* (Münster: Regensburg, 1967), p. 151.

cultural dynamics and those of the media system. It is only if we look at the real character of media content and production processes that an opening up of Western systems towards the Middle East and Islam can be imagined in the future.

The image of the Middle East and Islam in the German Press

Having introduced the arguments and preferred method of this investigation, this section presents the empirical results, based on a large study conducted on the image of the Middle East and the Islamic world in the German press. Around 14,000 articles were coded, analysed and interpreted using both quantitative and qualitative methods. While it is not possible to extrapolate too much from these German results, they do constitute a valid case study for a Western media system covering Islam.

Quantitative Results

Before taking a closer look at media narratives, we first examine some quantitative data on what kind of topics and facts were presented over the last few decades in the German press. These results allow a first glimpse into the strengths and weaknesses of news reporting.

Extent of Coverage: increasing, but still rudimentary

One positive result is that, compared to other regions, coverage of the Middle East has grown continuously in German media, and the region receives more attention than other world regions, such as Africa or Latin America (Hafez 2002a, Vol. 2, pp. 43 ff.). This increase in coverage started in the 1970s, and today, news and reporting on the Middle East have reached about the same level as those on North America. What makes these results less impressive is the fact that, on average over recent decades, not more than three articles a day on the Middle East have been published in national papers - a number that

must be compared with the mass of articles that are published about the Middle East in the region's own newspapers. The 'density of imagination' in Germany, as I would call it, is still rudimentary.

Moreover, this growth in news output was largely spurred by an increase in coverage of major world events, such as the Six Day War, the oil crisis of 1973, the Iranian revolution and the Gulf wars. Coverage of these events was sometimes very extensive, but coverage of the region itself frequently ebbed away with the end of events, which points to a low degree of continuity in news production. It is often much easier to report on aspects of a certain war or other sorts of political violence than it is to report about the subsequent peace negotiations or other signs of normalisation, as these constitute less dramatic news to German papers.

In addition, during the 1970s, a gap grew up between the increasing amount of newspaper coverage of the Middle East and the almost stagnating number of reports in political magazines. This can be seen as a sign that the German media, allowed for a steady growth in event-centred newspaper coverage, without providing the same amount of contextual information necessary to understand or analyse it.

In the final analysis, the Middle East and North Africa are regions about which the Western consumer receives much less information than about his/her own country and region, and rather a growing amount of poorly contextualised and often discontinuous pieces of information. Since it seems that more news about the Middle East cannot be digested by audiences, due to the constraints of everyday life, this is not to argue for more news. In fact, as will become clear later on, certain aspects of politics in the Middle East are almost over-reported. Instead, what is needed is more *contextualised* news and information.

Subject Areas: news routines and politically oriented views of the Middle East

About four-fifths of German newspaper and magazine reports over the last thirty years have dealt with political issues. Economic information counts for below ten per cent, and other subject areas like culture, entertainment, tourism and religion (in the narrow sense of religious teachings and practices) make up no more than about two per cent of coverage. Given that the mass media play an important role in shaping international perceptions, the German press has thus paved the way for a politically centred view of North Africa, the Middle East and the Muslim world. The normality of everyday life escapes this media perspective.

It is interesting to note that religion hardly plays a role in such coverage - only 'political Islam' features. This is also true for Judaism, of which we hear almost nothing except for its Zionist connotations.⁶ This has interesting implications for other news coverage. For example, the Judeo-Christian heritage of Europe and the Occident is a term frequently used in the debate on Turkish accession to the European Union. Yet it is arguably little more than a slogan, based on the legacy of the Old Testament at best, because contemporary Judaism is not very prominent in German mass media feuilletons. Similarly, contemporary Middle Eastern culture is almost invisible.

Another of the project's observations was that entertainment subjects, such as stories on the Persian Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlevi, on King Farouk or Aga Khan, for example, that were prominent front page news in the German and Western mass media in the 1950s and early 1960s, had vanished completely by the end of the 1960s. This development coincided almost exactly with the Six Day War of 1967, irrespective of the fact that figures like the Shah of Iran

⁶ Hafez, *Die politische Dimension*, 2002, Vol. 2, pp. 114 ff. In contrast to my findings, Detlef Thofern argues in his single-medium study on the German weekly news magazine *Der Spiegel* that the religious substance of Judaism gets more attention than that of Islam. Detlef Thofern, *Darstellungen des Islams in DER SPIEGEL. Eine inhaltsanalytische Untersuchung über Themen und Bilder der Berichterstattung von 1950 bis 1989* (Hamburg: Lit 1998), p. 77.

continued to rule and other monarchs kept on living their extravagant lives in exile. Therefore I would argue that the war was actually the first of a series of political shock waves that went through Western media, politicising the news and changing the whole system of news making. The second shock was the Iranian revolution and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism.

Yet we should not forget such observations about the post-war period: after the Second World War, entertainment and cultural aspects of the Middle East did make front page news in the West. While one could argue that the absence of Middle Eastern cultural and religious reporting seems to support Edward Said's position with regard to the cultural stereotyping of the Middle East by a Western media system like the German, this study's findings raise a major methodological objection: a missing agenda is no proof for the essentialist profiling of the 'Other'. The real problem is not so much what journalists and the public *think of* the Middle East, but what they *think about*, which is the classical agenda-setting paradigm in communication science. Large parts of the Middle Eastern and Muslim realities are just not reported in the German media. News gets rejected before it is even given a chance to be stereotyped. Moreover, the relatively short-term changes in news media culture with regard to entertainment issues show that there might not be a long-term, 'Orientalist', culturally *imbibed* bias at work in the selection of topics. Perhaps in the future we will be able to find ways of reviving older media cultures of diversity or develop new forms of cultural and entertainment approaches to the Middle East and North Africa.

If 'culturalism' is, as I argue, a poor explanation for such changes in media cultures, a far more plausible answer might be that great events tend to create their own news standards. Scholars found out a long time ago that news

values guide the process of the selection of news.⁷ For instance, news about 'violent' and 'nationally relevant' events are usually valued highly. Judgments on what qualifies a certain event as 'relevant', to stay with the example, can be routinised in a particular news room or other discursive spheres such as the German media system.

In the case of the coverage by German national papers of the Middle East and North Africa, there was a step-by-step worsening of standards, and the creation of news routines to which all players - news agencies, journalists and audiences - adhered. Of course, this seems unreasonable, because despite all the problems in the Middle East, there are enough positive events to report about (for example, an improvement in university education standards in most countries during recent decades), and there are enough reasons to treat the Middle East not *only* as a politically dangerous 'Near East'. While it is notoriously difficult to forecast tomorrow's media images, the documented shift in German coverage of the Middle East and North Africa that took place in the 1960s has shown that changes are possible. Thus future positive events that challenge existing news routines and revise existing news values - for example a viable democratic reform movement in the Middle East - could well diversify German media perceptions.⁸ It is not that German mass media do not react to the realities on the ground. They rather oversimplify. Learning processes in modern mass media seem much slower than one would expect, based on their otherwise fast, often real-time news coverage.

⁷ Johan Galtung and Mari Holmboe Ruge, 'The Structure of Foreign News', *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 64-91; Winifried Schulz, *Die Konstruktion von Realität in den Nachrichtenmedien* (Freiburg: Alber, 1976).

⁸ An example of this is the improved image of politics in modern Turkey that has been conveyed since democracy was revived in the 1990s. See Hafez, *Die politische Dimension*, 2002, Vol. 2, pp. 134ff.

Negativity as a news value

The media's focus on political issues makes diversification of the news agenda necessary for another reason: it almost inevitably leads to another problem, a conflict-centred view of the Middle East and the Muslim world that has the potential to increase tensions in international relations. Having analysed this large sample of German press coverage over a period from the 1950s to the 1990s, I found that one third to one half of the core events covered in the articles (depending on the kind of newspaper or magazine) were violent events such as terrorism, wars and assassination.⁹ Since this is a long-term average, it happens that at certain times, often lasting weeks and months, the absolute majority of news from the Middle East has been about political violence. This creates the image of a chaotic Middle East. Although media effects on people's opinions are hard to gauge using scientific means, it seems plausible that the concentration on negative news creates the widespread feeling in German society that the Middle East is a dangerous place - an area of the world where you had better not go.

A correlation of data showed that, not surprisingly, political news contains much more violence than, for example, cultural news. Therefore the strong focus on political news in Middle East coverage creates an image of a remote part of the world that appears in sharp contrast to the consumer's image of his or her local or national world. The latter contains conflicts, and sometimes violence, but also many other aspects such as entertainment and culture. We do not need comparative studies to show that there is currently more political violence in the Middle East than in Western democracies. Yet despite this, the social reality on the ground is often not as fierce and brutal as it seems through the 'binoculars' of German mass media. The reason many Westerners have prejudices against the Middle East might be deep-rooted cultural

⁹ See *ibid.*, pp. 59ff., 90f., 92ff., 125ff.

stereotypes, but they are also exposed to an often dehumanising image of life in the Middle East that contains politics, violence and not much else.

The high level of negativity in political reporting is not only a result of the nature of Middle Eastern politics, since even partly liberalised autocracies in the Arab world feature regular political behaviour and political debate, as well as elections. When Western media report these events, they tend to prefer highly institutionalised forms of regular politics, namely elections, referenda or changes in leadership (such as the succession after the death of King Fahd in Saudi Arabia). We only occasionally hear about ongoing political debates, and civil societies such as those in today's Egypt or Morocco, where governments are so often criticised and their policies debated in the national press. Meanwhile, when German news about the Middle East goes through the bottleneck of limited resources (usually publishing two to three articles a day), they tend to select news about violence. The situation is not much better when other parts of the world are covered. South American revolutions and African wars are all big news. The causes of such news standards can only be inferred, and not really proven empirically, because solid newsroom studies are rare and difficult to conduct. Some communication scholars argue that in the eyes of many consumers and journalists, the main function of the news media is to act as a warning system for dangers or potential dangers that develop in the outside world. Comparative research in various media systems of the world has shown that such news standards are a universal feature. Political violence in Ireland and Spain, or Islamist terrorism for example, make for preferred news. Still, there is also a certain North-South gap in the sense that political developments in the United States and Europe often receive more attention in non-Western media, because the US and Europe are at the centre of the global system.

Topics of Negativity: political Islam and Israel/Palestine

Continuing with the analysis, our findings about negativity can be correlated with single topics *within the subject area of political news*. We find that there are enormous differences that make it necessary to alter the assumption that the German media hold a consistently negative image of the Middle East. I shall demonstrate this by comparing two long established news topics on the German news agenda: political Islam and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

While in 20 to 40 per cent of all news items, violent events were the reason for German press reports on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this was the case in 40 to 70 per cent of all reports where 'Islam' was the major topic. There are obviously very different standards of reporting in various topical fields. 'Islam' is the single most negatively connoted topic in Middle East reporting in Germany. The reason for this can be deduced by looking at the chronology of news about Islam over the last four decades. It shows that prior to the Iranian Revolution in 1978-9, 'Islam' was hardly part of German news. Starting with the revolution, however, and inspired by a number of conflicts and international scandals such as the Rushdie affair, and, of course, the September 11th attacks, 'political Islam' became the object of public interest, rather than Islam as a religious or cultural phenomenon.

Underlying this are two completely different perspectives on conflict in the German media. Political Islam has been increasingly seen as an equivalent to terrorism rather than a political-cultural movement that has existed for over half a century and includes various aspects from actual opposition to existing authoritarian regimes, from social activism, to political violence of various kinds. Meanwhile, the Israel-Palestine conflict is seen as a 'civilised' conflict that can be solved. In other words, while political Islam is basically seen as a criminal phenomenon, the Israel-Palestine conflict is perceived as a substantial political problem with many different aspects, from violence to diplomacy to

regular political behaviour. This reductionism seems to conflict with Khalid Duran's argument that the really important phenomenon in many Muslim countries is the broad socio-cultural streaming of neoconservative 'Re-Islamisation' rather than Islamic fundamentalism, which is a much smaller phenomenon but receives most attention in Europe and the US.¹⁰ Moreover, most German media outlets have had difficulties in understanding the difference between moderate and extremist strands within fundamentalist political movements.

In fact, some Western governments have cooperated with certain 'fundamentalists' as diplomatic partners - consider EU-Iranian relations or relations between the US and Algerian, Egyptian or Turkish Islamists.¹¹ Yet that dialogue has not entered the media to any significant degree. The media have not learned that there is an imbalance between political culture and media culture in the West in the sense that the media are consistently stigmatizing political Islam as opposition movements, Western governments are pragmatically cooperating with those forces.

It seems that as long as Islamism is involved, a more balanced news agenda may not be achieved. In recent years, after German media were criticised for Islamophobia, many journalists began to pay lip service to the fact that Islam is not identical with fundamentalism. Yet they have continued to report news of fundamentalism or jihadism, with very few stories about aspects of moderate Islam.¹² With regard to this narrow view of 'Islam' - not of the whole Middle East - Edward Said and others who have said that there is indeed a deeply engrained cultural bias in the West that resists learning processes seem to be justified. The social psychologist Dröge differentiated between long-term

¹⁰ Khalid Duran, *Re-Islamisierung und Entwicklungspolitik* (Munich et al.: Weltforum Verlag, 1982).

¹¹ See Fawaz Gerges, *America and Political Islam: Clash of Cultures or Clash of Interests* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹² On the various branches of reformist Islam see, for instance: Mehran Kamrava, ed., *The New Voices of Islam. Reforming Politics and Modernity: A Reader* (London et al.: I.B. Tauris, 2006).

cultural, mid-term epochal and short-term contemporary stereotypes. It seems to me that Islam is a long-term stereotype. While the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been ongoing for sixty years and the image of Palestinians has improved or deteriorated several times (see below), the negative image of Islam in Western mainstream literature and culture is over 1000 years old. Since the Crusades and the time of Christian reformation and throughout colonialism, negative images prevailed over marginalised positive ones.¹³

Islam is not only a single, isolated topic, but a sub-theme that can appear in all other subject areas and topics, in politics as much as in culture and the economy. If it is true, as I would suggest, that there is a Western cultural bias against Islam, it seems to be comprehensive.

Countries of Negativity: the news geography

Moving from the topics of negative images to the geographical focus of such coverage, we can safely assert that the German media's images of the Middle East and North Africa are far from being homogeneous. An analysis of which Middle Eastern countries receive attention allows us to discern a specific news geography or news mapping. First, there are a limited number of 'white spots' in German news, because countries like Yemen or Oman are hardly ever covered. More importantly, there is a clear focus on the news of the Mashreq countries (Palestine, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria) and of Egypt, while news of the Maghreb, Sudan, the Arabian Peninsula, or countries like Pakistan and Afghanistan are much rarer. Since this is the average result of a long-term analysis from the 1950s to the 1990s, some might argue that certain things could have changed after the September 11th attacks, which was considered by many a turning point in the West's relations with the Middle East. However, after the initial attention paid to Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2001 and 2002,

¹³ See Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East. The History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

the prominence of those countries in German media seems strongly confined to the Western 'war on terror' in the area and could certainly end thereafter.

The news geography of the Middle East in the European media certainly differs from country to country. In France, for example, there is more awareness of the Maghreb. However, the fact remains that the image of the 'Orient' is not a unified phenomenon: it comprises various zones of attention and imagination. We simply have much more information available in our media systems about those parts of the Middle East and North Africa that offer prior 'news values' to us. News value is defined, for example, by international conflicts in the Middle East or cultural-historical proximity to certain countries, for example Egypt in the case of Germany and England, or Algeria and Lebanon in the case of France.

Interestingly, there is no correlation between the volume of bilateral trade and the volume of news coverage. While Germany conducts about half of its foreign trade in North Africa and the Middle East with countries like Turkey, Iran and Pakistan, these countries are the subject of only about 20 per cent of media reports.¹⁴ It is a combination of political interests, international relevance of conflicts and cultural proximity that determines foreign reporting, and not so much economic interest or socio-demographic factors such as the size of a country's population (see also Unland 1986). Even today's large coverage of Dubai is to a large driven by cultural fascination of a booming modernity and new opportunities for tourism (the mega-hotels and the like), and less by economic considerations. In-depth reporting about the fact that the harbour of Dubai is ten times bigger than Germany's largest port Hamburg and that the people of Dubai might very well revitalise their traditional trading culture at the crossroads of the Middle East is a side-show to German media.

¹⁴ Hafez, *Die politische Dimension*, 2002, Vol. 2, pp. 65 ff.

Regardless of the news values, a correlation of the country ranking with topical analysis shows that the more a country is represented in the German news, the more balanced the composition of subjects areas is, and the greater the chance of it escaping extreme concentration on political issues. If we further correlate these results with the analysis of negativity, we find there are basically three types of countries in the German news geography. There are blank spots like Yemen, which rarely surface in newspapers and media outlets. Then there are countries that are covered often because of political violence, but also because of non-exceptional political events like elections or issues of succession in government. This applies to many Gulf states, Israel, Egypt, or Turkey. Finally, there are countries whose image is very much confined to violent conflict, i.e. Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Afghanistan, and Sudan.

Thus what sometimes seems like a stereotypical monolith - German reporting about the Middle East and North Africa - is in fact a complex news geography. It consists of various spheres of density of reporting and awareness, and of more or less 'moderate', balanced and differentiated patterns of perception of political developments.

Qualitative Results: Framing, Discourse and Narratives

What remains to be explored is the qualitative aspect: how news stories are told, and what kind of frames and narratives are used. Since this is a vast field, and since it escapes quantitative content analysis, it is hard to give a representative answer. Instead, I would like to elaborate on a few case studies that show how interaction processes between media narratives, the media system and the national 'environments' of the media can be interpreted. In other words, how can the politico-economic complex and various segments of the audience and the public interfere with the media image of Islam and the Middle East and North Africa? I will concentrate on cases of international

conflict in the Middle East, crises of various types such as the oil crisis of 1973 (an economic, non-violent crisis), the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (a long-term conflict with various phases and aspects of both violent and diplomatic activity), and recent wars in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003). A crisis is by definition a turning point within a conflict that can lead to increased tension and violence, to stagnation or to resolution and settlement.

Before we try to interpret the cases, a few words about the framing of those events are in order. The first case is that of the coverage of the 1973 oil crisis in the German press, which went through roughly three phases.¹⁵ The initial phase, when the conflict began, was characterised by different approaches in the German press: this ranged from leftist-liberal sympathy with the Arab countries' endeavours to narrow the North-South gap in international relations, to conservative interpretations of the events as a danger to German national security and welfare. At the peak of events, after the October War of 1973, the coverage changed and the leftist-liberal segment of German newspapers took over the national security and welfare frame of the conservative papers. For about two weeks, while the OPEC boycotted the US and the Netherlands, it was almost as if there was full consensus in the German press that the Arabs had no right to do what they were doing. After the crisis was over, however, the coverage changed again and the liberal magazine *Der Spiegel*, to mention but one example, launched a whole series of articles on the exploitation of Arab countries by American and British major oil companies.

The next case is the German coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I conducted a full-text analysis of the major newspapers during major events such as the Six Day War, the October War, the negotiation of the Camp David

¹⁵ Hafez, *Die politische Dimension*, 2002, Vol. 2, pp. 180 ff.

Accords and the Lebanon invasion of 1982.¹⁶ On the whole, there was a tremendous change in overall framing. While in 1967, Germany sided almost completely with Israel, the media since changed step by step, applying a much more balanced approach that accepts both Israel's right of self defence and the national aspirations of the Palestinians, albeit with variations among newspapers mostly depending on the political spectrum to which they belong.

The third example is the wars in Afghanistan 2001 and Iraq 2003.¹⁷ In Germany, the question of whether or not the Afghan war was justified was not even debated, nor ever high on the agenda. This changed dramatically before, during and after the Iraq War of 2003. While in the United States, almost all mainstream media supported President Bush during the war, or at least did not allow for significant criticism, Germany's media were much more pluralist in their approach, allowing for anti-war, as well as pro-war voices to express themselves in articles, talk shows, etc. While 80 per cent of Germans, as well as the government, were against the war, opinions in the media were diverse. The situation seemed comparable to that in countries like Spain with the difference that the Aznar government was pro-war, but the Spanish people were against it, and the Spanish media systems comprised various elements from pro-government television to critical newspapers.

On the basis of all three, my interpretation of the framing and storytelling points in different directions. In countries that experience existential crises or else engage in full-scale war, the mass media seem ready to 'rally around their flags', supporting their governments, and what they define as their 'interests': a behaviour that has been recognised in modern media studies.¹⁸ For short periods, the media's ability to act in a pluralist way and attach weight to Middle Eastern perspectives can be seriously curtailed. This is what German

¹⁶ Hafez, *Die politische Dimension*, pp. 144 ff.

¹⁷ Hafez, 'Die irrationale Fehlwahrnehmung', 2002; Hafez, 2004.

¹⁸ See John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York: Wiley, 1973).

philosopher Hannah Arendt observed during the Vietnam War and what she labelled the 'mentality of *raison d'état*' - a serious threat to the plurality of Western democracies (Arendt, 1967, 1971). The case of Spain - a country that was involved in Iraq but which maintained diversity in the media - does not disprove this rule, because Spanish military engagement was on a limited scale, and did not activate the 'flag rallying syndrome'. The British example seems more interesting: I conducted a small content analysis of several British newspapers' coverage of the war and was impressed by the relative diversity maintained even in wartime (Hafez 2004). Although there were patriotic trends, this was certainly a much more 'distanced' coverage than, for instance, that during the Falklands War.

There are a number of reasons for the media to 'rally around the flag' when a country is engaged in war or feels threatened. *Firstly*, Western governments have learned to walk a tightrope between information and disinformation. Well-known examples include the US government's campaign on Iraqi 'weapons of mass destruction', and the British government's publications.¹⁹ *Secondly*, the media system itself is highly vulnerable to government propaganda, because one-sided government information 'trickles down' through news agencies into newsrooms.²⁰ The growing speed of news production makes checks on information almost impossible. *Thirdly*, mainstream audiences are often ready to rally around their flags, and there are always some powerful organised sectors in the public sphere, namely lobbyists, who support this trend.

While the mass media gain autonomy, manoeuvrability and diversity at regular intervals by playing politicians and audiences off against each other, this system collapses at wartime, because both groups push the mainstream media

¹⁹ See Howard Tumber and Jerry Palmer, *Media at War. The Iraq Crisis* (London: Sage, 2004).

²⁰ Hafez, 2007, pp. 24 ff.

in the same direction, making them active co-combatants of their governments.

The British case of 2003 is somewhat mystifying, but one might argue that British media coverage was exhibiting signs of a slow and gradual Europeanisation. In other words, due to the process of integration into the European Union, the national media system has perhaps been losing its dominance and opening up to trans-border influences from other European countries, *despite* the Euro-scepticism within the country. However, this is mere speculation and we have no empirical evidence to support it.

Apart from cases of war, German media are capable of retaining a critical distance. While media reporting during crises is a real problem, Western conflict reporting is on the whole much better. This is visible in the coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.²¹ Their coverage shows that if countries like Germany do not have to rally around their flag, or if the conflict as such is of a long-term nature, as in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the potential of German media to uphold diverse images of Middle Eastern conflicts increases.

Firstly, political lobbies and interest groups can be influential for a short time, but they are only one factor influencing media systems, and they do not control the media. *Secondly*, in times of conflict de-escalation, right and left wing political cleavages within the media allow for more diversity in their approaches (for example, the question of Turkey's accession to the EU is firmly entrenched in such party orientations, and these are echoed in German media). *Thirdly*, apart from times of high-intensity warfare, often meaning tight media control by the military, the visibility of human tragedies can activate the core humanist values of a society (note the first Intifada of 1987, which improved international attitudes towards the Palestinians). *Fourthly*, in

long-term conflicts such as the one between Israelis and Palestinians, domestic political cultures can undergo changes that can be conducive to changes in foreign reporting - for instance, German coverage of the conflicts was long overshadowed by the memory of the Holocaust and it is only very slowly that these issues are becoming dissociated from one another.

Conclusion

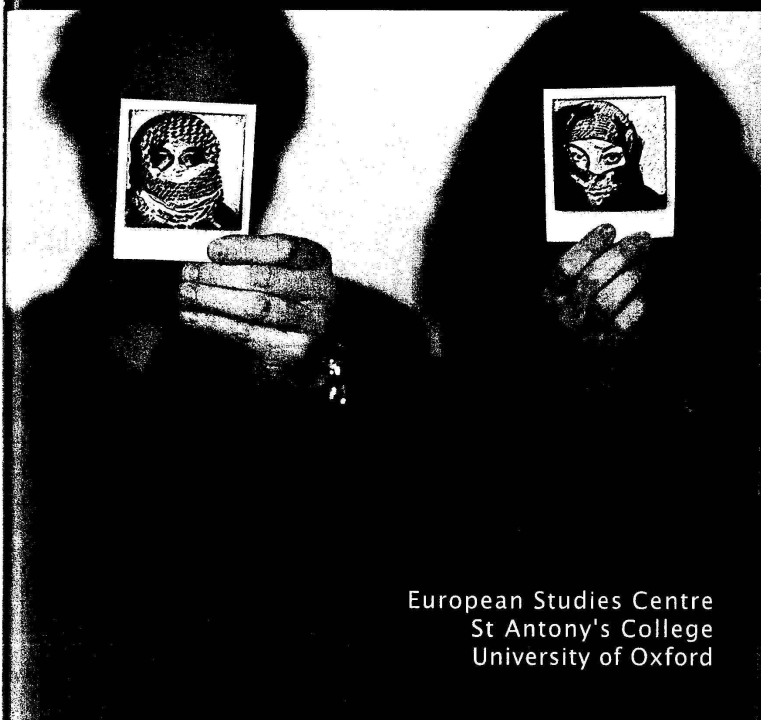
On the whole, under certain conditions, German foreign reporting on the Middle East can be firmly entrenched in nationalist argumentations that ridicule all talk of globalisation and of global exchanges in media systems. At other times, however, coverage is very diverse - a diversity Edward Said and many other critics of the Western media's coverage of the Middle East and Islam have probably not given enough credit. While many quantitative data, for example the strong focus of the German national press on violent issues related to Islam, seem to support Edward Said's argument of a stereotypical 'Orientalist' negative view of the Middle East and North Africa, we must admit that selectivity in news is no full-fledged stereotype. A constant media focus on issues like terrorism *implies* stereotyping on the side of the audience, but it is no *explicit* denigration of the 'Other' as inferior or evil. Moreover, a closer look at the complexities and changes of relevant discourses and narratives demonstrates that we must be careful not to overstate homogenous media coverage in Western Europe. What is needed are state-of-the-art analyses of media texts, narratives and a reflection on the multiple causes and effects of Western views of the Middle East and the rest of the Muslim world.

²¹ Hafez, *Die politische Dimension*, 2002, Vol. 2.

Mutual Misunderstandings?

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Kerem Öktem and Reem Abou-El-Fadl (eds.)



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