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"Frames" and Bias: How a Lack of Context in Middle East News Coverage can Impact U.S. Foreign Policy

Jennifer Lois Moore

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**“FRAMES” AND BIAS: HOW A LACK OF CONTEXT IN MIDDLE EAST
NEWS COVERAGE CAN IMPACT U.S. FOREIGN POLICY**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science, Interdisciplinary Studies

By

Jennifer L. Moore

December, 2016

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NEWS COVERAGE CAN IMPACT U.S. FOREIGN POLICY**

Political Science

Missouri State University, December, 2016

Master of Science

Jennifer L. Moore

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a critical examination into how American mainstream news media outlets often neglect to incorporate religious, cultural and historical context into their coverage of the Middle East. I show through my research and analysis that the news coverage of the Middle East, even at the highest echelons of American journalism, is often lacking in sophistication in terms of cultural and religious context, sometimes to the point of affecting its fairness and accuracy. The danger of this is that it has the power to grossly simplify and reduce to an “us versus them” frame an entire contingent of the global population: the Muslim world. I show that this fairness and accuracy is important because it directly impacts public opinion by promoting stereotypes and simplistic “frames” of storytelling, which, in turn, can affect the foreign policy making process by making it less democratic and potentially even altering the outcome of that policy.

KEYWORDS: journalism, Middle East, foreign policy, media, public opinion, impact bias, context

This abstract is approved as to form and content

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INTRODUCTION

Journalists like myself would like to believe that every story they report to the public has a direct impact on their audience and subjects they are writing about. This is, more often than not, a highly romanticized version of the field of journalism. However, some news coverage can and does result in ripples of change.

To evaluate whether American journalism does have the ability to impact foreign policy—which, if true, could have humanitarian, national security and democratic process implications—we must investigate the relationships between the mainstream media, American public opinion, and US foreign policy. I intend to do that by arguing:

1. There is strong evidence to suggest that public opinion helps shape US foreign policy.
2. There is strong evidence to suggest that mainstream journalism on foreign policy shapes public opinion.
3. Mainstream journalism's coverage of the Middle East can affect the decision making process and the outcomes of that foreign policy.
4. A serious lack of contextual information in American news coverage on the Middle East, heavy with “framing” that promotes ethnocentrism and stereotypes through the creation of a narrative bias, results in an ill-informed public opinion. Ultimately, I will argue that this detrimentally affects the foreign policy process.

In addition to connecting the dots of these relationships, this thesis will also contain a practical element. The latter part of the thesis acts as a resource for journalists and news media organizations aspiring to generate a more culturally comprehensive news coverage of the Middle East. In the future, I intend to expand this practical resource to include even more topics of news coverage; for the purposes of this thesis, the contextual background and press analysis is limited to four topics: the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, militant Islamist groups, the Hajj pilgrimage, and US troops in Saudi Arabia.

APPROACH TO DATA COLLECTION

Since there are several different parts to the thesis, the data collection and research varies somewhat among them, based on what method was most appropriate for that part of my research. To assess how the media, American public opinion and foreign policy relate to one another, I rely solely on peer-reviewed academic journal articles and scholarly books. I have written about, wherever relevant, the various schools of thought and progression of literature on these issues, as well as concrete examples of evidence for the positions, all of which are cited throughout the work.

News Media Database

In collecting data for my analysis of mainstream journalism, I have relied on databases that contain archives of TV and newspaper transcripts, most notably the LexisNexis Academic database. I have specifically analyzed two major newspapers, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, and three TV news networks, CNN, NBC and CBS, for their foreign coverage of the Middle East. My reason for selecting these mammoths in American news was primarily because of their leadership in setting the national conversation. As one scholar noted, when *The New York Times* publishes a story about an event or issue abroad, others often follow.¹ Similarly, CNN's broad network of foreign bureaus has earned it a stellar reputation for breaking foreign news. The reason I

¹Philip Powlick and Andrew Katz, "Defining the American Public Opinion/Foreign Policy Nexus," *Mershon International Studies Review* 42, no. 1 (May 1998) 42.

did not include ABC News in this analysis is because that network's international coverage was so thin it did not lend itself to this research.

Historical Sources

For data collected on the contextual information—including historical and religious information—which I deemed missing from the mainstream journalism coverage I analyzed, I rely on a combination of books, including multiple biographies of Muhammad, whom Muslims believe was the final prophet of God. These religious sources include The Qur'an as well as hadith collections of, primarily, Al-Bukhari, Al-Tabari, and Muslim. I have also drawn from nearly a dozen books by scholars of Middle Eastern history, including but not limited to Bernard Lewis, John Esposito, Albert Hourani, Maxime Rodinson and Karen Armstrong, leaning on those scholars who incorporate early religious history into their work for the purpose of trying to understand today's Middle East.

Author's Use of Ethnographical Research

I am a journalist who lived and studied in both the pre-September 11 (Egypt) and the post-September 11 (Qatar, United Arab Emirates) Middle East. I lived for seven years in a Salafist Muslim home, where Arabic was spoken, with a religious family who rendered and published their own English translations of The Qur'an and the hadith collections by Al-Bukhari and Muslim.² One of the household members was at the time,

² *The Glorious Qur'an*, translated into English by Ahmad Zidan and Dina Zidan, 1991, self-published in Cairo, Egypt. I will not be using this version for my research because it is not considered to be among the more objective or accurate of available translations. I

and still is, a central figure in the Al-Jazeera network, and the family had deep roots in the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The home I lived in served as a frequent meeting place for Muslim Brotherhood supporters working within Al-Jazeera, which gave me insight on their attitudes and beliefs on the media, American foreign policy, and political Islam.

Ethnographical research does not typically begin with a hypothesis and it often involves observation and even participation, allowing the researcher to learn through experience and firsthand accounting. Along those lines, even though my experience was a personal one, and not for the purposes of research at the time, I have since been able to glean from what I witnessed during those years and apply my firsthand knowledge of certain attitudes and movements to my overall understanding as a scholar. These experiences gave me more than just a glimpse into a political rationale and religious ideology that has become a noticeable presence in the region and on the world stage, namely that of conservative Islamist thinking. It allowed me to do careful examination, data review and analysis of these attitudes in a way that meets the standards of basic ethnographical research, in terms of observing patterns and behavior of participants over time.

In addition to my personal experiences mentioned here, I have a firm grasp of Modern Standard Arabic, having studied formally and receiving a certificate from the Arabic Language Institute, part of the American University in Cairo. I was a guest of the Saudi Arabian royal family on a trip to Mecca in April, 2000, where I observed firsthand,

instead use the more traditional translation: *The Holy Qur'an*, translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, 5th Edition, (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 2000).

on the ground, the Hajj pilgrimage and wrote about it for *The Columbia Missourian* newspaper.

Through these experiences, I am able to apply an element of ethnographical research to this theses, a research method I have limited to only the portions of cultural context I find to be missing from mainstream journalism coverage of the articles.

A REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Public Opinion's Influence on US Foreign Policy

In the years following the Second World War, the prevalent school of thought among scholars was that the public was unstable and irrational in terms of foreign policy issues.³ The most widespread theory was nicknamed “Mood Theory,” heralded by Gabriel Almond in his 1960 book *The American People and Foreign Policy*. Almond argued that the attitudes of most Americans toward foreign policy “lack intellectual structure and factual content,” except in times of immediate threat—and that these attitudes were subject to volatile “mood” swings of the nation.⁴ In his 1973 *The Public's Impact on Foreign Policy*, Bernard Cohen reduced the State Department's attitude on

³ Phillip J. Powlick, "The Attitudinal Bases for Responsiveness to Public Opinion among American Foreign Policy Officials," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 35, no. 4 (December 1991): 611.

⁴ Gabriel Almond, *The American People and Foreign Policy* (New York: Praeger, 1960) 69.

public opinion to this quote: “To hell with public opinion... We should lead and not follow.”⁵

The Vietnam War, however, changed the nexus between public opinion and foreign policy, as well as how that relationship was viewed by scholars.⁶ “Mood Theory” gave way to a completely different school of thought in the 1980s, one that actually saw the American public’s views on foreign policy as stable, researchable, and valuable in the foreign policymaking process.⁷ What was once dismissed as largely irrelevant to the actual decisions made in foreign policy, public opinion, began to emerge as a “significant factor in the making of American foreign policy.”⁸

In their 1988 research, Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro refuted that mass American opinion “moves in capricious or inexplicable ways.”⁹ Rather, they argued, that the public was quite steady and rational in its opinions and assessments of foreign policy. That is not to say that the American general public doesn’t change its positions on specific leaders or policies over time—because it can, and has, as in the Vietnam War era—but Page and Shapiro point out that, when given other policy alternatives, the public changes its opinion much less frequently than when merely asked about one, specific

⁵ Bernard Cohen, *The Public’s Impact on Foreign Policy* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973) 62.

⁶ Bernard Hennessy, “The Public Impact Upon Foreign Policy,” *International Studies Quarterly* Vol. 12, no. 1 (March 1968): 117.

⁷ Powlick, “The Attitudinal Bases for Responsiveness to Public Opinion Among American Foreign Policy Officials,” 611.

⁸ Donald L. Jordan and Benjamin I. Page, “Shaping Foreign Policy Opinions: The Role of TV News,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 36, no. 2 (June 1992): 227.

⁹ Robert Shapiro and Benjamin Page, “Foreign Policy and the Rational Public,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 32, no. 2 (June 1988): 243.

political “problem.”¹⁰ If the public appears confused, they write, the “fault may very well lie with the provider of information—or misinformation.”¹¹

When that information is accurate and fair, Page and Shapiro contend, public opinion is stable and rational and should be taken into account in policymaking as a part of the democratic process.¹² Other scholars take it a step further and suggest that certain subgroups of the public, particularly those identified as the “attentive public” who are well educated and informed of current events, should have input into the foreign policy process.¹³ The percentage of the American public that fall into the “attentive public” is quite small—most estimate between five and 10 percent of the total population.¹⁴

One scholar in particular, Philip Powlick, writes that research shows a correlation between public opinion and policy outcomes—and that there is a much more significant degree of public influence on foreign policy today than in earlier eras.¹⁵ His research, published in 1991, included 68 interviews with officials from the State Department and the National Security Council. He found that, while American foreign policy officials do hope to keep control over their decision making process, they now express “fairly responsive attitudes” toward public opinion.¹⁶ Similarly, Thomas Risse-Kappen asserts

¹⁰ Shapiro and Page, “Foreign Policy and the Rational Public,” 214.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 243-44.

¹² *Ibid.*, 244.

¹³ Powlick, “The Attitudinal Bases for Responsiveness to Public Opinion Among American Foreign Policy Officials,” 612.

¹⁴ Powlick and Katz, “Defining the American Public Opinion/Foreign Policy Nexus,” 37.

¹⁵ Powlick, “The Attitudinal Bases for Responsiveness to Public Opinion Among American Foreign Policy Officials,” 612.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 613.

that one of the main factors enabling a “top-down” approach, in which policy makers maintain control over public opinion, is a low degree of knowledge on issues.¹⁷

There are many examples, outside of the Vietnam War era, of public opinion directly influencing American foreign policy changes. In the spring of 1989, when George H.W. Bush was fresh in office, his initial policy was to be more cautious toward Moscow. However, the American public, shedding its fear of the Soviet threat, reacted negatively to Bush’s plans. By that summer, the Bush administration had changed its tone and assured the public that it firmly supported the new, more open Gorbachev and his plans.¹⁸ The public sentiments had changed primarily because of what they had learned through the news media.¹⁹

Public opinion can directly influence foreign policy in three ways: by changing policy goals, changing the order of priorities, and by narrowing the range of options for action.²⁰ When applying this idea to public opinion on the conflicts in the Middle East, particularly the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we can see that public opinion actually has the ability to play a role in improving conflict-ridden areas.

Throughout the literature on how public opinion can influence American foreign policy, there is a strong emphasis on the accuracy and objectivity of the information that the public is receiving. Page and Shapiro write that the key to the public’s rational participation in foreign policy matters lies largely in information being “unbiased.”²¹

¹⁷ Thomas Risse-Kappen, "Public Opinion, Domestic Structure, and Foreign Policy in Liberal Democracies," *World Politics* 43, no. 4 (July 1991): 481.

¹⁸ Ibid, 502.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, 482.

²¹ Shapiro and Page, “Foreign Policy and the Rational Public,” 244.

Their definition of unbiased refers to coverage free from “systematic misinformation” borne of framing constructed using, for example, nationalistic or anticommunist terminology and “experts.”²² This same position strongly implies that framing in mainstream American journalism, a result of bias, could lead to a weakening of the democratic process, due to a confused or misinformed public. This places a grave responsibility upon the mainstream news media in terms of getting it right, and on being as objective as possible, particularly in news stories about United States foreign policy as it relates to conflicts, peacekeeping, or its own national security.

News Coverage’s Influence on American Public Opinion

In a 1987 study, Page, Shapiro and Dempsey attempted to determine who and what, exactly, moves public opinion of ordinary Americans. Their research concluded that the “greatest mover of public opinion” was the news analysis and commentary done by prominent journalists, and that one reason was because of their perceived nonpartisan status.²³ Elected officials were found to have no persuasive effect in the study, except for popular presidents; this signifies that the mainstream news media, for all the criticism it endures for being partisan, was at the time of that study an effective mover of public opinion on policy matters. A study of 32 foreign policy cases and their effects on public opinion showed that news stories from news anchors, foreign correspondents, or special commentators “had a very large effect on public opinion about foreign policy”; a single

²² Ibid, 246.

²³ Powlick and Katz, “Defining the American Public Opinion/Foreign Policy Nexus,” 37.

story that fell into the category of “probably favorable” resulted in nearly six percentage points of opinion change.²⁴

Powlick and Katz suggest that the decisions made by journalists and editors in what stories they end up covering allows for the activation of public opinion.²⁵ Major newspapers and broadcasters in America use a rubric of newsworthiness to determine which stories to cover: those with violence or conflict often rise to the top, as do stories involving a degree of familiarity. It is these stories that rely on familiarity to resonate that run the risk of bias. Sometimes the journalist overemphasizes the Eurocentric focus on foreign policy coverage; at other times, journalists focus their attention on how the story affects Americans abroad.²⁶

What’s more, the literature on how public opinion impacts American foreign policy shows that states with highly active “societal actors” are states in which public opinion generally plays a “major role” in foreign policy.²⁷ Risse-Kappen writes that these societal actors, which he suggests are organizations and social coalitions that can express grievances, mobilize societal pressure and raise demands, could be the missing link between mass public opinion and elite decisions made on foreign policy.²⁸ Conceivably, the robust news media landscape like the one in the United States falls under this definition.

²⁴ Jordan and Page, “Shaping Foreign Policy Opinions,” 234.

²⁵ Powlick and Katz, “Defining the American Public Opinion/Foreign Policy Nexus,” 40.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Risse-Kappen, “Public Opinion, Domestic Structure, and Foreign Policy in Liberal Democracies,” 486.

²⁸ Ibid, 484-86.

News Coverage's Influence on Foreign Policy Makers

There are several examples of media reports spurring immediate action by policymakers. On December 4, 1992, President George H. W. Bush announced that he was sending US troops to the Horn of Africa, saying, "Every American has seen the shocking images from Somalia."²⁹ An even more powerful example comes from April 16, 1991, when President Bush announced he was sending U.S. troops to aid Kurdish refugees huddled in the cold of the mountains on the Iraq-Turkey border after fleeing bombing from Saddam Hussein's army.³⁰ Bush had, at several points in the previous two weeks, said the United States was very limited in what it could do to help the Kurds; on April 3, he had said he did not want to "see us get sucked into the internal civil war inside Iraq."³¹ But reporters were already on the ground having covered the conflict, and their transmission of video and photographs of mothers burying their children in makeshift mountain graves and of children with chemical burns created a sense of urgency and a human desire among the public to respond. Indeed, Bush even mentioned the press coverage in his April 16 news conference, saying, "No one can see the pictures or hear the accounts of this human suffering—men, women and most painfully of all, innocent children—and not be deeply moved."³² Richard Haass, who served on Bush's National Security Council, said he believed television "probably had the greatest impact at this time in pushing us through the various phases of policy than at any time during the [Gulf]

²⁹ Warren Strobel, *Late-Breaking Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: US Institute of Peace Press, 1997), 141.

³⁰ Ibid, 127-131.

³¹ Ibid, 128.

³² *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, George Bush, 1991, Book I* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1992), 321.

crisis.”³³ The news media further impacted this issue by pointing out that the president had encouraged the Iraqi people to rise up against Saddam Hussein, questioning the president about his role or responsibility for the Kurds’ outcome. As State Department spokeswoman Margaret Tutwiler would later characterize the media pressure, the administration was “taking on a lot of water,” and acted as a result of that pressure.³⁴

There even exists a term for media having an immediate impact on changing foreign policy: the CNN Effect. In her autobiography, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said she once referred to CNN as “the sixteenth member of the [UN] Security Council because the cable network had more influence on Council decisions than most governments.”³⁵ Several studies have concluded that news media coverage affects both agenda setting and policy preferences, and that the contents of those media reports bear consequences on the global stage.³⁶ Because of this, it becomes even more imperative that journalists are relaying an accurate, comprehensive portrait of the scenario so that policymakers are working from a position of facts.

Bias and “Framing” in Foreign Policy News

Journalists often use “frames” to craft a storyline in a way that is relevant and understandable to their audience.³⁷ This can be a useful tool in helping readers or viewers conceptualize and apply the news report in ways that are personal to them. However,

³³ Strobel, *Late-Breaking Foreign Policy*, 128.

³⁴ Strobel, *Late-Breaking Foreign Policy*, 129.

³⁵ Madeleine Albright, *Memo to the President Elect: How we can restore America’s Reputation and Leadership*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 126.

³⁶ Jordan and Page, “Shaping Foreign Policy Opinions,” 228.

³⁷ Powlick and Katz, “Defining the American Public Opinion/Foreign Policy Nexus,” 36.

“framing” can also have a negative effect when it causes the story to leave the reader with an inaccurate understanding, often by omitting facts pertinent to the overall understanding.

“Framing” and bias in the context of journalism are often used interchangeably, but they are not the same. “Framing” is far more intentional, usually with a purpose and intended outcome. Bias is usually more inherent and often unintentional; in theory, it is “a tendency, an inclination, or a bent that makes it difficult for us to communicate without prejudice.”³⁸ Essentially, bias is what causes someone to frame a story in a certain way.

There are different ways to analyze bias in the field of journalism. First, there is individual bias of each reporter and editor, which is unavoidable and exists because of a person’s background and life experiences. Then there is structural bias of journalism as a professional practice, which is much more deeply ingrained in the newsrooms and schools of journalism—the field of journalism itself, in other words—and which can take many forms.³⁹

Some types of “framing” are in terms of identity, such as an “us vs. them” frame.⁴⁰ A 1997 study of 21 Illinois residents showed that people who encountered a media story that either had a “human impact frame” or a “familiarity frame,” in which readers were able to identify with one party in the story, were much more likely to have a strong opinion on the matter.⁴¹ This is one example of how media bias, whether intended

³⁸ Andrew Cline, “Bias,” in *21st Century Communication: A Reference Handbook*, ed. William Eadie (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2009), 479.

³⁹ Cline, “Bias,” 483.

⁴⁰ Powlick and Katz, “Defining the American Public Opinion/Foreign Policy Nexus,” 36.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

or not, can impact public opinion which, as we have identified above, can in turn influence foreign policy.

TV reports on foreign policy often use what Powlick and Katz refer to as “episodic frames” that contain very little important contextual information on which the public could make a sound judgment.⁴² An “episodic frame” follows a narrative bias crafted for the purpose of framing.⁴³

This relates to foreign policy journalism because the public evaluates foreign policy issues through cognitive filters of their own belief systems, relying heavily on what is most familiar and known.⁴⁴ This combination—journalists portraying foreign policy stories in familiar, often Eurocentric “frames” and the public only taking interest in the familiar—make conditions ripe for bias and stereotyping to spread.

How Media Bias Can Impact the Foreign Policy Process

So far in this thesis, I have argued that a) public opinion helps shape American foreign policy, b) select news media outlets directly affect public opinion on foreign policy, c) news media can directly influence the actions of foreign policymakers, and d) bias in “framing” of foreign policy news stories can affect the attitudes and perceptions of events and issues happening abroad.

But why does this matter? Scholars have voiced concern that media commentators and journalists hold such “potency” in the foreign policy process, because if they are biased, for example with ties to interest groups, then that bias could cast a “disturbing”

⁴² Ibid, 43.

⁴³ Cline, “Bias,” 479-486.

⁴⁴ Powlick and Katz, “Defining the American Public Opinion/Foreign Policy Nexus,” 44.

shadow on a process meant to be in line with other democratic processes and values.⁴⁵ If systematic biases are not considered in foreign policy news coverage, then that pollutes the news coverage and affects the democratic nature of the foreign policy process.⁴⁶

In his book *Media and Political Conflict*, Gadi Wolfsfeld says journalists can influence the conflicts they cover in two ways: by altering the balance of power through raising the profile of the party deemed the “challenger” and leading a party to change its tactics, strategy or behavior. This means that, beyond just affecting the democratic nature of the foreign policy process, media bias can result in tangible outcomes on the ground. In one example of bias in American attitudes toward foreign policy, Page and Shapiro found in their research that, since the establishment of the modern national state of Israel in 1948, most Americans “and most of the U.S. media” have felt strong cultural ties to Israel, and in disputes, Americans have “favored” Israelis rather than Arab countries or Arab nationalist movements.⁴⁷ Conceivably, this could have ramifications on the US role in brokering a peace settlement between the two parties.

Edward Said, a political activist and literary critic, wrote extensively about what he saw as “misrepresentations and distortions committed in the portrayal of Islam” by American mainstream journalism, particularly in matters involving conflict with Israel.⁴⁸ Ironically, Edward Said himself is a good example of bias, and even “framing,” in his writing on the Israeli-Palestinian crisis. Part of this was his own inescapable personal bias; born in Jerusalem, his Palestinian family left for Cairo in 1947 as conflict arose over

⁴⁵ Jordan and Page, “Shaping Foreign Policy Opinions: The Role of TV News,” 237.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 238.

⁴⁷ Shapiro and Page, “Foreign Policy and the Rational Public,” 237.

⁴⁸ Said, *Covering Islam*, xlviii.

the United Nations partition of Palestine.⁴⁹ After becoming a professor at Columbia University, he was elected to the Palestinian legislature in exile, the Palestinian National Council, in 1977.⁵⁰ Although he supported a peaceful solution to end the political crisis between Israel and Palestine, Said was an outspoken critic of the Oslo peace process that would have ushered in a two-state solution. He fiercely portrayed Israel as a perpetrator of injustice and the Palestinians as victims, his own form of narrative bias.⁵¹

Despite the cynicism found in much of Said's writing, his work *Covering Islam* is useful because it is one of the few books that investigates specifically how some American journalists have used narrative framing to portray Israel as an underdog, and a familiar one to the West, at that. Said suggests that this framing is intentionally promoted by the Israeli government, and that it is "designed to obscure what it is that Israel and the United States, as 'Islam's' main opponents, have been doing."⁵² Whether this is true or not will not be examined here; it is worth noting, however, that the concept of media providing a blurry picture, or even a smokescreen that allows foreign policy officials to avoid accountability is worth serious investigation. This media narrative bias, Said contends, provided a smokescreen for the United States and Israel to bomb and invade Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Libya, Somalia and Iraq over the decades.⁵³ He says the American mainstream press has largely followed an Israeli-led public relations campaign to characterize Palestinians as "sub-human," a plan that has been shown to influence United

⁴⁹ "Edward Said". *Encyclopædia Britannica*. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2016. Web. 04 Nov. 2016, accessed at <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Edward-Said>.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Said, *Covering Islam*, xxi.

⁵³ Ibid.

States Middle Eastern policy.⁵⁴ This is an example of the news media applying a narrative bias through “framing,” since it creates a clear plot with a protagonist and an antagonist.⁵⁵

In addition to disrupting the democratic process, it could be argued that both bias and “framing” in America’s coverage of the Middle East have humanitarian and national security ramifications as well. However, the purpose of this thesis is not to examine the tangible outcomes of that media bias, but rather to identify the factors that lead to that bias so that the journalists’ coverage of such events is as comprehensive and as accurate as possible. I do aim to identify in the following pages of press analysis that there is indeed a bias in mainstream American news coverage of the Middle East, and that, based on the literature aforementioned, this bias weakens the democratic process and can lead to a less objective approach to conflict resolution in a region where the United States is still a significant player.

In this thesis, I am specifically focusing on the stereotypes and cultural bias that has occurred, and continues to occur to a lesser degree, in the coverage of Islam and the Arab world. That is not to say that bias is absent from other ethnic groups, religions and nationalities in the Middle East; it is the bias toward Islam and Arab culture, however, that appears to still be most widespread. To grasp the breadth and history of this bias and “framing” in American news coverage of the Middle East, I refer to the work of Edward Said, author of *Orientalism* and *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Cline, “Bias,” 483.

⁵⁶ Said, *Covering Islam*, 85.

HISTORY OF BIAS IN NEWS COVERAGE OF ISLAM AND THE ARAB WORLD

Edward Said, in his book *Covering Islam*, contends that Americans largely learn about Islam through the news media. What's more, Americans have scant opportunity to view the Islamic world except through the media, which Said argues gives an extremely reduced portrait of Muslims.⁵⁷ Said is careful to clarify that when he writes about Islam, he does not mean to suggest that there is one, uniform version of the religion. He discusses Islam, he says, as interpretations of the faith that manifest themselves in human acts.⁵⁸ Whereas one, "real" Islam does not exist in the Muslim world, the American media have "portrayed it, characterized it, analyzed it" to the point of making it, or at least a popular perception of it, known.⁵⁹ There is, therefore, now a perceived, uniform version of Islam among the general American population. The problem is, Said contends, this familiarity Americans now have with Islam is based on "far from objective material," including severe ethnocentrism and cultural hatred.

Part of this animosity may derive from fear of the unfamiliar, or the other. Said presents a strong argument that existential or historical context matters, particularly in American news coverage of Islam. Without this context, he writes, stories on Muslims in

⁵⁷ Said, *Understanding Islam*, 47, 55.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 45.

⁵⁹ Ibid, li.

conflict “in effect vitiate anything like the reporting of what takes place on the ground and deny it from inhabiting a more humane and more understandable context.”⁶⁰ Part of the source of this bias is because reporters do not know the predominant language of the people on whom they are reporting.⁶¹ During the first days of the Iranian hostage crisis in Tehran, for example, there were approximately three hundred foreign reporters—and not a Persian-speaker among them.⁶²

Language is one area where reporters often fall short of fully understanding a given situation abroad. Another area is knowledge of the hadith and The Qur’an, because it is interpretations of these religious texts that help lead different groups of people to respond differently to the same situation. It is imperative for journalists covering the region to have a knowledge and familiarity with early sources of Islam—including The Qur’an, hadith, and sira, because they allow the reporter to provide a more accurate portrayal.⁶³

Edward Said offers tips for American journalists who hope to responsibly cover the Islamic world: first, isolate the basic teachings of The Qur’an. Second, realize there are many different sects, jurisprudential schools and linguistic theories. Third, they need to understand the “sheer historical duration of the venture of Islam,” including the seventh century advent of the faith and the vast area that was involved.⁶⁴ Journalists also

⁶⁰ Ibid, xlvii.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid, 45.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 60.

need to be aware of how quickly officials in the Muslim world resort to using religion as a justification for legitimacy or to maintain political control and stability.⁶⁵

Edward Mortimer, a commentator and editorial writer for *The Times of London*, also suggests that journalists' lack of knowledge and familiarity with Middle East culture, history and religion leads to a "hostile" form of biased coverage. He himself was deemed an "expert" on the Middle East after a three-week tour of Israel, Jordan, Egypt and Lebanon, an "overnight" expertise he continued to remain sheepish about for decades.⁶⁶

In December of 1988, researchers at The Ohio State University and Cornell University conducted a study on 512 American adults' attitudes toward Israel and the Palestinians in terms of foreign policy. The results showed a 3:1 ratio of those who sympathized with Israel to those who were more sympathetic to Palestinians.⁶⁷ This suggests there is a "master narrative" of a storyline with characters who tend to behave in consistent roles.⁶⁸

One way in which bias creeps in is through the promotion of the idea that the Islamic world defines itself almost exclusively by what happens beyond its borders. Said suggests that it is a "condescending" approach, as well as being shallow and inaccurate, "to conceive of the whole Islamic world as bothered by only by what after all is external to it."⁶⁹ When the media portray Muslims as only having external concerns, it's another way of reducing the political and cultural richness required for accuracy.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 63.

⁶⁶ Edward Mortimer, "Islam and the Western Journalist," *Middle East Journal* 35, no. 4 (1981), 492.

⁶⁷ Jon Krosnick and Shibley Telhami, "Public attitudes toward Israel: A Study of the Attentive and Issue Publics," *International Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (1995): 540.

⁶⁸ Cline, "Bias," 483.

⁶⁹ Said, *Covering Islam*, 65.

PRESS ANALYSIS AND CONTEXT OF MIDDLE EAST COVERAGE

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Contextual background of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. According to early biographer Ibn Ishaq, Muhammad reported having had an extraordinary experience one night as he lay in a state “midway between sleep and wakefulness.”⁷⁰ In what The Quran calls a “vision,” Muhammad said he was visited by Gabriel and placed astride a miraculous white, winged steed. Muhammad said the creature flew him from the Ka’ba to “Al-Masjid Al-Aqsa,” translated as “the farthest place of prostration.”⁷¹ This destination has come to be understood as Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, although some early traditions interpreted it to mean a place in heaven.⁷² That part of Muhammad’s experience would come to be known Islamic heritage as the *isra’*, or journey.⁷³ What followed was the account of the *miraj*, or ascension: Muhammad said he soared with Gabriel from a nearby rock up to the gates of heaven. When he reached the highest level of heaven, Muhammad said, he encountered God.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ *Sahih Bukhari*, Volume 4, Book of the Beginning of Creation, Hadith 3207, Arabic-English translation by Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan (Riyadh: Darussalam, 1996).

⁷¹ Lewis, Bernard, *The Middle East: A Brief History of the Last 2000 Years* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 158.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991) 72.

⁷⁴ *Sahih Bukhari*, Volume 4, Hadith 3207.

The effect Muhammad's *Isra'* and *Miraj* has had on the current Palestinian-Israeli crisis is significant; it is what makes Jerusalem, and Al-Aqsa Mosque in particular, Islam's third holiest site, adding Islam to the other faiths which had already laid claim to the Holy Land. Today, Al-Aqsa Mosque—the place where Muslims believe Muhammad led the prophets in prayer—rests in East Jerusalem, the predominantly Arab part of the city. The mosque is part of an ancient compound that is known as the Temple Mount to Jews and the Noble Sanctuary to Muslims. Since Jews believe the place where Al-Aqsa Mosque currently stands is also the site of King Solomon's temple, the foundation is incredibly significant for Jews and Muslims alike.

The rock from which Muhammad is believed to have ascended is now part of one of Jerusalem's most recognizable structures: the brilliant, gold-and-turquoise mosque known as the Dome of the Rock. Jewish tradition holds that the rock inside is where Abraham bound his son, Isaac, with the intention of sacrificing him. Muslims are concerned that Israel's more conservative citizens are planning to take over the site and build a third and final temple there.

Israeli authorities, upon capturing the area in the 1967 Six Day War, chose to embrace a status quo agreement that made the Jordanian Waqf civil administrators of the site and declared only Muslims are allowed to worship there. Despite that this arrangement has become increasingly unpopular in recent years among some religious Jews, the official Israeli position remains unchanged. Jews and Christians who are caught praying on the Temple Mount are asked by authorities to leave immediately.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Amanda Borschel-Dan, "As Support Widens for Jewish Prayer on Temple Mount, Should We Fear Apocalyptic Consequences?" *The Times of Israel*, April 28, 2016.

The Name “Allah” as it relates to Monotheism. From a linguistic point of view, the name *Allah* implies singularity. The Arabic word for the general “god” or “deity” is “*ilah*,” but when the definite article “*Al*,” or “the,” is added onto the front, the “l” sounding consonant is doubled and the word becomes “*Al-lah*,” meaning “*The God*,” and denoting oneness.

Indeed, today’s Arab Christians and Jews also use the name *Allah* in their sacred texts and when referring to God in their churches and synagogues. A Bible in Arabic refers to God as *Allah* from Genesis to the Book of Revelation. Just as the French use “Dieu” and the Germans “Gott,” Allah is, quite simply, the word for God in the Arabic language. The Jewish and Christian Arabs of pre-Islamic Arabia believed in Allah as the deity of the “people of the scriptures.”⁷⁶ Much confusion has been caused by the West’s portrayal of the Muslim’s concept of God as an Eastern, mysterious deity named Allah. Often, this is due to a mere failure to translate the word “Allah” to the English word “God.” Renowned historian Albert Hourani wrote that the perception in the West has, for generations, been that “Allah is not God” and that, following that line of thought, “Islam is a false religion.”⁷⁷ This frame portraying the deity of the Muslims as a “foreign” god in mainstream media promotes an “us versus them” frame of reference, which, as we saw earlier in the thesis, can have ramifications on public opinion and foreign policy.

Due to mainstream America’s familiarity with Judeo-Christian culture and sources, the majority of Americans at least have some understanding of why Jerusalem is sacred to Jews and Christians. After all, it’s where many of the stories of the Bible are

⁷⁶ Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad: A History of the Prophet* (London: Phoenix, 1991), 45.

⁷⁷ Albert Hourani, *Islam in European Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 8, 10.

set, including where Jesus walked and preached. Religion scholar Diarmaid MacCulloch refers to Christianity as the “daughter religion” of Judaism.⁷⁸

In mainstream newspapers like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, Christians and Jews who speak something other than English are often quoted as invoking “God,” but Muslims speaking Arabic or Farsi or Urdu are said to invoke “Allah.” One is translated into English; the other maintains its original language. The effect is that one feels like the “same God” most Americans are familiar with, and the latter feels much more foreign, which is likely to produce an unnecessary bias, or a “frame” depicting “the other” that could have ramifications on public opinion, diplomacy and conflict resolution.

For example, reporter Nichole Christian wrote in *The New York Times* of a street scene where “Jewish fathers pass Muslim fathers clutching the Koran, each on the way to pray to God or to Allah.”⁷⁹ The same reporter contributed to a story two weeks later that involved a sentence about Muslims protesting with “chants of outrage...until the rally ended in prayers to Allah.”⁸⁰ In a 2012 article about Gaza civilians mourning children killed in an Israeli air strike, *The New York Times* described “fingers jabbing the air to signal, ‘Allah is the only one,’ even though the previous paragraph had used the term “God.”⁸¹

⁷⁸ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 89.

⁷⁹ Nicole Christian, “New Hostility in Mideast Echoes in a Brooklyn Neighborhood,” *The New York Times*, Oct. 5, 2000, page B1, column 2.

⁸⁰ Nicole Christian and Dan Barry, “Thousands March to U.N. to Support Palestinians,” *The New York Times*, Oct. 14, 2000, page B5, column 1.

⁸¹ Jodi Rudoren, “Hoisting Dead Children Gazans Mourn Family Killed by Israeli Strike,” *The New York Times*, Nov. 20, 2012, page A11, column 1.

Another way that familiarity is gained is through repetition or frequency in the press; Edward Said, in his book *Covering Islam*, contends that the American media have portrayed a skewed, reduced image of Islam for so long and with such frequency that it is now deemed “known,” even though it is not an objective view.⁸² Similarly, a database search of the phrase “Temple of Solomon” turns up 820 results for articles in the past ten years in *The New York Times*; a search of the same database for “Al-Aqsa Mosque” turns up merely 167.⁸³

The Israeli-Palestinian crisis is extremely complex, but its main points of contention can be contained to four critical issues. One is the issue of Israeli settlements, or Jewish townships, which keep popping up on land inside the West Bank, an area primarily designated as Palestinian territory. Another dilemma is what to do with the millions of Palestinian refugees scattered throughout the region and the world. A third area of disagreement has been where to place borders for any future Palestinian state. The fourth critical debate within the crisis is over who will control Jerusalem and administer the city and its sacred sites.

It is about that fourth point—the borders and control of Jerusalem and its sacred sites—that we investigate press coverage here. The second Palestinian *Intifada*, or political uprising, began in 2000 when then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon visited the Al-Aqsa mosque compound. A visit by any other Israeli leader may not have provoked such a fierce response, but to Palestinians, the name Ariel Sharon was synonymous with the 1982 massacres within the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps in Lebanon, events for

⁸² Said, *Covering Islam*, li.

⁸³ Search using Lexis-Nexis Academic Database in October of 2016.

which an Israeli commission found Sharon to bear indirect “personal responsibility” in his role as Defense Minister.⁸⁴

The site came into the news again when Israel began excavations near the Al-Aqsa mosque in February, 2007. Palestinian Muslims showed up in the thousands to riot, with the belief that Israel’s real motive was to damage the foundation of the mosque. The Israeli government dismissed those claims as “rubbish,” saying the construction work was necessary to build a walkway to the Dome of the Rock.⁸⁵

Many Palestinians resent the fact that their holy sites and much of the land they live on exists under Israeli control. East Jerusalem has existed in this state ever since Israel captured it from Jordan in the 1967 “Six Day War,” creating a unified Jerusalem that Israel sees as its eternal capital.

In its coverage of skirmishes and debate over the sovereignty of Jerusalem, mainstream American media tend to focus on how many people from each side were injured or killed—and what effect that could have on the peace process. A 2015 article in *The New York Times* on fighting at Al-Aqsa Mosque mentioned that the site was holy to both Muslim and Jews; it explained the significance to Jews as a place of “two ancient temples believed to have once stood at the holy site,” but did not mention why it was sacred to Muslims.⁸⁶ A 2015 article in *The Washington Post* about more conflict explained why the site is sacred to Jews, writing that “It’s the site of the first and second

⁸⁴ Linda A. Malone, “*The Kahan Report*, Ariel Sharon and the Sabra-Shatilla Massacres in Lebanon: Responsibility Under International Law for Massacres of Civilian Populations” (1985), College of William & Mary Law School Repository, Faculty Publications, 374.

⁸⁵ “Middle East, Jerusalem ‘Tense’ After Clashes, BBC News, Feb. 9, 2007, accessed at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6346093.stm.

⁸⁶ Diaa Hadid, “Clashes Damage Jerusalem Holy Site, and Jordan Warns Israel,” *The New York Times*, September 15, 2015.

Jewish temples,” but made no mention of why it was sacred to Muslims.⁸⁷ What’s more, this article and many others across mainstream media outlets often translate the Hebrew and Jewish sacred sites into English—like “Temple Mount” instead of *Har HaBayit*—while referring to the Islamic sites by their Arabic names, such as “Al-Aqsa Mosque” instead of “The Farthest Mosque.” This, too, has the potential to create a bias among readers and listeners who may find it harder to relate to the foreign names with no personal connection.⁸⁸

How Islam, Christianity and Judaism differ in monotheism. In the year 610 C.E., as the Eastern Roman Empire trudged through misrule and disorganization, Muhammad said he had heard the first verses of the greater volume that would come to be known as *Al-Qur’an*, meaning simply, “The Recitation.”⁸⁹ With more confidence than Muhammad himself appears to have held at the time, his wife, Khadija, pledged loyalty to the belief that her own husband was a prophet of the one true God, a messenger chosen to warn and guide his people to the straight path, similar to Moses, Noah and the esteemed prophets of old.⁹⁰ This book—a combination of poetry and prose, coming together bit by bit—would be the primary sacred text of Islam.⁹¹

This principle—that there was one divine deity and that it would show humans the enlightened way once again, this time through communicating it to Muhammad—was simple, and a far cry from the more comprehensive, organized religion *Islam* would

⁸⁷ Ruth English, “Israel Bans Muslim Guards in Old City,” *Arab News*, September 10, 2015, accessed online at <http://www.arabnews.com/middle-east/news/804796>.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Lewis, David, *God’s Crucible: Islam and the Making of Europe 570-1215* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), 119.

⁹⁰ Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad*, 85.

⁹¹ Maxime Rodinson, *Muhammad* (London: Pantheon, 1971), xxiii.

quickly develop into. However, this basic theme would remain the epitome of the faith throughout the centuries. It is still all one must profess to believe in to be acknowledged as a *Muslim* today: that there is no god but God, and that Muhammad was God's messenger.⁹²

A few years after Muhammad began preaching, the state of affairs deteriorated for the small group of early Muslims. They began to face persecution because of their disruption to the status quo, leading Muhammad to make one of his first landmark political decisions. He urged them to flee to someone he was confident would protect them as political refugees. According to biographer Ibn Ishaq, 83 Muslims set off into the waves of the Red Sea in an uncertain migration to the land of Abyssinia, modern-day Ethiopia.⁹³ They hoped to appeal to the land's Christian king for safe haven in his realm of monotheism. The Abyssinian king, known by Arab historians as Al-Najashi, wholeheartedly granted the refugees the political asylum they sought. This was most likely the ruler Armah, who held the scepter during the waning years of the great Aksum dynasty.⁹⁴ After the Quraysh non-Muslims sent an envoy to have the refugees returned, the Christian king dismissed the two Qurayshi envoys, swearing that he would never retract his pledge of sanctuary.⁹⁵

This was just the beginning of a long, intimate bond between two religious communities that, in recent years, have seen turmoil and at times extreme discontent with one another. Muhammad taught his followers that out of all the previous religious

⁹² Karen Armstrong, *A History of God* (New York: Random House, 1993) 150.

⁹³ Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah*, translated by A. Guillaume (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955) 149.

⁹⁴ Pankhurst, Richard, *The Ethiopians: A History*, (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001) 39.

⁹⁵ Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, 151.

communities, the Christians were the most pure in heart, and would always be the closest to Muslims.⁹⁶ Unfortunately, it is the Muslim world and the “West”—the latter of which is still heavily influenced by Christian culture and values—that are most at odds with one another today.

Islam, translating directly as “submission,” was not, in Muhammad’s eyes, a new religion at all. It was, he believed, rather a continuation of the message that God had been revealing to humankind throughout the ages: worship one God and walk in his ways. Muhammad regarded the previous monotheistic prophets as brothers in faith, righteous men who had been chosen by the same God to spread fundamentally the same faith.

The Qur’an’s numerous reminders that “to every nation has come a guide,” coupled with the vivid passages of their trials, gave Muhammad’s own calling a greater sense of depth and continuity.⁹⁷ He was soon to hear from Gabriel, however, that his own apostleship was to be unique in two substantial features. First, Muhammad was to be God’s final messenger sent to humankind; none would come after him. Second, and much as a result, rather than teaching one community or people, Muhammad was to proclaim the good news to all of humankind, and the message had to prevail from the moment he first heard it until Judgment Day.

Muhammad’s early days in Medina, where he established an Islamic state, gave leniency to the “People of the Book,” or Jews and Christians as long as they paid the *jizya* tax, which was a yearly, per capita tax placed on non-Muslims living under Islamic governance. If they abided by that, they were permitted to retain their own religions and

⁹⁶ *The Holy Qur’an* 5:82-86.

⁹⁷ *The Holy Qur’an* 10:47.

identities apart from Islam. This would change later, after the Muslim community had become more powerful militarily.⁹⁸ One of Muhammad's first political moves in Medina was to guarantee religious freedoms for the minority Jews: "To the Jew who follows us belong help and equality...the Jews have their religion and the Muslims have theirs," Muhammad included in the Constitution of Medina.⁹⁹

Tensions between Muslims and Jews in early Islam. It was anything but peaceful the day Muhammad approved the beheading of approximately 700 men from one of the largest Jewish tribes of Arabia, the Banu Qurayza, after he had established an Islamic state in Medina. Ibn Ishaq records the incident, as does the hadith collector Bukhari, who also reported that Muhammad ordered the widows and children of the executed men to be distributed among the Muslims as slaves.¹⁰⁰

Muhammad contended that the Jewish tribe had breached its pact with him and instead gave its allegiance to the enemy Meccan army, thus constituting treason, for which there was no place in a society still acting largely by tribal norms. Islamic apologist scholars argue that the mass execution was in line with the 7th Century penal codes in place at the time.¹⁰¹ The land, homes and wealth of the executed Jewish tribe were distributed among the Muslim community as war booty.¹⁰² Some Jewish groups today contend that this was nothing less than an act of genocide, especially since

⁹⁸ Armstrong, *Muhammad*, 158-9

⁹⁹ Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, 232, 233.

¹⁰⁰ *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Volume 8, Book 74, Number 278.

¹⁰¹ Armstrong, *Muhammad*, 102.

¹⁰² Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, 463.

Muhammad had previously evicted the only other large Jewish tribes from Medina.¹⁰³

Mainstream journalists in the United States and worldwide must be familiar with this critical event involving these two monotheistic ethnic groups and recognize how it still yields significance on today's interactions between Jews, Muslims and Christians in the Middle East.

This act of violence, however, was not the norm between the new community of Muslims and the Jewish tribes: the majority of inhabitants in Medina when Muhammad arrived there was Jewish.¹⁰⁴ They rejoiced when learning that Muhammad had initially instructed his followers to pray facing Jerusalem and the Jewish chieftans were, for the most part, content with Muhammad's governing legal document, the "Constitution of Medina."¹⁰⁵

ISIS, Al-Qaida, and other Islamist militant groups

Contextual background of ISIS, Al-Qaida and other Islamist militant groups. Muhammad was a military leader; he clearly believed war was acceptable under certain circumstances. Up until the time Muhammad migrated to Medina, he had believed it was his obligation to endure insult and overlook his enemies' faults.¹⁰⁶ Then came the revelation that opened up a new era in Islamic history: "Permission is given to those who fight because they have been wronged. God is well able to help them, Those who have

¹⁰³ "Mohammed's Genocide of the Qurayza Jews," BreitbartNews.com, August 9, 2016, accessed at <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2016/08/09/mohammeds-genocide-qurayza-jews-knife-jihad-israel/>

¹⁰⁴ Michael Lecker, *The "Constitution of Medina": Muhammad's First Legal Document* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2004) 54.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 54,57.

¹⁰⁶ Armstrong, *Muhammad*, 165.

been driven out of their houses without right, Only because they said ‘God is our Lord.’”¹⁰⁷

The tone of this verse mirrors Muhammad’s early approach to warfare: initially, his stance on fighting would be a defensive one. He originally allowed fighting in three instances only: in self-defense of lives and property, when coming to the aid of those who cannot defend themselves, and when Muslims are prevented the freedom to practice their religion.

Still, Muhammad led many military campaigns; battles and skirmishes defined most of his ministry, and warfare was a factor in the early spread of Islam. Some of those skirmishes were raids on caravans of rivals, and the hadith relaying the first major battle born of such a skirmish, the Battle of Badr, record contradictory accounts.¹⁰⁸ Some scholars point out that a raid is not done in self-defense, but rather in greed and plunder; Muslim apologists argue that the raids were conducted in what was already considered a time of war. Some historians such as Karen Armstrong suggest the caravan raid, or *ghazu*, was not seen as immoral “unless you stole the goods of kinsmen or confederates.”¹⁰⁹ Once again, this cultural context may shine light onto the actions and behaviors of communities and events from long ago that still bear some relevance to modern day. Muhammad used many tactics, including the promise of war booty and marriages between tribes, to unite the tribes of Arabia and bring them under the fold of Islam, which he largely succeeded in doing before his death.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ *The Holy Qur’an* 22:39.

¹⁰⁸ Rodinson, *Muhammad*, viii.

¹⁰⁹ Armstrong, *Muhammad*, 60.

¹¹⁰ William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of The Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2015), 54.

Media and the question: ‘Why Do They Hate Us?’ It’s been said that religion has been used for the purposes of war, power, land and money. On the crisp, clear Tuesday morning of September 11, 2001 it was used as an outlet for anger, and for revenge. In a televised address to a joint session of Congress, President George W. Bush gave his answer to the question which millions of his constituents were asking: Why do they hate us?

He said in his speech the perpetrators hate what they see in the chamber before him: a democratically elected government. “They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other,” he said.¹¹¹ He was partly right in that the followers of Al-Qaida wanted to ultimately establish a Caliphate in which *Sharia*, or Islamic law, governed.

But the American people needed, and deserved, more of an explanation, a religious and historical context to these attacks, and one that wasn’t simply a reduction of stereotypes for simplicity’s sake. There was, and still is resentment on the Arab street toward the government of America because of its long, murky involvement in the region. In large part, today’s citizens in the Arab world are able to draw a clear line between the American people and the American government’s foreign policy in the Muslim world. The vast majority of the Arab world takes offense to only the latter.

Even before World War One—but especially right after it—Europe’s major powers, Britain and France, were instrumental in shaping today’s Middle East, including

¹¹¹ “Text: President Bush Addresses the Nation,” The Washington Post, September 20, 2001, accessed at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html

carving up borders out of the remnants of the fallen Ottoman Empire.¹¹² But American government's involvement in the Arab world didn't begin in earnest until after World War Two, when its strength as a major world power was solidified and it began to aggressively pursue its interests abroad. CIA-aided coups in Iran and Iraq in the 1950s and 60s ousted those rulers who had declared that their nations' oil would be self-controlled.¹¹³ Later, the US-supported economic sanctions against Iraq's Saddam Hussein created suffering among the Iraqi civilians, who were without the basic necessities of food and medicine while their corrupt leader continued dining on gold-plated china.

Arab civilians are very savvy when it comes to their region's history; it has become an element of the pan-Arab culture to be familiar with the past century's sum of regional history, and that history is discussed and often incorporated into family and social gatherings. The same historical points of pride, angst and grief are often passed down from generation to generation.

But there is one factor that has fanned the flames of Arab anger towards America for generations now: the United States' ongoing financial and political support of the modern-day state of Israel. Many Muslims worldwide hold the view that modern Israel was created on stolen Palestinian land in 1948, and that the tiny, developed state continues to thrive, in part, because of vast American foreign aid. For decades, the Arab

¹¹² "Sykes-Picot Agreement," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, May 21, 2016, accessed at <https://www.britannica.com/event/Sykes-Picot-Agreement>.

¹¹³ Malcolm Byrne (ed.), "20 Years after the Hostages: Declassified Documents on Iran and the United States," *The National Security Archive*, Electronic Briefing Book No. 21, Nov. 5, 1999, accessed at <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB21/index.html>.

world has taken note as America has largely overlooked Israel's human rights record regarding the Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza.

The danger—extremism, as displayed by terrorism—enters into the picture when a small group of affected individuals decides to “retaliate,” viewing the scenario as a state of war. These individuals do not have the means to go head-to-head with a formal army, so they go for “soft” targets, like civilians. These militant individuals devise their own rulings, citing that, since all members of a democracy can vote, they are just as guilty as their leaders whom they elect, and therefore are deemed legitimate targets by extremists.¹¹⁴

The American mainstream news media, in reporting on President Bush's speech, could have filled in the gaps of context regarding the anger harbored both by the extremists who engineered the attacks and the wider Arab street toward American foreign policy. The frames through which the story was told were simplistic and projected a very clear narrative bias, with the protagonist and antagonist appearing only in terms of the September 11 attacks. The frame, however, could have been widened to incorporate America's involvement with the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, American troops on what is deemed sacred Muslim land, and many other factors that help answer the question of “Why do they hate us?”

Reforms Muhammad made to military code. The Qur'an says that devout Muslims are to follow Muhammad's example in all aspects of his life. Muhammad was directly involved in the fighting and likely killed many soldiers in battle. He also enacted the death penalty for traitors and absconders, usually by beheading. His early battles

¹¹⁴ Peter Bergen, “Holy War, Inc.,” *The New York Times*, Nov. 1, 2001.

were to keep the fledging religious group from being destroyed; later battles, fought by Caliphs after Muhammad's death, focused on expanding the realm of the Islamic Caliphate to North Africa and the Levant.¹¹⁵

While Muhammad was still alive, he would lay down several ground rules regarding the manner in which an army should conduct itself. In the context of medieval warfare, his reforms were considered revolutionary.¹¹⁶ He allowed fighting only once war had been formally declared; he allowed strikes only on actual military targets; he distinguished soldiers from civilians and prevented the harming of the latter. He instructed that the enemy's civilian property and livestock were not to be vandalized. Property of captured or killed enemies still became the spoils of war. This included the wives of captured or slain men; multiple hadith and sira sources indicate these captured women became slaves or concubines of the Muslims, and Muhammad himself had multiple concubines, all of whom were slaves.

The monks in their monasteries, the elderly, the women and children of an enemy tribe; all were granted protection under Muhammad. Perhaps the most revealing aspect of his warfare was his treatment of enemy prisoners of war: Muhammad instructed the Muslims to give the POWs their own clothes and food. One prisoner marveled at the fact that his captors let him eat the bread while they kept the lesser food for themselves.

Thus, according to Muhammad's example, there would have been no attacks on September 11, 2001, because they targeted non-combatant civilians. There would not have been an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, and no Abu Ghraib prison scandal. His army

¹¹⁵ Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, 561, 602, 677.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 176, 179.

was a testament to his beliefs: women were not required to enlist but could fight side by side to the men if they wanted. Nusayyba, a woman from the Ansar, received 10 wounds while trying to keep enemy soldiers from attacking Muhammad. Africans, Arabs, and Persians fought as one corps in the Muslim army. He repeatedly reminded his followers that “he who does not show mercy will not be shown mercy (by God).”¹¹⁷ However, he was the same commander who ordered 700 Jewish men and boys to be beheaded for treason, a decision that clearly did not show mercy and that could have been avoided by his pardon. It is important for journalists to be aware of all of these major events in early Islamic history so that they portray as accurate of a picture as possible, which allows the reader or viewer to deduct their own frames of reference.

Muhammad as head of the first Islamic State. In 2014, an organization of soldiers forged a brutal path to the forefront of the world stage by declaring a new *caliphate*, or Islamic State. The group would call itself ISIS, the Arabic definition of which translates as *The Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham*, with Al-Sham referring to parts of Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel and the Palestinian territories.

Muhammad was the first head of state of an Islamic nation; as scholar John Esposito described him, he was “prophet, head of state, commander of the army, chief judge, and lawgiver.”¹¹⁸ Diving back into the early Islamic sources, it is clear that there are several similarities between Muhammad’s new state and the declaration by ISIS; these similarities have given ISIS legitimacy. Both have a military wing, both take prisoners of war as “booty,” including captive women as wives and concubines, and both

¹¹⁷ *Sahih Bukhari*, vol. 7, hadith 5997 and vol. 9, Hadith 7376.

¹¹⁸ John L. Esposito, *Islam and Politics* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 4.

have resorted to warfare as a way to spread influence. They both refer to The Qur'an for inspiration and aim to establish the Islamic faith and respect for its laws throughout the world.¹¹⁹

However, that is generally where their similarities end. The hadith, which are filled with anecdotes of Muhammad's behavior both on and off the battlefield, portray a leader who saw war as a last resort and who championed the rights of even non-Muslim prisoners of war under his care.¹²⁰ Muhammad is also recorded numerous times as prohibiting Muslims from punishing anyone using fire, saying that punishment by fire is exclusively the right of the "Lord of Fire," or God.¹²¹ This however, did not stop ISIS from burning alive a captive Jordanian pilot in 2015 as part of its propaganda efforts.¹²² ISIS jurists, however, respond to Muslim critics by either citing Qur'anic verse or their own interpretation of the hadith: in the case of the pilot burned alive, they argued that Muhammad was not actually forbidding punishment by fire, but was just being humble.¹²³

Muhammad, despite waging many battles in the name of Islam, was progressive in the context of his time in furthering the human rights of women, prisoners of war, and enemy combatants.¹²⁴ His "Constitution of Medina" provided a framework for a diverse group of individuals to be governed under a common law.¹²⁵

¹¹⁹ Lecker, *The "Constitution of Medina,"* 37.

¹²⁰ Armstrong, *Muhammad,* 176.

¹²¹ Hadith collection of 'Abdullah ibn Mas'ood, hadith no. 2675.

¹²² Israel National News, "ISIS Burns Captive Jordanian Pilot Alive," Feb. 3, 2015, accessed at: <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/190877#.V11xVtCdJEc>.

¹²³ McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse,* 137.

¹²⁴ Armstrong, *Muhammad,* 179.

¹²⁵ Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad,* 233.

When considering Muhammad's role as statesman and revolutionary, progressive Muslims are eager to evaluate his actions based on the context of his time period, rather than to judge his actions by contemporary standards. Along this line, the progressives assert that ISIS should be held to the standards of the era in which it exists, rather than hearkening back to the laws of nearly a millennium and a half ago. However, one hadith often recited by Islamic scholars is Muhammad's declaration that Muslims would "never go astray" if they follow two things: "the book of God and the sunna of his prophet."¹²⁶ This would appear to counter the notion that Muhammad would have progressed with the times. Although this hadith is well known among Muslims and often quoted in Friday sermons, it was recorded by a rather obscure hadith collector, 'Ibn Musa al-Bayhaqi, and not by any of the six hadith collectors who are generally seen by Muslims as being the most authentic: Bukhari, Muslim, Ibn Majah, Tirmidhi, Nisai and Abu Dawud

Even if ISIS were operating in Muhammad's day, they would still be much more harsh and less tolerant than he was: Under Muhammad's rule, for example, any dissenter, male or female, rich or poor, could approach Muhammad directly with a complaint. An entire *surah* in The Qur'an—called "The Chapter of the Woman Who Disputes"—is devoted to a woman who argued with Muhammad over the injustice of an old divorce custom until God revealed to Muhammad that he should adjudicate on this matter in her favor.¹²⁷ ISIS does not appear to allow for arbitration, questioning the head of state, or checks and balances of any kind.

¹²⁶ Hadith recorded by 'Ibn Musa al-Bayhaqi, 'Sunan al-Kubra, vol. 10, p. 114 hadith no. 20123

¹²⁷ *The Holy Qur'an*, Surat Al-Mufajilah.

Women and girls taken as spoils of war. His tenure as head of state was not without its harsh edicts and archaic punishments. The execution of the Jews of the Banu Qurayza provides the most famous example. The spoils of war under Muhammad's leadership included women, children, and livestock taken as booty after winning a battle. Seen as separate from wives, multiple hadith and sira sources indicate these captured women became slaves or concubines of the Muslims.¹²⁸ Drawing on this, ISIS has heralded its revitalization of slavery as a major institution in a return Islamic law.¹²⁹

Evolution of the term “jihad”. As an Islamic term, the Arabic word *jihad* has itself been on a long, winding journey. Ideologically, Muhammad referred to *jihad* in various ways, a habit that gave birth to the potential for widely different interpretations down the road. In one sense, according to the hadith collections believed to be the earliest and most accurate, Muhammad said *jihad* was a militant act of worship done for the sake of preserving Islam. In other instances, he is said to have promoted *jihad* as more of an inner, personal struggle against weakness and temptation.¹³⁰ Literally, and without the Islamic context, the word is derived from the root verb of the Arabic consonants jeem-ha-dal, and means “to struggle or exert oneself.”

The word's journey has included pit stops in the writings of 13th century Islamic scholar Ibn Taymiyya and his belated follower 18th century Muhammad Abd-al-Wahhab in the Arabian Peninsula. The term eventually took on even more grassroots significance in the writings of an Egyptian named Sayyid Qutb, whose ideology would go on to

¹²⁸ Armstrong, *Muhammad*, 190-191.

¹²⁹ McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 132.

¹³⁰ Cook D., “Islamism and Jihadism: The Transformation of Classical Notions of Jihad into an Ideology of Terrorism.” *Totalitarian Movements & Political Religions* 10, vol. 2 (2009):179, 180.

inspire the growth of The Muslim Brotherhood and other groups that saw *jihad* as including the killing of civilians deemed to be the enemies of Islam.¹³¹ Qutb let loose the traditional ropes that had held back militancy in Islam and demanded that a world *caliphate* be established, a doctrine that was heartily embraced by radicals including Osama bin Laden.¹³² Qutb held that Jihad was “not for defense only, but to destroy all worship of false gods and remove all the obstacles which prevents men from accepting Islam.”¹³³ Today, groups like ISIS are using the term to recruit Muslims who are willing to kill non-Muslims for the group’s political-religious cause.¹³⁴

The classical notion of *jihad* was not exclusively affiliated with Muslim warfare in Muhammad’s day. The term rarely occurs in relation to the military in The Qur’an.¹³⁵ The expansion wars that occurred after Muhammad’s death are where the term *jihad* really began to take root as a term for divine sanctioned warfare.

Islam is unusual because of a liturgical understanding that some of the verses in its holy book, The Qur’an, take precedence over others. For example, the verses that Muhammad recited earlier in his mission, when his ministry was still fledgling and in need of political compromises, are trumped by more hardline verses revealed closer to his death. It is this system of abrogation—which was sanctioned by Muhammad himself,

¹³¹ J. Read, “Charting a Course through Radical Islam: Origins, Rise, Transformation and Prospects.” *Defence Studies* 9, vol. 2 (2009): 275-79.

¹³² Michael Chertoff, “The Ideology of Terrorism: Radicalism Revisited,” *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 15, vol. 1 (2008): 8.

¹³³ Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, 470.

¹³⁴ Porter, Tom, “ISIS calls for Muslim Youth to Wage ‘Holy War’ Against Russia and US,” *International Business Times*, October 14, 2015. Accessed at <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-calls-muslim-youth-wage-holy-war-against-russia-us-1523931>.

¹³⁵ Cook, “Islamism and Jihadism,” 177.

according to hadith collections—that means the passages about peace and tolerance are no longer binding, although they are often quoted without context by liberals in the West hoping to promote a sense of multiculturalism or peace. It is this very context that many radicals have latched onto in their attempts to justify the killing of non-Muslims.¹³⁶ Ironically, there are several verses that moderates say the radicals are also taking out of religious and historical context. This, too, is important context for journalists to know when covering conflict among Islamist groups.

Journalism analysis of modern Islamist militant groups. On September 11, 2001, nineteen men in the United States walked onto commercial airliners with the sole intention of killing everyone on board, as well as the thousands of civilians they hoped to crash their planes into. Their mission went largely as planned. Along with the horror and grieving which ensued came many questions. Who would do such an unthinkable act of injustice, and why? What would drive a person to not only kill himself but thousands of men, women and children whom he had never met? United States government officials soon announced that all nineteen individuals had come from the Arab world—the *Muslim* world. What’s more, the perpetrators appeared to have committed their crimes in the name of faith. Osama bin Laden, the next day, praised the efforts of the hijackers, but initially denied responsibility for the attacks, saying in a statement issued to the Al Jazeera network that he “did not plan the recent attacks” and that the leader of the “Islamic emirate of Afghanistan,” where he was living, did not allow him to carry out

¹³⁶ David Bukay, “Islam's Hatred of the Non-Muslim.” *Middle East Quarterly* 20 vol. 3 (2007): 11-20.

such operations.¹³⁷ It wouldn't be long before the FBI linked the hijackers to the Al-Qaida militant network.

The spotlight was suddenly and ferociously on Islam. Journalists were thrown headlong into covering what had been until then a largely obscure faith in the newsroom. In the months that followed, numerous factual errors were made. *Newsweek Magazine* reported that The Qur'an contained 6,666 verses, a rather diabolic-sounding figure.¹³⁸ It actually contains 6,236. Many media outlets published half-explained traditions, linguistic errors, or Qur'anic verses out of context. The result was a heightened state of distrust and confusion regarding an already unfamiliar faith and community.

Muslim organizations began issuing a flurry of press releases, denouncing the acts as murder and in clear violation of Islam's teachings. Two days after the attacks, Sheikh Yousuf Al-Qaradawi, head of the enormously influential—and strict—grassroots Muslim Brotherhood, announced, “We, in the name of our religion, deny the act and incriminate the perpetrator,” and encouraged Muslims to donate blood to the victims of the attacks.¹³⁹

The chief cleric at Al Azhar University of Cairo—the top institution in Sunni Islam—said, “Attacking innocent people is not courageous...and will be punished on the day of judgment.”¹⁴⁰ From Palestine to Bangladesh, from the Americas to the two sacred mosques of Mecca and Medina, top Islamic sheikhs raised their voices in their various

¹³⁷ “Bin Laden Says He Wasn't Behind Attacks,” CNN.com, September 17, 2001, accessed at <http://edition.cnn.com/2001/US/09/16/inv.binladen.denial/index.html>.

¹³⁸ Ron Moreau, Sami Yousafzai and Zahid Hussain, “Terrorism 101,” *Newsweek*, December 1, 2003, 26.

¹³⁹ Miriam Netzer, “One Voice? The Crisis of Legal Authority in Islam,” *Al-Nakhla*, Vol. 6, (2004): 1.

¹⁴⁰ Charles Kurzman, “Islamic Statements Against Terrorism,” University of North Carolina Faculty blog, accessed at <http://kurzman.unc.edu/islamic-statements-against-terrorism/>.

languages to categorically condemn the attacks.¹⁴¹ Their statements, however, appeared to fall on deaf ears in the United States. Even though the Associated Press and other wire services offered tidbits of information on Muslims taking a stand against the terrorist actions, these wire reports remained largely obscure and did not become major headlines in mainstream news outlets in the weeks and months that followed.

Instead, *The New York Times* ran a story about Christian evangelist Franklin Graham's post- September 11 statement condemning "the silence of the clerics around the world," in which he asked, "How come they haven't reassured the American people that this is not true Islam and that these people are not acting in the name of Allah, they're not acting in the name of Islam?"¹⁴² This short news article did not include mention of the fact that the clerics had, indeed, spoken out on those exact topics, leaving readers with a less than full picture.¹⁴³

It would have been seen as absurd for anyone to hold Christianity or Jesus accountable for the Ku Klux Klan lynchings of the 1960s, for example, although they were carried out as Bible verses were read aloud and their trademark symbol was a burning cross. The difference was the masses had a familiarity with Christianity—there

¹⁴¹ AMANA; CAIR, ICNA; and ISNA were among the American Muslim organizations issuing statements on September 11, 2001, denouncing the terrorist attacks.. Among those who condemned the attack abroad were: The Two Imams of the Mosques in Makkah and Madina (Sheikh Abdur Rahman Al-Sudais, Sheikh Salioh bin Hamid), President of Azhar Sheikh Omar Hashim, Mufti and Sheikh of Alazhar Syed Tantawi, Sheikh Hamza Yousuf, Sheikh Yousuf Al-Qardawi, Mustafa Mashhur (Egypt), Ahmed Yasin (Palestine), Qazi Hussain Ahmed (Pakistan), Motieh Rahman Nizami (Bangladesh), Sheikh Fasail Molvi (Lebanon), Sheikh Rashid Ganoshi (Tunisia), according to the Muslim Council of Britain's official website, www.mcb.org.uk.

¹⁴² Wilson, Michael, "Evangelist Says Muslims Haven't Adequately Apologized for Sept. 11 Attacks," *The New York Times*, August 15, 2002, page B8, column 1.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

was a deep enough understanding of the faith and its true teachings for the public to know that Christianity, the Bible, and Jesus were not to blame for the actions of a few misguided, angry souls.

Few journalists looked back to the days of Mecca and Medina to see what Muhammad believed about fighting, and how he commanded his followers to conduct themselves in times of war. As Edward Said writes in *Covering Islam*, this lack of context perpetuates a concept of “the other,” which in trying to resolving conflict, is counterproductive.¹⁴⁴

Similarly, in June of 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Shams, or ISIS, delivered a message through its spokesman: the group was now an official Islamic Caliphate, and whatever *jihadi* factions did not pledge allegiance to the new Islamic state would be put to death.¹⁴⁵ The militants had barged into the Iraqi city of Mosul, claiming it for their conquest and ruthlessly beheading or impaling those who tried to stop them. Those who did not fall under the group’s narrowly defined definition of Sunni Islam were either put to death or taken into slavery, the fate of many women and children.¹⁴⁶ The Yezidi ethnic group, in particular, took the brunt of the brutality: human rights groups confirm that ISIS fighters have used rape, sexual mutilation and sterilization tactics to control their prisoners and prevent the reproduction of more Yezidis. Children were sent to training camps “erasing their identities as Yezidis.”¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ Said, *Covering Islam*, xlvii.

¹⁴⁵ “ISIS Declares Themselves an Islamic State,” NBC News, June 29, 2014, accessed at <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/iraq-turmoil/isis-declares-themselves-islamic-state-n143876>.

¹⁴⁶ Cumming-Bruce, Nick, “ISIS Committed Genocide Against Yazidis in Syria and Iraq, U.N. Panel Says,” *The New York Times*, June 16, 2016, accessed at www.nytimes.com.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

The American press, in its coverage of ISIS, focused on the brutality. It was hard not to: the beheadings, the torture, the systematic murder and sexual assault of an entire ethnic group, the Yezidis, were grave and shocking. But when the Islamic State was declared, very few journalists and editors asked the question: what is an Islamic state, exactly, and what is the historical model for a Caliphate? What do the original sources from early Islam tell us about an Islamic State? These questions are critical for both the journalists covering the story and, by extension, the people reading the story to ask and have answered in the most comprehensive way possible. Even within jihadist groups there has been much debate and plenty of criticism surrounding the legitimacy and tactics of ISIS; in response to that criticism, a spokesman for ISIS replied: “All who try to sever the ranks will have their heads severed.”¹⁴⁸

The Hajj Pilgrimage

Contextual background of the Hajj pilgrimage. In the middle of the sixth century C.E., as the first Bubonic Plague was wreaking havoc on the heart of Europe, the Arabian Peninsula pulsed with an assortment of religious practices. The inhabitants of the land knew of and believed in “*Allah*,” or “The [One] God.” Beginning from the first chapter of the book of Genesis, “Elohim” is a word commonly used in the Hebrew Scriptures to refer to God.¹⁴⁹ There were Jews and Christians settled in the peninsula, with the most concentrated populations of these groups based where Yemen is today.

¹⁴⁸ McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 128.

¹⁴⁹ The Arabic, Hebrew and Aramaic languages are Semitic languages and share many words. Arabic speakers sometimes refer to God as “Allahuma,” a plural form indicating respect. The relative Hebrew “Elohim” can be found in Genesis, Chapter 1 of The Bible.

Even though they maintained their own religion, both communities “were thoroughly Arabized” in language and community.¹⁵⁰ There were also idols, superstitions, and folklore, creating a thriving culture of polytheism.¹⁵¹

Standing center stage on Arabia’s theater of religion and trade was the ancient city of Mecca. Nestled in a valley surrounded by jagged auburn-colored mountains, Mecca sits in a flash-flood plain despite being in one of the world’s harshest deserts. The water gushing forth from the city’s Zam-Zam spring is smooth and sweet to the taste. Since 1932, Mecca has been governed by the Al-Saud royal family, monarchs of Saudi Arabia. Before them came the Ottomans and before them, the Mamlukes and various tribal rulers. Having an idol in Mecca today would likely cost a Saudi his or her head; the city has since returned to the strict definition of monotheism which Muslims believe Abraham imparted there millennia ago, a belief the government enforces with austerity. The penal codes for what is deemed immoral behavior in Saudi Arabia are similar to those of ISIS, although ISIS keeps its executions public whereas Saudi Arabia tends to execute those found guilty in public to avoid international condemnation.¹⁵²

The Ka’ba, and Mecca in general, have come to symbolize to Muslims the basic themes of their religion: Monotheism, purity, and sanctity, as well as a historical association with Muhammad. But prior to Muhammad, in the days which he would eventually term *Ayyam al-Jahaliyya*, or “The Days of Ignorance,” the main themes of Mecca were the antithesis of what they were to eventually become. Idols were essential

¹⁵⁰ Lewis, Bernard, *The Middle East: A Brief History of the Last 2000 Years* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 103.

¹⁵¹ Armstrong, Karen, *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet*, (London: Orion), 1991, 64.

¹⁵² McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 136.

to the Meccan family; they were the focus on divinity and fertility and fate.¹⁵³ Idolatry was not just a peripheral aspect of Meccan society; its thriving economy depended on it. Rather than just being a desolate desert oasis, Mecca in the year 570 C.E. was, according to British historian Karen Armstrong, an “atmosphere of cut-throat capitalism and high finance.”¹⁵⁴ The city came alive once a lunar year when traders, poets and the faithful would descend en masse upon the valley to venerate the idols held in the Ka’ba.

Rituals and icons of the Hajj explained. The center of attention on the Hajj is not the historic site of Muhammad’s first revelation, nor of the place he was born, although both locations are known. The hardline Sunni scholars who are bankrolled by the royal family have destroyed most historic buildings relating to Muhammad’s life in an effort to prevent Muslims from turning them into shrines and giving Muhammad a status greater than he wanted. Those few sites that have not been bulldozed have government signs forbidding prayer or worship there.¹⁵⁵

Rather, the item that first-time pilgrims anxiously scan the Sacred Mosque for is the Ka’ba—a small, stone building in the center of the mosque, draped in the finest black cloth garnished with gold, embroidered calligraphy. The Ka’ba, referred to as the House of God, is believed to have pre-dated Muhammad, when it was part of pagan rituals.¹⁵⁶ Pilgrims scramble and push their way through the crowds to touch, rub, or kiss the building in the hopes that doing so will bring them blessings. The Ka’ba is what devout

¹⁵³ Armstrong, *Muhammad*, 64.

¹⁵⁴ Armstrong, *Muhammad*, 68.

¹⁵⁵ Power, Karla, “Saudi Arabia Bulldozes Over Its Heritage,” Nov. 14, 2014, Time Magazine Online, accessed at <http://time.com/3584585/saudi-arabia-bulldozes-over-its-heritage/>.

¹⁵⁶ Lewis, Bernard, *The Middle East*, 320.

Muslims turn to face when they are called to prayer five times a day, wherever they find themselves on earth. Next to the structure is a set of footprints petrified into the soil, believed by Muslims to be the imprint of the great patriarch of monotheism, the Prophet Abraham.¹⁵⁷

Most Muslims can only dream of entering the Ka'ba. In the days of the late King Faisal Al-Saud, who enacted the infamous oil embargo in the 1970s, it was open to the public—one day a week for women and a separate day for their male counterparts. Due to the growing crowds since the 1970s, however, the only people permitted to enter now are the caretakers or special guests of the government.¹⁵⁸ The building's doors open for a bi-annual cleaning ceremony, in which the caretakers enter with little more than simple brooms. This occurs once around the lunar month of *Ramadan* and again in the month of *Dhul-Hijja*. Today, the floor of the Ka'ba is marble, and thick, green curtains embroidered in gold Qur'anic verse adorn the interior walls. There are no windows, and the only objects inside are a few copies of The Qur'an and incense burners upon which the finest Arabian bukhoo smolders.¹⁵⁹

Over the course of his ministry, Muhammad revolutionized the pilgrimage, changing it from a pagan celebration to a ritual that honored the strict Monotheism he would be known for implementing. The rituals of the pilgrimage are powerful, too.

When pilgrims get close to the outskirts of Mecca, they are required to exchange their worldly clothes for simple, seamless white garments, signifying that they have

¹⁵⁷ Based on author's visit to Mecca and the Ka'ba, April, 2000.

¹⁵⁸ Telephone interview between author and Dr. M.Al-Shaiby, descendant of Uthman ibn Talha, December 2005.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

entered the sacred state of *ihram*.¹⁶⁰ One of the reasons for this is to remind believers of the egalitarianism between classes that Muhammad worked hard to establish—oil sheik and tea boy, CEO and night-shift janitor, princess and pauper have traditionally all appeared as equals during the *Hajj*. This equality symbolizes the coming Day of Judgment, when the only factor human souls will have to distinguish themselves from others are their beliefs and good deeds. Although the socioeconomic lines were meant to become blurred during the *Hajj*, the gender boundaries remain vivid, and they're woven into the firm rules of the *Hajj* itself. For men, the *ihram* garments consist of two white shrouds, one to drape around the waist and another to hoist over one shoulder. Women pilgrims must cover every part of their bodies except for their hands and faces. The mosque in Mecca is one of the few places where the sexes are permitted to worship side by side, but women must have a male *mahram*, or relative to chaperone them and cannot perform the *Hajj* alone. If a woman experiences the unfortunate timing of beginning her menstrual cycle on the *Hajj*, she is forbidden from stepping foot inside the Sacred Mosque because she is deemed unclean, and often prevented from completing the pilgrimage, even if she has traveled thousands of miles and waited decades to become a *Hajja*.

Even the spirit of class egalitarianism is diminishing with the advent of travel agencies specializing in highly indulgent VIP tours for pilgrims who are willing to pay. Now, a wealthy pilgrim can relax in an air-conditioned car and zoom past the other believers, who must walk to the sacred sites in the desert sun. Luxury *Hajj* packages

¹⁶⁰ Facts about Hajj rituals based on author's firsthand experience of the Hajj as a guest of the Saudi Arabian government in April, 2000.

promise seven-star hotel rooms, and for the portion of the pilgrimage that must be performed outdoors, sturdy tents with plush pillows and banquets of lamb and rice. The Ka'ba itself has been literally overshadowed since 2006, when the ultra-modern luxury hotel and clock tower *Beit Al-Abraja* went up next door to the Sacred Mosque, looming far over the mosque.

After dressing in the *ihram* garments, the millions of pilgrims circle the Ka'ba by foot, wheelchair, and on the backs of a strong son or husband, reciting prayers and verses from The Qur'an in a common language of Arabic. Except for the area near the Black Stone, this process is usually orderly, with pilgrims going in the same, counter-clockwise motion around the ancient structure, as Muhammad and his followers did before them. They scurry back and forth between two spots near the Zamzam well, imitating the actions of yet another figure to appear throughout the three main monotheistic religions: Hajar, the Arab wife of Abraham.¹⁶¹

Some of the men scatter into the hillsides for a few moments of solitude, where from a distance, they collectively look like tiny white pearls against a dark red canvas of rock. They venture to the nearby village of Mina, where they throw pebbles at the upright *jamraat* stone pillars, symbolizing the stoning of the devil and a rejection of evil. Most often, this is the part in which pilgrims have perished in stampedes; one reason is because some Islamic clerics insist there is a limited window of time for the throwing of the pebbles. This means vast numbers of pilgrims try to crowd into the limited space at the same time, often leading to injury or death.

¹⁶¹ Armstrong, *Muhammad*, 161.

Journalism analysis of the Hajj coverage. The journalism coverage of the Hajj is a classic example of what Edward Said refers to as “reduction” of culture to a simplistic, stereotypical frame. From a journalism perspective, the Hajj meets multiple criteria of newsworthiness: relevance, impact, timeliness, and consequence, even for an audience consuming news from 6,000 miles away in the United States. It’s a story that has significant political, religious, social, national security and public health ramifications each year. In years where contagious disease is a concern—like the outbreak of the deadly Ebola virus in 2014—the Saudi government prevents affected countries from participating.

Yet most years, there is little historical or religious context to the news coverage of the Hajj or its specific rituals. This lack of context, as studied earlier part in this thesis, runs the risk of reducing and simplifying the tradition to an idea that is easier to see as foreign and unknown, which allows for an established narrative bias to continue.¹⁶²

In 2015, *The Washington Post* had three articles on the Hajj, and each was about that year’s deadly stampede, in which more than 700 pilgrims perished.¹⁶³ CNN.com’s only coverage the year before, other than an online photo gallery, focused on how narcissism had penetrated the Sacred Mosque in Mecca by pilgrims snapping “selfies” during the various Hajj rituals.¹⁶⁴ In 2015, CNN.com produced two feature stories and one fact sheet about the Hajj: the fact sheet included 258 words on the rituals—including

¹⁶² Cline, “Bias,” p. 483.

¹⁶³ Morris, Loveday; Salim, Mustafa; and Murphy, Brian, “Deadly hajj stampede raises questions over Saudi handling of pilgrim surge,” *The Washington Post*, September 25, 2015.

¹⁶⁴ Keen, Andrew, “Selfies at the Hajj: Is Nothing Sacred? How Tech allows Narcissism to Run Riot,” October 30, 2014, accessed at <http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/05/opinion/hajj-selfies-keen/>

two brief sentences of religious context—and another 276 words on the history of stampedes at the event.¹⁶⁵ The two feature stories were on the stampede and the Saudi government's attempts to manage the crowd. Neither of those stories contained religious or historical background to the Hajj.

The New York Times' coverage of the Hajj in 2015 followed a similar pattern: nine out of the 11 stories about the pilgrimage were centered on the stampede and its rising death toll. As for those two remaining stories, one was about a crane accident that occurred shortly before the Hajj, killing 107 people, and the other was a feature report on a gay filmmaker making the pilgrimage.

The staggering number of pilgrims in attendance—an estimated four million each year—is more than 50 times the attendance in a full Super Bowl stadium. Those figures alone would command a significant presence on any news site committed to covering international news. In this particular story, the focus is largely on catastrophes that occur during the event; and very few provide the historical or religious context needed to show the relevance of the Hajj.

US Troops in Saudi Arabia

Contextual background of US troops in Saudi Arabia. By the end of his life, Muhammad had successfully transformed his young community from a fledgling faith group to a sociopolitical system.¹⁶⁶ In one of his final sermons, Muhammad is recorded as having said that Muslims should expel all non-believers from *Jazeera ul-Arab*, the

¹⁶⁵ “Hajj Pilgrimage Fast Facts,” Dec. 1, 2015, CNN.com, accessed on <http://www.cnn.com/2013/06/21/world/hajj-fast-facts/>.

¹⁶⁶ Esposito, *Islam and Politics*, 4.

Arabian Peninsula.¹⁶⁷ Depending on which Islamic scholar you ask, this rule has different meanings. Individuals with more extremist tendencies, like Bin Laden, have taken the position that this means non-Muslims should vacate the entire Arabian Peninsula or be put to death. Others say Muhammad spoke these words from the *Hejaz* area and only referred to the strip of land encompassing Mecca and Medina and not much more. The cited reason for this is that the second Caliph, Umar ibn al-Khattab, who had spent many years by Muhammad's side. Umar banned Jews from Khaybar and Fadak, which are in the *Hejaz* area, but not from Fayma, which was clearly still on the Arabian Peninsula.¹⁶⁸

In addition to the hadith, The Qur'an itself forbids non-Muslims to enter the holy city of Mecca.¹⁶⁹ The Saudi government enforces the ban with no apologies—although a few individuals beset with curiosity, like the Englishman Sir Richard Francis Burton in 1853, have risked their lives to sneak in and perform the *Hajj* under disguise. Upon his return to England, the Christian chronicled his illicit experiences, writing that as he approached the Ka'ba, it occurred to him that “a blunder, a hasty action, a misjudged word, a prayer or bow, not strictly the right shibboleth, and my bones would have whitened the desert sand.”¹⁷⁰ Modern road signs on the highways leading into Mecca designate one lane for Muslims, and two lanes labeled “Obligatory for Non-Muslims,” the latter of which exit the highway and redirect drivers to the cities of Taif or Jeddah.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁷ *Sahih Muslim*, hadith number 4366.

¹⁶⁸ *Sahih Bukhari*, Vol 4, hadith no. 3015, 3016.

¹⁶⁹ *The Holy Qur'an* 9:28

¹⁷⁰ Burton, Richard Frances, *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to el-Medinah and Meccah* (New York: Dover) Revised Ed. 1954.

¹⁷¹ Author's personal experience riding in a car to Mecca in April, 2000.

Journalism analysis of US troops in Saudi Arabia. It was the same air of exclusivity, of divine responsibility to safeguard the sanctity of Mecca—and to a lesser extent, Medina to the north—that led former Al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden to issue his lengthy “Declaration of War Against the Americans Who Occupy the Land of the Two Holy Mosques,” an edict read around the world on August 23, 1996.¹⁷² In that religious call to arms, Bin Laden mentioned the Ka’ba several times, and the two sacred mosques featured even more prominently. Bin Laden was greatly vexed by the American troops that had been based on Saudi soil since the first Iraq War. In his eyes, those were sacred sands that wholly belonged to followers of Islam. But beyond that, he felt “humiliation,” he wrote, that Saudi King Fahd ibn Abdul Aziz had allowed the foreign troops, and in doing so had become a puppet of the “crusaders.” The walls of this humiliation, Bin Laden wrote, could not be destroyed “except in a rain of bullets.”¹⁷³

This *fatwa*, or religious ruling, was a foreshadowing of the attacks of September 11, 2001. It was a call to arms against American troops, and his subsequent *fatwa* in 1998 would call for the killing of Americans more broadly. In their coverage of these *fatwas*, mainstream American media focused almost exclusively on the security issue. CNN secured an interview with Bin Laden a few months later, during which he announced that the United States’ presence in Saudi Arabia was an “occupation of the land of the holy places.”¹⁷⁴ Throughout that interview, Bin Laden referred to Saudi Arabia only as “the

¹⁷² “Timeline: Osama bin Laden, Over the Years,” <http://www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/asiapcf/05/02/osama.timeline/>, May 2, 2011.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ “Bin Laden Says He Wasn’t Behind Attacks,” CNN.com, Sept. 17, 2001, accessed at <http://www.cnn.com/2001/US/09/16/inv.binladen.denial/>.

country of the Two Holy Places,” refusing to acknowledge the ruling Al-Saud family.¹⁷⁵

A month after the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, *The New York Times* published a lengthy article written by journalist Peter Bergen—the former CNN journalist who had interviewed bin Laden—in which Bergen included one sentence of explanation for Bin Laden’s resentment. “In his view, the Prophet Muhammad had banned the permanent presence of infidels in Arabia,” Bergen wrote.¹⁷⁶

Most American journalism coverage of Bin Laden’s edict—and the subsequent diatribes he broadcast from hiding in central Asia—was extremely thin on religious or historical context. Even Bergen and *The New York Times* neglected to look into the religious belief that Muhammad banned non-Muslims from Arabia—or to examine the various interpretations of this ban.

The reason this kind of context is important is that it allows for those on the receiving end of this extremism to better understand the challenge facing them. Along with a more comprehensive understanding comes a wider palate of options for approaching the situation effectively.

¹⁷⁵ “Bin Laden, Billionaire with a Dangerous Grudge,” <http://edition.cnn.com/2001/US/09/12/binladen.profile/>, Sept. 27, 2001.

¹⁷⁶ Bergen, Peter, “Holy War, Inc.,” *The New York Times*, Nov. 1, 2001.

CONCLUSION

In his book *Covering Islam*, Edward Said identifies several important consequences that have occurred because of American journalism's practice of reporting Middle East news stories void of context, and with "patterns and values that are ethnocentric or irrelevant or both."¹⁷⁷ These consequences are as follows: a) a specific image, and not an accurate one, of Islam has been created; b) meanings of the stories are "circumscribed" and full of stereotypes; c) this news coverage has created a confrontational political situation with an "us against them" mentality; d) the reductive image of Islam has changed the Muslim world itself; and e) we have learned from the media's portrayal of Islam a fair amount about the West's institutions, politics of

¹⁷⁷ Said, *Covering Islam*, p. 44.

information and national policy.¹⁷⁸

American journalism reports influence public opinion every day, and in rare cases, as identified earlier in the thesis, those reports can directly impact foreign policy decisions. This broad power, which can have ramifications in the humanitarian, national security and democratic process realms, must also come with a heavy responsibility for fairness, accuracy and due diligence.

The distinguished French scholar Maxime Rodinson wrote, “Western Christendom perceived the Muslim world as a menace long before it began to be seen as a real problem.”¹⁷⁹ Albert Hourani noted that the overwhelming perception among citizens of the West has traditionally been that “Islam is a false religion, Allah is not God, Muhammad was not a prophet; Islam was invented by men whose motives and character were to be deplored, and propagated by the sword.”¹⁸⁰

Based on both the literature and news articles reviewed in this thesis, these stereotypes are still very much in play throughout American mainstream journalism coverage. One example of this is how quickly several major news organizations hosted “experts” who confidently linked Arabs, Muslims and Middle Easterners to the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing of a federal building without any evidence to back up their claims.¹⁸¹ A few days after the bombing, however, it emerged that a white, Christian, American radical had carried out the attack.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Rodinson, *Europe and the Mystique of Islam*, (London: I.B. Tauris), trans. by Roger Veinus, 3.

¹⁸⁰ Hourani, *Islam in European Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press) 7-8, 10.

¹⁸¹ CBS Evening News, April 19, 1995; *The New York Times*, April 20, 1995, *The Washington Post*, April 20, 1995.

As Said writes, the two things that can best counter this bias that is still inherent in the press are a) journalists who are very familiar with the history, language and culture of the people on which they are reporting, and b) much by extension of the first factor, more cultural context to the stories about the Middle East.¹⁸² This thesis, with the cultural context provided on four recurring topics coming out of the Middle East, aims to help the field of journalism in that endeavor.

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¹⁸² Said, *Covering Islam*, li, 55.

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