

# NEGATIVE IMAGE OF ISLAM AND US MASS MEDIA: HOW TO IMPROVE THE IMAGE OF ISLAM IN MUSLIM COUNTRIES

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## ABSTRACT

The study sheds light on brief history of Islam and Islamic world. It also slightly discusses that the confrontation between Islam and the West is not a new phenomenon. The history bears witness to the fact that the conflicts and military confrontation between West and Islam date back to the time of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in the seventh century and run through the Byzantine empire, the crusades, the Spanish re-conquered, the fall of Constantinople, the eras of colonial and national independence, cold war era, post cold war era and above all, after the incident of 9/11. The last but not least it was suggested that Muslim world should develop and utilize presentational, representational and mechanical devices of communication in order to erase misgivings/misperceptions about Islam and Islamic world. By applying the communication devices, it would be possible for Muslim world to disseminate developmental and positive aspects of their respective region.

## INTRODUCTION

Islam is one of the major world religions continuing since Hazrat Adam under different names but renamed and revived by Muhammad (PBUH) in Arabia in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. According to Encyclopedia of social sciences, "Islam (the act of submitting to God) is the proper and most widely used term for the religion of those who believe that the Quran is true word of God transmitted to mankind as an ultimate revelation through the medium of his Prophet and messenger Muhammad (PBUH). (International Encyclopedia, 1968). Islam is defined as technical term to

denote the system of beliefs, and rituals based on the Quran, is derived from the recurrent use of the verb "Aslama" (submit) in the Quran to denote the characteristic attitude of the true believer in relation to God (Har and Kramer, 1981). Webster dictionary describes "Islam as obedience to the will of God, submission to the orthodox faith" (Simon and Schuster, 1979). Britannica Concise Encyclopedia describes that the word Islam means, submission, specifically submission to the will of one God. Islam is a strictly monotheistic religion and its adherent called Muslims (Encyclopedia, 2002).

It can be said that the practitioner of the faith is a Muslim, a term that also serves as an adjective but the attributive adjective Islam preferable in social or cultural context (International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, 1968).

### **Brief History of Islam and Islamic World**

As mentioned earlier that Islam came into being in the early seventh century in West Central Arabia. Due to 23 years, preaching of Islam as by the Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) Islam, a new religion penetrated in Arabia within a short span of time. Subsequently Islam spread from Central Asia to Spain. Majority of the inhabitants of these regions overwhelming embraced Islam.

The Prophet of Islam and the four orthodox caliphs (i.e. Hazrat Abu Bakar, Hazrat Umar, Hazrat Usman and Hazrat Ali) who succeeded him were followed by Muslim dynasties.

1. Ummayah and Abbasi Dynasties
2. It can be said that period of kingship was era of autocracy and passive obedience. It is an

admitted fact that the Islamic imprints continued on the most of the known world for about 12 centuries, Muslims were the torch bearer, in the fields of arts, sciences, medicine agriculture, architecture, philosophy, literature and mysticism till 12<sup>th</sup> century AD. When, greater part of Europe was submerged in the Dark ages (Ahmad, 2002).

Succinctly, there were four major Muslims world power in 1700AD, these were:

- ☞ Mamluks of Egypt
- ☞ Ottomans of Turkey
- ☞ Safavids of Persia
- ☞ Mughals of India

The pages of history tell that Europeans defeated Mughals and Mamluks on 1720 and 1800 respectively. While the safavids, dynasty disappeared from the scene in 1723. Only the Ottomans empire continued as a world power up to 1923 (Memon, 1996).

The Ottomans Empire (14<sup>th</sup> century-1923) was based in Turks and was

controlled by Turks. Its jurisdictions covered Middle East and North Africa. Similarly, Greek, Yugoslavs, Albanians, Rumanians and Bulgarian in the Balkan were under the writ of Ottoman Empire and aegis (Memon, 1996).

In short, after World War I the Western powers succeeded in conquering the Middle East. The remaining parts of Ottoman Empire were divided in 1922. During World War II, Muslim countries were expected to support their respective colonial masters. In return, the imperialists vowed self rule and eventual independence. It is undeniable reality that the rift between the victorious allies and the subsequent cold war contributed considerably to the demise of the colonialism. Ultimately with the passage of time, almost all colonialized Muslim states became independent from the cruel clutches of imperialism. For example, Indonesia was liberated in 1945, Pakistan in 1947; Nigeria in 1960; Kuwait in 1961 and Malaysia in 1963. After the collapse of communism and disintegrations of USSR in 1989 Central Asian Muslim republics also became independent (Memon, 1996).

Islam is the principle religion that extends from Morocco on the Atlantic through North and East Africa and into sub Saharan Africa, across the broad expanse of central and South West Asia to the headwaters of the Indus in the table land of Tibet, and Southward to the Java Sea. It is subdivided into regional civilization and local cultures: Turkish, Caucasian, Central Asian, Persian, African, South and Southeast Asian and European (Saleem, 2008).

### **Population of Islamic Countries**

The population of Islamic world is approximately 1.2 billion till 2003 (Memon, 1996).

They constitute more than 85% populations in thirty two countries, between 75 and 85% in the 11 more countries and significant population in another 47 countries (Ahmad, 2008).

In 21<sup>st</sup> century, Islam constitutes one of the most pervasive and powerful transnational force in the world, with more than 1.2 billion, adherent spread world wide, Muslims are a majority in some 57 countries ranging from Africa to South East Asia.

And Muslims exist in growing and significant number, in United States, the republics of former USSR, and Europe particularly in UK. Similarly, extensive Muslim communities are also located in Asian countries such as Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan and India.

It is pertinent to mention here that every fifth person on the earth is Muslim. And as mentioned above, Islam is global phenomenon, embracing in its fold over 4000 ethnic groups (Ahmad, 2002).

### **Image of Islam and Islamic World by United States Mass Media**

The confrontation between Islam and the West is not a new phenomenon. The history bears witness to the fact that the conflicts and military confrontation between west and Islam dates back to the time of Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century and run through the Byzantine empire, the crusades, the Spanish re-conquered, the fall of Constantinople, the eras of colonial and national independence, cold war era, post cold war era and above all, after the incident of 9/11 (Greg, 2000).

It is claimed that mainstream media of Europe and the U.S. have been disseminating false information about Islamic world since several decades. Due to the distorted images, developed and manipulated by the media, Islam is the name of negativity in the West. It is generally believed that Western mainstream media often misrepresents and inaccurately interprets /portrays, Islam, Islamic world and its manifestation.

The elite media in the United States including the newspapers: New York Times and Washington Post; the magazines: like Time and Newsweek, electronic media including: ABC, CBS, NBC & CNN have been highlighting Islamic world in negative and unfavorable manner. It is said this anti Islamic campaign has reached enormous proportion with the demise of Communism. As Trinkha James has mentioned in her article that analyst, in Islamic world believe that negative image of Islamic country is primarily a conspiracy of American foreign office to invent a new bogy and enemy to fill vacuum created by the collapse of Soviet Union and world wide dissipation of

Communism, particularly demise of Communism in former USSR (Trinka, 1995).

Similarly Jean Kirkpatrick statement also endorsed the perception of Muslim analysts. Jean, former ambassador to the UN, had said on the CNN “as the watched the hammer and sickle go down last time on Kremlin: the next enemy is “Islamic fundamentalism” (Lewis and Bernard, 1990).

Since then, the American mainstream elite media has projected a distorted image in following alarming signals. “Beware or Islamic fundamentalism, the Muslims are coming, the roots of Muslim rage, Islamic fundamentalists call for a holy war” etc. (Saleem, 2008).

These headlines are self explanatory and depicting negative images of Islam and Muslim world. Who is responsible for the negative image of Islam, Muslim and Islamic world? Answer is obvious. Certainly US elite media is behind this machination. In present era no one can deny the significance of American mass media because they play vital role in the two ways, first they build public opinions; secondly they influence the

decisions of high ups as well as resolve foreign policy matters (Krishna *et al.*, 1993).

America mainstream elite media like New York Times, Washington Post, Newsweek, Time Magazine, CNN, CBS and NBC have been distorting the image of Islamic world.

Such words and phrases have been applied or associated with Islamic world. For example “Islamic militant from Pakistan”, “Pakistan backed Muslim rebels”, “Islamic terrorist training camp”, “Islamic fundamentalist theme”, rogue state “Taliban are the pawn of Pakistan Intelligence Agencies”, “Pakistan maintained links with terrorists in the region”, “Libya supports terrorists”, “Iranian or Palestinian terrorist groups”, “Pan Arab fanaticism”, “Libya’s terrorism”, “Militant Muslims” have been used for American enemies Islamic countries. Similarly positive and favorable words and phrases have also used for US friendly countries like Jordan, Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

## **SUGGESTIONS:**

## **How to Improve the Image of Islam and Muslim Countries**

In light of review of the literatures and after conducting in depth analysis of portrayal of Muslim countries, the following suggestions have been developed. These guidelines would prove helpful in building better image of Islam and Muslim countries as well as develop better harmony between Islam and the West. These recommendation/suggestions are as under:

Khaled al Aswar has rightly suggested about the ratification of the image of Islam in the West that it requires strong and persistent efforts from the Muslim themselves, both in the Islamic world and in Muslim communities in the West and America. This initiative should be a comprehensive process, starting from within by consolidating mechanism of Islamic work on the popular and official levels. They will have to appear as a nation of culture and civilization in order to present their better image in the world.

In this connection, effective initiatives must be undertaken to educate non Muslims, concerning correct Islamic

concepts of peace and tolerance. Moreover it is a job of Muslim experts and scholars to clarify incorrect and the distorted view of Islam held by some that lead to conflict and confrontation between the Western world and Islamic countries (Khaled, 2005).

It is an admitted fact that it is not plain sailing for Muslim media to break through the Western media as Western societies enjoy abundant media coverage and makes it un-necessary for them to look out side. It is suggested that task should be assigned to the specialized institutions to introducing a media campaign to project true image of Islam and Muslim World. It is necessary for the success of such campaign that it should be supported by the necessary financial assistance and human resources.

- It is suggested that Muslim thinkers must better explain Islam by writing books and articles, giving lectures and arranging meetings, with people of other religion (Memon, 1996).
- More and more English languages based radio and Satellite television station should be established in

Muslim countries. With the help of these satellite channels Islamic thinker would be in better position to answer the questions related religious political, social and economical condition of Muslim countries (Memon, 1996).

- Abdl al Moaty Bayoumy, Dean of Theology at Cairo Al Azhar University has suggested that Islamic scholars to spread out in Western world to teach non Muslims about teaching of Islam and communicate that Islam is a religion of peace mercy and tolerance that forbids the killings of innocents people. Fahmy Howidy, a renowned speaker in Eygpt for nonviolent Muslims suggested that if Muslims could establish their own democratic states as well as culture and protect their own values. It will go along way to build image of Islam and would diminish venom of extremism in the Muslim States (Memon, 1996).

The following recommendation /suggestions have been compiled from the report entitled “the image of Islam presented by Western Media, Written by Groups of professors and intellectuals.

The report was the joint venture of Salwa Bakar, Prof. Basem Ezbidi, Prof. Hanan Kassab Hassan, Prof. Fikret Karcic, Mazhar Zaidi and Jawher Hassan. The suggestions and recommendations regarding the better image of Islam and Muslim countries are as under.

- Conducive environment for research and cooperation between Muslims and western scholars in the arena of political debate culture, history, religion and media studies should be promoted for cultivation of mutual understanding, tolerance and culture of peace.
- Research organization should launch specifically designed collaborative research projects for the elimination of existing distorted images of the both Muslim World and West.
- A joint review and evaluation of text books, for educational institutes on both sides, should be introduced with task of treatment of the history, culture, religion, value systems and social reality of the other side.

- To improving the better image of the both sides, it is indispensable that media practitioner of the mainstream channel should adopt the universal canon of journalism. They should follow the golden principles of objectivity, fairness, and professional ethics in coverage of the issues involving the both sides.
- Inter media exchanges should be further promoted by improving and expanding existing journalist exchange program. The mainstream media of West and United States may allocate daily or weekly slots to Muslim intellectuals for presenting their point of view independently in order to erase misconception about the Muslim world.
- Inter cultural joint media ventures should be under taken in the field of documentary film production in order to promote an alternative image of the culture.
- The organization of Islamic countries should formulate their common media strategy in order to build up good image of Muslim countries in the world. In this connection,

satellite TV station, radio, channel, newspapers, magazines, internet website and news agencies should be established under the aegis of OIC. All Muslims countries should provide financial assistance according to their economic strength so that this dream may be materialized. These print and electronic media should disseminate their program in international languages like English, German, French, Polish, Spanish, Russian, Hindi etc. about Islam and Muslim countries. These satellite channels would play significant role in bridging the gap between the Islamic countries and West. These channels would work as low cost loud speakers in the hands of OIC to communicate their point of view to the West. So that monopoly of the Western propaganda warfare over the media channel would be counter in this manner.

- A concrete effort should be made by Muslim countries to address their respective governance pitfalls. In this connection, it is recommended that the Muslim countries should pay



attention to following areas like political participations, respect for human rights, reforms in economic, educational, public service sector as well as strategy elimination of corruption.

- Moreover, Muslim countries should initiate certain steps in order to address the political and socio economic root causes of militancy and terrorism. Therefore Muslim world and Europe should work jointly to enhance efforts in addressing the root cause of international political unrest. In this connection, the peaceful resolution of the Palestine, Kashmir, Kosovo and Chechnya, is need of the day because these issues are the most important factors resulting in Muslim anger and alienation in the present world.
- The vast majority of westerns are ignorant or misinformed about Muslims, Islam and Islamic countries. This is because of the biased approach of the mainstream media in United States and West. The western experts with absence of diversified sources of information

disseminate information in twisted and manipulated manner that is why the West is the place where Islam is a name of extremism, fanaticism and negativity.

- Similarly it was reported that statistics indicates that more than 90% of books about Islam which published in Western countries are written by non Muslims. After 9/11, 75% of media coverage in West and America was about Islam and almost 60 percent of the media content was negative (Khaled, 2005).Furthermore, the findings of most recent, a study of UK media commissioned indicates that only 4 percent were "positive" out of 352 articles examined in their overall depiction of Islam or Muslims.
- Another solution was suggested that Muslim countries should develop their media channels, establish internet sites in Western languages as well as published material in form of journals, booklets and books in order to counter propaganda of West and America about Islam and Muslim countries.

- Agata S. Nalborczyk has put up the following guidelines for the balanced and unbiased presentation /coverage of Islam and Muslim world (Agata and Nalbor, 2005).
- It would be helpful that first of all the mainstream media should try to adjust their existing in correct perception, views and procedures in-order to avoid the development of new prejudice hatred and bigotry about Islam and Muslims, particularly after the incident of 9/11, In this connection, it is necessary for the media to adopt a preventive strategy i.e. Well balanced and prejudiced sensitive approach
- This suggestion should be inculcated in the minds of media practitioner that they should try to avoid oversimplification and generalization
- Moreover, the media should start differentiating in their texts between various Muslim movements and groups/trends and emphasis the existing diversity of opinion and approaches in the Muslim world. In this connection, efforts should be made in order to enhance the general

knowledge of reporters, on the topics related to Islam and Muslims.

Bashy Quraishi in his article entitled “Islam in Western media” has chalk out following suggestions for the media (Bashy, 2005). Bashy Qurehi has presented ideal recommendations for the Western media practitioner regarding the true portrayal of Muslim in Europe. In our view (the researchers), these suggestions would be relevant for the better and positive portrayal of Muslim minorities in Europe and United States.

- Any reporting which promotes racism, perpetuates prejudices and disintegrates the society must be avoided.
- Reporting and covering ethnic minority issues as well as about Islam should be done with the same yardstick of objectivity and neutrality which is practiced in the case of majority.
- Journalists should be aware of the pitfalls of their own Eurocentric upbringing and ideological education when projecting other cultures and religion especially Islam. Use of

contacts and interaction with minorities can be helpful.

- Pejorative words like Nigger, Paki, fundamentalists, Ghetto, ethnic gangs, criminal second generation immigrants are derogatory to minorities. One should not use such biased terms which creates a negative impression.
- The culture, religion, ethnicity, colour or nationality of ethnic minorities should not be used as an explanation model regarding depiction of portrayal of minority.
- Unauthentic statistics, data or facts should not be used, as it can be misused by anti immigrant politicians, right wing movements and racist organizations. While writing about a particular issue regarding an ethnic group it is recommended that journalists should use multiple sources so that one sided impression may be minimized.
- In order to establish a sense of belonging, it is highly suggested that the point of view of ethnic groups should be given while

covering issues such as environment, traffic, sports, foreign affairs or the general development. The reason is obvious that the ethnic minorities lack socio political influence and the means to communicate and disseminate their own concerns. Journalists therefore are morally bound to convey the underdog voice to the majority.

- It is believed that the pen is mightier than sword. A spoken word, a published paragraph or televised images has a momentum of its own. Its damage takes time to repair. Journalists should use the power of pen for real presentation of the situation.
- The last but not least suggestion is this, that Muslim world should systematically utilize the power of mainstream mass media: newspaper, radio, TV, film, educational material and internet. By these means of communication, true and solid information regarding Islam and Muslim world could be disseminated to the Western world. Succinctly, it can be concluded that true picture of Muslim world would be established

with power of information technology and mass media.

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