

Polish Journal of Political Science

Volume 5 Issue 1 (2019)



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Ayman Al Sharafat

Department of American studies
Eötvös Loránd University

The Middle East in American media: a 21st century overview

Abstract

This study chronicles the portrayal of the Middle East in various American media that have received scholarly attention, centering on the print and broadcast media. The time frame of the media review in the United States towards the Middle East is from the September 11th attacks in 2001 until 2019. The article draws on the theory of orientalism to reveal a facet of the media that perpetuates false stereotypes of the Middle East as a threat to US interests, culture, and security. It finds that although the media in America have paid detailed attention to many issues in the Middle East during the last two decades, there are grounds to assume they have failed to comprehend the sociopolitical and economic reasons behind such issues. The coverage of the Middle East in American media during the 21st century has paralleled the government's official viewpoints and interests in the region.

Keywords: Media, The United States, The Middle East

Introduction

Like other people all over the world, Americans' understanding of other cultures and nations is profoundly impacted by the media. Most people in the United States get their information and knowledge about the Middle East and its events from newspapers and TV stations. But the media's biases are adopted almost without a doubt.¹ The media perform several functions in the United States and almost all of them have some political implications. Public misunderstanding of the Middle East appears to be on the rise all over the world, especially in the United States. There is a perceived link between the Middle East and terrorism, and American media reinforce this unfavorable image among Americans. Many previous studies demonstrate that media influence what issues audiences think about, as well as how they think about these issues. Nowadays, many scholars argue that the media affect political attitudes as well.² For instance, pro-Israel fallacies are spun into reality, and American media promoted pro-war attitudes prior to and during the Bush war against Iraq.

Some recent studies suggest that the perception of the Middle East as a cultural threat is probably more deleterious than its association with terrorism: public opinion data finds increasing anxiety about the Middle East's compatibility with Western values of acceptance, tolerance, and civility,³ and Americans who believe that people in the Middle East remain culturally distinct usually have negative opinions about them.⁴

¹ Ibrahim (2009): 511–524.

² Dimaggio (2015).

³ Panagopoulos (2006): 608–624.

⁴ Ciftci (2012): 293–309.

In other words, just as stereotypes about crime have been shown to shape the opinions of Americans as well as other people around the world concerning African Americans,⁵ stereotypes of the Middle East that are promulgated in American media may shape public opinion about peoples, women, wars and terrorism in the region.

This review centers on the print and broadcast media all over the United States that have described the Middle East. The time frame of the media review is from the September 11th attacks in 2001 until 2019. Social media is excluded from this overview because it reflects opinions of community rather than official organizations and governments, and what applies to print and broadcast media is different to social media. This article draws on the theory of orientalism to reveal a facet of the media that perpetuates false stereotypes of the Middle East as a threat to US interests, culture, and security. According to the orientalism theory, American media coverage of the Middle East portrays the member states of the region inaccurately.⁶

Although this work does not tackle the direct effects of American media on the Middle East situation, its substantial and fundamental contribution is to distinguish a key mechanism whereby American media portrayals construct stereotypes of the Middle East situation. In order to offer a comprehensive idea about American media and the Middle East, this study starts by discussing the history of American media in the Middle East. It then explains how the media in America has portrayed four contentious topics in the Middle East: terrorism, wars, democracy, and human rights.

⁵ Dixon, Daniel (2000): 131-154.

⁶ Terman (2017): 489-502.

2. The history of American media in the Middle East

At the beginning of WWII, American media de-romanticized the Middle East's image. Its coverage of the region was mostly unfavorable and conflict-oriented. Political, military, and economic news dominated.⁷ The Middle Eastern people were not presented as fighting for their independence, stories were limited, and presented from a distorted colonial viewpoint. This style of coverage is characterized in academic discourse as Orientalism.⁸ The media in America mobilized public support for the creation of Israel (1947-48). For instance, when President Truman changed his mind after the UN voted in favor of creating the Jewish state in 1947, and he decided to support the UN trusteeship over Palestine, the New York Times described this decision as weak, cowardly, and indicative of Truman's lack of leadership.⁹

During the period of Arab-Israeli conflicts, the 1956 Suez War, the 1967 Arab-Israeli Six-Day War, the 1973 Arab-Israeli October War (Yom Kippur), and the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, American media did not present Arab perspectives objectively and fairly. Arab countries in the Middle East were portrayed as dishonest, backward, undemocratic, unreliable, uneducated, and against peace. Meanwhile, Israelis were described as being highly educated, as having democracy like Western countries, and when Israel attacked Arab countries, that aggression was depicted as retaliatory.¹⁰ The year of the most widespread Middle East news at the time, 1980, was dominated by American media

⁷ Ibrahim (2009).

⁸ Said (1978).

⁹ Evensen (1990): 391-400.

¹⁰ Batarfi (1997).

coverage of the Iranian revolution, the hostage crisis in Iran, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. That year was a turning point for American media attention to the region. This increase of coverage applied to all three American national stations, ABC, CBS, and NBC.¹¹ In 1982, Israel attacked Lebanon, and there were eight frames in the coverage of that invasion: intransigence, terrorism, aggression, land legitimacy, peace-seeking, action justification, and competence or incompetence. The New York Times sided clearly with Israel; it mentioned Israel and the United States significantly more frequently than 10 Arab states in the Middle East combined; journalists argue that this was due to Israel's close ideological, cultural, and political ties to the United States.¹²

Television documentary producers in the United States usually have the luxury of months of planning, preparation, and research; documentary programming can provide a brilliant opportunity to shape public opinion on international conflicts, especially in the Middle East.¹³ Shaheen¹⁴ observes that the NBC documentary *White Paper* about Saudi Arabia depicted the nation in ethnocentric and very negative terms. Saudi Arabians were associated with wealth, oil, extravagance, and as being a threat to American people. Also, Saudi women were shown as forbidden to drive and shrouded in black veils.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Islam became the contemporary global threat that replaced Communism

¹¹ Adams, Heyl (1981).

¹² Barranco, Shyles (1988): 178-181.

¹³ Batarfi.

¹⁴ Adams (1981).

as the primary enemy of the West.¹⁵ Sheikh et al.¹⁶ conducted research on the American and European press representations of Islam as a religion, entirely separate from connotations involving the Middle East. They analyzed randomly selected articles using a Lexis-Nexis search with the keywords 'Islam' and 'Muslim'. Articles were sampled from the Times of London, the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and the Detroit Free Press from 1988 to 1992. The Detroit Free Press was expected to be more sensitive in its reporting on Islam due to the large Muslim population in the Detroit area. The results showed that a majority of articles about Muslims involved events, groups, and individuals from the Middle East. Topics were mainly focused on crises, conflicts, and wars. Coverage of Islam was, for the most part, international and monolithic, in that the references to Muslim groups and organizations lacked specificity. A clear majority of stories did not distinguish between the various branches of Islam. As for negativity and bias, the authors found weak support for their hypothesis that a high level of negative tone would be detected, with coverage found to be slightly more negative than positive. The Detroit Free Press was not significantly different in its coverage from the other papers included in the study, with the exception that the Detroit paper was less likely to describe Muslims in derogatory terms like 'fundamentalist'. This finding becomes more relevant when contrasted with the New York Times' trend of justifying Israeli actions in deference to the large Jewish readership

¹⁵ Saleem, Anderson (2013): 84.

¹⁶ "Press Treatment of Islam: What Kind of Picture Do the Media Paint?", (1995): 139–54.

in New York.¹⁷ In *Covering Islam*, Said¹⁸ analyses the British documentary *Death of a Princess* and the American-produced *Jihad in America*, both aired on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) television. He laments the lack of Muslim sources in both programs and cites the documentaries as examples of furthering the divide between 'us and them'. Documentary analysis is a particularly revealing method of investigating the representation of Arabs in the Middle East. Deconstructing longer format news shows can demonstrate in detail the reality of negative stereotypes perpetuated by television networks, despite the time and resources in documentary production that could theoretically facilitate deeper analysis and discussion than regular television news programs. Hashem¹⁹ also drew systematic samples from *Time* and *Newsweek* between 1990 and 1993. He found that *Time* carried slightly more articles on the Middle East countries than *Newsweek*. Iraq was the most mentioned Arab country, followed by Palestine, Saudi Arabia, and the rest of the Gulf States. Coverage was mostly negative for both magazines during the first two years, 1990 and 1991, as a result of the Gulf War. However, his results did show a trend toward more neutral or positive coverage over the entire four-year period. Hashem reconstructed recurring themes in both magazines: the economic decline of the Middle East, the growth of the fundamentalist Islamic movement, lack of democracy, the myth of Arab unity, Arabs living in the past, slavery still existing in the Middle East, and, finally, the changing political climate in terms of the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians.

¹⁷ Batarfi (1997).

¹⁸ *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (1997).

¹⁹ Kamalipour (1997).

In her content analysis of editorials in the New York Times, the Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times, together with an analysis of television news talk shows on ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN and PBS between October 1997 and February 1998, Khouri²⁰ used both statistical analysis and journalists' testimony to argue that the mainstream press marginalized both Arab and western voices that advocated withdrawal of sanctions and were opposed to further military assaults on Iraq. The LA Times emerged as the fairest newspaper from the Arab viewpoint; its editorial pages carried eight anti-war pieces and 10 editorials in favor of bombing Iraq, and the rest were neutral. The Post published 23 editorials in favor of bombing Iraq and eight against, with 44 neutral ones. Of a total of 75 articles, two presented Arab authors and 14 expressed concern for civilians. The New York Times, on the other hand, published not a single Arab perspective out of 59 articles, one anti-war piece and 19 pro-war editorials. As for broadcast news, an analysis of the guests chosen to appear on debate format talk shows found that of the five networks studied, all of them featured guests who represented the United States government line. Iraqi officials were the only Arab voices. These networks completely ignored independent Arab and American voices, and none of the shows discussed the suffering of the Iraqi people in detail. Khouri also highlighted several themes that various American network televisions and newspapers adopted in their late 1990s coverage of Iraq: Iraqi deaths presented as propaganda, the insignificance of Arab lives, and the portrayal of Arabs as irrational and violent. She describes the media discussion

²⁰ The Other Gulf War Syndrome: Flaws in US Media Coverage of the 1997/98 Iraq Crisis (1998).

about the possible bombing of Iraq as sensationalist and hypocritical. Arab arguments against the United States policy toward Iraq were consistently marginalized. Khouri argues that the consequences of the media reinforcing the pro-war administration policy had a negative impact on the Arab-American community. Hate mail, racial slurs, discrimination cases, and hate crimes against Arab-Americans all increased after the US–Iraqi standoff.

Using Lexis-Nexis, Abunimeh and Masri²¹ analyzed elite newspapers for their coverage of Iraq during December 1998 and August–October 1999. Using the keyword ‘Iraq’, they found over 1000 articles, but adding the keywords ‘civilians’, ‘sanctions’ or ‘UNICEF,’ the search results were far more limited, leading to their assertion that coverage of Iraq emphasized the bombing, while excluding reports of suffering by Iraqi civilians. They also analyzed transcripts from the television networks ABC, CBS, and NBC, as well as CNN and NPR. They found that CNN and NPR were the only media outlets that reported on the effect of UN and US sanctions on the Iraqi people. They outlined seven themes of the press during this period, using qualitatively extracted examples to illustrate their observations. They found that the media in their study ignored or downplayed the effects of sanctions on the Iraqi civilian population, discredited or ignored reports of civilian victims of the bombings, and personified Iraq as being entirely represented by Saddam Hussein. The news reports that were analyzed also created an artificial balance of coverage by relying on Iraqi government sources as opposed to including independent, non-governmental viewpoints. Journalists were towing the government line,

²¹ Arnove (2000).

exaggerating the threat of Iraqi weapons and using a narrow selection of ‘experts’ as sources.

Wars and Terrorism

Since the September 11th attacks and the subsequent war on terror, there has been a strengthening of the link between the Middle East and terrorism in American media. Journalists and editors were in general sympathetic to war, and media coverage clearly favored military action.²² President Bush, along with media all over the United States, amplified the rhetoric of hope and fear (hope of eliminating terrorism, and fear of terrorism itself). For example, the New York Times announced on September 15th: “For now, at least, the one state where American military power might be effectively used is Afghanistan, where the Taliban-led government is host to Osama bin Laden.”²³ Neutralizing bin Laden “would be no easy task”, but the military campaign was needed “to disrupt the use of Afghanistan as a terrorist base and to weaken the military capability of that country’s ruling Taliban movement”.²⁴ The Washington Post announced that “military force must certainly play a role in the coming campaign, and Afghanistan now looks like one place where it may be needed. The United States can no longer allow Osama bin Laden to operate there—much less his training camps for aspiring terrorists.”²⁵

Editorials usually referenced corruption, evil, and regime-supported terrorism in reference to the Middle East,

²² Dimaggio (2015).

²³ Pincus, Priest (2004).

²⁴ CBS News (2002).

²⁵ CNN (2002).

particularly Iraq, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia.²⁶ Most American media organizations devoted no attention to the sociopolitical and economic reasons that might have contributed to such a horrible region. After the invasion of Afghanistan and attacks on the Taliban, the New York Times was three times more likely to mention the progress of the war than to discuss the sociopolitical situation of Afghanistan and its neighbors.²⁷ On CNN, 38% of war coverage emphasized “the technology of the battle” and 62% focused on “general military activity”, whereas 17% discussed civilian casualties.²⁸ Few writers discussed humanitarian matters because the extreme emphasis on the one-sided rhetoric of hope and fear took the center stage. Of the ten widest-read newspapers in the United States, from the time of the September 11th attacks, no newspaper claimed that military action was inappropriate, and none assumed that the war would fail. The main concern of American media was with a government that was hanging on in the face of an increasingly powerful terrorist insurgency, and its support for a “civilian surge” to speed deployment of Americans to help Afghan and Iraqi leaders to strengthen their governance.²⁹ Official sources were consulted exclusively and uncritically accepted, while nonofficial sources were ridiculed or ignored. Polls carried out during the United States war on terror in the Middle East found that the majority of Americans were interested in antiwar views; but those views were rare in American media.³⁰

²⁶ Dimaggio (2015).

²⁷ Ibrahim(2009).

²⁸ Western (2005).

²⁹ Entous, Barnes (2011).

³⁰ Dimaggio (2015).

People in the Middle East are frequently portrayed as aggressive, violent, and drawn to terrorism across all types of media in the United States, including cable news, newspapers, television, and video games.³¹ Although the media usually speak about terrorism in the Middle East as occurring in a far off place, these portrayals have implications for Arab and Muslim minorities in the United States, as American media audiences generally do not differentiate between Middle Eastern people at home and abroad.³² Media effects go beyond public attitudes to conform with foreign policies. For instance, exposure to media propaganda and stereotypes of people in the Middle East as aggressive has been shown to highly increase Americans' support for foreign policies that harm the Middle East, such as sanctions and military actions³³. Furthermore, some studies argue that Americans who believe that Middle Eastern people in general and Arabs in particular remain religiously and culturally distinct from American mainstream society are much more likely to have negative opinions about them and associate Islam with terrorism, violence, and extremism.³⁴ American media is the only source upon which many Americans can base their opinions, particularly regarding international issues. Hence, the Middle East has been linked with terrorism in American public opinion as a result of the American media presentation of the region since the September 11th attacks.

Editorializing in elite media organizations is very important because these organizations set the agenda for how complex issues are discussed in other media all over

³¹ Saleem, Anderson (2013).

³² Terman (2017).

³³ Saleem, Anderson (2017).

³⁴ Ciftci (2012).

the United States. In the period under consideration, elite networks regularly emphasized the official administration's interests, although in different ways.³⁵ For instance, many studies find that the narrative of the Palestine-Israeli conflict differs in European and American media. Whereas European media tends to cover both sides (Palestinians and Israelis), American media is less eager to discuss Palestinian perspectives in the news because of their longstanding friendship with Israel.³⁶ Throughout its history the United States' media favors Israel by focusing on Israeli narratives and perspectives, providing easy access to Israeli officials.³⁷ In the Afghanistan and Iraq wars the Washington Post clearly echoed President Bush's rhetoric, whereas the New York Times echoed the views of the Democrats by agreeing that Afghanistan and Iraq constituted a threat to the United States' security and interests but asked whether the United States should immediately go to war or not.³⁸ During the United States' recent engagements all over the Middle East, the American media's support for the troop surge in the region as an anti-terror measure was clear. With violence escalating in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, many of the media networks lauded the presidency for having "correctly begun shifting attention and resources away from Iraq to Afghanistan and Pakistan, which is the more insidious threat".³⁹

It is no exaggeration to say that for far too long, mostly but not only under the Bush administration, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were carried out with little accountability

³⁵ Kumar (2012).

³⁶ Ruigrok (2013): 259-289.

³⁷ Rashed (2019).

³⁸ Dimaggio (2015).

³⁹ New York Times (2003).

from the US media. American media paralleled the views of the President in deploying spectacles of terror and threats in the Middle East to promote political agendas. For example, the Washington Post claimed that Saddam manipulated weapons inspectors: "Neither the U.N. weapons inspectors nor any permanent member of the U.N. [Security] council contends that Iraq has 'fully' cooperated... Those who advocate containment through inspections ignore the strategy's costly failure during the 1990s... Iraq stepped up its concealment operation, leaving thousands of tons of chemical and biological material and dozens of missiles missing."⁴⁰ Also, on March 20, 2003, the day after the Iraq invasion began, the Washington Post reminded its readers of the need for action: "Hussein has threatened his neighbors, and the United States, with war and WMDs for two decades; he has violated the cease-fire that ended the Persian Gulf War and defied multiple disarmament orders... The war that has now begun stands to end the single greatest threat to peace in the Middle East; it will help establish that rogue states will not be allowed to stockpile chemical, biological or nuclear weapons in defiance of the international community."⁴¹

During the United States' military operations in the Middle East, there were a huge number of front-page articles in the American media making the President's case for war. The general tenor of these articles is indicated by the frequency of such phrases as 'the President declared yesterday... the Vice President announced yesterday..., the Pentagon pointed out yesterday...' But there were only a few articles that ran on the front page that raised questions. What was

⁴⁰ Washington Post (2003).

⁴¹ Washington Post (2003a).

the level of truth? Was this really true? What were those aluminum tubes? Did the CIA really know?⁴² Furthermore, media coverage of American-Iran tensions since 2003 has been reminiscent of coverage prior to the Iraq war. American media has portrayed Iran as a threat to the security of the United States. It has generated a hope that the President of the country could resolve the crisis of Iran. Major media supported the claims of Presidents Bush, Obama, and Trump that Iran posed a serious danger⁴³ Exactly as with Iraq, the media in America mostly failed to question the official rhetoric. Journalists displayed an official bias, limiting their sources largely to official views.

With regard to the Syrian War, the media in America was mostly mixed, reinforcing speeches that were both critical and supportive of the President in power at the time. The media sometimes expressed opinions that were suspicious of military operations, and at other times supportive, and there has been no criticism of the United States' government regarding its failure to protect civilians in Syria.⁴⁴

Overall, during the times of conflict or in the run-up to conflict, many stories stenographically reported the Bush and Obama administrations' perspective on WMD and terror in the Middle East, giving no critical examination of the way officials depicted actions, threats, issues and policy options. American wars and conflicts in the Middle East also provide preliminary answer; the American media is in a state of crisis because it has seriously lost much of its moral authority.

⁴² Dimaggio (2015).

⁴³ Rashed (2019).

⁴⁴ Alalawi (2015): 281-290.

Democracy and Human Rights

The Arab Spring in some Arab countries which led to the removal of dictatorial systems in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Sudan, and Algeria, has dominated American media organizations, especially CNN, FOX News, the Washington Post and the New York Times. However, the coverage was not the same in the conflicts or protests in Syria, Yemen and Bahrain, where average coverage significantly dropped.⁴⁵ When the Muslim Brotherhood took office in Egypt and became stronger all over the Middle East, they were explained and pictured as connected with extremism and terrorism, rather than as a political movement of moderation and non-violence.⁴⁶ Coverage in American media of the Muslim Brotherhood constantly communicated to Americans and the world that they constitute a radical and fanatic organization. Moreover, the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East, particularly in Egypt, was described as a menace against democracy in the Middle East,⁴⁷ even if the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt succeeded to create the first democratic system ever there by electing Mohamed Morsi. As an example of American media bias against the Muslim Brotherhood, FOX News described them as “a real, clear present danger and the only organized political opposition. I think the odds are that radicals, maybe not immediately, but over time, they will sound moderate then it becomes radical Islamic.” American politicians along with the media were in conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The presence of a democratic system in the biggest Arab country and

⁴⁵ Al-Jenaibi (2014): 241-260.

⁴⁶ Saleem, Anderson (2013).

⁴⁷ Alalawi (2015).

a neighbor of Israel represented a threat to US greed and Israeli occupations in the Middle East⁴⁸ until they found el-Sisi as their man within only one year of Morsi's inauguration. Furthermore, according to a survey conducted by the Fairleigh Dickinson University in 2011 about information Americans had about the Arab Spring, FOX News audiences were found to be much less aware of the reality, reasons, goals, and consequences of the Arab Spring than people not listening to or reading news at all.⁴⁹ In fact, American media again paralleled the official viewpoints regarding the Arab Spring. American politicians were interested in changing the political system in Libya and in Egypt, and they were less interested in changing the systems in the Gulf countries and in Jordan. Protests in Jordan and in some Arab Gulf countries were ignored in American media.

On the other hand, the democratic deficits in the Gulf countries (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman, and Kuwait) were totally erased from the American political-media discourse. Due to the strong relationships between these dictatorial systems and the government of the United States, these countries are the biggest oil suppliers in the world, particularly to the United States.⁵⁰ Hence, Middle Eastern victims of U.S.-sponsored state violence in the Gulf countries received no attention, while those in an enemy country such as Iran received much concern and discussion in American media.⁵¹ In other words, the media all over the United States has failed to discuss political situations

⁴⁸ Glover (2013): 125-134.

⁴⁹ Alalawi (2015).

⁵⁰ Ruigrok, Atteveldt, Takens (2013).

⁵¹ Dimaggio (2015).

and the progress of democracy in America's allied countries while emphasizing violations in enemy countries.

Since the turn of the 21st century, Orientalism has undergone a remarkable revival in the American media. Many scholars argue that there has been "neo-orientalism" at work in the media portrayal of the Middle East.⁵² Some studies find that contemporary representations of women in the Middle East work to stigmatize them as suffering from continuous oppression and as victims of their religion, culture, and tradition.⁵³ So, according to the American media, the treatment of Middle Eastern women is a threat to American values of freedom and equality. The discourse in the American media is obsessed with women's oppression in the Middle East, for which the veil or Hijab is the paradigmatic symbol. It portrays Middle Eastern societies as uniquely or gravely misogynistic.⁵⁴ In addition, the media in America denies the agency of women in the region by portraying their lives as generally subject to oppression, while men in the region have been described as cruel and inherently barbaric.⁵⁵ Furthermore, the discourse of the American media usually compares women's lives in the Middle East to women's lives in the West, who are described, by contrast, as relatively free of sexism and liberated. In other words, the uniformity of gendered orientalism in the American media indicates that it is part of American foreign policy in the Middle East, and this orientalism reinforces the stereotypes of the Middle East

⁵² Abu-Lughod (2010).

⁵³ Terman (2017).

⁵⁴ Kumar (2012).

⁵⁵ Mahmood (2011).

as barbaric, uncivilized, and a threat to American and Western values.⁵⁶

In fact, no society in the world is immune to gender-based discrimination, even the United States. But American media has a limited attention span when it comes to women's rights globally, while Middle Eastern women are at the center of its agenda. Women from Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America lose out as a result of this agenda, even though many of them endure egregious discrimination on a daily basis.⁵⁷

On the topic of human rights violations, the discourse of American media has reflected paramount concern about the situation in Iran, Syria, Yemen, and Libya, but repression and human rights violations by oil-rich allies of the United States such as the Egypt of el Sisi, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia were generally given marginal coverage.⁵⁸ The United States authorized its allies in the Middle East to escalate human rights violations by offering training and equipment to their intelligence and police agencies.⁵⁹ For example, the 2011 Human Rights Watch report on Saudi Arabia clearly condemned Saudi Arabia for pursuing merely "symbolic" reforms for improving "the visibility of women" and establishing freedom of expression. The report mentioned that torture is routinely used all over the country to extract "confessions". There are also regular abuses against citizens, women, and foreign workers.⁶⁰ Therefore, this suggests that there is a human and women's rights double standard in the media in America when we compare

⁵⁶ Abu-Lughod (2010).

⁵⁷ Terman (2017).

⁵⁸ Al-Jenaibi (2014).

⁵⁹ Chomsky, Herman (1999).

⁶⁰ Human Rights Watch (2011).

the actions and reactions in Saudi Arabia and Iran. American media regularly proclaim the need to intervene in Iran and Syria on humanitarian grounds, but similar calls for intervention were absent with respect to Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.⁶¹ Hence, human rights in Middle Eastern countries are politicized by the American media discourse.

Finally, although the media in America usually echo humanitarian slogans concerning democracy promotion and human rights protection, its coverage of the Middle East's democratic and political situations during the 21st century gives decisive evidence of its paralleling the government's official outlook and interests whatever they may be at the time. It is fair to conclude that many American media organizations have paralleled American government interests over the Middle East, since they were part of the American strategic machine to sell wars of aggression and generate public support for such ventures. But that cannot be generalized uniformly, as some of the media networks have their own interests. The assassination of Jamal Khashoggi recently is an event which was considered deeply by many American media organizations.

Conclusion

This study attempts to chronicle the various approaches of the American print and broadcast media during the first 19 years of the 21st century that have been studied by scholars for their portrayal of the Middle East. The findings of these scholars have all led to a more comprehensive realization of how the Middle East region has been portrayed and

⁶¹ Entous, Barnes (2011).

why. An increase in qualitative analysis of the representation of the region in American media would certainly add further detail to the existing body of literature.

This study concludes that although the media in America have paid detailed attention to many issues in the Middle East during the last two decades, there are grounds to conclude that it has failed to comprehend and objectively present the sociopolitical and economic reasons behind such issues. The discourse in the American media played out in a way that privileged pro-war officials in the Middle East, while setting an agenda for public discussion that emphasized an imminent threat of terrorism and destruction to Americans and America's interests all over the world. The media in America protects America's allies such as Israel and oil-rich allies in the region against any blame for almost everything and anything. Although the media in America usually echo seemingly well-intentioned slogans to the effect that they represent democracy promotion, human rights protection, and freedom, its coverage of the Middle East during the 21st century gives indisputable evidence of its paralleling the official government's viewpoints and interests whatever they are.

The Middle East is a unique place where American media organizations can learn about themselves and their future, because it is the theater where all pretenses of neutrality towards power and interests have faltered. However, there are many brave and dedicated American journalists and media networks representing the Middle East whose work deserves praise.

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