In the Eye of the Beholder: How mass-mediated perceptions drive terror

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First, a word of warning: This presentation is not based on years of data collection or quantitative analysis. Nor is it an elaboration of the kind of seminal studies others on this dais are offering. Rather, it is more a collection of impressions and some thoughts on research I am intending to pursue, with the hope it might elicit some feedback and ideas.

As a journalist, I tend to take an experiential, rather than a scientific, approach to terrorism and its causes. My view of terrorism is deeply informed by having known so many terrorists, from members of Black September and the PFLP to the Baader-Meinhof gang, Armenians, Kurds, and a host of others; by having witnessed the birth of modern Islamic terrorism in Beirut; and by having covered more suicide attacks, hijackings and kidnappings by non-state players on the one hand, and, on the other, more so-called “surgical strikes,” naval bombardments and targeted assassinations by the agents of government, than I care to count.

In Lebanon in the ‘80s, I watched moderate Shi’ites whom I knew well, radicalized by U.S. policy and shift their allegiance to an emerging alliance of Iranian-allied clerics that would come to be known as Hizballah and, of course, carry out terrorist actions under the name of Islamic Jihad.

I sat in bunkers with Hizballah militiamen as our eardrums were crushed by the force of air as shells from the USS New Jersey the size of Volkswagens hurtled over our heads bound for other Muslim positions, and listened as they calmly argued, “You drop shells on us the size of cars. We have no New Jersey, so we put explosives into cars and drive them into your positions. What’s the difference?”
I listened to the frustration in the voices of mainstream Shi’ite and Druze leaders as they declared, “We want to be friends with America. Doesn’t the White House understand it is turning us against them?”

And I met with people like Hizballah’s original spiritual leader, Muhammed Hussein Fadlallah and heard his reasoning for why terrorism is the only choice.

And, in the context of anti-American terrorism, it comes down to one thing: U.S. policy.

Yes, socio-economic and political factors come into play, but the work of Scott Atran and others have shown those patterns often defy conventional wisdom (Atran, 2003). And yes, some Muslims are offended by the encroachment of American culture, but anyone who has watched the eyes of a radical militiaman as a Western blonde walks by, knows it is not revulsion he is feeling. Certainly, there are other issues that drive individual terrorists and terrorist leaders.

But, when it comes to anti-American terrorism, what unites them all is opposition to U.S. Middle East policy, and most fundamentally, U.S. policy toward Israel. I have been hearing that since I first arrived in the Middle East in 1980.

That was underlined in the spring of 1985 when I met Ali Akhbar Mohtashamipur, then Iran’s ambassador to Damascus and the man coordinating the activities of Islamic Jihad. One of my colleagues, AP reporter Terry Anderson, was then among the Western hostages being held by Islamic Jihad, so, after our interview, I made a plea for his release.

“Yes, it’s too bad about your friend,” Khomeini’s man in Damascus said. “He is innocent. They are all innocent as individuals. It is a very unfortunately situation. They are suffering for the policy of your government, just as others will suffer until that policy changes” (Pintak, 2003, p. 233).

The Marines were, quite literally, showered with rice when they first arrived in Lebanon during the Israeli siege of Beirut in the summer of 1982, just as the Israelis themselves had been weeks before. The Shi’ites initially saw them both as liberators after more than a decade of PLO rule in South Lebanon. But just as the Israelis soon took on
all the traditional trappings of occupiers, so too did the Reagan administration quickly reduced Lebanon’s complex mix of centuries-old ethnic, feudal, socio-economic, cultural and religious rivalries to a simplistic “good and evil … Us against Them” dichotomy.

There is a strong reason to believe that the U.S. and Israel – but particularly the U.S. – had taken a different approach, Hizballah would never have emerged and we would be looking at a very different world today. Instead, the Shi’a were polarized and America’s naively well-intentioned Lebanon policy proved the seed that gave birth to modern Islamic terror, a seminal event that resonates in today’s strategic realities. For Lebanon proved that suicide terrorism can bring a superpower to its knees. And then it served as the primary weapon in what would become the first Arab victory over Israel.

But even after the Marines scrambled back aboard their ships, Ronald Reagan and his Lebanon envoy, Donald Rumsfeld, never really understood why “they” turned on us. After all, from the perspective of the White House, we were only trying to help.

Which brings us to today.

Last October, President Bush went to Bali to meet Indonesian Muslim leaders. Of course, there was a certain irony in the fact that he chose Bali, a Hindu island, as the venue for a meeting with leaders of the world largest Muslim country.

After the meeting, The New York Times reported, Bush turned to aides and, shaking his head asked, “Do they really believe we think that all Muslims are terrorists?”(Sanger).

“He was equally distressed,” The Times reported, “to hear that the United States was so pro-Israel that it was uninterested in the creation of a Palestinian state living alongside Israel, despite his frequent declarations calling for exactly that” (Ibid.).

The incident – which, ironically, occurred on the 20th anniversary of the terrorism bombing of the U.S. Marines barracks in Beirut – reflects the complete perception gap that exists between the U.S. and the Muslim world.

‘Us’ and ‘them’. ‘Self’ and ‘Other’. It is the fundamental dichotomy of human existence; a concept embedded in psychology, anthropology, political science,
communications and a host of other disciplines. Since 9/11, it has been the defining characteristic of global affairs.

For Americans, Islam has emerged as the quintessential ‘Other’, replacing the Soviet Union as the touchstone against which U.S. citizens measure their collective sense of Self. It has become a cliche to say that the attacks of 11 Sept. 2001 ‘changed everything’. On one level, that is true. The nation’s illusion of security was shattered; its relationship with terror as something that happened ‘somewhere else’ was unalterably changed. But on another level, 9/11 simply made overt a worldview that had long been present but little acknowledged. Since a keffiah-clad Rudolph Valentino first strode across the silent screen, Arabs and Muslims have been Othered in U.S. society, the subject of stereotype and differentiation.

At the same time, while the image of the United States among Arabs and non-Arab Muslims has been shaped by a variety of factors, the overarching element has been the perception that the U.S. is intrinsically linked to, and responsible for, the policies of Israel, the ultimate Other.

Back in that 1985 meeting with Mohtashamipur, he told me, “We think that as long as America as a superpower looks to Israel in a special way and prefers it to all countries, and until the U.S. can be nonaligned in the Middle East, there will be difficulties” (Pintak, 2003, p. 232).

Very little has changed in the intervening years. “Anti-Americanism is for the most part a response to perceptions and judgments regarding our foreign policy,” Mark Tessler found in a study of existing polling data from the Arab world, and “all aspects of our Middle East policy were judged very unfavorably” (Tessler, 2003). Gallup concluded that "the perception that Western nations are not fair in their stances toward Palestine fits in with a more generalized view that the West is unfair to the Arab and Islamic worlds” ("Gallup Poll of the Islamic World," 2002).

The Djerejian public diplomacy report found much the same:
It is clear, for example, that the Arab-Israeli conflict remains a visible and significant point of contention between the United States and many Arab and Muslim countries (Djerjian, 2003, p. 13).

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, there existed a broad level of sympathy for the U.S. across the Muslim world. Formal polls showed that only a tiny percentage of Muslims approved of the attacks (Morin & Deane, ; Khashan cited in Tessler, 2003) Certainly, there were those extremists who celebrated the bombings. Certainly, there was, even among America’s allies, a level of quiet satisfaction that ‘they got what they deserved.’ But in general, public opinion was with the U.S.

Two years later, the Djerejian report concluded that, “hostility toward America has reached shocking levels” (Djerjian, 2003, p. 19), while Pew noted that “the bottom has fallen out of Arab and Muslim support for the United States” (Views of a Changing World, 2003), reflecting “true dislike, if not hatred” of the U.S. (Kohut, 2003).

Indonesia, the world’s most-populous Muslim country, is a case in point. After Sept. 11, Gallup found that only five percent of Indonesians surveyed said the attacks were justified (Morin & Deane). In the year 2000, Pew found that 75 percent of Indonesians had a “favorable view” of the U.S. In the spring of 2002, that figure still stood at 61 percent. But by the summer of 2003 the situation had essentially reversed, with 85 percent of Indonesians reporting an unfavorable view of the U.S. (Views of a Changing World, 2003, p. 19).

At the same time, in a country where the Israeli-Palestinian conflict had never been more than a tertiary issue, yet by 2003, 68 percent of those polled listed Yasser Arafat as the world figure in whom they had the most confidence, with bin Laden coming in third at 58 percent. Significantly, another major player in the Israel-Palestine dispute, King Abdallah of Jordan, came in second.

The question is: What happened?

The projects I am working on now revolve around several intersecting hypotheses about the relationship between the U.S. and the world’s Muslims (living outside North America) in the post-9/11 era.
The core thesis is that since Sept. 11, the importance of the Israel-Palestine conflict in shaping attitudes toward the U.S. among non-Arab Muslims has dramatically increased. Underlying that are the following hypotheses:

- That the conflicting worldviews of Americans and Muslims led each to perceive post-9/11 events in fundamentally different ways;
- That the polarizing rhetoric of leaders on each side was shaped by, and reinforced, those contrasting worldviews;
- That the prevailing worldview in the Bush White House – and the country-at-large – produced an elemental failure to understand the impact of U.S. policy statements and actions among Muslims;
- That the media on each side framed coverage in a manner that reinforced the dichotomy and inflamed opinion;
- That this impact was dramatically enhanced by the *al-Jazeera effect*, the growth of non-traditional media outlets in the Muslim world and a resulting liberalization in traditional media outlets; and,
- That the above factors led to the emergence of an imagined trans-national community of Muslims – or *umma* -- that is far more psychologically cohesive and politically-engaged than ever before.

The perception gap between the U.S. and the world’s Muslims is epitomized by the very definition of terrorism. Each of the main U.S. government agencies has its own, but they are all built on the definition enshrined in U.S. law that describes terrorism as “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by *subnational* groups or clandestine agents” (italics added) (CIA, 2002). The failure to acknowledge that to much of the world, state-sponsored terrorism is a far greater threat (Esposito, 2002; Haddad, 1996; Halliday, 2003; Telhami, 2002) drives home the perception gap. This difference in definition sparks a cascade of other essential questions: “Who is a ‘terrorist’ and who is a ‘freedom fighter’? When does a ‘freedom fighter’ become a ‘terrorist’?” (Alali & Byrd, 1994, p. 13).
Needless to say, from the U.S. side, this discussion leaves no space for the notion that many in the world would consider actions by the U.S. – and Israeli – military to precisely fit the definition of terrorism.

Sardar and Davies (2002) cast this contrast between America’s self-image and the image that many Muslims have of the U.S. in the terms of the quintessential Hollywood western:

American political rhetoric may circle its wagons around old familiar idea of national self-identity, with clear and certain recognition of the need for self-preservation and security. But beyond the comforting wood-smoke and firelight, outside that circle, the meaning is plain: other people will have to die (p. 171-172).

Arundhata Roy has posited Bush and Osama bin Laden as doppelgangers, each reflecting and enhancing the worst aspects of the other, each issuing forth with polarizing rhetoric couched in fundamentalist religious garb, reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty’s vision of “two mirrors facing one another” (Dallery & Scott, 1989, p. 91):

What is Osama bin Laden? He's America's family secret. He is the American president's dark doppelganger. The savage twin of all that purports to be beautiful and civilised. He has been sculpted from the spare rib of a world laid to waste by America's foreign policy: its gunboat diplomacy, its nuclear arsenal, its vulgarly stated policy of 'full-spectrum dominance', its chilling disregard for non-American lives, its barbarous military interventions, its support for despotic and dictatorial regimes, its merciless economic agenda that has munched through the economies of poor countries like a cloud of locusts, its marauding multinationals who are taking over the air we breathe, the ground we stand on, the water we drink, the thoughts we think.

Now that the family secret has been spilled, the twins are blurring into one another and gradually becoming interchangeable (Roy).
That image is no less true of the media in the U.S. and the Muslim world, embodied by Fox News and its ideological doppelganger, al-Jazeera.

While the U.S. media proceeded to “march behind and sustain hawkish patriotism after September 11” and, in the process, helped to “prepare the cultural ground for violence” (Waisbord, 2002), Muslims were exposed to images and language no less polarizing. Coverage built on a host of pre-existing stereotypes of the U.S. Central to these was that of the “crusader-Zionist conspiracy” in which “the Western demon [is] bent on the eradication of Islam” (Haddad, 1996, p. 419).

There have been no formal content analyses of al-Jazeera, al-Arabiyah and other emerging cross-border satellite broadcasters, but anecdotal evidence and reportage in the popular press paints a picture of reporting not so much biased per se, but rather broadcast through the prism of the Arab/Muslim worldview. As Rami Khouri, a political scientist and editor of Beirut’s Daily Star has written, “For different reasons, Arab and American broadcasters provide a distorted, incomplete picture of the war in Iraq -- while accurately reflecting emotional and political sentiments on both sides” (Khouri, 2003).

For example, where the U.S. media presented a sanitized view of the Afghan and Iraq conflicts, concentrating on the technological “shock and awe” (Katovsky & Carlson, 2003; Rao, 2003; Thussu & Freedman, 2003), al-Jazeera and its imitators, al-Arabiyah and Abu Dhabi television, focused on the suffering of civilians, with graphic, close-up images of casualties that has become their signature style (Ayish, 2002).

Media theory holds one clue to why the media on both sides covered events post-9/11 from such diametrically different perspectives. Journalists reply upon ‘news frames’ that simplify and prioritize news to fit existing societal concepts, values and knowledge (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974; Jamieson & Waldman, 2003). Akin to the psychological concept of ‘cognitive schema’ (Niedenthal, 1987), these frames ‘convey dominant meanings’ and ‘provide contextual cues, giving meaning and order to complex problems … by slotting the new into familiar categories or storyline ‘pegs’’ (Norris, Kern, & Just, 2003). They are based on the prevailing societal narratives about people, places and events (Bryant & Zillmann, 2002; Perse, 2001; Rosengren, 1994) and ‘reflect the power relations of the general society’ (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 219). They can involve
either ‘thematic frames,’ which reflect broad themes, or event-based ‘episodic frames’ (Iyengar, 1991).

Reviewing media coverage in the Muslim world post-9/11, certain key themes are readily detected: The U.S. as an imperialist power, as cover for Israel, as enemy of Islam. Each builds on existing attitudes and stereotypes.

The question ‘Why do they hate us,’ and its corollary, ‘Why has U.S. public diplomacy failed,’ have been the center of debate for the past few years. The administration argues that it is because a biased media in the Muslim world has skewed its message.

But is it that simple? In a new examination of the Gallup data, a group of researchers at Cornell and Ohio State compared the anti-Americanism of al-Jazeera viewers with the attitudes of those who watched CNN International and the BBC. They concluded that source of news had only a “slight buffering effect” on anti-American sentiments among viewers (Nisbet, Nisbet, Scheufele, & Shanahan, 2003, p. 26).

More importantly, they found that “for both types of networks, increasing levels of attention to coverage of the U.S. leads to stronger anti-American attitudes” (Ibid.). In other words, the more those Muslims questioned in the survey watched television, no matter which network, the stronger their anti-American views.

For the Muslim public, the difference in media effects for receiving news through either Al Jazeera or a Western network is a matter of degree, not direction (Ibid.)

The clear implication: Anti-Americanism stems not from the way in which Bush administration policies and actions are portrayed, as the White house claims, but from the policies and actions themselves.

This would seem to conflict with some earlier analyses that correlated satellite television viewing in the Arab world with more favorable – rather than more negative – sentiments toward “Western norms and institutions” (Tessler, 2002). Part of the answer lies in timing, some of those earlier studies took place before the rise of al-Jazeera, but it
underlines the need for more research both on framing effects and on the nature coverage since 9/11.

Osama bin Laden is, in many ways, the ultimate media icon of our age. It is unlikely in the extreme that he could have ever had the impact that he has ten years ago. Al-Jazeera was his bully pulpit. I won’t go into the journalistic debate over whether or not he should have been given such exposure – or whether the U.S. media would have done the same thing given the chance.

The fact remains that it was the emergence of this new communication channel, operating largely outside the control of Arab governments, that allowed his message to reach the so-called Muslim street from Nigeria to Indonesia.

Al-Jazeera also demonstrates another fact critical to understanding how the perception gap drives polarization in what I argue is a post-McLuhan world. Yes, the Information Revolution has brought the world into the proto-typical Indian village, but its impact has been anything but globally unifying. McLuhan’s “global village” has undergone massive urban renewal. Along with satellite television, the Internet has brought the emergence of a plethora of new communications vehicles, some associated with existing news organizations, some associated with religious groups, some tied to terrorist organizations. All provided a forum for bin Laden and other radicals to reach out to potential supporters in a way that would have been impossible through traditional, government controlled, media outlets in the Muslim world.

Precisely because we see the world through such diametrically opposed prisms, the impact of words and actions is received very differently depending on the audience, whether unmediated – in the form of live TV or Internet chat rooms – or mediated via the new fragmented channels of communication that frame information through a worldview that reinforces the stereotypes of the audience.

As Nisbet et al surmised,

the extreme anti-American predispositions that are endemic to individuals living in Muslim countries are likely to channel any opinion response, with these pre-existing views of the U.S. serving as perceptual screens,
enabling individuals to select considerations from TV news that only confirm existing anti-American attitudes (italics added) (Nisbet et al., 2003, p. 25).

In short, according to this theory, Muslims perceive U.S. policy statements and actions in the context of their worldview, no matter who is doing the framing.

So when President Bush says, as he did in a recent television interview, that “the Middle East is where you find the hatred and violence” (Meet the Press, 2004), Arabs have no doubt he means them. And when he couches those comments within the frame of Judeo-Christian values, Muslims respond in kind. The impact is exacerbated when such comments are mediated through the new fragmented information sources, which themselves are subjective in their choices of words and pictures.

Now back to those Indonesian attitudes toward the U.S. that shifted so dramatically from August 2002 to May 2004.

My contention is that it was the cumulative effect of a series of watershed events – or episodic frames – that resonated across the Muslim world between early 2002 and the capture of Saddam, which reinforced the perception of America as the ultimate Other.

Taking place against the backdrop of the invasion of Afghanistan a few months earlier, these events were portrayed very differently through what I call the bloodshot lens of the media on each side, thus exacerbating polarization, confirming stereotypes and underlining the perception gap.

These watershed stories include:

1. Israel’s spring 2002 offensive in the Occupied Territories, that included the siege of Ramallah and what Amnesty International called Israeli “war crimes” in Jenin, which left more than 50 Palestinians dead and some 4,000 homeless (Jenin, 2002);
2. Bush’s April 18, 2002 meeting with Ariel Sharon in which he called him “a man of peace” (Allen);
3. Bush’s June 2002 declaration that Arafat must be replaced by “a new and different Palestinian leadership” [REF];

Where the conflicts of the Middle East were once distant events, al-Jazeera literally brought them into the living rooms of non-Arab Muslims at a time when they had already become more politicized by the War on Terror. A University of Michigan anthropology PhD candidate on fieldwork in a small village in central Java, for example, tells of Indonesian villagers staying up until the early hours of the morning, waiting for the satellite that broadcasts al-Jazeera to come up over the horizon, then sitting for hours transfixed as scenes of bloodshed on the West Bank and Gaza Strip played out on their TV screens. But it wasn’t even necessary to have a satellite dish. One terrestrial TV station in Indonesia simply rebroadcast the al-Jazeera feed 24 hours a day during the height of the violence, while others made extensive use of coverage of the Intifada and the U.S. invasion of Iraq by al-Jazeera and its clones in their own newscasts.

Where before, viewers in the Arab world and beyond had to rely on brief clips provided on CNN or the BBC, or provided to their terrestrial TV stations by Western news organizations, now Al-Jazeera and its rivals supplied “hours and hours of uncut footage that was never available before,” notes Salwa Kaana, the Internet editor of the Palestinian daily *al Quds al Arabi* (Kaana, 2004). Not only that, but these Arab news teams had the local knowledge, language and access Western journalists could only dream of, enabling them to report from behind Palestinian lines on the West Bank, from the villages of Afghanistan, and from the streets of Baghdad. The great legacy of al-Jazeera and its rivals, as Kaana observes, is that “they emphasize stories that are important to the Arab world for a change,” and, by implication, important to other Muslims as well.

Through this new Arab journalist, there is a new Arab voice and a new Arab perspective on issues that impact our world. This dramatically decreases the influence of the Western media and has a major impact on the Arab psyche; on how we view ourselves, how we view our politicians, and how we view world events (Ibid.).

And as al-Jazeera and the other cross-border channels brought the wars of the Middle East and South Asia in the living rooms of Muslims from Morocco to Malaysia,
they increased the appetite for more, which meant that newspapers across the region ratcheted up their coverage as well. In Indonesia, this rise in interest coincided with the emergence of an independent media following decades of muzzling in the Suharto era. Elsewhere in the Muslim world coverage was influenced by two factors: Inspired by al-Jazeera, journalists were beginning to test the limits of censorship; and, anger at the U.S. led some governments to give anti-American voices freer reign.

I am in the process of comparing the level and nature of coverage in Indonesian and Pakistani newspaper of the first Intifada in the late ‘80s with that of the al-Aqsa Intifada in 2002, but early indications are that it is far more extensive – and shrill.

The implications are profound. Even as the administration and many others in the U.S. were downplaying the connection between U.S. support for Israel and anti-Americanism in the Muslim world, the psychological impact of that conflict among non-Arab Muslims was being amplified by the media, turning it into “a litmus test for United States-Muslim relations” (Norton).

So while President Bush was welcoming Sharon at the White House and praising him as a man of peace, Muslims were watching Palestinians being killed in Ramallah and Jenin on the orders of the man they know as the Butcher of Beirut.

While the administration was trying to disabuse Muslims of the notion that the War on Terror was some Zionist-Christian conspiracy against Islam, the president was adopting Sharonisms like “homicide bomber” and endorsing the Israeli leader’s notion of a “shared threat.”

And even as the White House insisted it was taking a new evenhanded approach to the Israel-Palestinian conflict, President Bush was calling for the elimination of Yassir Arafat, who Sharon had called “my bin Laden,” and who, at that very moment, was appearing beleaguered and besieged on TV screens across the Muslim world, a defiant David standing up to the armor of the Israeli Goliath that ringed what remained of his wrecked compound.

In an earlier era, the proclivity of successive U.S. administrations to say one thing and do another (Gerges, 1999, p. 229) was, to a large degree, masked behind a veil of
media silence. It was a legacy of the fact that in much of the Muslim world, where the media was (and still is) government-controlled, reporters towed the government line, had few resources, and “the concept of television journalism … was virtually nonexistent” (Ayish, 2002, p. 139). With the arrival of al-Jazeera and its clones, independent websites and loosened restrictions on print media in some countries, all that changed. A new, open, cross-border public sphere took the place of the fragmented communications patterns of the past.

Now, what America said and what it did, were right there for the world to see: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq.

In the process, America Othered itself, inadvertently creating both a heightened sense among Muslims that Islam is under threat and a greater sense of Muslim solidarity (Views of a Changing World, 2003, p. 46).

That is not to say this mass-mediated discord/polarization “causes” terrorism – suicide or otherwise. As Scott Atran (2003) has demonstrated, a complex array of cultural, socio-economic, and psychological factors motivate those who set out to become martyrs.

Rather, the barrage of words and images that have assaulted the senses of those on both “sides” has shifted the psychological center, and, in the process, to borrow Waisbord’s (2002) description of the effect of U.S. media reporting post 9/11, “prepared the cultural ground for violence.”

In short, the U.S. has achieved precisely what Osama bin Laden set out to do: polarize opinion in the Muslim world. That’s the bad news. The good news is that, to some extent, this polarization is only skin deep.

Again, Indonesia is a case in point. Prevailing wisdom is that Indonesian Muslims, long among the most easygoing in the Muslim world, have been radicalized since 9/11. That would seem to be borne out in the increased presence of headscarves among Indonesian women, the growth of Islamist political parties, and the rise of Jemaah Islamiyah, a home-grown al-Qaeda affiliate responsible for various terrorist actions across the region.
But a survey of attitudes toward Islam and politics carried out last year found that “while many Indonesian Muslims appear to be Islamists on the broadest construal of the term (they believe that laws should somehow be basically in accord with Islam), relatively few support policies advocated by Islamist activists” (Mujani & Liddle, 2004).

Although 67 percent of Indonesian surveyed said they wanted a government led by Islamic authorities and based on the Qur’an and Sunnah, and 71 percent thought shari’a should be obligatory, the numbers dropped dramatically when they were asked if they favored specific aspects of Islamic law. Only about a third of Indonesian favor requiring women to wear headscarves or cutting off the hands of thieves, 21 percent thought only Islamist parties should take part in elections, 26 percent opposed a woman president, and that number dropped to just eight percent when asked if women should be banned from serving in parliament. These finding are in synchrony with the relatively low support Islamist parties received in the last Indonesian election and would seem to indicate that while there is an increased sense of Muslim identity and politicization, the historically moderate approach to Islam among Indonesians, has not fundamentally changed.

That politicization of Islam in Indonesia stems in part from the fact that after decades during which it was sidelined from politics, Islam is again playing an active role in the post-Suharto era. But, as a quick look at the Indonesian media on any given day will demonstrate, a rising tide of anti-Americanism also plays a major part.

While there have been numerous studies of U.S. media coverage of the Arab world and Islam both historically and post 9/11, there has been little published on the framing of U.S. policy statements/actions in the media of the Muslim world and its impact on Muslim perceptions.

As part of a broader project led by Mark Tessler to assess attitudes toward terrorism in Indonesia, Jeremy Ginges and I propose to do three things:

1. Conduct a media content analysis of key Indonesian media outlets to examine how the watershed events listed above have been framed;
2. Conduct a series of focus group experiments in which participants are exposed to coverage of the U.S. in the Indonesian print and broadcast media and coverage from the U.S. media that is repackaged to appear to have come from the Indonesian media. The goal is to begin to assess the degree to which media framing effects in the various international media influence perceptions and the degree to which those perceptions are based on the policies and actions themselves;

3. Do a survey of thought leaders from across the Muslim world attending a conference at the International Islamic University in Malaysia this summer to determine attitudes toward the U.S., toward Islamic extremism, and to assess their primary sources of information.

My hope is that this would be a starting point to (1) carry out a broader comparative content analysis of coverage in the Middle East, South Asian, Southeast Asian, and U.S. media at watershed moments since 9/11, which might be matched against existing survey data; (2) collect data among members of Islamist parties in Indonesia to ascertain their primary sources of information; and (3) conduct media focus groups elsewhere in the Muslim world.

And on a more proactive level, I am also working on a project for a dialogue among media from the Muslim world and the U.S. to begin a self-assessment of the degree to which the media on both sides became a funnel for polarizing views post-9/11.

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