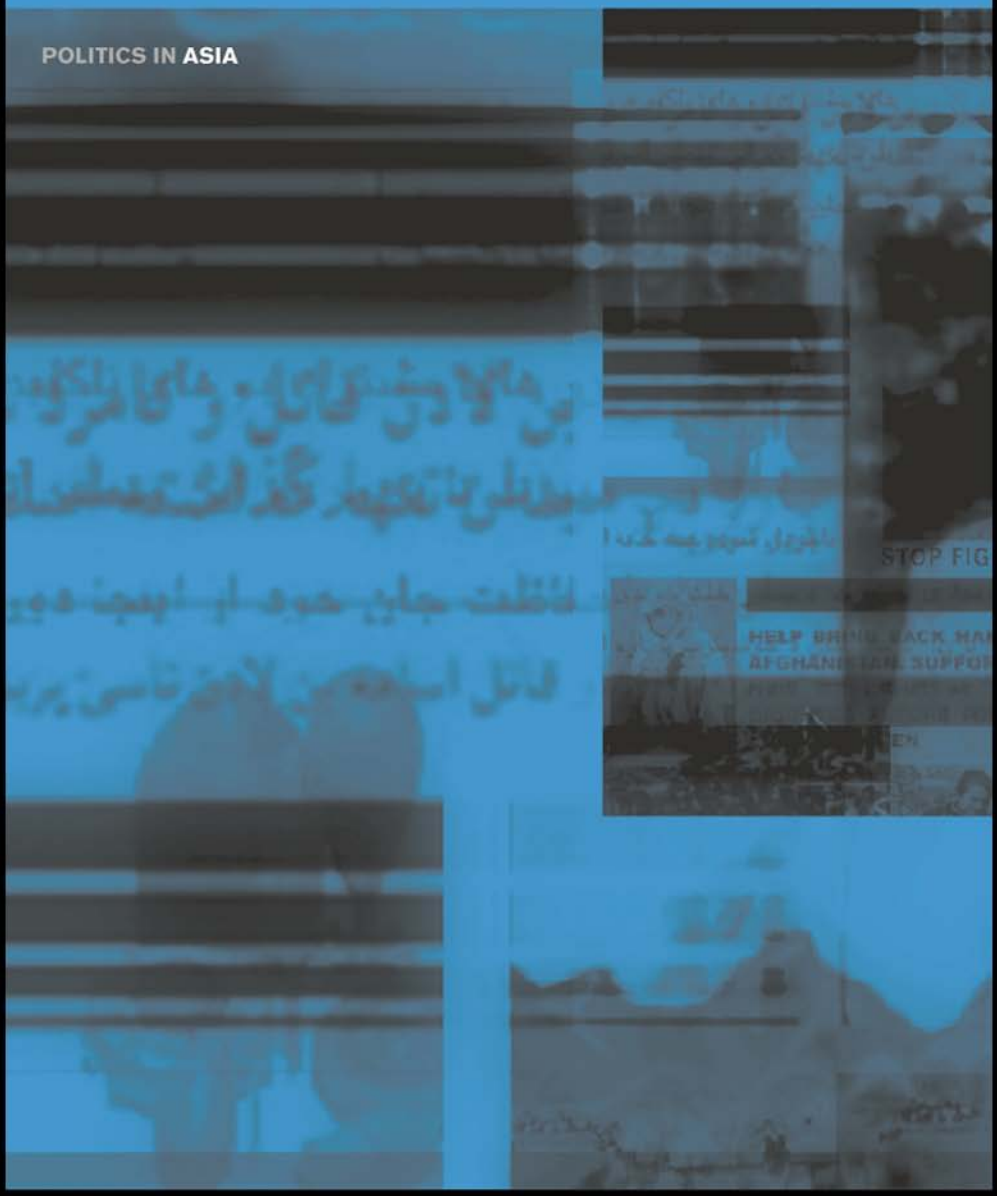
Media, War, and Terrorism

Responses from the Middle East and Asia

Edited by Peter van der Veer and Shoma Munshi

POLITICS IN ASIA



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Media, War, and Terrorism

Media, War, and Terrorism analyses responses to the events of 9/11, its aftermath and repercussions from the point of view of Asian and Middle Eastern countries. Perhaps controversially, the contributors argue that while the United States, and to an extent European, media seem largely unified in their coverage and silence in public debate of the events surrounding the attacks on the World Trade Center, there exists open, critical debate in other parts of the world.

By examining the use of media as an instrument of warfare and analysing the construction of public opinion in mediated electronic warfare, this book clearly shows the difference in perspectives between public opinion in the United States and the rest of the world. Moving away from popular assumptions that societies in the West are democratic and progressive and those in the Middle East and Asia are either authoritarian or underdeveloped, this examination of the media in those countries suggests the exact opposite. In combining an examination of the general, theoretical issues concerning the use of the media as an instrument of warfare with rich, geographically diverse case studies, the editors are able to provide a diverse and intriguing analysis of the impact and interconnectedness of national and global medias.

Bringing together contributions from academics, journalists, and media practitioners from all over the world, *Media, War, and Terrorism* is essential reading for all of those seeking an informed, non-Western perspective on the events following 9/11.

Peter van der Veer is Professor of Comparative Religion and Director of the Research Centre of Religion and Society at the University of Amsterdam. **Shoma Munshi** is Assistant Director at the Center for the Advanced Study of India, University of Pennsylvania.

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Contents

Notes on contributors xi
Acknowledgements xiii

1 Introduction 1
PETER VAN DER VEER

2 War propaganda and the liberal public sphere 9
PETER VAN DER VEER

3 The West and the Rest: a drama in two acts and an epilogue 22
LARRY GROSS AND SASHA COSTANZA-CHOCK

4 Television in the United States from 9/11 and the US's continuing 'War on Terror': single theme, multiple media lenses 46
SHOMA MUNSHI

5 The Middle East's democracy deficit and the expanding public sphere 61
DALE F. EICKELMAN

6 Political Islam in Iran and the emergence of a religious public sphere: the impact of September 11 74
MAHMOUD ALINEJAD

7 September 11 and after: pressure for regulation and self-regulation in the Indian media 118
MANOJ JOSHI

8 The Jewish hand: the response of the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind 137
IRFAN AHMAD

9 The WTC tragedy and the US attack on Afghanistan: the press joins in beating the war drums 155
TJAHJO PURNOMO WIJADI

10 War, words, and images 187
GOENAWAN MOHAMAD

11 When Osama and friends came a-calling: the political deployment of the overdetermined image of Osama ben Laden in the contestation for Islamic symbols in Malaysia 197
FARISH A. NOOR

12 Some 'Muslims' within: watching television in Britain after September 11 224
ASU AKSOY

Index *251*

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To bring out a volume that is truly global in its production with authors living in Indonesia, India, the United States and the UK, Europe, Iran, Malaysia – and one of them (Dale Eickelman) close to the bomb blast in Morocco during the

writing up of his contribution – is a feat in itself. Since this is a reflection on current events it was also imperative to update the book constantly because its subject evolved so rapidly. In responding to this challenge we were greatly helped by the comments of the readers for the press. Finally, we would like to record our appreciation of the efforts of Stephanie Rogers and Zoe Botterill of RoutledgeCurzon in bringing out this volume expeditiously.

Peter van der Veer

Shoma Munshi

Amsterdam/Philadelphia

June 1, 2003

1 Introduction

Peter van der Veer

An assault on the financial and military headquarters in the metropolis of an empire is unprecedented in modern history. The horror of the massacre and the scale of the destruction as well as its aftermath in warfare in Afghanistan and Iraq have made 9/11 a moment of world-historical significance. Empires have always been built by war and expansion and therefore have encountered armed resistance and military setbacks, but Paris, London or Amsterdam were never under direct attack from militants, coming from Africa, India or Indonesia. In that sense the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and on the Pentagon in Washington highlight a rupture in the history of empires. Earlier European empires, such as those of the French, British, and Dutch, were outcomes of a form of globalization in which empire and nation-state were produced within the same historical frame. There was a direct linkage between imperial culture and the national cultures of both the colonizer and colonized (van der Veer 2001). The struggle for national independence by the colonized often did not so much challenge the universality of enlightenment values, but rather challenged their imperial application in the domination of peoples of other race and civilization. In the contemporary form of globalization, a period of decolonization, in which independent nation-states have filled the United Nations and the map of the world, has been succeeded by the collapse of the post-World War II division between the First (capitalist), Second (communist), and Third (developing) World. The current era is characterized by simultaneous talk about a New World Order (or Pax Americana) and about a Clash of Civilizations. While the first is a continuation of the notion of the universality of the Western Enlightenment and the need for a global police to keep global peace, the second is a continuation of the romantic notion of essential differences between civilizations and the need to keep these civilizations peacefully in their separate geographical places. The responses to the assault on the United States on September 11 have held elements of both notions. This is the contradictory result of the contemporary form of globalization, in which, on the one hand, there is a growing connection between people of very different historical backgrounds and traditions within a framework of huge power inequalities; and, on the other, a growing disquiet and desire to keep things separate.

The horrendous attack on New York and Washington has raised, first and

foremost, the question of who the attackers were. It is striking how little the American public (but also the global public) was informed about the existence of a variety of terrorist groups, let alone their global nature, their ideology, their resources. While this may sound primarily like an issue for intelligence services, it is also a larger question in public debate. This is not unimportant, since the Oklahoma bombing, perpetrated by Timothy McVeigh, a psychologically troubled veteran of the first Gulf War, showed how easily everyone assumed that it must be 'foreign' Muslim terrorists who attacked the United States, and how surprisingly little the public was informed about American patriotic supremacists. Similarly, the anthrax scare that hit the United States after 9/11 has probably no connection at all with foreign terrorism. Nevertheless, there is now ample evidence that the 9/11 assault was carried out by the terrorist ring of Osama bin Laden, a Saudi multi-millionaire living in Afghanistan, although it has not been demonstrated, at least not in public. If one remembers the Lockerbie tragedy and its judicial aftermath, it should be clear that it is not easy to gather evidence about acts of terrorism. But if we assume that enough evidence is gathered that bin Laden is behind 9/11, then he should be brought to justice (which has still not happened two years after the fact) and not, as the US president has officially stated, just be 'wanted: dead or alive', if one does not want to answer group terrorism with state terrorism. Terrorism needs to be treated as an international crime, not as an act of war. The way the US government is treating those they have taken prisoner in Afghanistan as well as those who have been arrested in the United States shows great contempt for the procedures of international law. In view of the fear of terrorism the invocation of an exceptional state of emergency has found wide popular support in the United States

Perhaps even more striking than the lack of information and discussion in the public sphere about terrorism is the astounding ignorance of the American public about the role of the United States in world affairs, best expressed in the exclamation 'why do they hate us?' The terrorists who have attacked the United States were Arab Muslims and therefore terrorism has been interpreted as an expression of the clash between Western and Islamic civilizations. One could ask whether the fact that the terrorists are Muslims and Arabs is crucial. Attacks on civilians are common in terrorist activities all over the world. Underground stations in London have been bombed by the IRA; the Tokyo underground was gassed by Aum Shinrikyo, a Japanese sect; car bombs in Barcelona are regularly placed by ETA; Christian fundamentalists attack abortion clinics in the United States. Suicide bombers are also a common phenomenon in many parts of the world from the Tamil guerrillas in Sri Lanka who assassinated Rajiv Gandhi to leftist radicals in Turkey. In short, one does not have to be a Muslim and/or an Arab to launch suicide attacks against civilian targets. However, to commit suicide in an attack on one's enemy requires some ideology that justifies self-sacrifice for a higher cause. Martyrdom depends on an idea of the afterlife, but this does not have to be heaven or paradise or any other religiously described afterlife, but could just as well be the afterlife of one's people, the future of one's

nation (Anderson 1999). To die for a religion or a nation depends on ideas of connectedness with a larger community, secular or religious. However, religions all over the world have strong conceptions of good and evil, of the afterlife, and of just war, and Islam is no exception. As in Christianity, there are notions of martyrdom and self-sacrifice for the higher cause of religion. Moreover, Islam is, just like Christianity, a missionary religion, bent on conversion and spreading the message, and therefore has an assertive and sometimes aggressive aspect. Nevertheless, this is not the most important issue. More important is that religion in the modern world is directly connected to nationalist aspirations of various kinds and this is true for Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, as well as Islam.

In the case of Islam we are in general dealing with the poor and deprived areas of the world, especially Africa, the Middle East and Central, South, and Southeast Asia. The fact that nowadays so many radical and terrorist groups are Muslim should therefore not come as a surprise. Large populations in the impoverished South are Muslim and Islam provides the language of social justice that these groups use to fight the regimes which marginalize them. These regimes are often supported by the United States and its allies. This fuels the idea that there is a global conspiracy against the Muslim poor both through economic deprivation and through moral and political oppression. When these Muslims are Arab, the injustices of the Palestinian situation and the humiliation felt in the Arab region caused by Israeli and American supremacy are added to the general picture. Being a Muslim and being an Arab have to be historicized instead of being understood from some perspective as an essential Islam or Arab-ness. Regular wars have all been lost by Arab nations. The last one that was defeated by conventional warfare was Iraq. Terrorism is an instrument to attain goals that cannot be achieved by other means.

Western audiences have not been well informed by their media about terrorism and about the geopolitical role of the United States in Asia and Africa. The popular support for President Bush's 'War on Terrorism' that is shown in a number of public opinion polls in the United States and the similar (though somewhat more hesitant) support for it in Europe raises the issue of the relation between liberal democracy and warfare. It seems that rational political debate in the public sphere has much less to do with the weighty decision to wage war than war propaganda and the manufacturing of public consent. The response of the United States and its allies to global terrorism has been an attack on Afghanistan and subsequently on Iraq. This in itself is a sign of a profound misunderstanding of the globalized network society in which we live. What one will perceive as a 'success' in such a war will be subject to change in time and perspective. What will be the consequences of a war in Afghanistan for the entire Southern and Central Asian regions? It will have unintended consequences that may only surface in a decade, just as the unintended consequences of the first Gulf War surfaced only much later on 9/11. A crucial element will be the future stability of Pakistan, a nuclear power in perpetual contest with an increasingly Hindu nationalist India. The dangers of nuclear war in the region have already been

shown in the first half of the year 2002. Another crucial element is the connection between worldwide tourism and worldwide terrorism. The massacre of primarily Australian tourists in a holiday resort in Bali in 2002 has shown a clear example of this. The idea that this kind of conflict could be contained in the East worked in the earlier empires but not anymore, since the brothers and cousins of the people who die in Afghanistan by American hands live in Europe and the United States and their neighbors are on holiday in the areas where they come from.

It is increasingly clear that media representations are crucial for both the form of warfare and the understanding of it. These representations belong to a global capitalist system of production, circulation, and consumption in which the North is dominant, but an understanding of it in terms of world system theory with the North as center and the South as periphery is too static and one dimensional. A more culturally inflected understanding of disjunctures and differences in the current form of globalization could refer to Arjun Appadurai's delineation of mediascapes:

> Mediascapes, whether produced by private or state interests, tend to be image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality, and what they offer to those who experience and transform them is a series of elements (such as characters, plots, and textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places. These scripts can and do get disaggregated into complex sets of metaphors by which people live as they help to constitute narratives of the Other and protonarratives of possible lives, fantasies that could become prolegomena to the desire for acquisition and movement.
>
> (Appadurai 1996: 35–36)

Rather than taking the liberal account of the public sphere in modern democracies as the starting point for a comparison between societies that are considered democratic and progressive and those that are considered authoritarian and underdeveloped, the present volume wants to examine media responses to 9/11 in different mediascapes without assuming too much about the nexus public–media–politics. It is increasingly clear that media connect to complex cultural imaginations of the self, of the community, of the nation, of the global environment in an interplay of the local and the global that is not predetermined. Broadly speaking, this volume is mainly concerned with the mediascapes that are connected with the nation-states of Turkey, Iran, India, Malaysia, and Indonesia, but it is at the same time clear that they do only partially coincide with the mappings of national territories. Even more importantly there is a constant interaction and intertextuality between media that originate in very different places and constitute different mediascapes. Considering the huge importance of the United States, both in warfare and in information and entertainment, it is crucial to examine the development of the public sphere and the media in the United States. To say then that this volume is about Asian and

Middle Eastern media responses to 9/11 and its aftermath in the war on terrorism is not incorrect, but also does not stress sufficiently that interactions in the mediascape are truly global.

The media coverage of the events of 9/11 in the United States and their aftermath has shown us more than ever before some of the differences in perspectives between the United States, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Arguments in political theory about the existence of open, critical debate in liberal societies in the West have to be re-examined, just like arguments about the impossibility of such debates in the rest of the world. A fascinating illustration of this is offered by Western responses to Al-Jazeera, a satellite channel broadcast in Arabic from Qatar with a viewing audience estimated at 35 million. The leadership of Qatar does not want to interfere with the channel, which is thus free of censorship. Because of its presence in Afghanistan during the war, and even more that it was given the videotape on which Osama bin Laden clarified his political vision, Al-Jazeera gained worldwide prominence. The US media were pressurized by the government 'in the national interest' not to broadcast bin Laden's videotape and Qatar's ruler, Shaikh Hamad Khalifa al-Thani, told reporters during a visit to Washington that he had been advised by his hosts to have the channel toned down. On November 13, 2002, a US bomb 'accidentally' struck Al-Jazeera's office in Kabul. The use of the media as an instrument of warfare both in the Gulf War and in the Afghan War further forces us to analyze the construction of public opinion in electronic warfare. It also forces us to clarify the role of secrecy not only in terrorist operations, but also in the public sphere itself.

Arguments about an emergent transnational public sphere have to take into account that states are still very powerful in their attempts to control information and secret intelligence and that this is no different in the West than it is in Asia. Moreover, while the West seems largely unified in its media coverage and public debate (or lack thereof), there are important differences in the Middle East and Asia. This book intends first of all to describe these differences and to explain them in terms of politics and of the history of the media in different regions.

The present volume is divided into a section examining some general issues concerning media responses to 9/11 and a section of case studies dealing with Iran, the Middle East, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Turkish-speaking community in the UK. In his contribution, Peter van der Veer discusses the theory of the liberal public sphere as the lynchpin of Western democratic systems in light of an analysis of the connection between information and entertainment. He notes the interdependence of technologies of communication and technologies of warfare and observes that this produces a postmodern condition in which modern assumptions about the public sphere have become less useful. Van der Veer points out that the current form of globalization makes it both impossible to define a project of Enlightenment universalism as carried by Western power and to define a set of bounded, territorialized civilizations. The perspectives of the so-called East are also very much present in the so-called West and transnational migration enables as much contemporary forms of

capitalism as contemporary forms of terrorism. Van der Veer argues that the life-world of growing numbers of people in the world is drastically transformed by new economic regimes and that this elicits new religious responses all over the globe, enabled by the new technologies of communication.

Larry Gross and Sasha Costanza-Chock argue in this volume that one has to see the development of the present global media regime as a play in two acts. The first is the Cold War and the failed attempts of UNESCO and the non-aligned movement to create a new information order in which news presentations would take different perspectives into account instead of only the Western viewpoint. The second act is the new world order after the Gulf War and the collapse of the Berlin Wall, in which the old divisions of the First, Second and Third Worlds are replaced by that of the West and the Rest, or North and South. This time the opposition comes from both the right and the left, united in their opposition against globalization, although on very different grounds. The digital age obviously brings something new to play in the familiar battles about the unequal flow of information, but the authors are cautious in their assessment of it in light of their discussion of the post-World War II controversies about media, markets, and regulation.

Shoma Munshi examines in ethnographic detail the representations of the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath in the US corporate news media as well as in discussions on the Internet. Clearly this representation is not limited to the United States considering the global impact of US news channels. Her account of the televised images and narrative of 9/11 highlights the nature of reporting news as 'it happens', and conveys the shock of 9/11 but does not stop there. Munshi goes on to analyze how images and interpretation of news themselves exist in the dual sense of both representation and misrepresentation. Her contribution raises important questions about censorship, propaganda, and public debate in an open society.

Dale Eickelman's contribution marks the transition from the general chapters to the case studies. He engages directly with the theoretical issue of democracy and the public sphere in the Middle East. Contrary to the often encountered assertion that there exist not even the roots of democracy in the Arab authoitarian states, Eickelman shows that what is sometimes called 'the Arab street' is developing in a public sphere in which information is available and criticism is expressed. He examines in some detail the way in which the Arab channel Al-Jazeera has developed into a major player in the creation of public opinion in the Arab world. He also addresses the use of the media by Osama bin Laden and his group as thoroughly modern and extremely skilled propaganda.

Mahmoud Alinejad deals with the case of Iran, from which we have already learned in the Iranian Revolution that 'the street' shows not only crowd behavior but also informed, radical politics. Indeed, free democratic elections are regularly held in Iran to the astonishment of many Western observers. After the ousting of the US-backed authoritarian, but secular regime of the Shah, the United States has been a prime image of the devil in Iranian politics. Moreover, martyrdom as a political instrument in the form of suicide bombers has a strong backing in

Shiite sensibilities and theologies, from which it seems to have spread to radical Sunni groups. Iran, therefore, is an important player in the geopolitics of the war on terrorism. Alinejad explores the responses in the Iranian media to the war on terrorism and notes some interesting conspiracy theories that inform public opinion. Like Eickelman and van der Veer, he draws attention to the religious aspects of the public sphere that are insufficiently theorized in studies of modern society.

Manoj Joshi speaks directly from his experience as a leading journalist in India about the threat that terrorism and the war on terrorism pose to a free press. India is known for its free and active press and can in that way be compared to the press in Western democracies. At the same time India has faced insurgencies, terrorism of all kinds, and an unstable situation on its borders with China and Pakistan for a very long time now, without feeling the urge to counter this with exceptional governmental powers to curtail press freedom, except for the brief Emergency period under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi from 1975 to 1977. Joshi points out that 9/11 marked a new departure in countering terrorism in the United States through the Patriot Act of 2001. The change in international opinion about terrorism allowed the Indian government to come up with a draconian Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance (POTO) but this was changed in Parliament to allow journalists to do their work without being immediately forced to report any information on terrorism to the authorities. Joshi's contribution shows the extent to which global events like 9/11 get connected to national events like the attack on the Indian Parliament on December 13, 2001, and lead to similar discussions about press freedom in the United States, the UK, and India.

The secular press in India about which Joshi writes is one element in the print media, the other is the religious press. Irfan Ahmad has examined closely the publications of the Indian branch of the Islamicist Jama'at-i-Islami, a politico-religious movement that has been very influential in South Asia and the Middle East. One of the major themes surfacing in the English language publication *Radiance* as well as in the Urdu publication *Sehrosa Dawat* is the Jewish Conspiracy that is also mentioned in Alinejad's contribution on Iran and Goenawan Mohamad's contribution on Indonesia. It is striking that the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is used everywhere in the region as an interpretive framework to understand US foreign policy. There is a strong suspicion that 9/11 happened as a conspiracy of the Jews to defame the Muslims and make attacks on them possible. It is unsettling to find anti-Semitic conspiracy theories flourishing in areas where one can hardly find a Jewish presence

Tjahjo Purnomo Wijadi's contribution is based on a detailed empirical study of two leading Indonesian newspapers, *Jawa Pos* and *Kompas*, and their coverage of the WTC tragedy and the US war on Afghanistan. Reading his chapter, one can follow the decision taken by editors to allow some expressions, some headlines, and some interpretations rather than others. Wijadi's theoretical framework is based on Johan Galtung's opposition of war journalism that takes sides and peace journalism that tries to cover as much of the different perspectives as possible.