

**The 'War on Terror': Widening the Perception Gap  
US Neo-Conservatives, the Media, and the Muslim World**

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Since the signature of the Declaration of Principles between the Palestinian Authority and Israel in 1993 and the agreement popularly known as Oslo II in 1995, the prevailing belief underlying most analysis in the United States has been that the only serious obstacles to peace in the Middle East are Islamic fundamentalism and Palestinian terrorism, both phenomena normally associated with Palestinian stubbornness and lack of seriousness.

A prime example of this is the widespread belief among Israelis and Americans that the Palestinians rejected the opportunity to establish their own independent state. This view holds that Arafat's rejection of the maps that Ehud Barak showed him at Camp David in 2000, generally termed as "Barak's generous offers," unmasked his unchanged intention to liquidate the Israeli state. Academics, the public and the media rarely mention that what Israel conceded was a series of non-contiguous Palestinian areas with Israeli security posts and settlements surrounding them all. In addition, no one either has asked why words such as "generous" and "offer" should apply to territory illegally held by an occupying power in contravention of international law. But given the efforts of the US government to recycle certain assertions, plus the power of the media to repeat the same idea uncritically, it is now believed that Palestinians chose "terror instead of peace."

The main goal of this essay is to assess the gap in perceptions that separates Americans from Arab Muslim societies by exploring two main contemporary key disseminators of political information in the United States: the government and the mainstream mass media—private sector press and electronic journalism. This essay underlines the conservative nature of both the United States present administration and the media, and the extent to which such nature is reflected in their representation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The analysis presented here does not deal in depth with both elements, it rather offers a brief sample of some of their main statements and

actions that may account for their approach to the realities of the Middle East, their power of influence in public opinion and, consequently, for their contribution to the increasing gap between Arab Muslim and American societies.

We will also analyze two "magic" words which have become a sort of linguistic staple in the discourse of US officials of the present Bush administration and in news media: terrorism and collateral damage. We have selected for close examination cases from the private sector press and from some electronic media demonstrating that mass-media performance and the US government policies towards the Middle East manipulate both concepts and, most seriously, account for the existence of a vicious circle which keeps large sectors of American public opinion unaware of the double standards of US foreign policy and disconnected from the historical context of Middle Eastern conflicts.

### **Orientalism, Neo-Conservative Politics and the Media**

The background to some stereotypes and myths about the Arab and Muslim world in Western countries like the United States is Orientalism, the ensemble of writing that Edward Said characterized as a "style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the 'Orient' and (most of the time) "the Occident" (Orientalism 70). It is a systematic discipline which, since the late eighteenth century, has managed and produced the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily and ideologically. From this perspective, the Orient is not a free subject of thought or action.

As Said notes, even though to speak of Orientalism is to speak mainly of a British and French cultural enterprise, since World War II the United States has dominated the Orient and approached it as France and Britain once did.

The policies of the United States in the Middle East have been relatively stable throughout the past few decades. Even though there have been changes, they have consolidated the broad lines of a policy that first took shape under Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon. Among others, the US Middle East policy is built on two pillars: the security of Israel and plentiful supply of inexpensive oil. It continues basically the same today, except that Israel's position is not only stronger but also essentially unchallenged,

specifically after the September 11 attacks (Said "American 'Peace Process' " 87).

In 2000, the second generation of those who call themselves "neo-conservatives" became a decisive political influence in the United States government. A great majority of them are Republicans; foreign policy is their main focus, and the Middle East is their test case. They join think-tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute.<sup>1</sup> Their perspectives are inspired in the notion that the conflicts of the future will take the form of a "clash of civilizations," a term consecrated by Samuel Huntington. In the right-wing conservatives' imaginary, militant Islam now plays the same role that Communism played until the fall of the Berlin Wall.<sup>2</sup>

The image of the Arab and Muslim world presented by US government officials, strategic planners and most of the media is highly permeated by the Orientalist discourse. In fact, the complex mosaic of traditions, religions, cultures and histories that make up the Arab world are rarely known to them.

With regards to the media, the present analysis is based on the assumption that mainstream corporate media constitutes itself one of the least visible structures of power in modern society (Stork and Flores). As Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman have pointed out, "in countries where the levels of power are in the hands of a state bureaucracy, the monopolistic control over the media, often supplemented by censorship, makes it clear that the media serve the ends of the dominant elite" (*Manufacturing 1*). This observation applies to the United States. Although in this country the state does not control the media in any direct way, the government sets how a story is presented or an issue debated, or if it is presented at all. Indeed, mass-media performance functions according to free market principles; it does not need any conspiratory intent to select and distort information. And, as will be shown, the increasing global American media influence diffuses the American government's view in often invisible ways.

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<sup>1</sup> See the *Economist* articles "The Shadow Men" and "The Charge of the Think-Tanks."

<sup>2</sup> About Neo-Conservatives see Seymour M. Lipset, "Neoconservatism: Myth or Reality"; Norman Podhoretz, "The Neo-Con Anguish over Reagan's Foreign Policy"; Robert Kagan and William Kristol (eds.), *Present Dangers: Crisis and Opportunity in American Foreign and Defense Policy*; Irving Kristol, *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea. Selected Essays 1949-1995*.

Furthermore, the global media market has come to be dominated by the transnational corporations that rule US media: AT&T/Liberty Media, Disney, Time Warner, Sony, News Corporation, General Electric,<sup>3</sup> Viacom and Seagram. Thus, it is not surprising that conservatives are extremely well represented in every facet of US media, and that "conservative media structure more than ever determines the shape and scope of the United States political agenda" (Alterman; McChensey). The media relies on information provided by the government and "experts" funded and approved by these primary sources. That is why recent changes to media ownership rules in the United States could be interpreted as a political reward for major media conglomerates: i.e., "The change was a victory for the major networks, raising the cap on the maximum share of the national audience one company can reach with its stations to 45 percent from 35. News Corporation's Fox television subsidiary and Viacom's CBS division already own stations reaching about 40 percent of the market" (Kirkpatrick).

Not only media but also academics deliver Orientalist views, and ahistorical and willful political assertions in the form of scholarly argument: e.g., in a recent essay, Fouad Ajami affirms that "the driving motivation behind a new US endeavor in Iraq should be modernizing the Arab world [...] A reforming power's guidelines offer a better way than the region's old prohibitions, defects and phobias."<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, think-tanks and conservative activists routinely decry the "revival" of the "Islamic threat." Recently, more than 4,000 conservative activists gathered in Virginia for the 30th annual meeting of the Conservative Political Action Conference, where the Vice-President of the United States, Dick Cheney, was one of the speakers. During the meeting, two characters dominated the conference: Osama Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. There were activists selling "No Muslims, No terrorism" stickers, plenty of T-Shirts

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<sup>3</sup> General Electric is supplier of the Pentagon and owns NBC news.

<sup>4</sup> This is actually one of the essential ingredients of the propaganda model or set of news "filters" that Chomsky and Herman formulate in their research. By such propaganda, "the mass media are drawn into a symbiotic relationship with powerful sources by economic necessity and reciprocity of interest" (Herman and Chomsky 17).

<sup>5</sup> Ajami has become the most politically influential Arab intellectual of his generation in the United States. He is a regular guest on CBS news, and a frequent contributor to the editorial pages of *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times*. His Arab background undoubtedly gives him an air of authority that accounts for his celebrity in the American establishment. About Ajami and similar observers, see Adam Shatz.

mocking the idea that Islam is a religion of peace, and mugs hinting that Islam is a new form of Nazism.<sup>6</sup>

Many personalities follow the admonition of scholars like Samuel Huntington who suggests that if we want to understand anything important about any country of Muslim majority, at any historical period, we must refer ourselves to the Quran ("Clash"). It is as if Muslims belonged to an alien species, whose intrinsic motivations lay in some remote corner of their brains, waiting for an "expert" to interpret them. There are potentially endless cultural markers that could contribute to define a person's identity (e.g., ethnicity, gender, age, nationality, etc.). Depending on how they have been interwoven, identity can be a phenomenon endowed with a multiplicity of layers and textures, able to tolerate ambiguity and intermixture, or those multiple dimensions can collapse into a Manichean division between "us" and "them," in which the "other" is represented as an absolute alterity or, even worse, as our inverted image in a mirror. That is what Huntington does with regard to Islam: for him, once constituted, the boundaries between civilizations become so resilient that it is just as if they had been inscribed in stone. And just like stone, they are internally monolithic.

This view is evident in his choice of words, for example when he refers to the geographical boundaries between civilizations as "fault lines," as if civilizations were tectonic plates, that enter into contact only when they "clash," producing earthly and cultural tremors. This stereotypical view of the alleged Other seems to provide credibility to derogatory remarks about Muslims in general, or Arabs in particular, that would be considered unacceptable in the US if said about other ethnic groups. That is the case because those remarks seem to be supported by mainstream academic research, much same as the 19th-century racist thought claimed to derive its views from the avant-garde biology of its time. For instance, it would be in poor taste, and dangerously close to anti-Semitism, if we reminded our readers that many advocates of a neo-conservative agenda within the Bush administration are not only conservatives, but also Jews, and if we further suggested that maybe that could explain in part the views they have of Arabs and Muslims. However, it seems to be perfectly acceptable for a seemingly respectable journal like *Commentary* to publish an article by Daniel Pipes (Director of the *Middle East Forum* and a columnist at the *New York Post*) warning about a Muslim conspiracy to take control of the United States:

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<sup>6</sup> "The Right Unrestrained. Conservatives off Their Leash." *Economist* 8-14 Feb. 2003: 38.

The Muslim population is not like any other, for it harbors a substantial body who have worrisome aspirations for the United States. These people share important goals with the suicide hijackers: both despise the United States and ultimately wish to transform it into a Muslim country [...] The fact that this represents a not insignificant body of opinion [...] means that the existing order—religious freedom, secularism, women's rights—can no longer be taken for granted. It now needs to be fought for.

We could make an endless list of these and other clichés. What is worrisome is not their mediocrity as the fact that many of those who elaborate them are counselors to American politicians on the region. In this respect, the role of the official "observer" in reinforcing the propaganda line is remarkable: "the official observers are taken as notables, what they say is newsworthy, and their selection by the government from 'reputable' institutions adds to their credibility." Furthermore, "this rationale is in the nature of a self-fulfilling prophecy; they have effect only because the media accord them attention" (Herman and Chomsky 139).

### **Terrorism and Collateral Damage in the Occupied Territories**

During the recent war in Iraq, a member of the Iraqi Army crashed a car loaded with explosives into an American military checkpoint, causing the death of four American soldiers. Days later, a van carrying women and children passed in front of another checkpoint, and the American soldiers manning the post shot them, killing seven civilians. What is the difference between these two events? According to the version given by the American government, the first attempt was a terrorist act; that is, an action that should be punished under International Law. The second incident, in contrast, constituted a lamentable, though, understandable case of "collateral damage"; that is, an unfortunate accident with no legal consequences.

This is not simply an interesting anecdote. In recent years and around the world, the alleged cases of "collateral damage" have caused more deaths among unarmed civilians than the terrorist attempts the military personnel involved have been trying to prevent. The issue is not that collateral damage lacks legal status in International Law: it refers to the devastation of persons and property adjacent to a military target. The question is whether this

euphemism really applies to the recent cases in which the concept has been invoked. Often the answer seems to be negative, for two reasons: first, because of the nature of the chosen target, and, second, because of the obvious negligence characterizing the operation. In so far as the nature of the target is concerned, the 1977 Protocol of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 makes a clear distinction between licit and illicit targets: the populace and, in general, the so called "civilian objects" fall within the second category. This category includes the mass media, unless they are being used for military purposes. This military function of the media is the argument put forward by the United States government during the recent invasion of Iraq to justify its attacks against television stations in Baghdad.

However, as Aidan White, general secretary of the world's largest organization of journalists (IFJ) says: "The idea that the Iraqi soldiers were sitting in the desert watching TV to receive their orders is absurd." Not only there is no signal of the media being used with military purposes, but also the attack was done a short time after Iraqi television broadcast images of American soldiers captured by the Iraqi army. This suggests that the aim was to silence its content. This presumption is strengthened by the fact that the offices of the Al Jazeera TV network, whose broadcast was the subject of public criticism by the Bush Administration, were attacked with missiles both in Afghanistan and Iraq. During the last decade, the mass media, however, has not been the only civilian object attacked during wars in which the United States has participated; the same thing could be said about the military hospital destroyed in Kabul (which also attended to civilians) or about the destruction of the electricity supply centers in Baghdad and Basra.

Until now, we have referred to civilian targets attacked in a deliberate way. Nevertheless, there are cases in which civilian targets are hit by mistake. At first sight, such cases could be classified as "collateral damage." But not having caused those deaths intentionally is not enough to free the perpetrators of responsibility. This responsibility also requires that they have done everything within their means to reduce the risk of producing civil casualties. According to a U.S. intelligence report quoted by the *New York Times*, that is not exactly what happened in Afghanistan. For example, missiles launched by American Air Force planes hit a food depot of the International Red Cross twice. The depot had painted a large version of the organization's symbol on the roof, precisely to be visible from above. However, that symbol could hardly be seen by pilots who, during the first days of the war, flew at night and/or at an altitude of 5,000 meters.

Probably the clearest case of deliberate negligence has been the use of fragmentation bombs, which are prohibited by international conventions. This is especially serious when these bombs (the purpose of which is to cause the highest possible damage in a certain geographical area and not to destroy a specific, clearly demarcated target) are used against urban zones, as occurred in Baghdad and Nasirya, or when the pieces spread by those bombs have the same size and color as the amount of food dropped by the same airplanes, as happened in Afghanistan.

On the other hand, the "war against international terrorism" declared by the United States government glosses over the fact that the overwhelming majority of terrorist attacks in the world are of a national nature and that, in these cases, the main perpetrator is usually the State itself. This has the paradoxical consequence that officials accused of promoting or condoning terrorism at a national level (like the case of the Russian government in Chechnya) may also be key allies in the fight against international terrorism.

Regarding terrorism, when we remember that for each Israeli killed in the clashes of the past two years, at least three Palestinians have died, the Israeli government claims that the difference is one of intent: it says that while Palestinians deliberately target Israeli civilians, the Israeli army tries to avoid civilian casualties among Palestinians. If this is true, it would be a crucial observation, since several interpretations of the concept of "terrorism" coincide in that the intentional targeting of civilians is a defining feature of the phenomenon. Thus, for example, in the document outlining the United States' new strategy for national security, terrorism is defined as "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against innocents."<sup>7</sup> More specifically, and closer to the academic common denominator, is Michael Walzer's definition: "Terrorism is the deliberate murder, at random, of innocent people, with the intent of spreading fear among a population and to forcing the hand of its political leaders" (45).

Let us put those definitions to an empirical test. In November 2001, Israeli intelligence officers "planted" an explosive artifact in the streets of Gaza. Their supposed objectives were Palestinian militants that had attacked Israeli settlers from that area. Its actual victims, however, were five Palestinian children on their way to school who accidentally set off the bomb.

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<sup>7</sup> The National Security Strategy of the United States of America. Sept. 2002. 5.



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Following Walzer's definition, it could be argued that this was a terrorist act, since it was the murder of innocent people, and its real effect was to spread fear among the population of the area. It also fits the political objective outlined by Ariel Sharon in the Israeli Parliament (i.e., "to hit the Palestinians really hard" in order to "get out of their heads" the idea that they can force Israel to negotiate through force).

However, the Israeli Army appealed to the "collateral damage" euphemism to describe the incident, claiming that the Israeli government did not mean to provoke those deaths. So, the definition of terrorism would not depend on the nature of the act, but on the intentions of the perpetrators. If this is the case, the power to judge those intentions becomes a crucial political prerogative. This is especially true if it is assumed *motu proprio* by states, like Israel, which have made of causing "collateral damage" a daily routine (causing far more civilian casualties than the terrorist attacks its military officials are allegedly trying to prevent). This, in turn, gives us a clue as to the intention behind these supposed mistakes. If planting explosive devices in public places is considered a legitimate preventive measure, it is because it does not really matter whether those who detonate them belong to an armed militia or are simply passers-by.

The point is that under those circumstances the intentions of the perpetrators cannot be judged simply by what they say. As in a criminal trial, the defendant's word is not enough to establish his or her motives. In cases such as the one described above, the intention of the Israeli authorities could be judged based on the following criteria: the negligence shown by such behavior, the systematic nature of such negligent behavior, and the impunity with which it is repeated.

Probably the best example of the negligence with which Israeli troops regularly act is the assassination of the leader of "Hamas," Salah Shehadade in July 2002. This was carried out when a missile containing a ton of explosives was launched over a residential area of Gaza—the most densely populated city in the world. The missile not only caused the death of Shehada but also of fourteen other civilians in the area—mostly children. In this context, it is hard to take at face value Sharon's allegations that the civilian deaths were an unforeseen event. At that time, the US government, the principal Israeli ally, did not take those allegations seriously. During a press conference, the following exchange took place between journalists and Ari Fleisher, the White House spokesman:

Q. But, Ari, Israel's response is that it's in a war, as is the United States. And in war, innocent lives are lost. What is the difference from the president's perspective in Israel's action in Gaza, and United States actions against Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan where innocent lives have also been lost?

Mr. Fleischer: It is inaccurate to compare the two. And the crucial difference here being that in this instance, in Gaza, this was a deliberate attack against a building in which civilians were known to be located. [...] what happened in Gaza was a knowing attack against a building in which innocents were found. [...]

Q. Ari, what evidence does the administration have that the Israelis knew that civilians would be in that building, and that the attack would result in the loss of innocent civilian lives?

Mr. Fleischer: These were apartment buildings that were targeted. (Press Briefing)

According to Menahem Klein, since the beginning of the Intifada the senior Israeli command has "authorized the use of missiles or the planting of explosives in residential areas or against vehicles transporting civilians." Klein adds that "generally, such operations follow aerial reconnaissance of the target; for this reason, the presence of civilians is obvious" (Eldor and Klein).<sup>8</sup>

Israeli negligence can also be tracked in incidents such as the murder of a woman and her two sons (four and six years old, respectively), who were shot to death by Israeli soldiers in Jenin, in May 2002. Despite admitting that the victims at no time demonstrated threatening behavior, a military spokesman nevertheless claimed that the soldiers acted according to existing rules of engagement (Amayreh). The problem here is precisely those rules,<sup>9</sup> which not only authorize the use of firearms in situations that do not merit

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<sup>8</sup> Akiva Eldor and Menahem Klein, "Sharon is abetting terrorism against Israel." 25 July 2002 <<http://www.miftah.org>> Which violates war laws, that "forbid attacks with no precise enough weapons to distinguish between military and civilian objectives." B'Tselem *The IDF Fire Regulations*. Tel Aviv, 2002. 2.

<sup>9</sup> See "IDF Loosened Open-Fire Directives in the Occupied Territories." *Ha'aretz* Aug. 2001 and "IDF Loosens Open-Fire Regulations." *Jerusalem Post* 9 Aug. 2001.

them (for example, against unarmed demonstrators), but also concede a wide margin of discretion to officers in charge on the ground. For both reasons, the group B'Tselem considers these rules to be illegal (2002).

At this point, it would be relevant to mention another Israeli practice that has long been denounced by the Palestinians: the regular use of civilians as human shields. The Israeli Army used to vehemently deny those accusations—until the Israel Supreme Court verified the existence of this practice and decided to proscribe it.<sup>10</sup>

Regarding the systematic nature of this negligent behavior, it is important to recall that between September 2000 and September 2002 almost 2000 Palestinians died, most of them were civilians. These deaths tend to pass unnoticed by a large sector of the international press. For example, a headline of the Mexican newspaper *El Universal* maintained that the suicide-bombing perpetrated by a Palestinian on 19 September 2002, which caused five deaths, ended "six weeks of calm" in the region. Nevertheless, as a columnist from the newspaper *El País* stated, between 4 August 2002 (the date of the last attack of this kind), and 19 September, "Palestinian protests amounted to a series of isolated incidents, and yet 75 Palestinians died during this period" (Bastelier). It would seem that the daily death of Palestinian civilians has become a routine that does not disturb the calm.

The case of the *New York Times* is similar. On 17 July 2002, it reported a suicide attack which caused seven deaths. The newspaper maintained that there had not been a similar attack since 20 June of the same year and that "However, 40 Palestinians have been killed since then in the West Bank and Gaza strip, 22 of them unarmed civilians, according to figures kept by the Israeli human rights group B'tselem."<sup>11</sup> Curiously enough, the attack that took place in June, like the one that took place a month later, did make it into the paper's headlines, while none of the forty Palestinians deaths received the same attention.

Regarding the Israeli thesis, according to which the selectivity of their methods contrasts with the indiscriminate nature of Palestinian actions, it is worthwhile to note that in the current stage of the conflict, for each Israeli

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<sup>10</sup> "El Supremo Israelí Suspende el Uso de 'Escudos Humanos' Palestinos." *El País* 19 August 2002.

<sup>11</sup> "Seven Killed, Seventeen Injured in an Ambush of a Bus by Palestinians." *New York Times* 17 July 2002.

child who has died five Palestinian children have been killed, that is, a higher ratio than that of the population as whole.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, in order to illustrate the impunity with which Israeli colonists and soldiers behave, we can quote a quite illustrating example taken from the magazine the *Economist*:

Nahum Korman, who chased, kicked and beat to death a 12-year-old Palestinian boy in November 1996, was sentenced in January to six months of community service. This followed a complex legal process that included the Supreme Court, lower courts and plea bargaining. Betselem, an Israeli human rights group, condemned the sentence as giving "a message that Palestinian lives are cheap." It accuses the legal authorities of an "undeclared policy of absolution, compromise and mitigation for Israeli civilians who attack Palestinians."<sup>13</sup>

Sadly, the case described is not an isolated one. Some extra data shows the climate of absolute impunity from another perspective:

As of 14 November 2001, the Military Police investigations unit had investigated only fourteen cases of illegal shooting. This number is very small in light of the testimonies given to B'Tselem and the information received from other human rights organizations, residents of the Occupied Territories, and the media, which mention many other cases in which there was at least a significant likelihood that the Open-Fire Regulations were violated. (Dudai 7)

In other words, at a time when the number of women and children who had fallen victim to the fire of Israeli soldiers (not only of guns but also of shells shot from tanks and missiles launched from helicopters and fighter planes) was in the hundreds, the Israeli military police had investigated just fourteen cases.

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<sup>12</sup> *El País*, issued on 6 April 2002 reports that a total of 277 kids—230 Palestinians and 47 Israelis—have died since the beginning of the second Intifada in September 2000.

<sup>13</sup> "Israel, The Law and the Uprising." *Economist* 358.8211 (2001): 42-43.

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Faced with the evidence of this conspiracy of silence, the Israeli Defense Minister, Benjamin Ben Eliezer, had the number of investigations increased. In October 2002, according to a report by Ben Wedeman for CNN, the number of cases investigated had reached 220. As a consequence, 30 soldiers had been brought before military courts, but, and this is the most significant fact, the Israeli government refuses to reveal the number of soldiers convicted. In fact, it is not known if any soldier has received anything more than a disciplinary sanction for the cold blooded murder of Palestinian civilians.

The obvious problem here is that Israeli Defense Forces are at the same time judge of and party to the legal proceedings, as it is the soldiers who investigate among themselves. Even worse, Israeli soldiers are not only the defendants, but also the witnesses for the prosecution:

From conversations with several Military Police investigators, B'Tselem learned that the Military Police investigations units do not have Arabic-speaking investigators. In the large majority of cases, therefore, no testimonies from Palestinians are taken. As a result, the investigations are based solely on soldiers' testimonies, thus affecting the credibility of the investigations.  
(Dudai 8)

To sum up, negligent behavior, whether induced or deliberate, its systematic nature, and the cloak of impunity spread over it, tells us much more about the intentions of the Israeli government than any plea of innocence in its favor: the repression and intimidation of Palestinian civilians is a deliberate and systematic process intended to break their will to resist the occupation.

An additional proof that these actions are part of a coherent strategy and not an accumulation of random events, and that they have political purposes that go beyond the preservation of Israel's security, is the fact that they take place simultaneously with the military and economic siege that the Israeli army has exerted over all the occupied territories (a practice which led the British ambassador to Israel to affirm that the occupied territories constituted the largest prison in the world).

These are concentric circles that close tightly over the social and economic life of the Palestinian people, to the point of making it unbearable. The first circle consists of the border controls which prevent many

Palestinian workers from going to their jobs in Israel, and do not permit Palestinian exporters to sell their products abroad. When they are occasionally allowed to export, the Israeli government retains the taxes that this activity generates and which constitute one of the main sources of income for the Palestinian National Authority. The second circle is the one spread over each and every Palestinian city in the occupied territories, preventing movement among them. As a result, farmers cannot go to their fields because these are outside the surrounded area. Therefore, they lose their crops. People who do not work in the same area where they live cannot go to their work place, and patients requiring specialized treatment in hospitals in adjacent cities are not allowed to reach them (as the International Red Cross has been able to ratify). Finally, we arrive to the last circle: the Israeli occupation authorities often impose curfews for months, during which civilians can only be on the streets for periods of two to four hours once a week. In this short time, they have to get food, take care of their injured, and bury their dead. Obviously it is unlikely that someone would have the possibility of obtaining food when that person has not been allowed to work all week long. In places where humanitarian aid does not arrive, people simply die of hunger:

One fifth of Palestinian children under five are suffering from malnutrition, according to the report released yesterday by the United States Agency for International Development (USAid) and the charity Care International. [...] The USAid report [...] found food shortages caused by the blockades were a major cause of malnutrition. (Huggler)

If we take into account that a similar report published by USAid two years ago (that is, "before the current fighting began"), showed that even then chronic malnutrition affected 7% of children under the age of five, we can conclude that the actions of the Israeli army are responsible for a 200% increase in malnutrition among Palestinian children.<sup>14</sup>

According to the USAid report, the Israeli army justifies the siege of the cities claiming that it is the only way to prevent attacks from Palestinian militants. Such attacks have continued with no interruption during the siege, which gives us an indication of its ineffectiveness as an instrument of

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<sup>14</sup> Associated Press, 26 July 2002.

deterrence. It is worthwhile to ask why a policy is maintained indefinitely if it has not achieved its intended purpose, especially when it is a policy lacking any moral or legal basis. In such circumstances, it is not necessary to be particularly prone to suspicion in order to conclude that, along with other daily actions against Palestinian civilians, the military siege pursues political ends that have little to do with Israel's security. More specifically, whether we define the concept as "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against innocents," or as "the deliberate murder, at random, of innocent people, with the intent of spreading fear among a population and to forcing the hand of its political leaders" (Walzer 45) the type of actions that have formed part of the political strategy of successive Israeli governments can be described as state terrorism.

### **Strategic Overlook**

US politicians and influential mass-circulation publications in the United States tend to overlook documented records of Israeli human rights abuses like the ones mentioned above. The US State Department has detailed reports of human rights abuses in the occupied territories, available for anyone interested. Nevertheless, the United States refuses to challenge Israel's appropriation of the Bush administration's language regarding America's "war on terror."<sup>15</sup>

For example, in August 2002, during a question and answer session to Pentagon employees, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld referred to the lands Israel seized in the 1967 War as "so-called occupied territories" and questioned whether Israel was obligated to cease building settlements on them. Four months earlier, in March 2002, the columnist of the *New York Times*, William Safire, writing about the Palestinian occupied territories of Gaza and the West Bank wrote that: "To call them occupied reveals a prejudice against Israel's right to what were supposed to be secure and defensible borders."

Pat Robertson, founder and chairman of the Christian Broadcasting Network Inc. (CBN), one of the world's largest television ministries, recently called the Prophet Muhammad "a wild-eyed fanatic." Franklin

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<sup>15</sup> On 15 December 2001, the United States vetoed a United Nations Security resolution that would have cleared the way for international monitors in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, needed to help end the increasingly bloody low-intensity war Israel is waging against Palestinians, as well as the suicide bombing against Israeli civilians.

Graham—the preacher son of Billy Graham, a friend of President Bush, and on an occasion invited to deliver the Good Friday homily at the Defense Department—described Islam as "evil" (Keller). Billy Graham, Franklin's father, is a famous TV evangelist who founded the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association in 1950. Billy Graham once acted as unofficial adviser to Richard Nixon and since then has been reputed as "Chaplain to the White House."

According to another columnist of the *New York Times*, the reason why some Palestinians turned to suicide bombing was not despair over the occupation; they have turned to suicide out of perversity, because "they actually want to win their independence in blood and fire," and this has led them to adopt "suicide bombing as a strategic choice" (Friedman). Thus, blatantly ignoring 20th century history, he credits the Palestinians with inventing this "new form of warfare."

Similarly, the *Washington Post* has lined up the Palestinians as America's enemies, by telling its readers that the "sheer number of suicide belt-bombers attacking Israel this spring has increased fear among terrorism experts that the tactic will be exported to the United States" (von Drehle). A columnist of the same journal affirms that: "As with the American attack on Afghanistan, Israel is going into Palestinian territory to destroy the terrorists and the regime that sponsors it" (Krauthammer).

The record of this kind of information is so extensive that it cannot be sampled here. The relevant point to underline is that a proper history and form of news dominates, in which terrorism is the province of Palestinians, while Israelis carry out "retaliations," occasionally reacting with "regrettable harshness" and provoking inevitable "collateral damage." More significantly, examples such as the ones mentioned above are far from being isolated cases, they are recurrent. Indeed, as Edward Said notes: "Every major channel now employs retired generals, former CIA agents, terrorism experts and known neoconservatives as 'consultants' who speak a [...] jargon designed to sound authoritative but in effect supporting everything done by the United States [...]" ("Who Is in Charge?").

Concerning electronic media, evidence of one of the major broadcast networks suggests how chiefs normally decide the spin of the story and how reporters are compelled to submit scripts which cannot be "authorized and approved" unless they comply with the main line. The following example of an exchange between CNN's reporter in the occupied West Bank town of Ramallah and one of CNN's top executives in Atlanta might clarify this point. During the incursion of Israeli troops in the West Bank in April 2002, the



reporter referred to how Israeli troops were shooting at the Red Crescent ambulance drivers. A CNN executive threw the story away, arguing that they did not have an Israeli army response, even though reporters had stated that Israel believed that Palestinians were smuggling weapons and wanted people in the ambulances. When the Israelis finally gave CNN an interview, "the journalist's story ran—but with a line concluding of a line that said the ambulances were shot in 'crossfire' [i.e. that Palestinians also shot at their own ambulances]" (Fisk).

### **Palestine and Iraq**

It is not difficult to establish a parallel between the double standard applied by the US government and corporate media towards the Palestinian and the Iraqi questions. As Edward Said notes, "when organizations such as the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, *US News and World Report*, CNN and the rest mention Iraq's flouting of 17 UN resolutions as a pretext for war, the 64 resolutions flouted by Israel (with US support) are never mentioned. Nor is the enormous human suffering of the Iraqi people during the past 12 years mentioned" ("Iraq, Palestine").

Concerning Iraq, there has never been much sustained attention in the US media to the costs of sanctions inside Iraq, or sustained reporting about the effects of the warfare the United States waged in Iraq during the operation Desert Storm in 1991. In 1998, UNICEF came out with the first report, based on a survey of 24,000 households, suggesting that the total "excess" deaths of Iraqi children under the age of 5 due to the sanctions regime was about 500,000 (Majahan). Despite the information released by authoritative sources like UNICEF, there has been a revival of claims that sanctions are not to blame for Iraq's suffering, but Saddam Hussein bears sole responsibility. Thus, it is possible to find scholars expressing their views about Iraq who do not seem to know such basic information.

For example, when talking about the alternatives to war against Iraq, Richard Betts refers to the "tightening of sanctions—not the ones that *allegedly* harm civilians" (42). In an essay for the same journal, Michael S. Doran, a scholar from Princeton University and Adjunct Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, uses the same term: "The vast numbers of Iraqi babies the United States had *allegedly* starved by imposing sanctions on Saddam Hussein" (24).

In *Newsweek*, Fareed Zakaria writes: "The current policy of containment has the awful side effect of starving millions of Iraqis. The United Nations tried to design its sanctions to prevent this, but thanks to Saddam's subterfuge, the oil-for-food program has become the *oil-for-palaces* program" (9). Zakaria is one among many analysts who seem to adhere to the idea that Saddam Hussein kept the money of the "oil for food program" for himself and, therefore, starved his people. This is a nonsense accusation, since the oil-for food program has been administered by the United Nations and money was disbursed directly from a US bank account to foreign suppliers, making appropriation of funds by the Iraqi regime impossible.

It is also worth noting that, in the case of Iraq, the American target audience is not quite aware of the distinction between the Iraqi regime and Al-Qaeda. Surveys show that a majority of Americans think that some or all of the September 11 hijackers were Iraqis, while many believe that Hussein was involved in the attacks.<sup>16</sup>

## **The Results**

Given the interest in the media's influence on American public opinion, it is worthwhile to describe or point out at the relationships as they appear in the data: A Gallup survey asked Americans to indicate how often they got their news from a variety of sources. Forty three percent of Americans answered that they got their news every day from nightly network news programs on ABC, CBS or NBC, and 41% from cable news networks such as Fox News Channel and CNN.<sup>17</sup>

A Pew survey found that for the majority of the American audience, CNN continues to be rated the most believable television news source, with 37% of Americans who are able to rate it saying they believe all or most of what they see and hear on CNN.<sup>18</sup> Regarding print media, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, *Newsweek* and *US News* are among those seen as highly credible news sources.

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<sup>16</sup> Paul Krugman, "Behind the Great Divide." *New York Times* 18 Feb. 2003. According to a poll by *Time Magazine*, 59% of Americans think the Book of Revelation will come true, and almost a quarter believe that the Bible predicted the attacks of September 11 ("Behold the Rapture," *Economist* 24 August 2002: 27).

<sup>17</sup> The Gallup Poll, December 2002.

<sup>18</sup> Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, May 2000.

From a long-range perspective, there are indications underscoring the basic finding that Americans lean toward the Israelis in the conflict with the Palestinians. Around 49% to 41%, Americans say Israeli actions against the Palestinians are justified, while 66% say Palestinian actions against Israel are not justified. Similarly, Americans are more likely to say that Israeli actions have been legitimate acts of war. Up to 70%, Americans say that the violence committed by the Palestinians against the Israelis can be described as acts of terrorism rather than legitimate acts of war. In contrast, up to 53%, Americans say that Israeli violence against the Palestinian population can be described as legitimate acts of war and self-defense.<sup>19</sup>

### **Why do 'they' hate 'us'?**

It has now become a habit to ask the question "Why do they hate us?" a question that reflects the persistence of Orientalist views about two monoliths divided by an imaginary line. Academic experts, media and government officials have been caught in this peculiar and abstract obsession. Here, the Palestinian case is instructive, because reporters, commentators, and academics rarely view events in Palestine in the greater context of Palestinian disfranchisement and Israeli state terror with US compliance.

In one of his articles for Foreign Affairs, Barry Rubin says that

Arab and Muslim hatred of the United States is not just, or even mainly, a response to actual US policies—policies that, if anything, have been remarkably pro-Arab and pro-Muslim over the years (sic). Rather, such animus is largely the product of self-interested manipulation by various groups within Arab society to distract public attention from other, far more serious problems within those societies.

In a similar mood, Michael S. Doran affirms that:

Many critics argue that the Bush administration should put off a showdown with Saddam Hussein and instead focus on achieving a breakthrough in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But they fail to understand that

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<sup>19</sup> The Gallup Poll, April 2002.

although Palestine is central to the symbolism of Arab politics, it is actually marginal to its substance. Now, as in 1991, if a road to a calmer situation in Palestine does in fact exist, it runs through Baghdad.

The road, however, lies somewhere else. In spite of the apathy and opportunistic politics of Arab regimes regarding the Palestinian issue, Palestine has always been and continues to be the main reference Muslim Arabs and Arabs in general have of American policy. Arabs find it difficult to understand why it is highly meritorious to demolish Iraq because of its failure to withdraw from Kuwait in 1991 under the US terms of unconditional surrender, while it is a reversion to anti-Semitism to criticize Israel for ignoring the order of the UN Security Council Resolutions to withdraw from the occupied territories. They also find it hypocritical to invade Iraq in 2003 for its failure to account for its alleged weapons of mass destruction, when no one says a word about Israel's nuclear arsenal.

A recent poll is revealing. It shows that when asked about what they think of American values, more than 50% of Muslim Arabs in the Middle East answered that they admired and liked American conception of democracy and freedom. However, when the same people were asked if they agreed with America's policy towards the Middle East, less than 10% answered affirmatively.<sup>20</sup> In other words, the opposition of a great majority of the Arab people against American foreign policy towards Iraq is not an expression of their support of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship. They do it mainly out of mistrust, perceiving that the United States has its own agenda, which hardly has to do with international law. Palestinians, for example, recall that part of the funds destined to the construction of Jewish settlements in their confiscated lands comes from the generous contribution of American taxpayers (every Israeli citizen annually receives around 500 dollars from the United States, which sums a total superior to the amount received by Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa, even though Israel's per capita income is similar to that of many Western European countries). It is also difficult for them to forget that the F16 and Apache helicopters from where they are shot at are American gifts to the Israeli government, who uses them in densely populated urban areas.

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<sup>20</sup> "Muslim Opinion Polls." *Economist* 19-25 Oct. 2002: 43. Under this title, the *Economist* compiles the result of a series of polls carried out by the following enterprises: Zogby International, National Society of Public Opinion Studies, Gallup, World Values Survey, and NFO Middle East.

## The 'War on Terror': Widening the Perception Gap

A poll carried out last year among residents of Arab and Islamic countries provides some insights of their views about the United States. One clear fact is that the Palestinian issue has much greater significance in the Arab nations surveyed, than in the non Arab nations. Attention to news about Palestine exceeds attention to entertainment programs in Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Morocco and Lebanon: 80% of the population in 4 of those countries (Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Jordan and Kuwait) and 70% of Lebanese population follow news concerning the Palestinians.<sup>21</sup> Because of the pervasiveness of entertainment programming in the nine countries surveyed, comparing attention to news of Palestine with attention to entertainment shows is indeed revealing.

Therefore, even though the peoples of the Middle East have lived under dictatorial regimes, they also watch, feel and hear what happens in their immediate surroundings. They know that there is an occupation of Palestinian territories which has lasted 36 years; they are aware of the fact that Israel has consistently violated all UN resolutions pertaining the occupied territories and that the US has used its power in the Security Council to veto many resolution projects; they know that in the past 2 years 40 thousand Palestinians have been wounded and 2,500 have been killed (these deaths are counted as part of the so-called "collateral damage"); they know that Palestinian lands continue to be confiscated, that more than 50% of Palestinians live on 2 dollars per day;<sup>22</sup> that Israel has nuclear weapons and that it annually receives 3 billion US dollars in American aid (military, financial, and other).

Contrary to what scholars like Doran believe, the opinion of the people in the Middle East changes in function of a changing environment, rather than remaining constant as a function of a fixed mentality. A poll conducted in early March by the Arab American Institute and Zogby International asked Arabs in various countries whether they possessed a favorable or unfavorable view of America: "in Jordan, the positive/negative ratio had dropped from 34/61 in March 2002 to 10/81. In Morocco, it fell from 38/61 to 9/88" (Corn).

The significance of media in molding public attitudes towards the Middle East can be further assessed by comparing its performance and influence in Europe. Whereas printed and electronic media in Western

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<sup>21</sup> The Gallup Poll, April 2002.

<sup>22</sup> World Bank Report, 7 March 2003.

Europe were tainted by dissent, in the United States the media—with very few exceptions, such as the *Los Angeles Times*—took as their assignment to sell the war in Iraq, not to present a mix of information that might call the justification for war into question. Instead of informing the audience, most of the US electronic media openly took part in the war campaign, despite of being privately owned. Thus, for example, Fox News Channel and NBC used in their coverage of the war in Iraq the pronoun "we" and "they." This is in stark contrast with, say, London-based BBC network, which, although being owned by the British government, did not use that kind of language and tried hard to present itself as impartial, in order to avoid being seen as a tool of the ruling party (Krugman "China Syndrome"). At the pick of the crisis and war in Iraq, Europeans and Americans were at odds, something that can be due to the fact that they watch different broadcasting news (Krugman "Great Divide").

### **Concluding Remarks**

The purpose of this essay has been to explore the widespread information that lies behind the gap in understanding between American public opinion and Arabs and Muslim societies. We have taken media performance in its interaction with dominant interests and the US government as an analytical tool to accomplish that aim. By using the information around the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the manipulation of concepts like "collateral damage" and "terrorism" we have tried to underscore how the double standard of US policy towards the Middle East and the role of the media conglomerates reinforce each other and have laid down an immense process of mystification all over the Arab world. Such a process is highly invisible, since actually the US media encourages spirited debate, criticism and dissent, as long as these remain "within the bounds of acceptable premises" (Herman and Chomsky). Most seriously, the attitude of the US media and intelligentsia in the specific case of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict influences the approach of the US government to the problem. This, in turn, can inhibit the US government's freedom of maneuver, since any decision to take far-reaching action or to modify its policies can eventually be opposed by important sectors of public opinion, which are imbued with the media and scholars' own de-contextualized interpretation of facts in the occupied territories.

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