

The Islam-Discourse in European Media - Between Islamophobia and Intercultural Dialogue

Conference Summary

**April 6th, 2011 in Berlin,
Museum of Islamic Art**

I. Conception

The event was aimed at a specialised audience from the branches of science, culture, media and politics. It focussed on the interdisciplinary disputes concerning Islamic discourse in the European media. To discuss this issue, guest speakers from Germany, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and Denmark were invited. They offered a scientific-analytical perspective and presented their current progress in research, and related this to the questions.

Over the course of the 3-session conference, the speakers focussed mainly on questions concerning the interaction between the media image of Islam and perception of Muslims in majority society; the area conflict between measured media coverage and polemic, Islamophobic tendencies in the media; and the reasons for and questions surrounding the relationship between Islamic discourse in the media, the integration debate and processes involved in forming a sense of identity. Each session included a discussion, during which the respective moderator involved the audience.

II. Introduction

The representation of Islam in the media has become a topic of considerable socio-political importance, especially since the September 11th terror attacks. Areas of the European media are being accused of presenting Islam in a biased, selective, and unbalanced way; they present debates surrounding the headscarf, honour killings or the “Islamic threat” to European, non-Islamic society in an unmeasured and one-dimensional way; and that single events are highlighted in order to negatively portray “Islam”. According to criticism of biased media, terms such as “unwillingness to integrate”, “foreign infiltration” and “terrorism”, as well as the visual representation of war zones like Afghanistan, Iraq or Yemen, distort the public image of Islam and are conducive to cliché-thinking. In addition, generalisations like “Islam” and “the Islamic world” can lead to occasional Islamophobic comments in current Islamic discourse in the media, and encourage media coverage that is selective without analysing, that aims to evoke emotion instead of establishing facts. This is not just the view of many European Muslims, but also a growing number of scientific actors are carrying out interdisciplinary research on the significance and role of European media in Islamic discourse.

Numerous examples from across the whole of Europe indicate what consequences such thematically undifferentiated debates concerning “Islam” and “Muslim” can have. The minaret ban in Switzerland or the integration debate in Germany, after the publication of Thilo Sarrazins’ book in 2010, show the emotional aspect in the media, which give the impression that an objective and topic-focussed discussion seem impossible. National-cultural theses of “Christian-Jewish origin” and an “occidental approach” in Europe are more or less opposed to the “foreign Islam”, against a culture within a culture, a society within a society. Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilisation” seems to have proved to be true - not only between the Orient and Occident, but also within the immigration society in Europe. At the same time, the media are playing a not inconsiderable role.

This is how the opinion became widely accepted that, after many incidences, the Islam discourse in the European media is mostly shown in extremes. Together with an over-critical position of Muslim migration and the resulting consequences for majority society in the countries of the European Union, a tendency towards an “Islam-glorifying” position can also be witnessed in the media. Problems and challenges concerning Muslim immigration tend to be played down or negated, the interaction with Islamic cultures and the uniformity with European mentalities and lifestyles is barely questioned. Both phenomena, however, Islam criticism and glorification, tend to be stigmatised and therefore prevent rational objectivity in a debate.

The revolutions and uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, the beginning of the so-called “Arab Spring”, have partly changed the media’s view of the Muslim-Arabic world. The young, dynamic generation’s quest for democracy, openness, freedom, and access to resources and education has also had an impact on media coverage: as an observer the uprising is now being presented as a symbol of increasing modernity, as an outlet of hope away from repression and lacking political participation. The barely significant role Islam played for the demonstrators is being seen as a positive signal for more secular constitutions and justice systems, desires for advancement, and the quest for democracy.

Due to the revolutions and uprisings, the Arab world seems to be closer to Europe, closer to “us”, and the gap between “us” and “them” seems to be closing step-by-step. In general, this has corresponded with the media representation over the last weeks and months. Another important sign was the positive tendency towards differentiation: unknown phenomena,

actors, developments, and the intent. Experts should be included in this, and the intensive media coverage surrounding hot spots showed, mainly, a genuine “will” to inform, classify and present facts. This may have effects on the Islamic discourse in European media in the future. As the Islamic world, Muslim communities and Europe continue to change daily, to continue developing and reinventing themselves, the European media will also find a way to deal with these developments.

The media is termed the Fourth Estate in constitutional democracies. It serves not only as a source for information and mediator, but also it reflects public opinion. The Islamic discourse in the media can therefore be read as a barometer of public opinion in majority societies in Europe: the media’s coverage of “extremist Islam” in Paris suburbs, the dispute concerning the “cartoon controversy”, the politicising of the “fear of Muslims” through the minaret ban in “neutral” Switzerland, or the significance of the *Facebook* Generation in the changes taking place in the Arab world, to name just a few examples.

Country-specific differences in the debate surrounding “Islam” are understandable considering the make-up of Muslim societies is different in the respective countries. Correspondingly, the British majority society believes that most Muslim ethnicities are of Pakistani origin, whereas in France the majority of Muslims living there are mainly North-African Muslims; in Germany the Muslim population is overwhelmingly Turkish.

Following this line of reasoning, one of the biggest contradictions between independent media coverage and the media mirroring public opinion becomes clear. The media is supposed to serve as an independent source of information for society, but it often aligns itself, however, according to up-to-the-minute trends or target groups, often hindering differentiated analysis. The tendency, especially in the mass media, to follow the principle “bad news is good news” and operate in an economically efficient manner, often causes one-sidedness and reduces deep, analytical background research.

How sufficient is this mirror image of society and is independent Islamic discourse still possible? How can media in the respective countries conduct socio-political Islamic discourse without relying on different cultural influences of the majority society? Are public opinions and judgements generated through the media coverage? What is the significance of the interaction between recipient and communicator?

The debate surrounding Islam in the media is not only about Islam in itself, but also about a way of representation, interpretation and reflection, often disputed and trans-local image of society, which is often defined by the media.

But can this provide an opportunity to find solutions for the future handling of questions of migration, integration, and building a society? How much does analysis of the Islam debate in European media connect socially, politically and culturally to the Europe of today, and how can this build bridges to forming a European identity regarding the exposure to Islam?

The conference “The Islam-Discourse in European Media – Between Islamophobia and Intercultural Dialogue” aims to answer these questions.

III. Conference Report

The conference “Islam-Discourse in European Media – Between Islamophobia and Intercultural Dialogue” took place on April 6th, 2011 in Berlin and dealt with the aforementioned phenomena and developments regarding the Islam-Discourse in media of several European countries.

Organised by the German Orient-Institute with support of the Fritz Thyssen Foundation and in cooperation with the Museum of Islamic Art that delivered the conference rooms, the event’s selected audience contained experts of media, science, politics and cultural work to guarantee the academic level and the close connection between topic and participants.

Welcome Speeches

Dr. Stefan Weber, Director of the Museum of Islamic Art

Dr. Stefan Weber delivered the opening speech and welcomed all attendees to the conference in the historical halls of the Pergamon Museum in the heart of Berlin. He thanked the German Orient-Institute and the Fritz Thyssen Foundation for their support and putting such an interesting and newsworthy topic on the agenda.

He highlighted in his lecture that besides media, culture also plays an important role in providing knowledge about Islam and Islamic cultures. Therefore, it is the objective and vision of the Museum of Islamic Art to deliver that knowledge and support the intercultural dialogue between different people, religions and cultures. Especially in times of increasing trouble and obstacles between “the West” and the “Islamic World”, described as a “Clash of Civilisations”, such a task might be the best opportunity to overcome prejudices and clichés. In that case, Dr. Stefan Weber outlined the responsibility of cultural intermediation in media-focused societies.

H.E. Ambassador Ömur Orhan, Special Envoy on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims, Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC)

Information and Understanding – these two basics were mentioned by H.E. Ambassador Ömur Orhan, Special Envoy on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims, Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), regarding a successful and sustainable dialogue between the “West” and the “Islamic World”. Therefore, “inter-cultural and for that matter inter-faith dialogue has often been defined as an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups belonging to different cultures and religions”, he explained. “The aim, on the other hand, has been articulated as acquiring a deeper understanding of the other’s world perceptions.” Correspondingly, he focused on the ambitious assistance the OIC has delivered in the past 40 years for deepening the understanding between different cultures and religions to create an atmosphere of peaceful coexistence instead of widening the gap between “us”, whoever that might be, and the “other”. Nonetheless, “[...] a true dialogue can only be maintained when there is genuine respect and understanding of other cultures, religions and value systems”, he clarified.

However, this true dialogue needs also to be realized by the medial actors if the aforementioned “clash of civilisations” and the ongoing implementation of Islamophobia are to be kept from widening in the future. “There is and there can be no hierarchy among cultures, nor is there superiority in the manifestations of human achievements [...] The OIC believes that negative stereotyping or defamation of religions is a contemporary manifestation of religious hatred, discrimination and xenophobia. Such stereotyping applies not only to individuals, but also to their belief systems. It results in negative portrayal of the followers of those religions and leads to incitement to hate, discrimination, intolerance and

violence against them, hence directly affecting their human rights.” Furthermore, he expressed his angers and sorrows regarding the growing number of Islamophobic opinions in several European media. Despite this negative perception of the current situation, he concluded that “our basic objective must be to find and put into good use constructive and imaginative solutions to the divisions, misapprehensions and bad feelings between the West and the Muslim world. Within that context, the main problem emanates from lack of knowledge of ‘the other’, and the negative propaganda perpetrated in the absence of knowing the other side or knowing the other side in the wrong context.”

Session I: A Question of European Identity? Islamophobia and Islam Glorification on the European Media

Panelists: Mustafa Hussain, Roskilde University, Dr. Amir Saeed, Faculty of Arts, Design and Media, University of Sunderland

Moderation: Prof. Dr. Susanne Schröter, Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, Frankfurt Main, Member of the Board of the German Orient-Foundation

What characterizes individuals’ and groups’ identities and what does the constitution of identity mean for Muslims in Europe? In this regard, which problems exist between the majority and minority society and which role does the media play in this public debate? The first session of the conference “A Question of European Identity? Islamophobia and Islam Glorification on the European Media” dealt with these questions.

Firstly, Mustafa Hussain, Roskilde University, spoke in his lecture “Islam and Muslims in Mainstream Danish Media Discourses - Cultural dialogue but with whom?” about the difficult situation, Muslims living in Denmark are facing today. The majority of the Danish society thinks in an islamophobic manner and does not accept the Muslim diaspora in their “home country”. Therefore, the discourse in the media and in political debates is characterized by anti-Islam and anti-Muslim remark and comments. Thus, Denmark is facing the risk of becoming a society full of hatred and mistrust against Muslims, Hussain explained. At the moment, an intercultural dialogue seems to be impossible, because both parties are not organised and unable to structure themselves to speak with one voice. The heterogeneity of the media and the political landscape as well as the lack of influential Muslim organisations

in Denmark lead to the situation that the gap between “them” and the “other” is widening day by day. It was the fault of the Danish media for portraying Islam as a rigid, backward religion, and Muslims as strange outsiders, despite the fact that 70% of all Danish Muslims place more emphasis on their family than on their faith, Hussain cited a survey. However, he also presented citations of Danish politicians in Danish newspapers such as “Islam is cancer”, “Islam is poison” or “Islam is the enemy of the Christians”. Due to that atmosphere of rancour, Hussain concluded, the current situation would not improve in the foreseeable future.

Despite this mostly negative outlook Hussain had given, the lecture of the second panelist Dr. Amir Saeed, Faculty of Arts, Design and Media, University of Sunderland, focused on the positive aspects of music and art for the intercultural dialogue and the abolishment of Islamophobe tendencies in European societies. In this regard, he talked about „Between Hip-Hop and Muhammad: European Muslim Hip-Hop and Identity” and outlined the widespread opportunities Hip Hop is offering, especially for young Muslims, to express their feelings, their sorrows and disparities in a strange environment. Thus, Hip Hop serves as a vehicle for constructing new identities for the Muslim youth in Europe instead of becoming disillusioned, hopeless or even radical. Hip Hop gives young Muslims a chance to find their place in European societies. He exemplifies the Danish band Outlandish with its popular song “Aisha” which deals with a veiled Muslima showed as a friendly and happy girl despite wearing the headscarf. It was the first time that the Danish majority saw a smiling, self-confident veiled Muslima, Saeed explained. This shows that youth culture, especially music, could describe the transformation of belief, and the relationship between sexes. To put it in a nutshell, Hip Hop might be useful to overcome prejudices and “cultural resistance”. “This ‘cultural resistance’ can be understood as an attempt to positively assert their beliefs (without fear of ridicule) whilst simultaneously communicating with wider aspects of society at a level that may provide grounds of dialogue and understanding”, Saeed outlined.

Session II: An Opportunity for Integration? Muslims in European Media

Panelists: Dr. Elizabeth Poole, School of Humanities and Social Science, Staffordshire University, Dr. Patrik Ettinger, fög - Forschungsbereich Öffentlichkeit und Gesellschaft, University Zürich

Moderation: Dr. Willi Steul, Chairman of Deutschlandradio, Member of the Board of Trustees of the German Orient-Foundation

Based on empirical and statistical methodology, Dr. Elizabeth Poole and Dr. Patrik Ettinger evaluated the presence of Islam and Muslims in the media of their home countries, England and Switzerland. In combination to the explanations of Mustafa Hussain and Dr. Amir Saaed, both expressed the growth in negative images of Islam and Muslims in Swiss and British newspapers.

In her lecture “Reporting on Islam in Britain: The Case of Geert Wilders”, Dr. Poole reported on her two-year research project “Media portrayals of Religion and the Secular Sacred” which aimed to analyse current portrayals of popular religion and the secular sacred in a selection of British newspapers and terrestrial TV channels to examine media representations of religious issues, beliefs and practices, and to uncover and interpret inherent media values and interests; to examine people’s reception and experience of religion in the media; and to analyse the mass media treatment of a widely reported event or controversy involving religion. Furthermore, the results of the study from 2008 to 2010 were compared with a study conducted in 1982-1983. Therefore, Poole referred to the results the study had evaluated in terms of the Islam-Discourse and the importance of Geert Wilders, the Dutch right-wing populist and Islam-critic. In this regard, she explained that Wilders was largely constructed as an outsider by British media. “The spectrum of this construction varies from an extreme distaste for his ‘racist’ views by the liberal press to a more favourable representation by the conservative press”, she stated. However, despite the negative evaluation, he is the most widely quoted person in media coverage. She concluded that Wilders is a vehicle for saying the unsayable in the guise of “double standards”.

In Dr. Patrik Ettinger's lecture "More than the Minaret Controversy? The Islam-Discourse in Switzerland's Media", he referred to Poole's words and outlined some parallels between England and Switzerland. As in Britain, Muslims in Switzerland are seen by the majority as a homogeneous bloc without inner differences or conflicts. This was exemplified whilst the so-called "Minaret Controversy" took place. Here, the ban of minarets in Switzerland was supported by mostly all Switzerland's political parties. No public discussion took place. Instead, the debate was characterized by Islamophobe opinions, while a true and open discussion about the transformation of the identity of Switzerland's citizens was lacking. Therefore, a differentiated debate is necessary to overcome the one-dimensional Islamophobia on the one hand and to raise the question of identity of the majority society on the other hand.

The following discussion led by Dr. Willi Steul dealt with this important question: To what extent could the Islam be recognized as a positive part of the whole society in a process of identity crisis? In fact, both countries, Switzerland as Britain, are suffering from a fundamental crisis of identity. The more the structure of one society is changing the more the self-identification as a nation has to be transformed. Muslim migrants are one factor for these developments, but instead of realizing them as an expression of the modernity and flexibility of one's society, they were seen as a threat to the inner unity, a sign for the release of traditional habits and bonds.

Session III: Islam as a Part of Europe? Integration and Segregation of Muslims

Panelists: Professor Dr. Mathias Rohe, Member of the Board of Trustees of the German Orient-Foundation, Faculty of Law, Friedrich-Alexander-University Nurem-berg-Erlangen, Stephan Hallmann, Member of the Board of Trustees of the German Orient-Foundation, Foreign Correspondent, ZDF

Moderation: Dr. Gunter Mulack, Director of the German Orient-Institute

The third and last session dealt with the possibilities and obstacles of Muslim integration in European societies. In this regard, Professor Dr. Mathias Rohe talked about "Muslims and their Representation in German Media: Integration or Segregation?" and drew a positive picture regarding the opportunities for Muslims' successful integration in Germany. At least,

the perception of Muslims in Germany has changed in recent years although media reports often oversimplify the concepts of “Islam” and “Muslim”. Here, more differentiation might be necessary. Nonetheless, the individual performance of a Muslim determines his success within the German society rather than his religion. If this development gets better in the future, Muslims in Germany will be perceived as enriching elements of the society instead of being isolated and segregated. To achieve this, the media is responsible as well. Therefore, more Muslims and migrants are supposed to work at newspapers, TV channels or in the internet to reflect Muslim life in Germany adequately and inform the majority about the way of “Muslim thinking”.

Whereas Rohe had chosen the domestic perspective and the role of German Muslims within the society, Stephan Hallmann focused on “Transformation in the Arab World and German Media Perspectives”. As a journalist and foreign correspondent, Hallmann experienced the historical changes in the Arab world and the democratisation process on the streets and recognized a changed view of the Arab world by the “West”. The common picture, that describes Muslim societies as backward, poor, unfriendly towards democracy, and unwilling to fight the oppression by dictatorships, has turned into a more positive and sometimes enthusiastic one due to the “Arab Spring” beginning in Tunisia and Egypt. Overnight, the Arab masses got a face; the broadcasts from Tahrir square with all these young, modern and cheering Egyptians demanding freedom and democracy provided a positive image of the Muslim world; the West was positively astonished that Arabs and Europeans are obviously sharing the same values and hopes.

The final discussion was led by Dr. Gunter Mulack, Director of the German Orient-Institute. He outlined the obstacles of fighting Islamophobia in European media and focused on the opportunity intercultural dialogue offers. Therefore, the recent developments in the Arab world could have changed the image of Islam in Europe tremendously. This is also supposed to have some important implications for the self-identification and self-understanding of the Muslim diaspora in Europe, which is present in the current media discourse. Despite still-existing obstacles regarding the discussion with and of Muslims in Europe, the opportunities for an open and differentiated media discourse seem better than most observers have expected. There is a long way to go, though, the positive developments in the Arab world, the ongoing integration and participation of Muslim journalists in European media and the inter-connective character of the media world due to

Facebook and other social networks might lead to an open-minded and dialogue-friendly media landscape in Europe. He thanked all the participants and lecturers for joining the conference.

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