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RELIGIOUS IDENTIFICATION AND THE REPRESENTATION OF ISLAM IN WESTERN MAINSTREAM MEDIA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF POST-9/11 MEDIA NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

This article critically examines how Islam and Muslims have been represented in Western mainstream media after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The study argues that post-9/11 media narratives did not merely report events related to terrorism and global security; rather, they actively constructed Islam as a religious, cultural, and political "Other." Drawing upon framing theory, agenda-setting theory, representation theory, Orientalism, and securitization theory, the article investigates the ways in which Western news media, television coverage, newspapers, documentaries, and digital platforms have repeatedly linked Islam with extremism, violence, terrorism, backwardness, and civilizational threat. The study adopts a qualitative research design based on content analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis. It explores the dominant frames used in Western media, including Islam as threat, Muslims as suspects, Muslim societies as backward, and Muslim women as symbols of oppression. The article finds that these patterns are not isolated or accidental; rather, they are embedded in wider political, ideological, and economic structures that benefit from fear-based reporting. Such media representations contribute to Islamophobia, social exclusion, surveillance, restrictive immigration policies, and public suspicion toward Muslim communities. The article concludes that ethical journalism, balanced representation, Muslim self-representation, media literacy, and intercultural dialogue are essential for countering stereotypes and promoting a more accurate understanding of Islam in contemporary global society.

Keywords: *Islamophobia, Western media, religious identification, post-9/11, Orientalism, framing theory, securitization, Critical Discourse Analysis*

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The attacks of September 11, 2001, became a defining moment in modern international politics, global security discourse, and media representation. The event not only transformed the foreign policy priorities of the United States and its allies but also reshaped the ways Islam and Muslims were discussed in Western public life. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, Western mainstream media became one of the most influential institutions through which audiences interpreted the meaning of terrorism, security, religion, and identity. News channels, newspapers, documentaries, opinion columns, and later digital platforms produced repeated narratives linking Islam with extremism and global insecurity. As a result, Islam was often represented not as a complex and diverse religious tradition but as a political and security problem.

Media institutions do not simply reflect reality. They select, organize, frame, and circulate meanings. The media has the power to make some issues visible while pushing others into silence. In the post-9/11 context, this power became particularly significant because millions of people in Western societies had limited direct contact with Muslims and therefore relied heavily on mediated images to form opinions about Islam. When news coverage repeatedly placed Islam in the context of terrorism, radicalization, border control, war, and cultural conflict, the public image of Muslims became deeply shaped by fear and suspicion.

The central problem addressed in this article is that Western mainstream media has frequently used reductionist and stereotypical representations of Islam. These representations often overlook the internal diversity of Muslim societies, the difference between religion and political violence, and the historical and geopolitical causes of conflict. Instead, media narratives tend to construct a simplified connection between Muslim identity and security threat. Terms such as "Islamic terrorism," "radical Islam," "Muslim extremism," and "jihadist violence" have become common in media discourse. Although such terms may appear descriptive, they often create an implicit association between Islam itself and violence.

This article examines the ideological, political, and discursive mechanisms behind such representations. It asks how Islam and Muslims have been portrayed in Western mainstream media after 9/11, what stereotypes dominate these portrayals, how these narratives affect public opinion and policy, and what role media can play in challenging misrepresentation. The study is significant because media portrayals have consequences beyond symbolic representation. They influence social attitudes, state policies, policing practices, immigration debates, foreign interventions, and the everyday lives of Muslim communities.

1.2 Literature Review

The study of media representation begins with the understanding that representation is not neutral. Hall (1997) argues that representation is a process through which meaning is produced and circulated. In other words, media representation does not merely show the world as it is; it constructs a version of the world through language, images, symbols, and narrative structures. When applied to Islam, this means that media portrayals do not simply describe Muslims but actively produce social meanings about who Muslims are, what they represent, and how they should be treated.

Western representations of Islam have historically been shaped by Orientalism. Said (1978) defines Orientalism as a Western intellectual and cultural tradition that constructs the East as irrational, backward, exotic, violent, and inferior, while presenting the West as rational, modern, civilized, and superior. This framework did not disappear with the end of colonialism. Instead, it continued to influence modern media, literature, cinema, journalism, and political discourse. In the post-9/11 period, Orientalist assumptions were reactivated in the language of security and terrorism. Islam was no longer only represented as culturally backward; it was increasingly represented as dangerous.

Framing theory provides another important lens for understanding media representation. Entman (1993) explains that framing involves selecting certain aspects of reality and making them more salient in communication. Frames define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest solutions. In Western media coverage of Islam, the dominant frame after 9/11 has often been the security frame. This frame presents Islam mainly through issues such as terrorism, extremism, radicalization, violence, surveillance, and national security. As a result, audiences are encouraged to interpret Islam through fear rather than through social, cultural, spiritual, or historical complexity.

Agenda-setting theory also explains how media shapes public thinking. McCombs and Shaw (1972) argue that media may not always determine what people think, but it strongly influences what people think about. When Western mainstream media repeatedly covers terrorism and connects it to Muslim identity, Islam becomes a major public

concern associated with danger. The repetition of certain themes creates the impression that Islam is primarily a security issue. Other aspects of Muslim life, such as education, family, charity, art, civic participation, political diversity, and intellectual traditions, receive far less attention.

Securitization theory further deepens this analysis. Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998) argue that securitization occurs when political actors present an issue as an existential threat that requires extraordinary measures. After 9/11, Islam and Muslim communities were increasingly securitized in Western political and media discourse. Muslims were not only discussed as religious communities but as populations requiring monitoring, regulation, and suspicion. This securitization helped justify policies such as expanded surveillance, counter-terrorism laws, airport profiling, restrictive immigration measures, and military interventions in Muslim-majority countries.

Islamophobia is closely connected with these media patterns. Allen (2010) defines Islamophobia as hostility, fear, prejudice, and discrimination directed toward Islam and Muslims. Media-driven Islamophobia operates through repetition. When audiences repeatedly encounter Muslims in stories about violence, extremism, and cultural conflict, stereotypes become normalized. Morey and Yaqin (2011) argue that Muslims in Western public discourse are often presented as a problem population, constantly required to prove loyalty, moderation, and compatibility with Western values.

Scholars have also shown that popular culture reinforces these media narratives. Shaheen (2001), in his study of Hollywood representations, demonstrates that Arabs and Muslims have often been portrayed as villains, terrorists, oil-rich tyrants, oppressed women, or irrational fanatics. Such portrayals created a cultural background in which post-9/11 news narratives could easily position Muslims as threats. Thus, the media image of Islam after 9/11 did not emerge from nowhere; it built upon older colonial, cultural, and cinematic stereotypes.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

This article uses an integrated theoretical framework based on representation theory, framing theory, agenda-setting theory, Orientalism, and securitization theory. These theories are interconnected and collectively explain how media constructs Islam as an object of fear.

Representation theory explains how meaning is produced through language and images. It helps us understand how repeated depictions of Muslims as violent, backward, or suspicious become part of public common sense. Framing theory explains the structure of these representations by showing how media selects certain aspects of Islam and ignores others. Agenda-setting theory explains why certain topics related to Islam, especially terrorism and security, dominate public attention. Orientalism provides the historical and ideological background that makes such portrayals appear natural to Western audiences. Securitization theory explains how media and political discourse transform Muslim identity into a security issue requiring exceptional state action.

Together, these theories show that media portrayals of Islam are not merely the result of individual bias or journalistic error. They are produced within wider systems of power, politics, ideology, and commercial media logic. Western mainstream media often operates within political environments shaped by foreign policy interests, counter-terrorism agendas, and market competition. Fear-based stories attract audiences, increase ratings, and support state narratives. Therefore, Islamophobic representations are not only cultural products; they also serve political and economic functions.

1.4 Methodology

This article is based on a qualitative research design. The study uses content analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis to examine how Islam and Muslims are represented in Western mainstream media after 9/11. The focus is on major English-language Western media, including television news, newspapers, magazines, documentaries, opinion pieces, and digital

platforms. The time frame begins from 2001 and extends into the contemporary period in order to understand both immediate and long-term changes in media narratives.

Content analysis is used to identify recurring themes, dominant frames, repeated keywords, visual symbols, and patterns of representation. This method helps classify media portrayals into major categories such as Islam as threat, Muslims as suspects, Muslim women as oppressed, Islamic culture as backward, and Western society as civilized. Critical Discourse Analysis is used to examine deeper ideological meanings in media language. CDA focuses on how discourse reflects and reproduces power relations. It examines word choice, metaphors, labeling, silences, assumptions, and narrative structures.

The study relies on purposive sampling. This means that media texts are selected because of their relevance to the research problem rather than through random sampling. Priority is given to high-impact media content that has shaped public discussion of Islam, terrorism, immigration, foreign policy, and Muslim identity.

The research is interpretive in nature, and its aim is not to measure every media text quantitatively but to critically examine dominant patterns of meaning.

The study is limited to English-language Western media, especially media from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Europe. This limitation is necessary for analytical clarity but means that non-English Western media and Muslim-majority media are not fully examined. Another limitation is that qualitative interpretation may not represent every possible media perspective. However, the strength of this method lies in its ability to uncover deeper ideological patterns that are often missed by purely numerical analysis.

1.5 Findings and Discussion

1.5.1 Islam as a Security Threat

The most dominant frame identified in Western mainstream media after 9/11 is the representation of Islam as a security threat. In this frame, Islam is frequently discussed in connection with terrorism, radicalization, violence, border security, and global instability. Media narratives often use religious labels when reporting violence committed by Muslims, while similar religious identification is less common when violence is committed by non-Muslims. This selective labeling creates the impression that terrorism is uniquely or naturally connected to Islam.

The repeated use of terms such as "Islamic terrorism," "radical Islam," and "jihadist threat" creates a strong psychological association between religion and violence. Such language does not merely describe events; it frames the audience's interpretation. When the word Islam appears repeatedly beside terrorism, audiences may begin to see Islam itself as a source of danger. This is an example of framing at work. The frame defines the problem as religious extremism, identifies Muslims as potential sources of threat, and suggests security-based solutions such as surveillance, policing, and military intervention.

This security frame also simplifies complex political conflicts. Many conflicts involving Muslim-majority countries have historical, economic, colonial, strategic, and geopolitical causes. However, Western media often reduces these conflicts to religious fanaticism. This reduction removes political context and presents violence as a natural product of Islamic belief. Such representation is deeply problematic because it essentializes an entire religion and ignores the diversity of Muslim interpretations, practices, cultures, and political positions.

1.5.2 Muslims as Suspect Communities

A second major finding is the construction of Muslims as suspect communities. After 9/11, Western media narratives often shifted from identifying specific extremist individuals to treating Muslim communities as populations requiring scrutiny. Ordinary Muslims became associated with questions of loyalty, integration, radicalization, and national security. Muslim neighborhoods, mosques, charities, student groups, and religious schools were often represented as spaces of potential threat.

This frame has serious social consequences. When a community is represented as suspicious, its members are forced to constantly prove innocence and loyalty. Muslim citizens in Western societies

are often expected to condemn terrorism, explain Islamic teachings, and distance themselves from extremist violence, even when they have no connection to such acts. This creates an unequal burden of representation. Other religious or ethnic groups are usually not required to apologize for the actions of individuals who share their identity.

The suspect-community frame also supports state surveillance. Media narratives that present Muslims as vulnerable to radicalization make extraordinary policing appear necessary. Surveillance programs, airport profiling, mosque monitoring, and counter-radicalization policies become easier to justify when the public already views Muslim identity through suspicion. In this way, media discourse does not remain symbolic; it helps shape real policies and institutional practices.

1.5.3 Orientalist Representation and Cultural Backwardness

Another dominant theme is the representation of Muslim societies as culturally backward, irrational, and resistant to modernity. This frame is rooted in Orientalism. Western media often presents Muslim-majority societies through images of war, poverty, gender oppression, authoritarian rule, religious fanaticism, and social disorder. While such problems may exist in some contexts, the issue lies in the selective and repetitive nature of the coverage. Positive developments, intellectual diversity, democratic struggles, artistic production, scientific achievements, and everyday Muslim life receive far less attention.

The figure of the Muslim woman is especially important in this frame. Western media often uses images of veiled women as symbols of oppression, silence, and lack of freedom. This representation reduces Muslim women to passive victims of religion and culture. It ignores the diverse experiences of Muslim women, including those who choose religious dress, participate in politics, lead academic work, engage in activism, and challenge patriarchy within their own societies. By portraying Muslim women mainly as oppressed, media narratives allow Western audiences to view Muslim societies as inferior and in need of rescue.

This frame also supports foreign policy agendas. Military interventions and political pressure are often justified through the language of saving Muslim women, promoting democracy, or civilizing backward societies. Such narratives repeat colonial patterns in which Western power presents itself as morally superior and interventionist policies appear humanitarian. The problem is not the criticism of injustice in Muslim societies; the problem is selective criticism that ignores Western responsibility, local agency, and the complexity of social change.

1.5.4 The "Us versus Them" Binary

Western media narratives after 9/11 frequently construct a civilizational binary between "the West" and "Islam." In this binary, the West is associated with democracy, freedom, rationality, human rights, secularism, and progress, while Islam is associated with violence, tradition, irrationality, oppression, and intolerance. This binary simplifies global politics and creates a moral division between a civilized self and a dangerous other.

The "us versus them" structure is powerful because it appeals to fear and identity. It tells audiences that their values and way of life are under threat. Once Islam is framed as a civilizational enemy, public debate becomes less open to nuance. Muslims who criticize Western foreign policy may be seen as disloyal. Muslim practices such as veiling, mosque construction, halal food, or religious education may be interpreted as signs of separation rather than ordinary expressions of religious freedom.

This binary also affects Muslim identity in Western societies. Muslims are often treated as outsiders even when they are citizens by birth, speak the national language, and participate fully in public life. Their belonging is made conditional. They are accepted only when they conform to dominant expectations of moderation and integration. This conditional acceptance reflects the power of media representation in defining national identity.

1.5.5 Visual Representation and Emotional Framing

Media representation is not limited to words. Visual imagery plays an equally important role. Western media coverage of Islam often uses images of armed militants, explosions, angry crowds, burning flags, veiled women, mosques, desert landscapes, and police raids. These images produce emotional associations. Even when a news report uses balanced language, the accompanying image can reinforce fear.

Visual framing works quickly and powerfully. Audiences may not remember the details of a report, but they remember images. When Islamic symbols such as mosques, Qur'anic calligraphy, beards, veils, or prayer scenes are repeatedly shown in stories about terrorism, these symbols become visually linked with danger. This is a form of symbolic association. It affects how ordinary Muslims are perceived in everyday life. A beard, hijab, mosque, or Arabic phrase may become a trigger for suspicion because media imagery has trained audiences to read these signs through fear.

Visual representation also contributes to homogenization. Muslim societies are visually represented as if they are all the same. The diversity of Muslim cultures across South Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and North America is often erased. This creates a single stereotypical image of "the Muslim world," despite vast differences in language, ethnicity, politics, class, sect, culture, and history.

1.5.6 Public Opinion and Islamophobia

The study finds that media representations contribute significantly to Islamophobia. Islamophobia is not only personal prejudice; it is also produced through institutions, policies, public discourse, and cultural narratives. When media repeatedly represents Muslims as dangerous, backward, or incompatible with Western values, public fear becomes normalized. This fear can then appear as common sense rather than prejudice.

Media-driven Islamophobia affects social behavior. Muslims may face discrimination in employment, housing, education, travel, and public spaces. Muslim women who wear visible religious dress often experience verbal abuse and social hostility. Mosques may face opposition from local communities. Muslim charities may be viewed with suspicion. Muslim students may feel pressure to avoid religious or political expression.

Public opinion also influences policy. When voters fear Muslims, politicians may support harsher immigration laws, expanded surveillance, and aggressive foreign policies. Media narratives and political rhetoric reinforce each other. Politicians use media fears to gain support, and media outlets use political conflict to attract audiences. This creates a cycle in which Islamophobia becomes politically useful and commercially profitable.

1.5.7 Muslim-Owned Media and the Reproduction of Western Frames

An important issue raised in the study is why some Muslim-owned or Muslim-representing media platforms reproduce Western frames instead of challenging them. One reason is the dominance of Western media in the global information system. Many media organizations rely on Western news agencies, journalistic models, terminology, and editorial priorities. As a result, even non-Western media may adopt the same language of terrorism, extremism, and security.

Economic pressure is another reason. Media outlets compete for visibility, funding, advertising, and political acceptance. Challenging dominant Western narratives may invite accusations of extremism, bias, or sympathy for terrorism. To avoid backlash, some Muslim-owned media platforms adopt defensive positions. They may focus on proving that Muslims are peaceful rather than developing independent frameworks for representing Muslim experiences.

There is also an internalized ideological dimension. When Western narratives dominate global discourse for decades, even Muslim media professionals may unconsciously adopt them. This shows the depth of representational power. The issue is not only who owns media but what frameworks shape media thinking. Genuine alternative representation requires not merely Muslim ownership but critical editorial

independence, intellectual confidence, and ethical commitment.

1.6 Recommendations

The first recommendation is the development of ethical reporting guidelines for coverage of Islam and Muslims. Journalists should avoid unnecessary religious labeling unless religion is directly relevant to the story. They should distinguish clearly between individual actions, political movements, extremist organizations, and the broader religion of Islam. Media organizations should avoid terms that essentialize Islam or imply collective responsibility.

Second, media outlets should include diverse Muslim voices. Discussions about Islam should not be limited to security experts, politicians, and counter-terrorism analysts. Muslim scholars, women, youth, community leaders, artists, professionals, activists, and ordinary citizens should be included. This would help break the monolithic image of Muslims and show the diversity of Muslim life.

Third, visual representation should be improved. Editors should avoid using stereotypical images of veiled women, angry crowds, armed men, or mosques in unrelated stories. Visual balance is necessary for fair representation. Images of Muslims in everyday settings, workplaces, universities, civic spaces, cultural activities, and family life should be normalized.

Fourth, media literacy should be promoted among audiences. Citizens need the ability to critically evaluate media frames, identify stereotypes, question selective reporting, and understand how fear-based narratives are produced. Educational institutions should include media literacy, interfaith understanding, and critical discourse awareness in curricula.

Fifth, Muslim communities should invest in independent media production. Instead of only reacting to negative portrayals, Muslim journalists, academics, filmmakers, writers, and digital creators should produce alternative narratives that reflect complexity, diversity, and lived experience. Self-representation is essential for challenging stereotypes.

Sixth, policymakers should recognize the connection between media discourse and discrimination. Laws and policies addressing hate speech, religious discrimination, and community safety should consider how media narratives shape public hostility. Freedom of expression must be protected, but it should be accompanied by professional responsibility and anti-discrimination standards.

1.7 Conclusion

This article has critically examined the representation of Islam and Muslims in Western mainstream media after 9/11. The analysis shows that Islam has often been framed through security, fear, suspicion, Orientalist assumptions, and civilizational binaries. These representations are not neutral reflections of reality; they are constructed through language, images, repetition, framing, agenda-setting, and ideological power.

The dominant media frames identified in this study include Islam as threat, Muslims as suspects, Muslim societies as backward, Muslim women as oppressed, and the West as the defender of civilization. These frames simplify complex realities and contribute to the growth of Islamophobia. They influence public opinion, support discriminatory policies, justify surveillance, and deepen social divisions between Muslim and non-Muslim communities.

The article also shows that media representation is connected to political and economic interests. Fear-based reporting attracts audiences and supports state security agendas. As a result, Islamophobic narratives become profitable and politically useful. Challenging such narratives requires more than correcting individual errors. It requires a deeper transformation in media ethics, journalistic practice, public education, and global communication structures.

A more balanced representation of Islam must recognize Muslims as diverse human beings rather than as symbols of threat or cultural conflict. Ethical media should provide context, avoid collective blame, include Muslim voices, and resist sensationalism. In an increasingly polarized world, responsible representation is not only a journalistic duty but also a democratic necessity.

Accurate and inclusive media portrayals can help reduce prejudice, promote intercultural understanding, and support peaceful coexistence in plural societies.

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