

## **Images of the U.S. in Egyptian media: a new factor enters the equation**

**By Dr. Hanan Badr, Faculty of Mass Communication, Cairo University**

### **Introduction**

Since 2011 an open-ended transition process set on in Egypt that put the public in the centre of attention, as a major player in influencing politics. It has been conventional wisdom among political scientists and media scholars that foreign policy and international communication are fields where the public has little interest or knowledge to participate in. Yet the public opinion emerged as a visible and active source of bottom-up pressure, not just a latent factor that needs to be considered. This paper examines the US image in media and public perceptions, with a focus on an explanatory approach that considers the dynamics of the political culture in Egypt.

After a brief recapitulation of the major elements of the US image as depicted in media and public perceptions, the paper analyses the factors shaping the US image, by situating it within a multi-level theoretical context to explain the foreign coverage. The paper concludes with a future-oriented discussion on what can be done on both sides.

### **1. The US image in Egyptian media and public perceptions**

Research in the past decade on mutual US-Egyptian images shows that they are not at their best. Apart from fascination of the ancient Egyptian heritage, Tahrir Square and anecdotal daily aspects the image has been largely dominated by issues like terrorism, poverty, corruption, authoritarianism, and underdevelopment. In the past three years Egypt's image has been initially shaped as striving towards democracy, yet now coverage focuses on instability and violations of human rights.

On the other hand, the US image in Egyptian media and public perceptions has been negative in the past years. Polls by various institutions repeatedly conclude that the US image is largely negative, only percentages vary depending on the time. The US image is predominantly political in nature, shaped by Anti-American attitudes. In the past decade media images fed mainly on political issues, in particular the US foreign policy towards the MENA. Main characteristics include the following: Biased role in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process; unjust invasion of Iraq killing and displacing millions of innocent people, in a so-called democracy. The post- 9/11 era witnessed a wave of Anti-American sentiments in media and public perceptions due to the war on terror doctrine against Muslim-majority countries. Further aspects include the relativity or double standards in applying human rights (i.e. Guantanamo, aiding dictatorship regimes, extra-legal assassination of terrorists, and committing war crimes).

When it comes to the US position to Egypt directly there are also a number of issues shedding negative light on its image: it is perceived as a superior power that exerts humiliating pressure on Egypt by using the military aids. Renewed Congress debates on cutting the military aid to Egypt are viewed as an unfavourable and threatening intervention in Egypt's internal affairs.

The position of the US towards the Arab Spring is another field that shows negative perceptions: since 2011 the US image has been widely negative due to factors related to its inconclusive position first towards the 25<sup>th</sup> of January Revolution in 2011, and then towards the developments of June and July 2013. New elements emerged: the revolution was a "US-Iranian-Qatari-Hamas led conspiracy".

Nowadays, the US is perceived as supporting Muslim Brotherhood to instil unrest (example: the recent National Geographic article<sup>1</sup>).

Yet, media and public perceptions are not solely political; culture plays a role in shaping US images, too. A complex and ambivalent “love-hate relationship” is evident: Egyptians continue to consume US cultural export artefacts (Disney, Hollywood movies, American Diploma, American dream as a pursued lifestyle, etc.) although some regard it as cultural imperialism. In the same time, majority of Egyptians resent the way the US policies are shaped towards Egypt and criticize racism towards Muslims and Arab-Americans. Mutual images are not differentiated enough. Often media explain differences by a reductionist cultural interpretation within the “immoral West vs. the pious Arab/Muslim world” cliché.

Media strategies of discourse on the US image include techniques as personalization of politics, focus on elites, sarcasm, scepticism, selection of anti-Egyptian statements by US officials or media in a “they hate us, too!” narrative, de-contextualization and focus on the cultural particularism. The second part of this paper aims to contextualize this image within the foreign coverage dynamics.

## **2. Factors shaping the US image in Egypt**

According to the theoretical matrix on the political dimension of foreign coverage as outlined by Kai Hafez<sup>2</sup> there are various factors shaping the national images in international communication: macro-level: political institutions and political culture and public attitudes; meso-level: factors related to the journalistic and media landscape and finally the micro-level: the media image producers, i.e. individual journalists. This concise paper will only elaborate on the macro-level, with brief explanations on the meso- and micro-level of analysis.

Since this paper deals with media and public perceptions, and not foreign policy, analyzing the macro-level of this paper focuses on the Egyptian political culture as a major determinant of foreign coverage which serves as a context for the US image. Political culture can be defined as the sum of political attitudes towards the political system, its different national or international components, and one’s role in this system. The Egyptian political culture is generally characterized by a radical-polarized structure, with lacking experience of deliberative procedures. This reflects on the public attitudes towards three contested issues or topics that shape the US image in the current phase. The main argument of this paper is that those attitudes point out a gap of perceptions in the US and Egypt.

The first set of attitudes towards the two main political actors in Egypt (Military, Muslim Brotherhood) in the post-Mubarak era shapes the perception of the US. After 2011 the US based its course on the premise that the MB are a moderate faction among the Islamists, and since they were the most organized opposition it was likely it would come to power when democratic elections take place in the Post-Mubarak era. It would be better to cooperate with them instead of alienating and radicalizing them and hence losing a strategic partner in the region. Within Morsy’s presidency the majority of the Egyptians were dissatisfied with their incompetence to govern, the intransparent clientelistic way in decision making. In addition Muslim Brotherhood tolerated a number of human rights violations on religious minorities with supporters adopting sectarian hate speech without even

---

<sup>1</sup> Hessler, Peter. Egyptian Governor Blames Obama for Burned Churches. National Geographic. 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2014. URL: <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/05/140502-egypt-muslim-brotherhood-morsi-mubarak-mallawi-world/>

<sup>2</sup> Hafez, Kai. Die politische Dimension der Auslandsberichterstattung. Theoretische Grundlagen. (The political dimension of foreign coverage: theoretical foundations) Vol. 1, Baden-Baden, Nomos Publishing, 2002.

being held accountable; hence this alarmed religious minorities as well. The Brotherhood's "double speak" discourse consists of a democratic rhetoric to the West in English, and an exclusive emotional and populist rhetoric to its supporters in Arabic. An amusing tweet thread in 2013 between the US Embassy and the Ikhwanweb illustrates this perfectly: the punch line made by the US Embassy: we read your Arabic tweets, too, you know. The speeches aired on AlJazeera Mubasher Misr aired during the Rabaa sit-ins in prime time before it was violently dispersed contained further hate speeches, irresponsible messages and incitement to hatred against West and Copts. In the past year the Muslim Brotherhood lost much of their initial popularity. Recent polls show the Muslim Brotherhood as a source of threat to national security, as an exclusive group with a tendency to violence and showing a non-inclusive way in governance.<sup>3</sup> Currently the toleration of exclusion is the result of lack of empathy as Charlotte Wiedemann recently wrote.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand the public perception of the military as the last intact state institution to protect the country, serving its people both in war and peace time, and linking the military with competence, patriotism, sacrifice, security and stability positively shaped its image.

Unfortunately these attitudes towards the Muslim Brotherhood and the military reflect the post-Mubarak dichotomous trap in the perception of the transition. This is reflected in the US opening up two separate communication channels after 2011 with the Military on the one hand, and the Muslim Brotherhood on the other, ending up in mediation processes between the two<sup>5</sup>. The neglect of building a centrist inclusive third block or forming a new young elite closer, to the core values of January 2011, was a fatal mistake.

The second set explaining the US image connects to attitudes regarding political protest vs. stability. Various polls indicated that the majority of Egyptians want democracy, even if they do not use the exact terms of democracy theory. Yet the practice has shown illiberal traits of the Egyptian political culture. Currently one can observe a general public fatigue of continuous protests, fear of disintegration of state institutions, growing scepticism towards protest movements (endorsed by state and media) and a wish for stability at any price. Economic hardships and persistent socio-economic grievances explain the low priority given by the majority to freedoms and human rights. Hence any criticism from abroad is not welcomed by the majority. This completes the picture when judging the acceptance of the Egyptian public of the recent developments and tolerating the repressive measures in order not to de-stabilize.

Public fatigue, fear of anarchy, lacking experience with democratic procedures and the economic situations has harnessed the initial willingness to take further risks with the Muslim Brotherhood. In addition to the prevailing conspiracy theory, unfortunate developments in Syria, Libya and Yemen had crystallized anti-extremist attitudes. Terrorist attacks and the troubled geo-political neighbours (i.e. smuggling weapons across the borders) give the security discourse a prominent position. Similar to the post 9/11 War on terror doctrine, balancing security concerns and human rights is challenging. Those who push for security have the loudest voice, because they address a basic

---

<sup>3</sup> Press Release on Baseera Public Opinion Poll on Egyptians' sentiments towards the Muslim Brotherhood. URL:[http://baseera.com.eg/baseera/pdf\\_poll\\_file\\_en/Towards-the-Muslim-Brotherhood-en.pdf](http://baseera.com.eg/baseera/pdf_poll_file_en/Towards-the-Muslim-Brotherhood-en.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Wiedemann, Charlotte, On Islam, anti-terrorism and fascism, Qantara.de. URL:<http://en.qantara.de/content/terrorism-and-repression-in-the-arab-world-on-islam-anti-terrorism-and-fascism>.

<sup>5</sup> Shahin, Magda. Executive Summary. In: Shahin, Magda (Ed.), Egypt-US Relations in a New Era: Challenges and Possibilities. Prince Alwaleed Center for American Studies and Reserach, Cairo: American University in Cairo, 2013 p. 40.

human instinct: fear. This explains the search for the strongman who defends the country (the saviour, “the just despot” metaphor, someone who has a firm grip on the country to avoid further destabilization). In this regard, the vote for the 2013 constitution was interpreted as a popularity contest on the military.

In the struggle between the new and old elites most Egyptians clearly favoured the return of the old elites. In the same time, public notions of “traitors” reflects the security oriented argumentation that actually serves the rulers to monopolize the dialogue with the West by delegitimizing non-state actors when dealing with foreign media, politicians, officials, etc. This is not to say that in future it is unlikely for Egyptians to return to the streets: rising informality in non-political sectors (as health, education, etc.), active civil society despite the constraints and continuing socio-economic problems that bear the potential for growing dissatisfaction are all factors of uncertainty.

The third set of attitudes tackles the intervention from the US and the West in the region. It is based on a number of long-term traits of the Egyptian political culture<sup>6</sup>. Based on its own history Egypt shows strong anti-colonial elements, with high sensitivities towards imperial policies. A collective victim narrative prevails that focuses on powerlessness of the nation and depicts Egyptians and Arabs as losers of the globalization. (In the public eye it is equivalent to the uni-polar world system since the 1990s. So instead of being perceived as a chance of interconnectedness the global world system is viewed as a threat towards weaker states due to the imbalances and dependency.) Despite of this powerlessness there is a high national pride which explains the mixed positions when there are public calls for cutting of the relations when the congress criticizes Egypt.

In addition, pan-Arab nationalism is still present (i.e. the Arab dream, the Arab unity, the Arab awakening) which is based on geo-cultural and linguistic proximity. Yet, these sentiments have subdued over the past decades due to waning official discourse, political divergence and rivalry of the ruling Arab elites and growing state nationalism. When in doubt or conflict: an Egypt first narrative is adopted by the public. In the same time, “political subcultures”<sup>7</sup> are not to be ignored. Ralph Sell concluded that the secular western oriented elite does not necessarily share the pan-Arab sentiments. In the same time there is a top-down diffusion of their attitudes through culture and media.<sup>8</sup> Finally, attitudes towards religion and pan-Islamic attitudes are still prevalent in the Egyptian public. This has strengthened through the “Islamization from below” phenomenon (i.e. increasing signs of religion in public life). Gallup polls conclude repeatedly that religion plays an important role to Egyptians in their daily lives. Indeed, one needs to differentiate between religiosity and the adherence to political Islam. This explains the prevalence of negative attitudes in regards to the Muslim-West relations (i.e. perceived Islamophobia in the West).

Negative US images have been stirred up by secular or Islamist currents alike, because they cause an instant rally-around-the flag phenomenon, i.e. patriotism and nationalism that legitimizes whoever is ruling. In the same time the pressure of the public is not to be neglected, even on politicians and journalists who resort to populist measures to gain popularity. Both ideological political Islam and current “secular” currents and media profit from a negative US image because it serves the decision

---

<sup>6</sup> This part builds largely on chapter two from the unpublished PhD dissertation. Badr, Hanan. *Wessen Terrorismus? Das Framing des Untergrund- und des Staatsterrorismus in deutschen und ägyptischen Medien* (Whose terrorism? The framing of underground and state terrorism in German and Egyptian print media), Unpublished PhD thesis, Erfurt University, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Almond, Gabriel Abraham, Powell, G. Bingham, Dalton, Russell J., Strøm, Kaare (Eds.), *Comparative Politics Today. A World View*. 9th Edition, New York, Pearson Longman, 2008, p.43.

<sup>8</sup> Sell, Ralph, *International Affinities in Modern Egypt: Results From a Social Distance Survey of Elite Students*, In: *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 1990, p.79-80.

making process and adds legitimacy to the incumbents of power. In addition factors like lacking information, highly emotional judgements hinder convincing the public of the pragmatism of the US-Egyptian partnership. One example: developmental aid lacks prominence in the US image which shows that the public either uninformed or misinformed.

### **Meso-level and micro-level of analysis: how do media dynamics shape the US image**

The US image is shaped within a larger context of a discourse on foreign news and international relations. The analysis of foreign coverage revealed a certain pattern towards politicization, elitism, personalization, de-contextualization and a focus on conflicts and crisis. Dictated by news values and international news flows from agencies the international news market that shapes national images is not as free as we think.

Media have to adhere to universal norms and rules of journalistic profession worldwide which also shapes the US images. All established media must select certain news stories, aspects and style to fit in the limitations and time pressure (i.e. deadlines, word count or time frame). In line with Galtung's theory on center-periphery dynamics the US, a super power, enjoys more prominence in Egyptian media, especially in politics and entertainment. Yet on the meso-level of the Egyptian media system a number of factors shape the US images: long years of authoritarian rule have limited the development of an autonomous and diverse journalistic professional culture. The media, especially the print media, show a high party press parallelism<sup>9</sup> as reflected in the media ownership (state, party, private). This means Egypt's radical polarized culture is reflected in an external pluralism of media. These can be classified into groups according to different parameters: a) proximity to the incumbents (loyalist, oppositional) or b) ideology (leftist, liberal, social-democrat, Islamist, nationalist, etc.). Editorial policies of the media are shaped directly by the owner, founder or whoever finances it. Professionalism is still underdeveloped in Egypt's media system. Financial resources and independence are the two major concerns in the Egyptian media market. Like other societies in transformation the (private) media enterprises struggle with the finances: in a profit-oriented journalistic logic as a profession that sells, the Egyptian market is highly competitive. The print media market is even smaller due to high illiteracy rates and a more visual oriented audience. This explains the high populism in the US images.

The micro-level of analysis refers to individual journalists, and how they shape the US image. In emerging -unlike mature- professional journalistic cultures the journalists' personal values tend to have more influence on the media content, not professional values.<sup>10</sup> This means their political ideologies; personal choices and biases are more present in the coverage. In addition many journalists view themselves as advocates advising the audience what to do. Due to historical processes in media and journalists' syndicate the Nasserist nationalist current has the upper hand in most media institutions. Liberal and Islamist voices are -in the current phase- underrepresented in the media contents, yet the online communication like blogosphere and social media gives them access to the public.

To sum up the determinants of the US image in Egypt on macro-, meso- and micro-level one can conclude the following: the US image is shaped by the critique of US interventionist approach especially in the MENA region, belief in the conspiracy theory, fear of the unknown, nationalist

---

<sup>9</sup> Hallin, Daniel; Mancini, Paolo, *Comparing media systems: three models of media and politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Pintak, Lawrence, "Islam, Identity and Professional Values: A study of journalists in three Muslim-majority regions." *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism* (Online First, June 17, 2013).

sentiments and importance of religion in public life. In addition, the transition period witnessed highly emotional and volatile Egyptian attitudes. The roller-coaster of US policies after 2011 strengthened negative perceptions in Egyptian media and public. The meso-level of the media shows an underdeveloped professional culture that is still evolving, which results in publishing unchecked facts, sensational wording and lack of cultural sensitivity. In addition, on the micro-level personal biases of individual journalists also shape the US image.

### **3. A future-oriented perspective: a dynamism not used**

Negative images can improve over time, as numerous examples show, but they need to be invested in. Although media images and public perceptions are not static, the US-Egyptian case shows a failure from both sides to utilize the eventual dynamism of attitudes to convince the public of the pragmatism and necessity of the bi-lateral relations. So the political elite on both sides finds itself confronted with an internal pressure that makes maintaining relations in troubled times even more difficult.<sup>11</sup> There seems to be an agreement after the visit of Egypt's foreign minister last week, that there is no desire to change the strategic framework of Egyptian-American relations, even if times are shaky regionally and internationally in an evolving multi-polar world. It would be disadvantageous to risk further de-stabilization for Egypt and the region. On the Egyptian side it is clear that a radical change in Egypt's foreign policy and international relation towards the US is not desired, yet a diversification of its relations. On the US side, despite of its reluctant position of the past year it starts to sink in that the US cannot afford to lose a partner of long years.

The negative public images on both sides of the Atlantic are a challenge that needs to be addressed. On the macro-level negative stereotypes are rooted and easily stirred up in media. Two questions need to be discussed: First: can media change images at all, especially if they are based on real incidents? In image studies we often give the media recipes on what they should do. Yet this raises a question on discussed in media effects research. Recent literature concludes that media do not operate according to linear stimulus-response logic: media and society are rather a system of interdependencies. True, big positive events can lead to changes in images; provided they are cumulative (examples include the Obama visit in 2009 to Egypt, or the revolution of 2011). No false PR, propaganda or censorship are needed, only information. Genuine steps of transparency to enlighten the public on both sides of the international settings, constraints and consequences in decision making need to be taken.

The second question is whether the media are the right medium to enhance mutual intercultural understanding. From a social responsibility approach they should, yet professional and profit-driven constraints remain. Media lives on scandals, conflict and crisis. A first step in deconstructing negative images in enhancing mutual dialogue is focussing on the similarities, not the differences, including on offering context and cultural sensitivity in the coverage of foreign nations. A more people-oriented coverage can work on this, instead of focussing on the political elites only. A more radical a long-term, yet sustainable way is re-consider the type of journalistic training and news values journalists are trained to. This corresponds to the call for peace journalism, i.e. journalism that works

---

<sup>11</sup> It is noteworthy how despite of the strategic alliance with the US since 4 decades now, the executive failed to change the public image of the US or at least convince the majority of the Egyptians of the necessity of a pragmatic approach in international relations. Until now there are populist calls for cutting the relations to the US or abolishing Camp David altogether (of course the initiation of the new strategic alliance with the US under Sadat was not forged deliberately or inclusive manner, so this is the aftermath of the deal 40 years ago).

on diffusing negative images by providing more context and interpretation on the other. These two inputs can cause the US image to shift with time in the Egyptian media and public perceptions.