Chapter 15
From “Angry Arab” to “Arab Spring”

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ABSTRACT

The 2011 “Arab Spring” revolutions seemed to turn over a new leaf in Western news depictions of the Middle East, shifting from “angry Arab terrorist” visual stereotypes to stereotypes of youthful Internet-savvy-grassroots protesters demanding reasonable democratic reforms. This chapter examines the photographic reportage of the Associated Press wire service photojournalists during the Arab Spring and the decade that preceded it to determine if a measurable shift in coverage did occur. Just as media depictions of the student protesters involved in the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran shifted the media stereotype of Arab and Persian from Hollywood’s vision of oil sheikhs, belly-dancing harem girls, and camel-riding Bedouins to young and angry religious fanatics, the largely secular democratic reforms of the Arab Spring subtly altered media conceptions of the “angry Arab.” This chapter examines media depictions of the visible elements of Middle East unrest—from Libya to Pakistan—in the ten-year period from 2002 through the revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya in 2011. An examination of news photographs during the period shows subtle shifts in the imagery.

INTRODUCTION

On December 17, 2010, Muhammed Bouazizi, a street vendor selling produce in the small town of Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia, fed up and humiliated by the injustices he had endured from local authorities, went to the street in front of the governor’s office and lit himself on fire. Less than a month later, on January 14, 2011, Zine el-Abidene Ben Ali, the President of Tunisia since 1987, left the country on a flight to escape the hordes of protesters inspired by Bouazizi, who had become a revered martyr for democracy. Days later, protests for democracy engulfed Egypt and continued for several weeks until Hosni Mubarak relinquished power after 30 years in 2011.

Thus began the Arab uprising of 2011, or Arab Spring, which eventually included democratic revolutions and protests in Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, Jordan, and Syria. News articles about these
revolutions emphasized the role of social media, and the crucial role of young, tech-savvy activists.

In the book, *Tweets from Tahrir*, Idle and Nunns (2011) collected many of the messages the Egyptian pro-democracy protesters in Cairo sent out to the world during their confrontations in Tahrir Square with the government security forces and pro-government factions. “The most compelling coverage was on Twitter, coming directly from the people in the square. The tweets were instant, and so emotional and exciting that anyone following them felt an intense personal connection to what was happening in Tahrir” (Idle & Nunns, 2011, p. 13). Many of the tweeters acted like citizen journalists:

> The importance of citizen journalists cannot be overestimated in a country like Egypt with a state controlled media. One of the features of the uprising was the gradual undermining of state TV and newspapers, to the extent that journalists began to resign as the public saw the ludicrous coverage for what it was (Idle & Nunns, 2011, p. 20).

In a previous era, the idea of idealistic young activists in the Middle East might provoke memories of the Iranian revolution of 1979, and thoughts of the American embassy hostages—unpleasant memories for Americans. However, the stories and pictures this time around, particularly from Tunisia and Egypt, seemed especially inspiring for a change. This time around, “The battle cry across the Islamic world . . . is selmiyya, selmiyya or ‘peaceful, peaceful’” (Wright, 2011, p. 253).

This chapter provides an examination of the news pictures of the Arab Spring of 2011 and of pictures from the decade prior, to look for visible changes in the way protesters from the Middle East, Pakistan, and Afghanistan have been framed by the photographers of the Associated Press, an international newswire service.

**CONCEPTUALIZING THE OTHER**

Edward Said (1978) argued that the West has maintained power and domination over the Orient through the telling and retelling of a Eurocentric history of the region. “Orientalism is the general group of ideas . . . shot through with doctrines of European superiority, various kinds of racism, imperialism, and the like, dogmatic views of ‘the Oriental’ as a kind of ideal and unchanging abstraction” (Said, 1978, p. 8). Western news media depictions of Middle Eastern—and specifically Arab subjects—tend to repeat similar stereotypes and myths. “Islamophobia posits ‘Islam’ as a conception of the world that is incompatible with modernity, with civilization, and, more important, with Euro-Americaness” (Semati, 2010, p. 267).

Shaheen (2009) says Hollywood continues to replicate the ancient Orientalist stereotypes of Arabs as villains since the beginning of the movie business. Action movies from Hollywood depict “Arabs as backward, as savages (in the eternal struggle with our forces of civilization), and as incompetent” (Semati, 2010, p. 261). Vultee asserts that Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism emphasizes the idea that “the East is incapable of representing itself and must be represented by experts” (2009, pp. 624-625).

The 1979 Iranian revolution provided “another caricature of Muslims, mobs of chanting fanatics, was added to the list of negative images that shape the discourse of Islam” (Semati, 2010, p. 259). It also motivated a shift in the framing of Islam in the American press that grew beyond traditional Orientalist depictions of Muslims—from belly dancers and the desert savage to the image of the religious fanatic (Ibrahim, 2011). This is attributed to the ongoing distortions found in western coverage of Islam; specifically, that “Jihad” is commonly translated as “holy war.” However, Jihad is not a holy war—it is a conflict involving challenges