The Gap between Media Portrayals and the Reality of Islam and Islamism in Iran and Turkey

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Abstract

Since the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, the western media has mainly perceived Iran as an extremist, fundamentalist and terrorist country. While there is an anti-Iranian sentiment, Turkey is defined as a country of modern Muslims. However, developments in both countries have led them to a crossroads in the media and in reality. The current study aims to understand the existing gap between media portrayals and the reality of Islam and Islamism in Iran and Turkey – two old rivals in the Middle East. This paper argues that while Iran is portrayed as a more conservative, Islamist and suffocated country, Turkey is regarded as experiencing a more conservative walk on its Islamisation path.

Keywords: Iran and Turkey, Islamisation, Political Islam, Media Portrayal.

Introduction

Wherever there is talk about threat and terrorism, Iran's name is there. However, on the other hand, when one speaks of a 'model of Islam and democracy' Turkey's name is the pioneering one. The media portrayal of Iran and Turkey can be considered as black and white, evil and angel. Iran, portrayed as 'an axis of evil,' has been associated with a number of things in western media: terrorist, extremist, operation, fundamentalist, deceptive and irrational. Turkey does not have the same stance. Although President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his government have received a considerable amount of criticism, still most of the time the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and Turkey are referred to as a positive model for Islamist movements.

Islamisation in Turkey even has advocates in the west: Mustafa Akyol writes, "Although Turkey's supposed shift away from secularism toward Islamism has raised eyebrows in the West, it should not. In fact, Turkey's new path may actually increase the benefits of the U.S.-Turkish relationship." He expresses the reasons behind this as follows: "at the heart of this story is a battle between Western enlightenment and obscurantism. But in fact, Turkey's real dichotomy has always been between its westernizers and its modernizers. [...] Despite their leftover religious rhetoric, the AKP rejects true Islamists' most basic goal - the creation of an Islamic state" (Akyol, 2010).

Nevertheless, the reality does not always match with what is portrayed in the mass media. The Turkish government is focusing more on Islamisation and inevitably the Iranian government is making the blurred lines more rigid. While the Turkish government increasingly encourages society to adhere to Islam in Turkey, on the other side of the Middle East region there are Iranian youths who are considered as being increasingly antipathetic towards Islam.

The current study aims to understand the existing gap between the media portrayals and the reality of Islam and Islamisation in Iran and Turkey – two old rivals in the Middle East. The paper is designed in four main parts: first, media portrayal of Iran and political Islam in this country is reviewed. Second, the study intends to show how the media misrepresent the real picture of Islamisation in Iran. In comparison, in the third part Turkey's media portrayal is evaluated and the last part glances at the actual creeping of Islamisation in Turkey. The conclusions support interesting facts about Iran and Turkey: while Iran is usually portrayed as a more conservative, Islamist and suffocated country, Turkey is experiencing a more conservative walk on its Islamisation path.

Media portrayal of Iran: Political Islam

There is a rich literature concerned with how the mass media has portrayed Islam and Islamisation in Iran. Since the 1979 Islamic revolution, the U.S. media have portrayed Iran in a different way compared to the preceding 'Shah' period. According to Dorman and Farhang, the U.S. media used terms such as "determined" and "autocratic" to describe the Shah, but used "as more the work of turbaned religious zealots" in representing the Islamic revolution (Jahedi, Feiz Sathi and Mukundan,

2014). U.S. media representation of Iran's Islamic revolution and its level of violence was pitched in such a way that an American audience might conclude the Iranians were in "Bloody Clashes," "violent upheaval" and so on. Headlines like "Moslems Riot; 13 Die in Iran" appeared in metropolitan California newspapers (A. Dorman and Farhang, 1987).

The Hostage crisis on November 4, 1979 and the following 'American obsession with Iranian affairs' resulted in obscurity in the U.S. media and among American people. According to Tadayon, a national survey on Iran in early 1980 showed a strong antagonism of American opinion towards Iran (Tadayon, 1982). Similarly, Mughees argued that the U.S. media portrayed the image of Iran as a threat to security and the interests of the United States by describing Iran as a "terrorist" or "fundamentalist" country. The U.S. media often portray Islam as a religion of non-tolerant people (Mughees-uddin, 1995). Edward Said explained that the Hostage Crisis led to Islam become equivalent to "everything irrational and anti-western" in the mainstream media (Said, 2007). In his famous book *Covering Islam*, which focuses on Western media representation of Islam after the Hostage Crisis in Iran, Edward Said explained the negative media portrayal of Islam as: "Sensationalism, crude xenophobia, and insensitive belligerence are the order of the day, with results on both sides of the imaginary line between 'us' and 'them' that are extremely unedifying" (Said, 1997).

In addition, by analyzing a number of British newspaper headlines, Koosha and Shams also argued that the British press characterized a negative image of Iran. Most newspaper coverage of Iran is negative and increases the idea of us and them. This idea of 'the other' gives Iran an unfavorable feel in most of the British press:

"The picture that emerges from the newspapers coverage of Iran is negative. The newspapers have printed news stories that reinforce the dichotomy of 'us' and 'them,' often with hegemonic undertones. This representation tends to emphasize negative images and casts Iran in an unfavorable light [...] Negative representation of the 'other' and positive representation of 'us' appear to be two common strategies in all the discursive strategies used by the British newspapers" (Koosha and Shams, 2005).

Koosha and Shams support their argument by explaining that some scholars like Hall (1982), Said (1994), Cones (1997) and Karim (2000) have noted that after the Cold War, there was a need to create a new enemy for the west, replacing communism. Hence, Islam was determined as "mankind's enemy" (Koosha and Shams, 2005). Adopting a negative picture of Iran by western media increased after the tragic events of 9/11 and the labeling of Iran as an "Axis of Evil" by then US President George W. Bush. By implementing in-depth interviews with Iranian elites, Heradstveit and Bonham concluded that the metaphor affected the entire country and not only the leaders (Heradstveit and Bonham, 2007).

Thus, mainstream media configured an overall negative image of Iranians. The Pew Research Centre has done two consecutive researches on global views of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Both results for 2013 and 2014 surveys shows that Iran's global image is largely negative. About 59% in most of 39 countries surveyed in 2013 and 29 of 40 countries surveyed in 2014 have an unfavorable opinion of Iran. Unfavorable views towards Iran are firstly widespread in Israel; moreover, in Western Europe about 8 out of 10 and in the U.S. about 7 out of 10 express negative views towards Iran. According to Sahar Roodehchi (2014), "State officials publicly condemn Iranians, including Speaker of the House John Boehner, who said, 'I don't trust the Iranians,' and Wendy Sherman, a state official involved in nuclear talks with Iran, who stated, 'deception is part of the [Iranian] DNA.'"

Misleading the Readers on Iran

While the Iranian government maintains strong repression of its people, young Iranian people are increasingly rejecting Islam. Iran is going through a metamorphosis. Published by Pax Americana Institution, Major Prokopowicz's paper on Iranian youth evaluated the political impact of Iran's youth on the future of Iranian democracy. Prokopowicz explains that while the 1979 Iranian Islamic revolution leader Ayatollah Khomeini's goal was to create a society with high Islamic morality and ethics, the harsh application of his ideas caused anger in the subsequent generation. Prokopowicz (2009) cited the New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof, who stated that "In much of the world, young Muslims are increasingly religious, but compulsive Islam has soured some Iranians on religion."

Iran's youth embody its major paradox: the conflict between religious virtue and modernity. Again, according to Prokopowicz, "As a societal configuration, Iran ironically resembles the United States more than any other Middle Eastern state. Concerning western life style and freedom, Iranian youth – especially women - defy state dress codes. Women's expression of disgust against forced Islam can be realized by scrutinizing the resonant wave in social media. A Facebook page called "Stealthy Freedoms of Iranian women" managed by a young Iranian journalist, Masih Alinejad, encourages

Iranian women to discard their hijabs in public and enjoy a brief moment of freedom. The page received more than 140,000 followers in its first week and 500,000 in one month, and now it has more than 790,000 members. Not only women, but also men supporting this page reveals society's resentment against imposed Islam.

Perception and practice of Islam is very different among Iranian youth compared with other Muslim majority countries like Turkey, Iraq and Afghanistan. Recently an Afghan woman – Farkhondeh – was stoned to death in Kabul for supposedly burning the Quran in a shrine. I wonder what the reaction of Iranian men would be if the same thing happened in Iran. They may even praise her on their hearth because of her courage, and this would later become a symbolic movement. If the same case happened in Turkey, how would the Turkish people react? The answer to this question is left to the reader.

Iranian Youth, who comprise roughly 60 percent of the Iranian population, are seeking change. Iranian youth are among the most politically active in the 57 nations of the Islamic world. The Director General of the Cultural Observatory of the Islamic Development Organization in Iran has declared, "Our researches have acknowledged that the degree of practicing Islam in society has decreased." *Baztabe Emrooz* analytical news website of Iran has announced an increase in atheism in the country. Accordingly, extravagant usage of religion and religious beliefs to cope with the 2009 protesters have led to the growth of a "Tsunami of Atheism" among Iranian youth (Deutsche Welle, 2013). However, finding true statistics for the number of atheists in Iran would be very hard as Iran is reported as being included in the world seven countries where the state can execute a citizen because of being an atheist (The Washington Post, 2012).

Moreover, in a field report released by *Zamaneh Radio* news website, Iran's young population difference with their previous generation has been recognized. By attempting to answer the question "which one is more powerful: sex and love or fear of hell?" Hamid Rezayi tried to discover the hidden layers in society. When one of his interview respondents was asked if he believed his sexual relations out of custom and tradition would be contrary to the percepts of Islam, he answered: "Everyone has (sexual relations out of custom), many people have. If God wants reprisal he needs to punish every one, he can't only punish some of them" (Rezayi, 2015). God for many Iranian Muslims youths is reminiscent of fear and anxiety and that's why they further distance themselves from Islamic beliefs day-by-day.

Increase of insouciance to Islam has been reflected in new generation music as well. Shahin Najafi, who has more than a million fans on Facebook, is an Iranian musician and singer. His songs mostly deal with theocracy, sexism, censorship, poverty and drug addiction. On May 2012, Najafi released a song called "Naghi" which is a reference to the 10th of the 12 Shia Muslim Imams. In "Naghi," Najafi states that: "Hey, Naghi! As the Hidden Imam is sleeping, we are calling you. Hey, Naghi! We are in our shrouds and ready to be buried. Hey, Naghi, Rise!" By releasing this controversial song, Najafi has been accused of insulting Imams. Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi issued a Fatwa calling him an apostate, which is considered punishable by death by Muslims under Sharia law. Even an Iranian religious website has offered $100,000 reward to anyone who kills him. That's why *The Guardian* has called him "The Selman Rushdie of music."

However, Najafi has never stopped his artwork protests. In his interview with BBC Persian, Najafi stated that "I am like a spring, much more pressure will lead to more jumping from me!". At his May 2015 concert in Germany, he mocked Iranian religious Shia singers called "Madah." In April 2015 he released an Album called "Sade" including a song called "Mammad Nobari" in which he is accused of insulting Islamic prophet *Muhammad Rasool Allah* and also bantering *Abbas Ibn Ali* - the stepbrother of *Husayn Ibn Ali* who is the most important holy Shia Imam martyred in the battle of Karbala. In regard to his last album, Najafi explains, "Mammad Nobari is a process of building an idol. There is no concept inherited with this [Muhammad]. We should doubt about many concepts that historically have been passed on to us and try to pass the self-awareness process. Concepts pass through a process to become what we understand and believe. These concepts become like a weapon against us; Mammad Nobari has such a process."

The growing trend of the so-called 'white marriage' in Iran is another indication of youth's indifference to religion. Cohabiting before marriage in Iran is known as 'white marriage' – a phenomenon that is worrying Iranian authorities. Despite strict Sharia law and the Iranian government's rigidity on youth, increasing number of Iranian young couples are choosing to live together before marriage. There are no official statistics, but it has become common enough that many Iranian government officials have made comments about it and even a popular woman's magazine in Iran called "Zanan" has devoted a special edition to the issue. Mohammad Mohammadi Golpayegani, Iran's supreme leader's head office, expressed his concern by stating "It's shameful for a man and a woman to live together without being married. It won't take long for people who've chosen this lifestyle to have wiped out a legitimate generation with an illegitimate one. Hence, Islamic governors should oppose this." Sociologist Mehrdad Darvishpour quoted: "What happens under the skin of a society cannot be controlled [...]

the government might try to use force to stop this [white marriage], just as they tried to impose stricter adherence to the rules on wearing a hijab [headscarf] on young women, but young people will continue to move forward. Modernity can't be stopped."

In their research called "Religious Participation among Muslims: Iranian Exceptionalism," Tezcur, Azadarmaki and Bahar have indicated that mosque attendance rates in Iran– as an important indicator of religious practice - are surprisingly low. The survey evidence indicates a strong correlation between frequency of mosque attendance and positive evaluations of political governance. In addition, surveys show that Iranians residing in Tehran make a distinction between their religious duties and religious faith. Moreover, the States' ability to control popular religion has waned and massive politicization of religion in today's Iran has negatively affected religious participation (Tezcur, et al., 2006).

The best description for today's Iran and its contribution to Islam can be found in the work Eric Roulaue – a profound western expert on Iranian studies – has done: "Islam confronts Islam in Iran." In the same way, Ramin Jahanbegloo (2004) admits the social changes in Iran by naming the country as "Iran where a reinterpretation of religious thought is a critical variable influencing the process of political development." Also, Mahmoud Alinejad (2002) sought to find an answer for the question of how Iranian intellectuals' interpretation of Islamic tradition in Iran since 1997 are contributing to cultural, social and political critique, within a public sphere defined by Islam. He concludes that developments in Iran illustrate "the real possibility of the public expression of dissent within the constraints of Islamic politics." Alinejad explains that political dissent is expressed by struggles against the constraints on citizenship rights and demand for fairer allocation of cultural, economic and social resources.

Many opponents of the Iranian government make major criticisms of the regime by expressing that political Islam itself has resulted in a spread of hatred against Islam. Ali Sina (2002), an active writer in *Faith Freedom* website states that in order for Islam to grow it needs a hate object. Most Arab countries have other non-Muslim groups to hate (Jews, Americans etc.) but Iranians stopped hating after the hated Shah fell from power. Now Iranians hate those who impose Islam upon them. They do not trust the Islamic regime which punishes with executions and stoning - they see Islam as a deception. He wrote that:

"Today the new generations of Iranians hate only their oppressors who happen to be those who impose Islam on them. Islam has become synonymous with deceit, with betrayal, with torture, with imprisonments, with flogging, with stoning, with plucking out the eyes and with executions. Even the parents of these kids who made the revolution now are repentant and regret trusting the Mullahs and are realizing that Islam was nothing but a hoax, an instrument of subjugation and deceit."

Media portrayal of Turkey: Islamisation

Political Islam in Turkey is not the same as Iran in the way it is portrayed through the eyes of the media. Today the majority Muslim population of Turkey is governed by Islamic leaders and under a secular governmental system. Since its establishment in 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) have increasingly tried to pave the way to creating an Islamic concept of democracy. This symbiotic conflict between Islam and Secularism in Turkey has been an attractive theme for the media.

Shahzad Ali (2012) has investigated the portrayal of Turkey in the US during the time period 1991–2001 by two American print media (Newsweek and Time magazines). He found that out of 19 articles written about Turkey in these two magazines during the given time period, 17 were neutral and 2 were unfavorable about Turkey. He writes, "By the scrutiny of the articles of both magazines it is as clear as day that America was the adherer of secular Turkey instead of Islamic Turkey."

The secular state model in modern Turkey was developed under the leadership of Mustafa Kamal Ataturk from 29 October 1923. These developments were influenced by the ideas of secularization and modernization (Refat, 2014). Later on, with the rise of AKP, the debate about the desire to return to the past manifested itself. Visited by almost 38000 viewers on YouTube, Ray Charles compared Ataturk and Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the current President and former Prime Minister of Turkey. In his speech he said, "when Ataturk was asked to be Sultan, Ataturk rejected it and instead let this nation be a secular, civil society. But in contrast today Turkey has a Prime Minister who seems to want to be a modern Sultan." Refat Syed Ahmad explains that AKP has defined its basic ideology as "Conservative Democracy" in which it is conservative in political, social and religious terms but, unlike Iran, it does not spend energy on "enjoining what is commendable and forbidding the reprehensible" in matters of daily conduct of the people.

In the book edited by Aksịt, Șenyuva and Üstüṅ (2009), called *Turkey Watch: EU Member States' Perceptions on Turkey's Accession to the EU*, the EU perception of Turkey is analyzed. The book explains that although until 2009 there were very positive developments regarding the negotiation process for Turkey's EU membership, things started to change after 2009. For a variety of reasons among which the most important is the lack of progress in Turkey's reform process, Turkey's full membership of the EU has been undermined. Different scholars provide insights of France, Germany, Belgium, Italy, Spain, Greece, Sweden, Austria, 'Republic of Cyprus', Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria on Turkey. Some of these states have questions about Turkey's EU membership; France, Germany and Austria are in this group. Some others, like Italy and Spain, are supportive of Turkey, having a generally positive perception of Turkey.

On 20 January 2009, The Belgian Foreign Minister Karel de Gucht stated that The EU has not behaved well or fairly to Turkey and Europe should be building a permanent, close alliance with Turkey, as it is a bridge to Asia and the Middle East. Turkey also shows Islam can be part of a secular, democratic political system. The EU must have Turkey as a close EU ally in the important years ahead (Yvonne, 2009).

For his MA thesis, Mesud Hamza Hasgur (2013) has worked on the perception of Turkey in the Middle East in the last decade by analyzing the combination of media, political elite discourse and people's political themes. He concludes that the perception of Turkey in the Arab world is very positive. Most Middle East Islamists admire "Turkey's Muslim Sensitive foreign policy," its Islamic-oriented government and Erdogan's foreign policy toward Israel. In addition, Turkish TV series have been very effective in shaping positive Arab public opinion on Turkey. Hasgur also found that "Turkey's coherent blending of Islam and democracy was the most important factor creating a positive perception of Turkey in the Middle East [...] it seems that the perception and image of Turkey greatly correlates with the status of democracy in Turkey."

Real Islam in Turkey: Creeping Islamisation

Day-by-day, Turkey is becoming more Islamic. Yavuz Hakan (2012) supports this claim by stating "Islamic identity, norms, institutions, and practices are much more extant in the public sphere." He adds that the discourse of Islam in Turkey is more related with identity and the Islamic way of life; and it is more focused on the inner self. Hence, he argues that Turks identify Islam as a personal ethic, which does not necessarily contain the role of state.

The significant point here is that Islam and Turkish identity are intertwined into each other. According to Hakan Yavuz, "Due to Islam's constitutive role in the construction of Turkish identity, the state never succeeded in disengaging Islam from debates over the politics of identity. This symbiotic relationship between Islam and Turkish nationalism made Islam the foundation of Turkish identity… Even Said Nursi focused on the positive nationalism of Islam-Turkism as long as that nationalism could be used in the service of Islam."

The current AKP government is increasingly following Islamisation in Turkey and has challenged the Turkish secularism model during recent years. On May 24, 2013, at that time Turkish President Abdullah Gul approved alcohol restrictions, which consist of, firstly, completely banning retail alcohol sales between 10pm and 6 am. Secondly, a ban on screening images of alcoholic drinks in TV and films was brought into law. Thirdly, a restriction on alcohol sales within 100 meters of mosques and schools; and, lastly, lowering the alcohol limit for drivers from 1 to 0.5 promil.

Turkey's Gezi Park Demonstrations of 2013 are another example showing the AKP's rising authoritarianism and conservatism. The event started with a few environmental protestors' occupation of Gezi Park in Istanbul, in order to prevent the park's destruction to build a shopping mall. The protests developed into riots when the police violently tried to suppress the crowd. Hence, the subject of the protests broadened beyond the Gezi Park issue, and it converted into a protest against the government. The protestors included a wide range of groups, "from Kemalists and nationalists to the Kurds and the broad left, each expressing different grievances with the AKP government" (Onur, 2013). Despite the broad discontent, there has been almost no change in the Turkish 'Moderate Islamist' picture or the 'Model for Islamic World' role of the country. However, the government struggle against the demonstration was reflected as being authoritarian in the western media.

According to *the Independent* (2013), many believe that Erdogan "imposes his religious views in a way that far exceeds his democratic mandate." On May 21, 2013, Mahmut Macit, the senior member of AKP's Ankara provincial board, wrote in one tweet: "My blood boils when spineless psychopaths pretending to be atheists swear at my religion. These people, who have been raped, should be annihilated." He also argued "insulting Islam could not be considered freedom of expression." Previously, President Erdogan himself had commented that his government wants to "raise a religious youth," fuelling

debate over whether he has a hidden agenda to Islamize Turkey, in the way the Iranian government has. However, the famous CNN journalist, Christiane Amanpour stated, "The Turkish government has said over and over again that it is not an Islamic government as you might find in Iran [...] you can see that. We know that it has no plans to make Turkey into an Islamic Republic in the way that you see in places like Iran or elsewhere."

Results and Conclusions

In today's world, there are many people, not only in western countries but even in neighboring countries of Iran, understanding Iran as an extremist and fundamentalist Shia-Muslim country. Perception of Iranians is under the shade of the government, but it is time to draw out the real picture of Iranians, especially Iranian youth, who comprise 60 percent of the Iranian population. On the other hand, as a neighbor of Iran, Turkey is enjoying positive perceptions and labels by the media on its approach toward Islam as a modern Muslim country. However, tough Islamic traditions and superstitions are still ongoing among conservative Turks, whose number is increasing. While Iranian youth are getting further and further away from Islamism and so forcing their government to attend to their demands, the Turkish government is progressively applying an Islamisation agenda and encouraging the country's youth in a more conservative direction. The conclusions support this paper's main argument: while Iran is portrayed as a more conservative, Islamist and suffocated country, Turkey is experiencing a more conservative walk on its Islamisation path. Iranian youth are seeking reform and they are increasingly distancing themselves from religion and tradition. According to Walter Lippmann (1922), "News and Truth are not the same thing, and must be clearly distinguished. The function of news is to signalize an event, the function of truth is to bring to light the hidden facts."

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