

# Focusing on violence

The West and the Middle East in international TV news,  
06/11 - 07/15/2007

**Worldwide perception of the strained relationship between Western society and Islam is shaped by international conflicts. But MEDIA TENOR's in-depth monitoring of TV news in eleven European and Middle East countries reveals different angles in these communities – even when dramatic events shape the international news flow and the news agenda.**

MEDIA TENOR analysed reporting about the Middle East conflicts and the relationship between the different religious communities in the wake of Hamas' takeover of the Gaza strip in June 2007. The dramatic development billed as "civil war" by Germany's second channel **Heute Journal** current affairs programme took up the biggest chunk of reporting in the first week of the analysis (**chart 1**). But while up to 60% of all protagonists in the news coverage of Middle East conflicts or religious affairs centred on Palestinians ten of the eleven countries analyzed, US network news places notably less emphasis on the upheaval in the Palestinian Territories. Only 28% of reporting focused on Palestinian politicians or political fractions in that week.

A comparison over time shows the different weights put on these disturbing events in the Western and Arab news communities. While the events in Great Britain eclipsed Palestinian affairs in Western TV news in the third week of the analysis, there was only a slight increase in Arab TV – but Palestinians continued to account for about one in five protagonists described in the context of the relationship between the West and the Middle East. The other hot

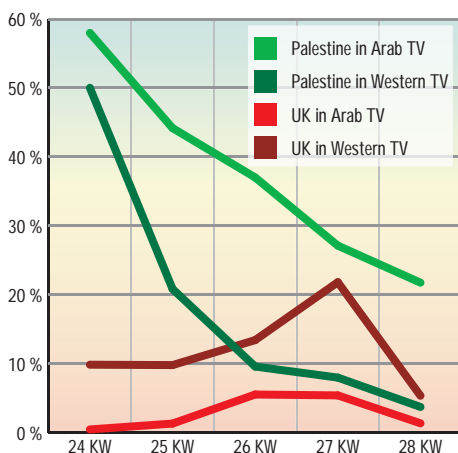
spots in the Middle East received much less coverage over the five weeks of this analysis (**chart 2**).

## Shaping Perceptions

When thinking about the way, the media shape our impressions from the world outside our heads, visibility constitutes only the first step – but it is a precondition for other media effects. Only those protagonists and issues that receive enough reporting in order to transcend beyond the noise level. On this level of cognitions agenda-setting theory indicates the dominance of conflict-related information. But the original thesis from McCombs and Shaw can be extended to the salience of protagonists as well, leading to the assumption that the media might be very successful in influencing the public, whom to think about. Politicians, governments, political parties, security forces and armed groups eclipsed religious leaders, clergy, theologians or ordinary believers by far. In the period analyzed, only 5.2% of all statements addressed a religious perspective in a narrow sense, while 66.2% dealt explicitly with political protagonists or armed groups and terrorists. Moreover: As reporting focused primarily on Middle East protagonists, which accounted for 70% of all persons, groups or organisations described in the TV newscast, Islam and violence become firmly associated in the news. Although the five weeks analyzed witnesses several political upheavals, these results are much in line with previous research (cf. MT No. 156). Changing events lead to comparable reporting. While the locations and the victims change, the narrative stays the same.

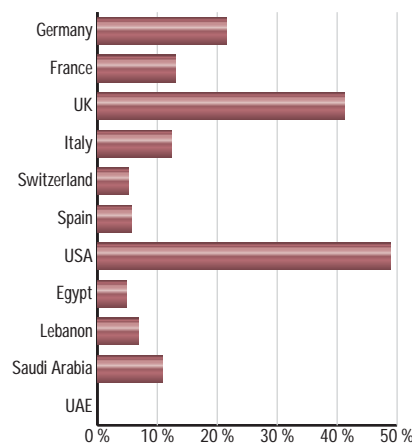


## 1) Visibility of Palestine and UK



Basis: 39.544/25.065 statements about protagonists in the context of Middle East conflicts / description of religious protagonists  
Time period: 06/11- 07/15/2007

## 2) Salience of national protagonists



Basis: 64.609 statements about protagonists in the context of Middle East Conflicts / description of religious protagonists  
Time period: 06/11- 07/15/2007



As the political processes in the Middle East are primarily framed as religiously motivated, the protagonists are portrayed primarily in political contexts. Information about religious life or teachings, peaceful co-operation or development played a minor role in the news flow.

There may be several causes for this simplistic reporting. On one hand media frames reflect the dominant conventions of political debate. While the “war against terrorism” frame is somewhat discredited in the editorial media, reporting about terrorist attacks remain a staple for the TV public. The high news value of scores of victims and the attractive imagery of bloody patches on the streets ensure that TV editors invariably prefer terror footage to other news. At the same time protagonists, not the least terrorists themselves, cater for the demand for terror footage.

On the other hand, the long history of conflict in the Middle East has been interpreted more and more in religious context since the Iranian Islamic revolution in the late 1970s. After the attacks on September 11, the framing of the conflict as general war between Islam and the West pushed the competing frame of a fight between Israelis and Palestinians for land at the base of the problem to the background.

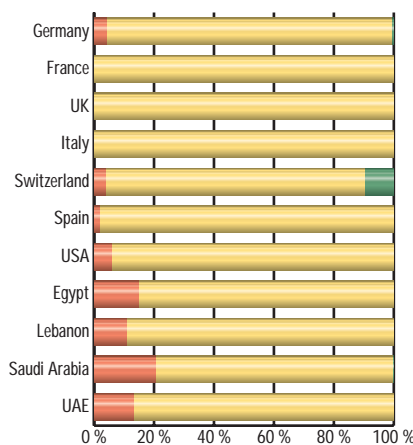
**Polarized Coverage**

Reporting about the “clash of civilisations” is much stronger shaped by explicit valuations than overall reporting – at least, when it is about the role of Israel or Hamas. Overall ratings of protagonists were much in

line with the media evaluation of domestic protagonists. In Germany for instance political protagonists have been evaluated in a rather balanced way in seven German TV news shows during the period of this analysis: In domestic debate in Germany 5,7% of all statements about politicians, political parties or government departments conveyed an explicit negative evaluation, 92% of all units of information contained no clear explicit rating. The overall tone in the coverage on the Middle East conflict is comparable, with 6,8% and 92,5% respectively. But when it comes to the various countries and the different protagonists, this picture shifts in a telling way. Israeli protagonists were characterized in a negative way in at least 10% of all statements in Arab TV news (**chart 3**), but US and German TV news were more critical than British, French or Italian news. Palestinian groups and politicians, on the other hand, were bashed most on German and US screens, while Arab TV news were most reserved in their explicit judgements (**chart 4**).

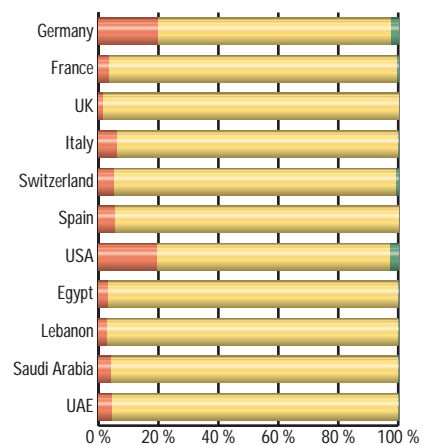
Surprisingly the journalists themselves stroke a much more negative tone than the other sources quoted in the newscast. Journalistic description and evaluation accounted for 60.8% of all statements in the Western TV stations, while in the Arab news programmes 55.2% per cent of the information consisted of quotes from politicians or other protagonists. Journalists’ statements were even more negative in Western TV shows, with 11.8% of all statements containing an explicit negative rating, as compared with a share of 3.8% of negative statements in Arab news.

**3) Explicit tone towards Israeli protagonists**



Basis: 3.942 statements about protagonists in the context of Middle East Conflicts / description of religious protagonists  
Time period: 06/11- 07/15/2007

**4) Explicit tone towards Palestinian protagonists**



Basis: 21.322 statements about protagonists in the context of Middle East Conflicts / description of religious protagonists  
Time period: 06/11- 07/15/2007

## Targeting the Enemy

Although Israel stood on the sidelines when Palestine infighting accelerated in June, Arab news continued to address the role of Israeli protagonists. Overall reporting in the five Arab news programmes analyzed devoted about 8.2% of all statements toward Israeli players, compared with 2.7% in Western TV news. While criticism in Arab news focused on Israel, overall reporting in the Western news shows was most negative towards protagonists from Iraq. Especially US network news continued to highlight the fallout from the ongoing insurgency in Iraq. Despite the growing dissatisfaction with the development in the country, US TV abstained from criticism of US protagonists: Not only explicit negative comment towards American players was lowest in ABC, CBS and NBC news – even the share of overall unfavourable reporting – including the description of events with a negative impact – occupied a notably lower share in the American news programmes. Over the period of five weeks only 14.1% of all statements about American players in the context of the clash between Islam and the West conveyed a negative description, while for instance German TV news reported in a negative way in 23.8% of all statements.

Negative reporting in US and German network news focused clearly on Hamas (charts 5 and 6). Almost one in five reports about Palestinian protagonists conveyed an explicit negative rating. In overall reporting Hamas quite clearly dominated reporting in terms of volume. Negative coverage in Western TV

news most probably turns out as “good news” among the supporters of Hamas. The established patterns of reporting from the Middle East therefore turn out not only to be rather unhelpful in the process of fostering mutual understanding between the clashing civilizations, but might even be supportive for the radical groups in a strategic perspective. (ck)

### Basis

**Germany:** ARD Tagesthemen, ZDF heute journal, RTL Aktuell; **France:** TF 1 **UK:** BBC 1 News at Ten, ITV Late News, BBC 2 Newsnight **Italy:** Rai Uno, Rai Due, Canale 5 **Switzerland:** SF DRS Tagesschau; **Spain:** TVE Telediario **USA:** NBC Nightly News, ABC World News Tonight, CBS Evening News **Dubai:** Al-Arabiya **Egypt:** Al Nile TV Nile news **Lebanon:** Al-Manar; **Saudi-Arabia:** Al-Ikhbariyah; **Qatar:** Al-Jazeera

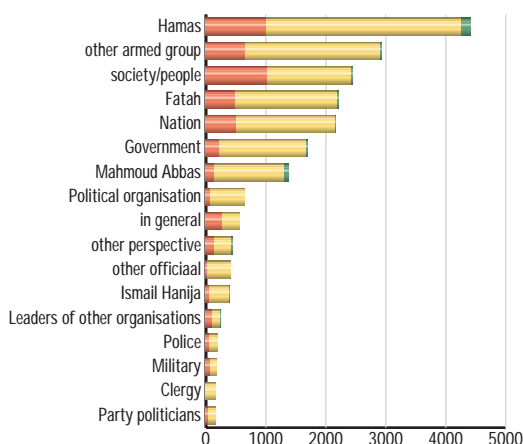
**Time period:** 06/11 - 07/15/2007 (UK TV missing in the week from 06/25 - 07/01)

**Analysis:** Examination of all news stories that refer either to the relationship between Islam and the Western world, the Middle-East conflicts, or to religious issues, groups or organisation. Analysis of the visibility, media tone and topic structure of all protagonists described in this context.

### Research Links

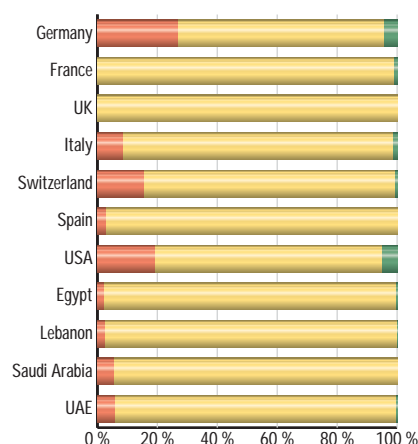
<http://www.zdf.de/ZDFmediathek/inhalt/21/0,4070,5553813-5,00.html>

## 5) Protagonists from Palestine in the media



Basis: 21.322 statements about protagonists in the context of Middle East Conflicts / description of religious protagonists  
Time period: 06/11- 07/15/2007

## 6) Explicit tone towards Hamas in international media



Basis: 4.483 statements about protagonists in the context of Middle East Conflicts / description of religious protagonists  
Time period: 06/11- 07/15/2007