

# New Zealand newspaper coverage of Islam and Muslims

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*The following article provides an overview of New Zealand mainstream newspapers' coverage of Islam and Muslim nations' issues from 2012 to February 2016. The discussion outlines "Islamic religious politics", international politics and policies, and Western "party politics", which are experiencing a surge in far-right ideology such as the anti-Muslim speeches of the Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump. These issues are discussed as they impact both the West and Muslim nations.*

The data that this discussion is based on come from New Zealand newspapers' web sites. The discussion also refers to the findings of my PhD thesis at the University of Otago (Kabir, 2014); and other contributions published since 2010 and based on research between 2006 and 2007. Discussion is confined to two mainstream newspapers' coverage – the *Otago Daily Times* (ODT) and the *New Zealand Herald* (NZH). The NZH is the highest circulation paper in New Zealand and the ODT is the oldest. One caveat is that there are many issues pertaining to Islam and Muslims during this timeframe and it is not possible to explain all of them as space is limited.

To start with, it should be noted that September 11, 2001 (here after 9/11) is marked as one the most significant events in the history of the relationship between Islam and the West (Poole, 2011). Later incidents such as the July 2007 bombings in London, the Muhammad Cartoon controversy, and the two Paris attacks in 2015 (one in

January that killed 12 people at the *Charlie Hebdo* office and the November attack that killed 129 people), innocent tourists killing on a Tunisian beach; and the rise of Islamic State (IS) in the Middle East also impacted the world. In addition, the desperate immigrants from the Middle East seeking shelter in Europe and elsewhere, the Iran nuclear issue, the Arab Spring (which started in 2010 in Egypt) among others became significant issues which are prominently featured in the Western media.

The Arab Spring was initially given a constructive slant, but later coverage created an opposite perception. For example, the Arab uprising, which started in Egypt and toppled Hosni Mubarak's dictatorial rule of 30 years, received positive coverage in both the NZH and ODT. However, when it was observed that the uprising paved the way for the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the election began to receive negative coverage in NZH editorial and news.

The NZH did not criticize the military takeover of Egypt and the dictatorial rule of Fatah al-Sisi. It perceived that the Mohammad Mursi government had failed and that Egypt was searching for alternative leadership. After decades of dictatorial rule, they did not understand that a year or so is not enough time to achieve a democracy. They did not see that dictatorial rule cannot be simply changed to a democratic system; and that a democratic system may require many years of trial and error so that citizens can chose an appropriate leadership. The NZH newspaper's editorials never focused on the need for a democratic government and the price the Egyptians would pay in the case of military rule.

In contrast, ODT editorials rejected the al-Sisi military government. After the fall of Brotherhood government in Egypt, the newspaper, in its editorials and cartoon images, underlined Egyptians failure to benefit from the "fruit" of the uprising as what they gained from the revolution was snatched by the military. The ODT also played a constructive role in the context of Libya. It argued against the killing of Gaddafi. The ODT also argued for "the West" not to do anything in the Middle East without the sanction of the United Nations.

The news coverage of these newspapers implied that because of the continuous violence in Iraq and the Middle East and the rise of IS, New Zealand should play a role as an “ally” of Western nations by providing training for Iraqi soldiers. Their editorials and editorial cartoons, however, were critical not only of the New Zealand government but also of the Western elite nations’ policy in Iraq. All editorials and editorial cartoons rejected the New Zealand government’s decision to send their troops to Iraq. New Zealand did not join the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and these newspapers recognized that invading Iraq was unethical (Kabir, 2014; Kabir and Bourk, 2012) and that the current Iraqi crisis was the responsibility of the invading party.

My finding (2013) in the coverage of the Iran nuclear issue was that New Zealand newspapers provided an Orientalist perception that promoted Islam as a threat. However, recently that situation appears to have changed. The ODT encourages a peaceful relationship between Iran and the US. Its editorials advocate a firm Iran-US relationship for the Middle East peace process.

Previously, editorial coverage in the NZH dehumanized Iran and its leadership – for example, by using words such as “Mullah”, “Islamist”, “Islamic cleric” and so on. Further, until 2008, both these newspapers’ editorial cartoons pushed a negative perception of the US, e.g. the US is going to invade Iran to cover up its failure in Iraq. Both newspapers welcomed the lifting of sanctions against Iran in 2015 and neither published any adverse cartoons. Both newspapers’ editorials were of the opinion that to defeat IS, the US should negotiate side Iran.

While covering the Palestine-Israel conflict the news coverage reinforced the notion that Israel kills only “Muslim militants”. Both these newspapers’ editorials and cartoons, nonetheless, blamed Israel for its “irrational” and “unethical” action against Palestinian people. They also blamed the US for its blind support (see the cartoon images appearing in the ODT) of Israel that caused huge casualties in Palestine.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the NZH rejects “Islamist” Hamas and reinforces the assertion that “Islamic politics” should have no

place in the world as their “ideology” goes against women rights and human rights.

The ODT promoted a similar perception in its news coverage, but its editorials put forward a different argument from the NZH, arguing that “the West” needs to be more practical towards negotiating democracy in the Middle East. Its editorials maintained that an optimum result may never come about and this is why “the West” needs to accept Hamas in the democratic process in Palestine. Indeed, the ODT specifically rejected “Israel’s contentious settlements” in Palestine, identifying them as one of the main obstacles in Israel-Palestine peace negotiations.

### **Misrepresentation and incitement**

The “Western” attack against IS in Syria is accepted in news coverage. However, the Russian attack against the same group (IS) is rejected and the Russian attack is identified as an action that saves “dictator” Bashar al-Assad and “kills innocent people”. In contrast, “the Western attack” is perceived in a way that will “establish democracy” in the region. The coverage rarely focuses on the causes of the loss of lives and rights in Syria from “the Western” attacks.

For many years the world has been observing the mass killing of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. They were desperate to find refuge in Bangladesh because of socio-economic and cultural discrimination. Muslims are subjected to continuous harassment due to their religious identity (New York Times, 2014; 2016). Neither NZH nor ODT said anything about the religious discrimination, racism and killing of hundreds of Muslims in Myanmar although coverage of the democratization process in the country and news about Aung San Suu Kyi were prominent. The negotiation process between the military and political parties demanded media attention, but not, apparently, the abuse and violation of human rights.

The attack on the office of Charlie Hebdo (2015) killed 12 people – eight journalists, two police officers, a maintenance worker and a visitor; and the later Paris attack killed 129 innocent people. In the news narratives it was common to read that they “epitomized Western author-

ities' greatest fear: Islamic radicals". In their explanation, the central concern became "Islamic radicalism", and "Islamic terrorism". In some narratives, "terrorism" and "Islam" become interchangeable. However, when Muslims were attacked or killed by some "attackers" after the Paris incident, the events were presented less critically, identifying the person as "a psychiatric" patient or similar. The narratives never disclosed the identity of the "attacker".

Their editorials and editorial cartoon images also reinforced a similar perception of an "Islamic threat". However, some editorial cartoons promoted a constructive view. For example, the NZH published one image by a Brazilian cartoonist, Carlos Lotuff, which shows that the "terrorist" attack does not kill innocent people only; it eventually backfires on "Islamic faith" (see the cartoon image).

Both newspapers fell into a controversial trap when they failed to criticize the US presidential candidate, Donald Trump, in the context of his anti-Muslim speeches. One might argue that his speeches are similar to some Muslim "Imams", such as Abu Hamza in England, who preach anti-West hatred. Abu Hamza is seen as a "hate-preacher" but in news coverage Trump is never perceived as a hate-speaker against Islam and Muslims. However, Trump is rejected as a leader. Photo-coverage was also negative (see the photograph).<sup>2</sup> Editorials observed that Trump is not a "moderate" person". For example, an ODT editorial argued that the Republicans are searching for a "moderate candidate" to be selected (i.e. other than Trump). Similarly, an NZH editorial observed that in Trump's win in New Hampshire, the "Republicans picked a demagogue".



*Residents of Glasgow, Scotland's largest city, protest in favour of welcoming refugees in the wake of Europe's migration crisis. Glasgow was the first city in Great Britain to accept Syrian refugees.*

In the context of the immigrant crisis in Europe, newspaper coverage referred to migrants as "refugees" and the "refugees" were sometimes portrayed as "Islamic terrorists", "members of IS", "rapists", "people with anti-West values" who will destroy "the West". The coverage constructed this image without exploring the roots of the crisis and without acknowledging that they are victims of their own governments and "the West". They also promoted a discourse of fear by stating that Europe is vulnerable and its nations would soon "collapse" due to the "refugees".

Coverage ignored the fact that the "refugee" issue is critical in Muslim nations too – for example, Turkey has taken in 1.7 million Syrian "refugees" (UNHCR, 2015). Further, when a "refugee" is identified as Muslim and involved in "criminal" activity, his/her identity, including their name and nation of origin, for example, are mentioned prominently and repeatedly. In contrast, in cases where the "refugees" become victims of the "local people" or any "organized group", their

identities are rarely published and their activities are presented in a less inflammatory way, such as “gunman” instead of “terrorist”. However, the readers of the NZH and ODT can see a different picture in the editorial cartoons.

### Tackling inherent contradictions

New Zealand newspapers focus on a limited number of themes – terrorism, fundamentalism, criminal issues, Islamic religious politics – in covering Islam and Muslims. However, all these issues in one way or another relate to “Islamic terrorism”. New Zealand society does not have a first-hand experience of Islam and Muslims and they receive information from media. The representation of these themes may function to negatively influence New Zealand people.

It needs to be noted that in many cases New Zealand newspapers receive stories from the international newsfeeds including news agencies and foreign newspapers. This can cause readers to receive contradictory images of Islam and Muslims in news coverage and in opinion-making. Specifically, the ODT does not have any correspondent stationed overseas and the NZH sometimes covers international events through its own correspondents. Thus, one might argue that the negative coverage of Islam and Muslims in the news is not the result of the New Zealand newspapers per se.

However, all media outlets have gate-keepers that check and select what is going to be published. It is very common in the world’s media for the frequency of news coverage to be several times higher than the publication of editorials and editorial cartoons. Thus, regular focus on an issue in a negative, prejudicial way in news can be a problem. Readers see news coverage frequently but see opinion only occasionally, sometimes ignoring opinion pages altogether. ■

*Photo credit page 26: Scottish Refugee Council (2015).*

### Notes

1. There is no recent cartoon available on this issue.
2. The NZH published the cover page of the *Daily News* (US) after his defeat in Iowa.

### References

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