

International Media Misperceptions of Islam and Terrorism: A Social Constructionist Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Background: For several decades, Islam and Muslims have frequently been associated with terrorism in international media, including films, despite the fact that Islam neither teaches nor endorses acts of terrorism. **Purpose:** This article seeks to clarify that Islam is not a religion that endorses terrorism or terrorist acts. More specifically, it explores the brief history of terrorism, elucidates the Islamic perspective on terrorism, and argues that terrorist acts may arise, in part, from negative media labelling by powerful actors. **Methods:** This study employs a desk-based research method. **Results:** The findings suggest that terrorism frequently emerges from political, social, or economic repression. Although some acts of terrorism have been perpetrated by groups identifying with religious causes, terrorism is not prescribed by any religion. Islamic teachings, in particular, explicitly condemn terrorism. However, when certain Muslim groups are labelled as terrorists, their reactionary behavior may stem from negative labelling and perceived unjust treatment. Such groups are often portrayed as terrorists by international media, including films, in response to their harsh reactions despite experiencing various forms of oppression. **Conclusion:** Islam does not endorse terrorism; therefore, acts of terrorism should not be attributed to the teachings of Islam or to Muslims as a whole. **Implications:** International media and Western countries—particularly the United States—should reevaluate their policies and adopt more balanced approaches toward Muslim communities by examining the underlying factors that motivate some groups to resort to terrorist methods out of frustration or desperation.

Keywords: international media; Islam; labelling; symbolic interaction; terrorism

To cite this article (APA Style):

Mulyana, D. (2026). International media misperceptions of Islam and terrorism: A social constructionist perspective. *Kajian Jurnalisme*, 9(2), 128-141. <https://doi.org/10.24198/jkj.v9i2.68565>

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Submitted: 7 December 2025, **Revised:** 28 January 2026, **Accepted:** 6 February 2026, **Published:** 31 January 2026
ISSN: 2549-0559 (Printed), ISSN: 2549-1946 (Online), Website: <http://jurnal.unpad.ac.id/kajian-jurnalisme>
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INTRODUCTION

The European Union and the United States have labelled Hamas as a terrorist organization because of its armed resistance against Israel, which has incorporated suicide bombings and rocket attacks (Robinson & Merrow, 2025). Since the start of Israeli aggression 7 October 2023, the death toll in Gaza Strip has risen to 71,657 (WAFA, 2026). Due to this brutal genocide of Palestinian people by the Israelis, it is more appropriate to designate the Israelis a terrorist organization rather than Hamas who has fought against the Israelis due to their long colonization and oppression of the Palestinians. On 5 December 2024 Amnesty International declared that Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza. In September 2025 a United Nations Commission of Inquiry also stated that Israel is committing such a crime. Ironically, the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu labelled the victims of genocide in Gaza and the anti-genocide groups as terrorists. So it is as if terrorists are calling others terrorists (Heryanto, 2026).

Media framing functions as a soft power apparatus in international relations, providing epistemological perspectives that simplify objectivity-bias dichotomies (Ainani & Yudiansyah, 2025). The association of Islam with terrorism has been found in the omnipresent international media, especially in the West, not only in mainstream media - printed and electronic, including documentaries – but also in online media, including personal blogs and websites. Some observers, for instance Manzoor-Khan (2022) and Nasution (2024), term such disposition Islamophobia. Due to such biased media reports, some scholars such as Puspita et al. (2025), call for the practice of journalism which is more balanced, contextual, and ethical in reporting issues of terrorism to prevent stereotypes and public polarizations.

An early instance was found when The American TV station NBC broadcast a film entitled *Under Siege* on 9 February 1986. The plot involves Muslims associated with terrorists who attack various targets in the United States. It is portrayed in the film that the main film character lives in a suburb of Detroit which is - in reality, even until now - inhabited by a Muslim community. The main character is arrested when he observes his prayer (Mulyana, 1988).

The misperception of Islam as condoning terrorism has been overwhelming in Hollywood-produced fictive films since the twentieth century, such as the *Delta Force* (1986), *Navy Seals* (1990), *True Lies* (1994), *Air Force One* (1997), *the Siege* (1998), *Syriana* (2005), and *the Kingdom* (2007). In those films, Muslims are frequently depicted as antagonists who commit acts of violence. One study of over 900 Hollywood films concluded that Arab or Muslim men were typically portrayed as terrorists or other kinds of villains (Corbin, 2017). Some studies on these kinds of films (Ali & Rizvi, 2020; Eijaz, 2018; Kiran et al., 2021; Rahayu & Mediyansyah, 2021; Ramji, 2005) have highlighted and confirmed such pejorative stereotypes. In a broad sense, the study of films may be included within the study of journalism as journalism is generally understood as a practice of constructing and representing reality to the public.

For centuries Islam has been misunderstood in the West, especially in the United States. The World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago stated in 1893: "There is no system that has been so willfully and persistently misrepresented as Islam, both by writers of so-called history and by the newspaper press" (Shihab, 2004). Such a statement is still relevant today. One of the explanations is that Muslims have been the target of stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination by others (the West), especially through the mass (conventional) media, including films, since they believe in a religion different from that professed by most people of the West. The misperception of Muslims as terrorists has been more apparent since the tragedy of the 9/11 attack in New York in 2001. The terms Islamic terror, Islamic terrorism or Muslim

terrorists have filled the agenda of international media, especially television and online media, throughout the world.

Based on the brief background above, this paper aims to explore the brief history of terrorism, to elucidate the Islamic view of terrorism, and to delineate that the acts of terrorism may be borne out of negative (media) labelling by the powerful others, and propose recommendations to reduce this unjust misperception. As this issue has rarely been articulated by researchers in a clear and systematic manner, it constitutes the novelty, significance, and research gap of this study.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study is qualitative in nature. It is mainly based on desk-based research or a desk research method which, after determining the research topic, incorporates the following steps: first, source identification, locating pertinent information sources, including journals, books, articles, reports, government publications, and online databases; second, data collection, acquiring data from these sources through reading, summarization, and extraction of information relevant to research goals; third, information analysis, analyzing collected data to extract insights, recognize patterns, and draw conclusions that address the research questions or objectives; fourth, findings synthesis, amalgamating findings from various sources to offer a comprehensive overview of the investigated topic; and fifth, results reporting, documenting the outcomes of the desk research and communicating them through reports, articles, presentations, or other formats tailored to the target audience (McEvoy & Machi, 2012; Qualtrics, 2026; Robson & McCartan, 2016), which in this context, results in this paper.

Simply put, the researcher has employed a literature study which is pivotal in the research design process. This research component explores data from documents and previous research, all of which constitute secondary data used to gather information on the case under study and to achieve the aims of the study. The reason is that this research topic is beyond the researcher's direct observation and interviews with relevant sources. However, the existing data from these secondary sources, such as news items, reports, (journal) articles, commentary, movies, (text) books, etc, can build strong arguments and solid propositions as part of the analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Terrorism: A Historical Perspective

There is no a universally accepted definition of terrorism (Tankard & Severin, 1992). To define terrorism is imperative to go beyond slogans such as "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter," and "Terrorism, like beauty, lies in the eye of the beholder" (Keeley, 2002).

Terrorism is the use of force or threats to demoralize, intimidate, and oppress others. One generally accepted definition comes from David Whittaker (in Praja, 2004) who defines terrorism as "premediated threat or use of violence by subnational groups or clandestine individuals intended to intimidate and coerce governments to promote political, religious or ideological outcomes, and to inculcate fear among the public at large." This definition is rather biased as it uses the perspective of the government, ignoring that any government can also commit acts of terrorism.

Ronczkowski (in Khairil, 2024) classifies terrorism into six categories: political terrorism, ecological terrorism, agricultural terrorism, biological terrorism, narco terrorism, and cyber terrorism. In fact, terrorism can also be classified into individual terrorism and collective

terrorism. Individual terrorism has existed as long as humans have lived on earth. History tells us that the first terror was implemented by Cain when he killed Abel, both were sons of Adam, because of the jealousy of Cain toward Abel. Since that time there has been a lot of terror on an individual basis occurring in everyday life, albeit irrelevant to be discussed in this paper.

Collective terror committed by a group of people, an organization, or a state has existed at least since the time of ancient Rome. The purposes of this terror vary, whether it be racial, political, economic, social or “religious.” In the United States, Ku Klux Klan (KKK) used to intimidate and even kill Black people based on a racial prejudice against them. In this context, terrorism is often associated with violent acts conducted by a group of people against a state, as if a state never terrorizes its own people. More contemporary history tells us that even a state was able to commit terror against its own people such as that carried out by Adolf Hitler (in Germany), Joseph Stalin (Russia), Idi Amin (Uganda), Ferdinand Marcos (the Philippines), and Slobodan Milosevic (Yugoslavia). In the late 1930s and the early 1940s Hitler ordered his military to kill hundreds of thousands of Jews due to his racial hatred against them while his motive was also political. Most recently, the attack by the U.S. military on Venezuela on 3 January 2026, resulting in the deaths of dozens of Venezuelan military personnel and the alleged abduction of President Nicolás Maduro, has been described by some observers (e.g. Heryanto, 2026) as an act of terrorism.

Terror based on pseudo-religious motive has also been existent for centuries. The first most significant terror was committed by the Crusaders when they fought Muslims between the 11th century and the 13th century. In the 11th century with pseudo idealism, the European Christians struggled to take the holy land (Palestine) from the Muslims by killing a lot of Muslims (some 80.000) and Jews and burning their villages and houses. They attacked Istanbul, a Christian city, and stole golden objects from churches. These European Christians did not understand their religion and misused the name of Jesus for their bloodthirstiness. They were so different from Christians in Byzantium who were more civilized and morally superior to European Christians. The terror committed by the crusaders is discrepant with Christianity which is a religion of love, according to the New Testament: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew, 5:44). And according to Luke, Jesus said: “If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also” (Luke, 6:29). When Shalahudin Al-Ayyubi - better known as Saladin in the Western world - defeated the Crusaders at the Battle of Hattin and took back Jerusalem in 1187 from the Crusaders who had conquered it 88 years earlier, he did not kill Christians who surrendered nor made them into slaves. Due to his noble behavior, Shalahudin was much respected by Christian historians (Phillips, 2024).

Much later, in the 17th century, there were conflicts between Protestants and Catholics in Europe. A similar conflict has been commonplace between the British and the Irish for the last several decades. In Spain the Basque people who wanted to be independent from Spain were considered terrorists. First emerging in the late 1950s, the Basque people were severely persecuted by the Franco regime; their unique culture, including their language, was banned (News BBC, 1998). Meanwhile, the Jews have committed terror by oppressing and killing Palestinians since 1936 until now.

In Asia horrible terror leading to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people was severely committed by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia in the second part of the 20th century. In the 1960s and 1970s an anti-Western act of terror was also carried out by Soviet-backed communist organizations. During a similar period, terrorism committed by a Marxist group of guerrillas called “Shining Path” led by Abimael Guzman in Peru, caused the deaths of some 30,000 people, mainly innocent civilians (who were kidnapped, raped, and tortured), including

women and children (Yahya, 2003). In Africa, especially in Rwanda, Nigeria, Angola, and Sudan, there has been a lot of terror causing the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocent people. In Japan, a terrorist group who worshiped Aum Shinrikyo (change its name to Aleph in 2000) committed an act of terror in 1995 in the subway system in Tokyo (by releasing Sarin gas). The attack resulted in the deaths of approximately a dozen Japanese nationals and injuries to thousands. Founded by Shoko Asahara in 1984, Aum Shinrikyo has been recognized formally as a terrorist organization by the United States, Canada, and the European Union (Drambarean, 2023).

It is also worth mentioning that the Rohingya Muslims, a minority group in Myanmar (formerly named Burma), has been bitterly oppressed by the Myanmar military regime for over 50 years. This Muslim minority group has lived in Rakhine Province as their homeland for centuries. Yet, those who want to fight for the independence of their homeland, have been considered terrorists by the government based on their view that the Rohingya people recently migrated from the Indian subcontinent (Kocaman, 2013).

Last but not least, for the last few decades the United States has accused minority groups of Muslims of being terrorists, causing other Muslims to be discriminated against by non-Muslims throughout the world. Often these minority groups are considered fundamentalists (those who insist on applying their religions literally). The word fundamentalist has a pejorative connotation now, but for some, a Muslim fundamentalist is a Muslim who practices his religion faithfully.

It is unfair to think that terrorism is always associated with Muslims. We seldom hear the label terrorist preceded by words such as Buddhist, Christian or Jewish. Remember when a young American man bombed the Federal Court Building in Oklahoma on 19 April 1995. As described in a Netflix documentary entitled *Oklahoma City Bombing: American Terror* (2025), first people thought that the terrorist was linked with Muslims. It was evident that the terrorist was Timothy James McVeigh who was a Christian. Yet, until now people have never labelled his act as Christian terrorism.

The two consecutive mass shootings on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand on 15 March 2019 caused 51 Muslims dead. They were killed by Brenton Tarrant who entered both mosques during Friday prayer, firstly at the Al Noor Mosque and then at the Linwood Islamic Centre (Nasution, 2024). Yet, as a Christian Tarrant was hardly called a terrorist by international media. Thousands of Muslims, especially Palestinians, have been killed by Israelis, over 70,000 people since 7 October 2023 alone. We have never heard that what the Israelis have done (killing civilians in Gaza) is Jewish terrorism, except once mentioned by the late Pope Francis.

The US military has also killed hundreds of thousands of civilians, including women and children in the two Gulf wars (1991, 2001) and in the Afghan war (2001-2021), but the international media never call what the US did terrorism, let alone Christian terrorism. While the US government has condemned the violence committed by Palestinians in their conflict against the Israelis, it has never labelled the brutal violence committed by the Israelis against the Palestinians as terror, even though the Israelis killed civilians, including women and children.

Clearly, terrorism is not related to the teachings of any true religion. The right religion must preserve human life. Islam itself condemns terrorism as will be discussed in detail later. No one has the right to kill other people in the name of religion without moral justification. It cannot be denied that some Muslims transgress the Islamic laws, because they do not understand their religion. However, it is misleading to judge Islam solely based on the way Muslims behave and treat other people, whoever they are, whether they be Saddam Hussein, Moammar Khadafy,

Osama bin Laden, etc. Similarly, no one cannot judge other religions professed by Hitler or Ferdinand Marcos based on their cruel terror against others. The companion of the prophet, Ali bin Abi Talib, once said, "If you want to judge Islam, look at its teachings, then you can judge who follows Islam and who does not." The problem is, as Imam Siraj Wahhaj in the United States once said, although Islam is the best in the world, many Muslims now do not act as "good marketers" of Islam, that Islam is hard "to sell" (Mulyana, 2004).

Studies reveal that non-Muslim sources and journalists are more likely to associate Muslims with terrorism compared to Muslim sources. The gap between Muslim sources on the one side and non-Muslim sources and journalists on the other side is more significant for severe terroristic attacks and for articles mentioning dead and injured victims, especially in tabloid newspapers as compared to quality newspapers (Matthes et al., 2020; von Sikorski et al., 2022). Those with less favorable stereotypes of Muslims, especially in terms of violence and trustworthiness, are more likely to support several aspects of fighting "terrorist Muslims". In relation to the United States, the two false narrative that "all terrorists are Muslim" and "no whites are terrorists" weaken rather than boost the security of the United States. More specifically, negative stereotypes endanger the security of Americans who are Muslim or are perceived as Muslim. In addition, the misperception that white people are not terrorists breeds security blind spots that make the United States less safe (Corbin, 2017).

Seeing Islam as the scapegoat of terrorism, Karim (2003) argues that the news discourses on the war against terrorism ignore not only the violence committed by states but also terrorism carried out by diverse groups in Ireland, Spain, Sri Lanka, etc. In so doing many mainstream journalists tend to become cheerleaders of state militarism rather than analyze critically the ongoing violence and its long-term consequences. In framing the news on the 9/11 tragedy in particular, Islam has been depicted in US media as a monolithic religion advocating violence. As Pavlik and McIntosh (2011) contend, these inaccurate depictions of Muslims hurt our ability to see them on equal terms or humanistic terms and ignore that Judaism and Christianity also face similar fundamentalist movements.

Definition of Islam and Muslim

The word Muslim is associated with the word Islam, although some non-Muslims think they are two distinct words that are not connected at all. Both words come from the same root: salam which means, among other things, peace, purity, submission to God (Abdalati, 1975). So essentially, a Muslim is one who submits to God and seeks to promote peace. In their daily prayers, five times a day, Muslims close the prayers by saying, "Assalamualaikum" which means "Peace be upon you."

If the meaning of Islam is peace, then Islam is by no means the source of or even related to terrorism. Clearly, terrorism is contradictory to the meaning of Islam. Any terrorist cannot be a Muslim in the true sense, since these two words cannot be reconciled. Although the actors of the 9/11 tragedy are Muslims based on their names or religion, if it is true, the terror cannot be called Islamic terror. In the same vein, any other terror, as has been done from century to century, cannot be labelled Christian terror, Buddhist terror, or Hindu terror, based on the identities of the actors.

The meaning of Muslim can also be classified into two meanings. First, a general meaning as mentioned above. This means that whoever or whatever submits oneself or itself to God is Muslim, whether it be Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, or even a cat, a tree, a star, the sun or the moon. The Prophet Muhammad once said, "A human being is born Islamic. It is his or her parents who make him or her a Jew, a Christian, or a Persian who worships fire (of Zoroastrian religion)." Second, a narrow or specific meaning, which is a person who follows

the religion propagated by Muhammad (Peace may be upon Him). The general meaning is more correct because we do call ourselves Muslims rather than Muhammadans. Muslims do not regard Muhammad as Christians regard Jesus.

From a Muslim perspective, Islam is not a new religion. It is the only religion (in Arabic Ad-Din which means a way of life) that has been given by God to mankind since Adam's time until the day of judgment. Muhammad came to perfect the religion that has been sent by God to mankind through His prophets, from Adam until Jesus, Muhammad being the last prophet. Muslims must believe that Jesus is one of great prophets of Islam, otherwise they are not Muslims.

In reality, non-Muslims often associate Islam with the religion propagated by Muhammad, and Muslims with those following Islam. There is no significant problem in the meaning. However, in real life, there is always a distance between Islam and a Muslim. Islam is perfect and eternal. But a Muslim is a person who is imperfect and is always in the process of becoming a true Muslim. His or her interpretation of Islam is always influenced by his or her cultural background no matter how hard he or she tries to purify Islam from the contamination of his or her culture. Only God's messengers have practiced the perfect Islam, while their companions have had qualities close to those of the prophets.

As in the process of becoming, Muslims may vary in their cultural, sociological, and even psychological characteristics. They may come from different racial and/or ethnic groups who adhere to and practice cultural values that are not necessarily Islamic. An Indonesian Muslim man or woman may believe in and practice more Javanese values than Islamic values, although he or she is a Muslim. An Arab Muslim may still practice Arab cultural values and ways of communication (such as when men kiss each other on the cheeks as a form of greeting) which are not necessarily Islamic. The majority of Indonesian Muslims eat rice, but this does mean that eating rice is necessarily Islamic. In brief, Muslims are not monolithic and uniform. There are over 1,8 billion Muslims in the world with distinctive cultures. It is unjust to generalize certain acts of minority Muslim groups (such as acts of terrorism) into this whole Muslim population. There are fundamentalist Muslims, as there are fundamentalist Christians, or fundamentalist Jews, but as in any other religion, this is a minority group, compared to the vast majority of Muslims. Besides fundamentalist Muslims, there are also moderate Muslims (this is the largest part of the whole Muslim population), and nominal Muslims who do not observe their Islamic duties; they are Muslims in name only, often because their parents are Muslims.

How Islam Views Terrorism

Basically, killing innocent people is a major sin in Islam, as it is in other religions. The Holy Quran says, "... if someone kills another person, unless it is in retaliation of someone else that has caused corruption on earth, it is as if he had murdered all mankind" (V:32). There is no single verse in the Quran that teaches Muslims to commit the acts of terrorism. The emergence of violence in the Muslim world emanates from other factors other than religion such as unjust social and economic Muslim condition, oppressive domestic political regime and the West intervention in Muslim politics (Alfiah, 2013).

Basically, all religions teach love, mercy, goodness, justice, compassion, and peace. No religion promotes mischief and evil. When violence or terrorist acts are committed in the name of religion, we must be careful to understand the situation. It is misleading to correlate the act and the religion of the actor without understanding the teachings of that religion. In the Holy Quran and in the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad there are no statements suggesting that Muslims must carry out violence or terror to achieve their goals. Even when they are ordered to call others to enter Islam they must do so with kindness, as said by the Quran: "Invite all to

the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious: For your Lord knows best who have strayed from His Path and who receives guidance” (XVI:125).

In fact, Muslims consider Christians and Jews as their brothers to be treated with full respect and justice because they have the same father: Abraham. Once when the Prophet saw a Jew being carried to be buried, he stood up out of respect. Muslims cannot force other people, even atheists, to believe in Islam, since believing in religion must be based on free choice and conscience. The Quran says: “Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from Error; Whoever rejects Evil and believes in God has grasped the most trustworthy handhold, that never breaks. And God hears and knows all things” (II:256).

To reiterate, the morality of Islam can be lived only with sincere decision, through one’s submission to the will of God and to follow one’s conscience honestly. Enforcing others to believe in one’s religion is a total transgression in Islam, because everything submitted to Allah must be based on sincerity. Islam guarantees that other people are free to believe in and practice their own faiths (Yahya, 2003).

Even God orders Muslims to treat their enemies justly as long as the enemies do not fight them and do not drive the Muslims from their homes (LX:8). Muslims are even supposed to repay evil with better treatment, so that their enemies become their faithful friends (Fushshilat:34; XXIII:96). The Prophet once said: “Do not repay evil with evil, but forgive them.” On another occasion the Prophet said: “The closest one to Allah is one who forgives others when he has power over those who have hurt him.” And last but not least, God says, “Keep to forgiveness and enjoin the kindness, and turn away from the ignorant” (VII:199). The Quran illustrates that even Moses was instructed by God to treat the Pharaoh of Egypt kindly.

In case Muslims are compelled to fight against others who oppress them, they are not allowed to go beyond the limits (II:190), for example by killing civilians, the elderly, women and children, by burning their churches or synagogues, by destroying their houses, killing animals or destroying plants. In other words, one cannot propagate religion by making mischief, as “God does not love mischief makers” (XXVIII:77). It is clear that killing people, even one person, is mischievous. In Islam, Muslims are frequently reminded in religious teachings to refrain from mischief and crime.

Islam does not tolerate killing oneself, either. Like murder, suicide is a huge sin in Islam. Unless God forgives him or her, the actor will be cast into hell. Thus, suicide attacks committed by Muslims cannot be considered as part of the Islamic teachings. It is worth noting that such attacks have also been done by non-Muslims in other countries, notably Sri Lanka and India. So it is more logical to think that terror and suicide attacks are more associated with political and social problems rather than the teachings of religion. Based on such assumptions, it is unsurprising that some Muslim perpetrators have carried out terrorist attacks against fellow Muslims, as in the case of the attack in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on 12 May 2003. The two major bombings in that city caused 39 people dead, and over 160 wounded. In such adversities, as Alfiah (2013) contends, some extremist Muslims misinterpret the doctrine of Jihad and employ such doctrine to attain their political goals. So in this context, still terrorists can claim that their acts are religious, while they are merely pseudo-Muslims, or pseudo Christians, pseudo Buddhists, etc.

The Media Construction of Terrorism

Many Western media platforms now portray Islam and Muslims negatively. Fox Television even stated once that the enemy of the West are those who are Muslims. They often label Muslims as “terrorists.” This erroneous generalization is dangerous. A French writer once

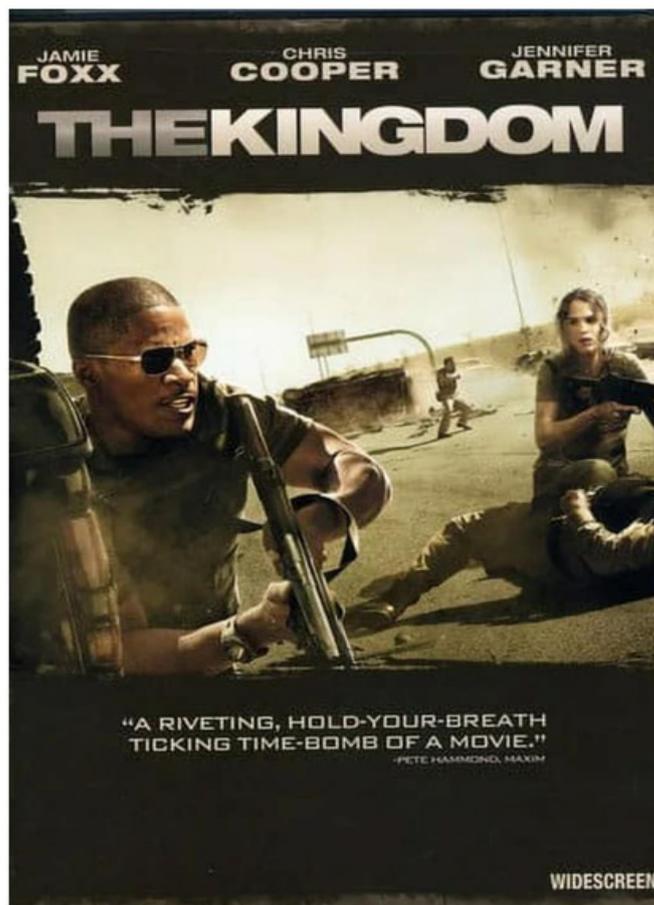


Figure 1. A scene of the movie “the Kingdom”

Source: Facebook @Corey Maller, 2024

said that Islam is a stupid religion. “I have never shown the slightest contempt for Muslims but I have always held Islam in contempt” (Shihab, 2004). As I will argue later, such discourses may provide the basis for media constructions, whether in television or in film.

Starring Jamie Foxx, Chris Cooper and Jennifer Garner, the Hollywood film entitled the Kingdom (2007) depicts an FBI investigation into a bombing in Saudi Arabia (see Figure 1). Most of the antagonists are Muslim Arabs portrayed as violent, anti-Western terrorists. The film uses gross stereotypes, for instance, by depicting Saudi Arabia as a desert land inhabited by Arabs keen on killing Americans.

It is widely known that Americans are ignorant about Islam because they always seek and receive the information from secondary sources (American mass media or books written by American scholars, and websites and blogs designed by non-Muslims). Some American students who studied Islam have admitted this stereotyping, for instance: “What I find, as a United States citizen, to be most discouraging is the wide spread ignorance of other cultures and the unwillingness of people around me to open their minds and learn about other ways of life without predisposed bias” (Shihab, 2004).

Labelling other groups or other individuals as culturally or politically different, let alone as terrorists, has a serious impact. The impact will be greater if it is reinforced and disseminated by mass international media and social media, especially when the victims are powerless. A perspective that can be used to explain this phenomenon is the labelling theory. This theory is inspired by the theory of symbolic interaction of George Herbert Mead in his book *Mind, Self*

and Society (1934), although his theory is applied in a social world of deviants.

According to Mead's theory, people learn to play various roles and assume such identities relevant to these roles, indicating to each other who and what they are, defining situations they encounter, and engaging in behaviors related to such social identities, meanings, and situations. The labelling theory assumes that deviance is not a set of individual or group characteristics but it is a process of interaction between deviants and non-deviants. Those who represent power or are able to enforce a definition of conventional morality on others, such as the central government, local governments, the military, politicians, social scientists, (international) media and journalists, provide main sources of labelling. Labels are created to categorize people and their specific types of deviance, thus reflecting the structure of the power of society. This theory is important because it assumes that there is no action inherently criminal. The definition of crime is determined by the powerful party, through the formulation of laws and interpretation by the police, the court, and other institutions (Giddens & Sutton, 2021). According to this theory, the process of labelling is so dreadful that its victims cannot stand its impact. The continual definition given by others finally changes the victims' self-definition, although the definition is initially denied by them.

Labelling is problematic. The process is a vicious circle. In the case of those with a mental illness, for example, if they are sane and protest the label "insane," the protest is considered as a confirmation of the label. A patient's irritation will be interpreted by other people that they are justified to label the patient as "mentally insane." On the other hand, if the patient remains silent, his or her behavior will be interpreted as "abnormal," because no normal person would behave that way. Right or wrong, other people's labelling and the victim's reaction justify the labelling. So the prophecy has been fulfilled by itself, and in this case has become a reality for the labelling party and the labelled one. The classic statement made by the sociologist William I. Thomas "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Jones, 1985) is still valid. People decide to act based on their interpretation of the world around them. Such mechanisms can also apply to people being called terrorists by the central government within one country or by other countries, especially a superpower like the United States, its effect being multiplied by conventional international media platforms such as newspapers and television, online media and social media. When we label a group of people as terrorists, we will tend to consider whatever this group of people say and do as terror. The fact that we hate them and seek to destroy them may provoke anger, aggression, and even violence in response; based on such reactions or acts of violence, we then conclude that they are terrorists.

The victims of this misinterpretation often cannot completely escape from the labelling, if the labels are given by the powerful and reinforced by conventional media and new media. Sometimes, the object can reject the labelling, but will still find it hard to change the consequence of the labelling. Apparently, the fact that a group of people defended their land by using weapons when their land was going to be confiscated or invaded by the military of the United States and other foreign troops, was used as justification by the United States and other nations taking the side of the superpower that those groups were terrorists. Such mechanisms may have also been possible in the case of people being labelled as terrorists in Muslim countries such as Palestine who defend their lands and fight against the invasion of Israel, in Iraq and Afghanistan, and in other countries where Muslims are minorities such as in the Philippines and Myanmar.

All forms of news implant a certain consciousness in the minds of audiences. The media narratives, that individual groups have certain characteristics and behaviors, leads to an interpretation that they are against the superpower. This is then internalized by media audiences and is assumed to be a "natural reality." There is a transformation of meaning on the part of



Figure 2. The process of labelling Muslims as terrorists by international media
Source: Research Results, 2025

media audiences, or to put it in another way, audiences construct meaning in the process of receiving messages from the media. The social order presented by the media, including current values, becomes a reality; valid and coherent. In short, the audiences' perception of the world has been developed and often confirmed by the media. As the social constructionist scholar Leeds-Hurwitz (2009) contends, naming and labelling render what is named and labelled substantive and real.

Specifically, according to Moss (1999), television news is a cultural construct produced by a certain ideology because, as a product of the mass media, television news uses a certain frame in understanding the world, and that helps produce and distribute definitions of the world. Ideology here means a set of cultural assumptions that has become "the natural normality and is never questioned." The television program producer tends to select a set of assumptions (and pictures or images disseminating such assumptions) from so many formal and semi-formal versions about the world produced by many sources: the government, labor unions, telecommunication companies, and other organizations. The cultural assumptions offered by the media force the audiences to revise their own cultural assumptions and the response patterns they have held. The cultural recipes they have long maintained, or their "thinking-as-usual" (Schutz, 1971), to interpret their physical and social environment are modified.

Narratives or press reports that include labelling offer a new symbolic universe for audiences to define themselves, others, and their social environment. As Dahlgren (1999) maintains, according to the constructivist (phenomenological) perspective, social reality, at least in part, including language use, is a human product. Meaning is a construction, albeit sometimes vulnerable and complicated, and a primary way to produce meaning about the world is through narratives of the mass media. Events captured by the mass media, even in the form of straight news, and also in terms of its sequences and duration, are not actual events. The media narrative is a selection of events reproduced in an artificial form. It is the narrative that creates meaning in the minds of audiences.

Various labels towards certain groups of people created by powerful groups such as high-

ranking officials of the government and the military are the sources of social construction, which are in turn spread by the mass international media. These labels define new realities about events, individuals, or groups. This mechanism may also apply in the international context in which the powerful states such as the United States and Israel label other states or certain groups of people as “terrorists”. Although some experimental studies have indicated such a mechanism, albeit indirectly, further real-world (phenomenological) studies may be conducted to determine whether the proposition holds true.

CONCLUSION

Islam does not condone acts of terrorism. Terrorism is a complex phenomenon with multiple causes. Social realities such as terrorism cannot be reduced to simple explanations. One possible contributing factor is the tendency of Western powers—particularly the United States—to apply double standards in promoting democracy and human rights. These principles are at times instrumentalized to mask predominantly material interests, such as access to oil, as seen in the two Gulf Wars and the recent US military operation in Venezuela. Such practices are often disseminated and reinforced through certain Western and US news channels, journalistic routines, and even popular films. At the core of this double standard lies the practice of labelling groups that oppose Western interests as “terrorists.” This labelling is deeply problematic, as it may be resisted by the labelled groups through acts of violence, which are then interpreted as confirmation of the terrorist label itself, thereby creating a self-reinforcing cycle.

International media and journalists should therefore move beyond merely presenting psychological realities—namely the views and opinions of individuals in positions of authority within superpowers and their allies. More importantly, they should strive to present sociological realities grounded in field research and accounts from all parties directly involved, including the symbolic world and lived experiences of those labelled as “terrorists.” This represents the noble task of international media. Through fair, comprehensive, and phenomenological reporting, audiences are more likely to develop empathy for the victims of misrepresentation and misinterpretation. To support this goal, more journalistic training programs and Islamic studies courses should be offered by Western universities, particularly in the United States. These courses should be taught by professional, ethically committed journalism scholars and Muslim scholars with a deep and nuanced understanding of Islam. Most importantly, further phenomenological studies are needed to examine whether the labelling of Muslim groups by international media contributes to a self-fulfilling prophecy that ultimately exacerbates violence rather than preventing it.

Acknowledgement: No funding, so no acknowledgement

AI declaration: The author hereby declares that no significant use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) or ChatGPT tools utilized in the preparation, writing, analysis, or editing of this manuscript.

Ethical clearance: Since this is a desk research study, no ethical clearance is needed.

Data availability statement: All data are available

Conflict of interest: No conflict of interest

Funding: No funding

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