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# Combating Stereotypes: The Media's View versus Personal Experiences in Pakistan and the United States

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*Rizwan Ali Shinwari and Ken LeBlond*

**ABSTRACT** | Pakistan and US media often negatively portray the opposite side. The media's propagation of negative imagery that two friends (one American and one Pakistani) both consumed in their early lives did not prevent them from being curious and open-minded about each other's countries. This article addresses how one American and one Pakistani had their views shaped by American and Pakistani media and how their personal experiences contradicted those media images.

**KEYWORDS** | Pakistan-US relations, media, stereotypes, Pakistan-U.S. relations, War on Terror, US invasion in Afghanistan, impacts of war, Pakistani-American friendship, people-to-people interaction, cultural exchange programs

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The world has always been in conflict. The past few decades witnessed tumultuous situations in Muslim-majority countries, especially in the Middle East. In most circumstances, the United States played the role of a mediator. But in some places, it took part to save its interests. Media in both the United States and in the Muslim countries played a role in to present a bad image of the other side. This role achieved their goals, and one of its major impacts was that this process kept people of the United States and the Muslim countries away from each other. This article is written by two friends: an American and an indigenous Pakistani who met in a New England town in the United States. They shared their views and experiences of how their image of the other country was reshaped by American and Pakistani media and how their personal experiences contradicted those media images.

## Pakistani Author

Media is a pillar of a democratic society. Along with its other role of being a watchdog of governments, as well as many other sectors of society, it also plays a major part in shaping how media consumers see different parts of the world. Being an indigenous from a remote conflict-ridden tribal part in

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Pakistan, I have witnessed how the media has portrayed the United States and the American people. The media guided the perspectives of Pakistani people about the Americans, notwithstanding the fact that Pakistan and the United States had been allies in many adventures—most recently during the Afghan jihad and the post-9/11 War on Terror—and that the United States helped Pakistan in many instances. At one point, because of the media portrayal, every white person in the streets of Islamabad was suspected to be a US spy. I had also similar views, but that changed when I had a personal contact with the Americans in the United States.

The United States has been involved in military adventurism in different Muslim-majority countries, including Iraq and Afghanistan. The media reaction to these actions deeply affected its image in other Muslim countries. I still remember as a child in the 1990s, when the United States and allied forces attacked Iraq in response to the unprovoked invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein's regime. The national television channels in Pakistan, instead of reacting to the illegal invasion of a Muslim country, were instead showing how US forces "attacked" a Muslim country. I remembered my mother told me that "America attacked a Muslim country. America is a bad country." Although my mother was not a political person, she was living in a town that is hundreds of miles far away from the center of Pakistan. But she and people like her got this image of America from the media. This whole incident and its media portrayal left deep footmarks in the mind of Muslims, especially Pakistanis, for a very long time.

I am from a tribal region in Pakistan that is only a few miles away from the Afghanistan border. After the unfortunate 9/11 attacks thousands of miles away in the United States, people in my village could have never imagined the decades-long and far-reaching implication of this attack and how it would affect every walk of life there. A few days after the 9/11 attacks, the United States started air strikes on the Taliban strongholds in Afghanistan. After the inevitable US invasion, the collapse of the Taliban government was followed by Taliban infiltration into the bordering tribal areas in Pakistan, including my hometown.

During this phase of engagement in Afghanistan, the US image was further reshaped by the media in Pakistan, which led to a widespread hatred against the United States. Of course, the Afghanistan War was a decision by the US military and political elites with little involvement of the common American people. But the American people as a whole were thus seen as anti-Muslim, and Pakistanis thought it was a clash of civilizations in which a Christian state strived to annihilate Muslims states, particularly Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The US air strikes on the Taliban's hideouts in the mountains adjacent to my town was the worst nightmare for us. The impacts of heavy bombs were

so strong that it would jolt the earth and sometimes break windows in my home. Because our houses are made of concrete, we would rush out of our rooms in the fear that the concrete ceiling would fall on us. The psychological impacts of those bombs are unimaginable for most Americans.

The impacts of the US war in Afghanistan in my area were so profound that, to a higher degree, it changed the political status, social infrastructure, and economic landscape of the tribal belt. The invasion of Afghanistan and the fall of Taliban started a decade-and-a-half-long era of destruction in Pakistan via a vicious cycle of violence by the Taliban fighters, US drones strikes, and the Pakistani security agencies that engulfed thousands of local people, including the deaths of tribal leaders and elders. Most of the elders were killed by the insurgents and their demise created an intergenerational leadership gap, since they were leading the society. In the tribal customs, in most circumstances, elders are chosen based on their age, experience, leadership skills, and the general acceptability in the masses they represent. This was probably the first time in the history of tribal customs that so many elders were killed by the religious insurgents.

I am a moderate practicing Muslim and I used to go to the religious educational institutions because of a custom in my area that after age seven children get preliminary religious education. Since my family was moderately religious, I had access to television and other media electronic devices. This accessibility provided me an opportunity to watch Hollywood movies as a child. Previously, I had a negative image of the United States as an attacker of Muslim countries. But through my access to family-oriented American movies, I saw the other side. This raised my curiosity and convinced me to study more about the United States and its people.

After completing high school, I studied American history side-by-side with a major of economics. It helped me change my worldview of the United States, and particularly, its people. I realized that the American people are the best in the world. My perception was further transformed into a personal reality when I got an opportunity from the US government to visit on a short academic fellowship. I made many friends during that program. For educational purposes only, I also participated in voluntary political campaigns for some statewide candidates. I first met the governor of Tennessee during his campaign for re-election and I later did telephone campaigns for the governor of Virginia. All these events exposed me directly to the American society and common people. My personal experiences in the United States were quite different than what I had watched previously on my television back in Pakistan. For example, the anti-US media in the Muslim world portrayed America as a barbaric aggressor, showing images of how the US cruise missiles and airstrikes hitting civilian targets. In this entire campaign, the only US image presented

was of its military adventures. When I came to the United States, my personal contact with people in the United States changed. The US society, in general, is the most stable one in the world, and there are proper rights for everything, including the human rights, irrespective of caste, color, creed, or nationality.

After the Tennessee fellowship, I was lucky to win another longer-term fellowship from the Pakistan government to study at an American university in Massachusetts. This time, I was more enthusiastic about staying closer to the American people, politics, and society. At nearly the same time I started this second fellowship, some events and tragedies that happened to me that brought me closer to the people and helped me to holistically study American systems, including its society, healthcare industry, and education. I was so involved in these systems that my American professor even told me "Since you have been so heavily engaged in so many American institutions, it's made you more American than we are!" During that difficult time, my American friends and families helped me in my medical, educational, and logistical needs. Some of my friends helped me understand the American society and its politics, including the one about racism. By that point, the views I had ten to fifteen years before about the United States had now been totally changed. I met my friend-cum-mentor and this article's cowriter during my current fellowship. He was the first guy who welcomed me here. He helped me in my English writing and research. He and a few other friends also brought me even closer to American society.

The purpose of this article is not to discuss the US wars, but to discuss the immediate and ultimate reactions from the media in sharing the US image in the Muslim world. This essay also aims to minimize the gap of misunderstanding between my people and the Americans. I believe views like these can help policymakers to evaluate the implications and unforeseen destruction of such unnecessary military adventurism in other countries, particularly Muslim countries.

## **American Author**

I was eight years old when the Soviet war in Afghanistan started. I was a young adult when it ended and the Iron Curtain crashed down shortly after. As a young adult, I would've struggled to find Afghanistan or Pakistan on a world map.

Until recently, Pakistan had never held my interest. What I knew about Pakistan was the chaos and instability I read about or watched in the media. I was born in and spent the first thirty years of my life in the US Midwest.

In many ways it was (and still is) insulated from an entire world of international events, trends, and threats. I think I understood this insulation at an early age and wanted to counteract it by reading the newspaper every day.

Pakistan was a country that was only in my local news when violence or other instability occurred. At the time, I had never encountered Pakistanis either in high school or at the large public university I attended, also in the Midwest. As I moved through my early adulthood and into my thirties, my international travel experiences mounted with visits to Central America, Europe, and Australia. My travel taught me not only how other people lived, but also what I learned through the media was just a thin slice of reality.

Starting in the years of my young adult life into middle age, the United States and international media told slightly differing versions of the same story about Pakistan: it suffered from ongoing instability. It was also bordered by its enemy India and also by war-torn Afghanistan, international pariah Iran, and Communist China. I also learned through news reports that contradictions also seemed to be the norm with Pakistan. For example, although Pakistan was an ally to the United States in the War on Terror, it was also the same place where Osama bin Laden was living when he was killed. I further learned that while the Pakistan government was simultaneously assisting the United States in fighting the Afghan Taliban, their secret police also supported the Taliban. The United States and international media fed on these contradictions to portray Pakistan in this unstable image. Never once did I (or anyone else) see a media headline that approximated, "Pakistan was peaceful today," because such news will not counter the theme of Pakistani instability nor sell newspapers or increase television viewing ratings.

In my current job, I am fortunate to have the opportunity to meet groups of visiting college students, professors, and professionals from all over Pakistan. The first year I was around these groups, I wasn't sure what to make of Pakistani people, given what I had understood about them through the media. The Pakistanis were actually both very polite to me and curious about my American life. I tried to match their curiosity and warmth with my own questions about them. Later, I had many of them to my house for meals and discussion. Although many of them discussed how much fun it was to be in the United States, they had all come with fears about the presumed Islamophobic culture in the United States. In our time together, it was my mission to not only dissuade them of their fears, but to also lessen my suspicion of them. I believe they left the United States with a more balanced view of who Americans actually are. I also had a much more nuanced view of their country.

Many of these visitors asked me if I'd ever been to Pakistan (which I hadn't) and immediately invited me to come. Initially, I wasn't sure if these



were just acts of simple politeness or serious invitations. After dozens of these invitations, I did take them seriously!

After spending so much time with these new friends and after they went back home, I came to be very interested in learning more about Pakistan and South Asia. I then started to read about Pakistan's history, culture, and current issues, as well as Islam. Much like I devoured the news about entire world when I was a young person, I now devoured information about Pakistan. Its complexity jumped from the pages and easily replaced the repeated images and themes I'd seen in the media. I've since read over forty books about Pakistan from both domestic and foreign authors. My Pakistani friends now say that I know more about their country than they do.

I was thrilled to finally go to Pakistan in 2017 and return in 2019. It was then that I experienced the legendary hospitality of Pakistanis in their homeland. Additionally, and on multiple occasions, strangers would approach me and ask where I was from. All these times they would first guess the United Kingdom or Germany. They were all happily surprised to hear that I was American. However, many would then ask, "Why are you here? I thought Americans hated us!" This made me sad, but I understood. They too had been deeply affected by the news about the United States, much like I had been affected by news about Pakistan.

I'm still curious about Pakistan and its people and I deeply wish to return. While many of my friends say that I know more about Pakistan than they do, I have only started to understand a place that I've misunderstood for most of my life.

**KEN LEBLOND** is a marketing professional in Amherst, Massachusetts. He received his master's in public administration from the University of Washington in Seattle, Washington, and his bachelor's in sociology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

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