No Laughing Matter: Post–September 11 Political Cartoons in Arab/Muslim Newspapers

MATTHEW DIAMOND

This section on political cartoons has been added to this special issue of Political Communication at the suggestion of the journal editor, David Paletz, because we think political cartoons are an important mode of expression in the Arab/Muslim world that the journal’s readers will find enlightening. These cartoons provide alternative perspectives to the events of September 11 that are not presented in any of the articles in this issue or widely seen in the U.S. media.

We found these cartoons by searching newspapers from the Arab/Muslim world in Duke University’s Perkins Library and accessing the Internet for on-line newspapers and cartoon Web sites, such as the collection of Arab cartoons maintained at http://www.arabia.com and Daryl Cagle’s collection of political cartoons at http://www.slate.com. We were also very fortunate to receive quite a few cartoons taken from other newspapers by the editor of this special issue, Kai Hafez. We had several cartoons with extensive or important non-English text translated for us by appropriate Duke faculty.

From this large group of cartoons, the editorial staff–David Paletz, Teresa Chung, and myself–culled the cartoons presented here according to several criteria aimed at maximizing the representative nature of this selection. First, we wanted cartoons that were widely circulated, so we focused primarily on newspaper cartoons. Second, we wanted as wide a distribution across countries as possible, since publications from different countries might have different views or concerns. We have included cartoons published in Egypt’s Al-Ahram newspaper, Pakistan’s Dawn and Chouk, Iran’s Nowrooz Daily and Iran News, Saudi Arabia’s Al-hayat (based in London) and Arab News, as well as cartoons identified by arabia.com as being published in Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine. Last, we chose those cartoons that we thought expressed their points powerfully.

Studying Political Cartoons

The dramatic terrorist assault on the United States on September 11, 2001, and the subsequent American response led many, especially Americans, in their traumatic shock, to share the sentiments expressed by Boston Globe columnist Ellen Goodman (2002): “On Sept. 11, we said, everything changed. Safety was shattered. Irony was dead. Materialism was trivial. Comedy was an inappropriate effect” (p. D7). This “collective wisdom” regarding the urge to silence irony and comedy as forms of discourse unwisely
ignored the deluge of political cartoons around the world, including Arab/Muslim countries, which gave voice to irony and comedy (and other forms of discourse) regarding the events of September 11 and their aftermath.

Political cartoons often get short shrift in the academy. No discipline has truly embraced the study of political cartoons, yet at the nexus between several disciplines there is a small academic literature on political cartoons (De Sousa, 1981, and 1984; De Sousa & Medhurst, 1982; Edwards, 1992, 1997; Gamson & Stuart, 1992; Hess & Kaplan, 1975; Medhurst & Benson, 1984; Paletz, 2002). Though some have located political cartoons as a subcategory of political humor or of political satire, both of these designations seem too narrow, since political cartoons can also be decidedly unfunny or nonsatirical. To be sure, humor and satire, comedy and irony are all frequent elements of political cartoons, but they are not necessary ones.

If political cartoons are to be located anywhere, it would be as a subclass of political symbols. The study of political symbols, broadly drawn, bridges political science, sociology, and anthropology and has a fairly well developed literature dealing with a number of subcategories as varied as the political aspects of myth (Cassirer, 1946; Flood, 1996); ritual (Aronoff, 1977; Kertzer, 1988); rites (Wilentz, 1984); signs (Deshen, 1976); names (Burke, 1969); ceremonies (Aronoff, 1989); memorials (Azaryahu, 1995); holidays (Liebman & Don-Yehiya, 1983; Shamgar-Handelman & Handelman, 1986); maps, museums, and censuses (Anderson, 1991); flags (Firth, 1973); religious doctrine (Asad, 1993; Kopelowitz & Diamond, 1998); “political spectacles” (Edelman, 1964, 1988); and election ephemera (Herszog, 1987). All of these various approaches recognize that symbolic constructs contribute to the creation and contestation of meaning within a given political context of power relations. As Paletz asserts about political humor (Paletz, 2002), these symbolic constructs can affect the political context in a broad spectrum of ways, from supporting the prevailing pattern of authority and power relations to undermining or subverting it. Political cartoons are no exception. How, then, to analyze and understand them?

Elder and Cobb (1983) proposed placing the emphasis on distinguishing between political and nonpolitical symbols on the basis of their symbolic content. Drawing from Easton and from Almond and Verba, they suggest that “the typology of symbols we distill from them includes 1) symbols of the political community; 2) symbols associated with regime norms, structures and roles; and 3) situational symbols relating to a) current authorities, b) non-governmental political actors, and c) policies and policy issues” (p. 36). A political cartoon is a specific type of political symbol, a drawn image that may include text within the image. All of the cartoons in this selection are political cartoons, which meet at least one of Elder and Cobb’s criteria. However, this essay will not be concerned with categorizing them according to this typology, because the typology does not, by itself, tell us what these cartoons mean.

Though political symbols, including political cartoons, refer to uniquely political content (as per the Elder and Cobb typology), with regard to their meaning they share certain critical properties of symbols more generally. David Kertzer (1988) notes that “three properties of symbols are especially important—condensation of meaning, multivocality, and ambiguity” (p. 11). Abner Cohen (1979) concurs: “It is the very essence and potency of symbols that they are ambiguous, referring to different meanings, and are not given to precise definition” (p. 87). It is easy to see that these properties are no less important for political cartoons. Indeed, there is a certain built-in conflict here, since we deliberately tried to pick cartoons that expressed clear and unambiguous points. Moreover, this conflict between these properties of symbols and our desire to overcome
them directs us toward the fundamental significance of hermeneutical strategies for conducting research on political cartoons.

Umberto Eco (1994) suggests that there are three types of interpretation strategies—author oriented, reader oriented, and text oriented:

The classical debate aimed at finding in a text either a) what its author intended to say, or b) what the text says independently of the intentions of its author. Only after accepting the second horn of the dilemma can one ask whether what is found is (i) what the text says by virtue of its textual coherence and of an original underlying signification system or (ii) what the addressees found in it by virtue of their own systems of expectations. (p. 51)

Research on political cartoons starts from the phenomenon of the cartoon, not from the methodology. Nevertheless, each of these three hermeneutical strategies leads to different analytical frameworks in which political cartoons might be examined. An author-oriented strategy would point toward psychological and historical analyses of the cartoonist and his or her historical context, while a reader-oriented strategy would point toward sociological and public opinion analyses of cartoon readers (see De Sousa & Medhurst, 1982). Finally, a text-oriented strategy would point toward semiotic analysis of the text itself. Among political cartoon researchers, a good example of this type of strategy is Janis Edwards’s (1997) emphasis on the narrativity of political cartoons. She writes that political cartoons “exhibit the features of narrative. Cartoons consist of characters, settings and plot, although not all cartoons express all features to the same degree. Three basic meaning strategies of cartoons—characterizations, situations, and narrations—and the invention means that enliven those meaning strategies—visual metaphor, motif, oppositions, and other references—supplement the elements of narrative” (p. 10). As she adds, not every cartoon contains all of these elements, but it is a kind of “tool kit” for constructing meaning.

In this essay, I will try to follow a text-oriented hermeneutical strategy to analyze this selection of political cartoons regarding the events of September 11 and their aftermath. The cartoons vary in their ease of interpretation, but in all cases some degree of polysemy is unavoidable. Readers are welcome to suggest alternate meanings where they feel I have missed the mark.

We have categorized these political cartoons thematically as follows: the events of September 11 (with emphasis upon the World Trade Center site), Osama bin Laden, and the U.S. domestic response; the role of the media; Pakistani involvement in the war in Afghanistan; the conduct of the war in Afghanistan; the hunt for bin Laden; the fate of Afghanistan; and the next move in the U.S. “War on Terror.”

**September 11, Osama bin Laden, and U.S. Domestic Response**

As might have been expected, in the first days after September 11, many political cartoons focused on the World Trade Center disaster scene, the glorification or demonization of Osama bin Laden, and the U.S. domestic response to terrorism. These cartoons describe the U.S. as a great financial and commercial power now trying to balance liberty with security but often doing so incompetently, ignorantly, or naively. A frequent motif used is that appearances are deceptive, and that there is an esoteric truth or power hidden behind the appearance. This motif appears often with political actors shown as puppets of the real powers, or as wearing costumes, masks, or disguises.
Gomaa’s cartoon in the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram* shows the World Trade Center site with smoke billowing from the two towers. Lady Liberty is covering her mouth, perhaps coughing or gagging on the smoke from the towers. However, what is most arresting about Gomaa’s image is his labeling of the twin towers—one is labeled “CIA” and the other “FBI.” These labels challenge the identification of the site with American financial power and virility as symbolized by the double phallus of the World Trade Center. By a traditional American reading, the juxtaposition of the World Trade Center with the Statue of Liberty, symbolizing liberty and the welcoming of immigrants, implies the interdependence of America’s financial strength with liberty and immigration. Gomaa’s labels subvert this understanding and substitute instead the CIA and the FBI as the twin towers of American power. Liberty now is interdependent with security, not free-market capitalism, and the security services have replaced trade as the symbolic projection of American power in the world. Another possible meaning is that this was an attack on the CIA and FBI, both upon their credibility and upon any facilities they had in the two buildings.

The identification of Osama bin Laden as the mastermind of the terrorist attacks made him a natural subject for many cartoons, of which two are included here. The first, by Lebanese cartoonist Stavro, depicts Osama as USA-ma bin Laden and tries to identify those elements that would constitute an “American-style” bin Laden. On one reading, apparently the difference between Osama and USA-ma bin Laden is only on the superficial level of style. Change bin Laden’s outward appearance and he is just like any American—a clear contestation of attempts to demonize bin Laden. Moreover, though the cartoon is ostensibly about bin Laden, Stavro takes the opportunity to expound the essential elements of American-ness as seen from Lebanon: a diet of Coke, burgers, and Marlboro cigarettes and a wardrobe of T-shirt (with a dollar sign logo) and jeans, boots and cap, a Rolex watch, and of course, no outfit would be complete without an M-16. On another reading, this cartoon might indicate instead the ability of bin Laden and his followers to adopt American mores as a disguise, hiding themselves in plain sight.

Though Stavro challenges the demonization of bin Laden, bin Laden did not receive universal acclaim and sympathy in the Arab/Muslim world. In the cartoon by Iranian cartoonist Touka Nayestani of the Iranian *Nowrooz Daily*, bin Laden is portrayed as a
diabolical Grim Reaper/Death armed with an enormous scythe for cutting down lives and with a fiendishly smiling countenance. Just as Superman was portrayed pulling open his shirt to reveal the “S” logo beneath, bin Laden is shown here pulling apart his robes to reveal an “I Love NY” tourist T-shirt. This is also a jolting comparison of bin Laden to Superman, and of death/killing to love, and adds to the demonization of bin Laden as a supernatural killer with inhuman power. Moreover, the fact that bin Laden is hiding one costume under another is an example of the deceptive appearances motif.

Two cartoons deal specifically with how the U.S. is responding to the threat and reality of nonconventional terrorism, especially the anthrax attacks and possible nuclear...
terrorism. In the first cartoon, Fathi Abu al-’Izz presented the anthrax theme in Egypt’s *Al-Ahram* by showing Lady Liberty wearing a gas mask. Symbolically, liberty must hide behind a protective security mask in the face of bioterror.

In the second cartoon, which appeared in Pakistan’s *Dawn* newspaper, the cartoonist Stephff continues the theme of the threat of nonconventional weapons while also criticizing airport security. Terror, dressed as Death/Grim Reaper, is shown eschewing the razor blade weapon used on September 11 for a nuclear suitcase bomb at an airport security checkpoint. The security guard manning the checkpoint is either bored, incompetent, or so obsessed with preventing razor-blade type weapons from passing through...
that he clears the nuclear weapon. Perhaps the presence of radiation detecting equipment at security checkpoints for New York’s most recent New Year’s Eve celebration in Times Square (Phial, 2002) shows that U.S. security officials have recognized Stephff’s point as a pertinent warning.

The Role of the Media

Two of our cartoons dealt directly with the role of the media. They show media coverage of the war in Afghanistan to be an entertainment consumer commodity blinding viewers to the world around them. War coverage also dominates the media focus and agenda to the exclusion of other less gory news items.

The first cartoon by Gomaa from Egypt’s Al-Ahram tackles the themes of media coverage of the war in Afghanistan and American materialist complacency. America, as an obese Uncle Sam, sits comfortably in a recliner watching the war on TV (American bombers attacking in Afghanistan) while drinking soda and eating hamburgers—culinary symbols of American materialist culture. The war is just another commodified fast-food entertainment. Meanwhile, Uncle Sam is blissfully ignorant of the bin Laden figure skulking behind his chair. The implicit faith in fast-food capitalism renders America blind to ideologically motivated threats.

The second cartoon, from Pakistan’s Dawn, depicts the TV media as obsessed and single-minded about war coverage. Rather than film a live Pakistani family releasing doves of peace right behind him, the cameraman, who is oddly tied to his camera, has it firmly pointed in the opposite direction. He is determined to focus solely on a poster of bin Laden attached to the camera so that no other subject can come into view.

Pakistani Involvement in the War in Afghanistan

The complex nature of Pakistan’s involvement in the war in Afghanistan is represented by the next five cartoons—four from Dawn and one from the Arab News. On the one
hand, Pakistan has been competing with Iran for influence in Afghan politics through various proxies, including the Taliban. However, the new relationship with the U.S. required Pakistan to turn against some of its former allies. At the same time, the Pakistani security state is negotiating its own religious and cultural identity, between the Islamic fundamentalism of the Taliban and the Western secularism of its U.S. friends, and is afraid of the destabilizing effects that each might have upon the military regime.

The first cartoon from *Dawn* is one of the few that does not include the U.S. It uses the puppetry motif to illustrate the complex political triangle of Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan. Pakistan and Iran are shown competing with each other as they pull the strings of their Afghan puppet proxies.
Next, George W. Bush and Pervez Musharraf illustrate the saying about mutual aid, “you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours,” by literally scratching each other’s back. However, the word “scratch” is written with a dollar sign replacing the “s,” signifying that Pakistan is helping the U.S. for financial remuneration rather than out of a sense of shared values or interests.

The relationship between the security services of the U.S. and Pakistan—the FBI and the ISI, respectively—is depicted in the next cartoon. The picture is of an ISI agent leading an FBI agent. They are dressed similarly, and both wear dark glasses—perhaps the blind leading the blind in circles. Additionally, the cartoon shows the asymmetry in power between the U.S. and Pakistan by portraying the ISI agent as a foot soldier pulling the animal upon which the FBI agent rides, relaxed, with a hot drink.
George W. Bush is drawn as a barber in the last cartoon from *Dawn*. He is shown shaving off the beard of a person who may be Pervez Musharraf or may simply be a generic Pakistani or Afghan. The act of shaving a beard symbolizes secularization in defiance of Islamic strictures regarding beard-shaving, closely enforced by the Taliban regime in Afghanistan as well as in Islamic communities in Pakistan. Bush is given the credit (or the blame) here for the regional wave of beard-shaving and relaxation of religious observance that followed the defeat of the Taliban regime. It is not clear, however, from the cartoon whether this is portrayed as a positive event or as the United States forcing Muslims, including Musharraf, to abandon or to remove elements of their religious identity. It may also symbolize emasculation.

Finally, Kahil’s cartoon in the Saudi newspaper, the *Arab News*, depicts Pakistan as a heavily perspiring gambler at a roulette table. The croupier, representing the U.S. with a “stars and bars” cuff, declares Pakistan a winner and pushes over the winnings. In place of poker chips, the winnings are Taliban soldiers. Pakistan, which had bet on controlling Afghanistan with Taliban proxies, now is faced with these soldiers entering Pakistan and destabilizing the Musharraf regime: hence the fearful perspiration and the raised hand rejecting the “winnings.”

**Conduct of the War in Afghanistan**

Our largest group of cartoons is concerned with the conduct of the war in Afghanistan, its victims, and the power asymmetry between the U.S. and the Arab/Muslim world as played out on the Afghan battlefield. The U.S. is often portrayed as a cowboy, a giant, or an oversized bomber or bomb, all extremely powerful, dominating, and indiscriminate in the application of that power. Moreover, time and time again, across countries
and papers, these cartoons posit the moral equivalence of the September 11 attacks and the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan.

Enormous twin missiles dwarfing the Statue of Liberty, in Nik Kowsar’s cartoon from the Iran News, have replaced the twin towers of the World Trade Center. George W. Bush, in cowboy regalia, is lighting the detonation cord for the missiles, which are destined for the Taliban, while Lady Liberty looks on in awe. The U.S. military might is being set in motion by the cowboy president while the financial center smolders and liberty can only look on. In Touka Nayestani’s cartoon (bottom left) from the Iranian paper Nowrooz, the U.S. is a giant so large that its body extends into the clouds and its foot alone is the size of dozens of Afghans. This crowd of Afghans, in traditional garb, has Osama bin Laden somewhere in its midst, but all are about to be crushed by the gigantic U.S. foot trying to stamp out bin Laden. Shahid’s cartoon (bottom right) from the Pakistani paper Chowk continues this theme, suggesting that in its zeal to get bin Laden, the U.S. is oblivious to world suffering. In his cartoon, mushroom cloud explo-
sions are occurring around the world, but the president is only concerned that bin Laden be captured without U.S. casualties.

The next three cartoons are from the London-based Saudi newspaper Al-hayat. All three equate the U.S. bombing in Afghanistan with terrorism. In the first one, an oversized bomb is careening toward a frightened group of Afghans in civilian dress. The label on the bomb—“WARNING! Unable to distinguish between civilians and combatants”—suggests that the U.S. bombing can claim no more legitimacy and moral superiority than the “terrorism” it claims to fight.

The second cartoon from Al-hayat shows the twin towers of the World Trade Center transformed to twin towers of skulls and relocated to Afghanistan. This once again proposes the moral equation between the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan.

Finally, the third cartoon from Al-hayat is even more challenging to the claims of the American government. Here a moral equivalence is drawn between the U.S. bombing in Afghanistan (drawn as a U.S. bomber dropping bombs on a mountain region labeled “Afghanistan”) and the anthrax attack on the U.S. (drawn as a large envelope...
raining down spores on a skyscraper city labeled “the United States”). If the two are morally equivalent, then either they are both illegitimate (biological warfare and the U.S. bombing campaign in Afghanistan) or both legitimate forms of warfare.

The comparison of U.S. and Afghan suffering is also the theme in the first Osama Qasem cartoon from Egypt’s Al-Ahram. He juxtaposes the wreckage of the World Trade Center and a broken jet fuselage with a scene of an Afghan (refugee?) tent camp and spent U.S. bomb casing. This equates the suffering of the September 11 victims with the suffering of Afghans.
In his second cartoon, Osama Qasem critiques the conduct of America’s war in Afghanistan. He depicts an Afghan mother holding a baby, surrounded by an endless stream of wailing, starving babies. Upon seeing a U.S. plane in the sky, the mother hopes it will drop food, and the baby hopes for toys. But their hopes are dashed because the plane is dropping coffins. Instead of supplying the Afghans with what they need and hope for, the U.S. is portrayed as just a purveyor of death.

The last cartoon in the selection that deals primarily with the conduct of the U.S. war in Afghanistan is Kahil’s cartoon from the Saudi newspaper, the *Arab News*. Two Afghans are stabbing each other with bayonets while a smiling American soldier rests above it all on a hammock attached to the rival rifle butts, tossing down bombs on the Afghans at his leisure. The U.S. is shown letting the Afghans of both sides bear the burden of war while it tries to maintain a comfortable distance from the violence. This comfort is possible only through the support of the warring factions whose rifle butts hold up the U.S. hammock.

**The Hunt for bin Laden**

As the war progressed, attention turned increasingly to the U.S. hunt for Osama bin Laden. Three of our cartoons broached this subject and used it as an opportunity to
show that despite its technological and military superiority, the U.S. is incompetent, prejudicially blinded, or quixotically seeking a mythical bin Laden.

The first cartoon, from *Al-hayat*, shows the Al Qaeda forces outsmartering the U.S. forces despite the latter’s technological advantage. The U.S. forces are searching a cave and using an advanced power drill to bore through the rock while beneath them the Al Qaeda forces escape in the opposite direction using only a pickaxe to chip away at the rock. The U.S. cannot bring its search to a competent conclusion.

Similarly, the next cartoon from *Al-Ahram* shows a U.S. Special Forces soldier in full camouflage and face paint looking baffled and confused as he comes across a group of Afghan men. He is unable to pick out bin Laden because (to him) all Afghans look alike. What prevents him from discerning bin Laden—is it his incompetence, his lack of comprehension, or prejudice?

The Jordanian cartoonist Jafari has a different take on the hunt for bin Laden. He shows a U.S. soldier in full and extensive battle gear, including hi-tech vision and
communication equipment, fruitlessly trekking across the desert. In this cartoon, Bin Laden can never be reached since he is just a mirage, an American social construction of an ideal enemy.

The Fate of Afghanistan

With the defeat of the Taliban, Afghanistan’s fate became a salient political issue, and four of our cartoons address it and the post-Taliban future of Afghanistan. These cartoons portray the Afghan people as victims of Bush and bin Laden, of their own internal disunity and conflict, of all of the previous regimes, of the neighboring states jockeying to protect their own interests, and even of the weakness of the United Nations.

Nik Kowsar’s cartoon from the Iran News shows George W. Bush in cowboy garb collaborating with Osama bin Laden to crucify the Afghan people. The Afghan people are thus the true victims, suffering and dying for the sins of both Bush and bin Laden. We see
once again the claim made for the moral equivalence between the U.S. and bin Laden. Furthermore, although there are many Christian Arabs, Kowsar’s use of Christian imagery is quite unusual. Since this was published in an English-language Iranian paper, perhaps he had foreign audiences in mind for whom this imagery would resonate strongly.

The Jordanian cartoonist, Rasmy, cautions against expecting too much from the United States’ preferred outcome in Afghanistan. He shows the arm of the U.S. holding up the arm of an Afghan making the victory sign with his fingers. However, the Afghan victor, labeled “Afghan unity,” is dead, a mere skeleton. The U.S. can come in from the outside and try to declare a victor in Afghan internal politics, but even the long arm of the U.S. cannot revive Afghan unity.

Two cartoons from Stephff also deal with the future of Afghanistan. In the first, an average Afghan is shown adjusting to a new regime by painting his turban to reflect the color of the ruling authority. There are no qualms about changing loyalties; indeed, he has many paint cans from the many previous regimes (Taliban black, Soviet red, etc.). He is currently painting his turban “United Nations blue,” but the caption reflects his nervousness about associating with the UN, since this “can give you strong headaches.”
This might reflect the difficulty encountered by the UN standing between combatants, or it might reflect an evaluation of the UN’s limited capacity for governance. In either case, associating too closely with the UN might cause problems.

Stephff elaborates further about the UN’s role in post-Taliban Afghanistan in the next cartoon. Here he portrays the UN as a soccer referee/timekeeper at the Bonn conference to determine the post-Taliban political arrangements for Afghanistan. The various Afghan leaders are hurriedly carving out pieces of Afghanistan (represented by the very table at which they are meeting) for themselves before the UN referee blows the whistle to end the “game.”

The U.S. and the World—The Next Move

Our last four cartoons deal with the relationship of the U.S. and the world, particularly the Arab/Muslim countries, in anticipation of the next move by the U.S. in its “War on Terror.” These cartoons share a frustration with the direction of U.S. foreign policy. They show a dominating U.S. controlling the world and determined to victimize Arab/Muslim states, whether Iraq or other targets. One shifts the blame away from the U.S., depicting the U.S. as being manipulated by Jews. In all of these cartoons, there does not appear to be anything the Arab/Muslim world can do to escape its fate.

The first of these cartoons is a final selection from Stephff. In the left foreground is a very large image of George W. Bush, many times larger than the tiny Sadaam Hussein figure in the right background. The size discrepancy suggests a parallel to the
power relations between them as well. Bush pontificates to Hussein that “you are either with the bad guys or against the good guys!!!” With that one sentence, Stephff casts Bush as illogical and portrays Sadaam Hussein as the victim of a Kafkaesque U.S. determination to eliminate his regime. Neither of the options Bush gives him would even permit Hussein to acquiesce to U.S. demands.

Palestinian cartoonist Omayya depicts the U.S. as a slaughterer of innocent sheep, with the sheep labeled as Arab and Islamic countries. Having slaughtered the Iraq sheep and the Afghanistan sheep, the U.S. now turns its eye and its bloody knife toward the rest of the Arab/Muslim world. Omayya presents the U.S. as having the power and weaponry to slaughter Arabs/Muslims at will, as having done so in the recent past, and as having a desire to do so in the immediate future. All that remains is to choose the next victim.

Where Omayya’s cartoon shows the U.S. choosing its next victim, Gomaa’s cartoon from Al-Ahram suggests that there is a hidden power controlling the dumb and brutal monster that is the U.S. In the cartoon the large and powerful clenched-fisted U.S. is holding a bloody caveman club (the blood is labeled “Afghanistan”) in one hand while receiving instructions in his ear (“... then Iraq, Hizbullah, Hamas and ...”) from a Nazi-style anti-Semitic caricature of a tiny hook-nosed ultra-Orthodox Jew. The cartoon relies on the assumption that Iraq, Hizbullah, and Hamas are not actually terrorist states/organizations, but the unfortunate victims of a Jewish cabal controlling U.S. power. This is not a critique of certain Israeli policies or even a denial of Israel’s right to exist, but an assault on Jews as using the crudest genocide-justifying stereotypes. In examining the many cartoons for this essay, I found that anti-Semitism of the sort displayed in this cartoon is common in Arab/Muslim political cartoons, even in those countries allied with the U.S. and at peace with Israel.
The final cartoon is by Fathi Abu al-‘Izz in Al-Ahram. Once again the U.S. is shown as a cowboy straddling the globe in a stars and bars saddle. The globe is under the control/domination of the U.S. cowboy. In a reversal of the previous cartoon, the anti-Semitic element in this cartoon—the Jewish-star spurs—is an instrument of the U.S. The U.S. uses the spurs—Jews—as its instrument to provoke, spur, and wound the world.

Conclusion

Political cartoons are an important mode of communication worthy of increased academic attention. They are a mode of communication widely used not only in the West, but in the Arab/Muslim world as well. Though they often utilize humor, satire, or irony to advance their narratives, they are not limited to these modes of discourse. Nor are they limited topically to “laughing matters”—they can and do portray narratives as serious as the events of September 11 and their aftermath. These cartoons provide alternative perspectives at a glance because they are visual and vivid and often seem to communicate a clear or obvious message. However, the inherent possibilities for ambiguity and polysemy force us to think seriously about our hermeneutical strategies when studying political cartoons. Each of the three strategies suggested by Eco leads the study of political cartoons in a different direction.

In this case, a text-oriented hermeneutical strategy allowed us to analyze political cartoons from Arab/Muslim newspapers regarding the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and their aftermath. Close attention to the cartoons themselves reveals a number of frequent themes and motifs. These include description of the events of September 11 and the World Trade Center site; glorification or demonization of Osama bin Laden; and use of costumes, masks, and puppets to imply esoteric truth or power. The cartoons deal with the threat of nonconventional weapons and possible justifications for their use, comment upon the role of the media in producing war as an entertainment commodity to the exclusion of other newsworthy stories, and allude to the complex role of Pakistan. They also depict the U.S. as a physically large and powerful cowboy, a giant, or a well-
equipped (but often stupid, blind, or misled) soldier; draw a moral equivalence between the war in Afghanistan and terrorist attacks, the suffering of the U.S. victims of September 11 and that of the Afghan victims of the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan; and ridicule U.S. incompetence in its hunt for bin Laden. Finally, they evince concern over the carving up of a disunited Afghanistan, fear of the next move in the U.S. “War on Terror,” and resentment of the focus on Arab/Muslim targets.

References


