

# Military Orientalism: Representations of Oriental Enemies in Late Modern War.

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**Abstract:** *The present article explores, based on the novel concept of military Orientalism, how Western representations of Oriental enemies alter the strategy and decision making process. Orientalist representations and prejudices about Oriental adversaries are indeed invariably distorted by epistemological and ontological considerations that are at the heart of Orientalism. Besides, because of the intrinsically interested and ethnocentric character of military strategy, it involves desire and prejudice which unavoidably affect the perception of reality, and therefore, cannot be fully objective to deliver accurate estimates and adequate courses of action. When Western militaries fail to defeat perceivably 'inferior,' 'irrational,' 'weak' and 'uncivilized' Oriental opponents as anticipated, there ensue consequences in terms of identity politics.*

## 1. Introduction

At a time Western military pride themselves on being at the edge of science, technology and organization, it is very edifying to explore how representations of oriental enemies alter rather adversely Western strategy and decision making process. In general, representations about an external reality are invariably distorted by epistemological and ontological considerations which are at the heart of Orientalism. As far as war is concerned, civilian and military leadership just like any other reflecting agents may "attempt to reach a level of relative freedom from ... brute, everyday reality, but they can never quite escape or ignore their involvement as human subjects in their own circumstances" [1]. The specific character of the war-making institution further complicates the perception of its members. Indeed, the military strategist "as practitioner is not a disinterested scholar striving to liberate empathetic meaning for the general understanding of [a military situation]; rather he or she is obliged by the very nature of their job, to seek national military advantage or at least to minimize the unavoidable military disadvantage" [2]. In fact, because of the intrinsically interested character of military strategy, it involves desire and prejudice which unavoidably distort reality to varying degrees and, therefore, cannot be completely objective. War, as Clausewitz's core trinity indicates, involves simultaneously

reason, chance and hostility. The latter relies on a combination of the strong feelings of passion, hatred and enmity [3]. Objectivity is further compromised by the strategists' reliance on ideologically and institutionally sanctioned scholarship that provides unescapably tainted policy-relevant prescriptions and expertise, as co-opted academics tend to be selected by the policy world based on whether they "reflect, endorse and legitimise the overall interests and ideologies that underpin the prevailing order" [4].

The aim of this article is to discuss, based on the novel concept of Military Orientalism, the influence of Orientalist representations and prejudices on the strategy and conduct of war in the Middle-East/Orient from a Western perspective.

## 2. From Otherization to Orientalization

Basically, at the heart of any dispute or conflict, there is a strong otherization process which results in an acute dichotomization of the identities of both the adversary and the Self. However, otherization is particularly severe in the case of war which represents the extreme and most violent form of dispute between distinct societies and collective identities. War provides, in fact, a strong impulse to define the self against the other. As Mirjana Dedaic holds, in the context of war, otherization usually precedes justification, even if both processes "might intersect and infuse each other from the initial stage of the conflict until its end" [5]. Hence, political and military leaders are keen to use both otherization and justification to foment the discursive build-up needed for the legitimation of the use of lethal and costly military violence, which engages a country's "blood and treasure."

In many historical instances involving "Western" belligerents, otherization of the enemy was brought to the stage of orientalizing even where the enemy was not oriental. Indeed, the orientalizing potential of war is so huge that it may affect Westerners themselves. Historic precedents in this regard include the British discourse and practices that sought to portray the Irish as an "inferior race" [6] and as Europe's "backyard Orient" [7] to justify their

colonization and the suppression of their resistance to imperial rule. There is also the British characterization of Kaiser Wilhelm II's soldiers as 'Huns', a hostile tribe from the depths of Asia [8]. To these, Rudyard Kipling referred in his poem "Recessional" as "lesser breeds without the law." Other more recent examples, mentioned by Barkawi and Stanski [8], and Barkawi and Laffey [9] are the tendency to define Germany as non-Western during World War II, as well as the stigmatization of the Soviet Union as an "Oriental Despotism." The mere invocation of the menacing figure of the oriental serves as a justification for violence. Thanks to the legacies of the past and to popular culture, it conjures up violent images from the collective imagination about the threatening oriental hordes that need to be repelled or destroyed.

The idea that war is "a potent site for Orientalism" [10] takes on more significance when enemies are already subject, in time of peace, to an enduring legacy of biases and stereotypes. When the enemy is oriental, self-evident orientalization is extreme and instrumental. This is well illustrated by the majority of peripheral conflicts which characterized the post-war period and were condescendingly called "small wars." The expression "small wars" used nowadays by Western military historians and strategists was initially coined to refer to imperial campaigns waged against oriental indigenous peoples, in contrast with major conflagrations involving great powers. The appellation was consecrated by colonel Charles E. Callwell, a British colonial officer who wrote *Small Wars: A Tactical Handbook for Imperial Soldiers* in 1890, that is at the height of British imperialism. Later on, the US Marines officially adopted the term when it issued its Small Wars Manual as early as 1940 and which is described on the back cover of its 2005 reprinting as "one of the best books on military operation in peacekeeping and counterinsurgency operations published before World War II" [11]. In addition, the expression "small wars" continues to echo expeditionary campaigns of the past since these take place on natives' territories and imply immense power imbalances. In fact, only a great power can afford the capability to project military might into faraway places to wage a "small" war. In a nutshell, modern "small wars" or "low intensity operations" stand for re-inscribed expeditionary wars with their heavy orientalist implications.

Even if the historically significant implication of the non-European world in Western identities have been recognized by many scholars including Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Catherine Hall [12], fighting oriental enemies and waging new orientalist wars have proved more problematic and consequential than it used to be in the past. Actually,

"small wars" are more than just battles fought by a great power against an oriental enemy; they are trans-cultural conflicts with far reaching consequences for the identity and self-image of the Western belligerent, especially in case of reverse or defeat. This is all the more the case since war is increasingly conceived, thanks to theoretical advances by Critical War Studies, as an "antagonistic and generative process with the power to undo and order political life" [13].

And it is under this light that the examination of the implications of orientalism for war and war for orientalism becomes meaningful and worthwhile. The military campaigns waged by the United States in the opening decade of the third millennium under the banner of the Global War on Terror have inspired several scholars to initiate important research in the nascent field of Critical War Studies. These include Tarak Barkawi, Patrick Porter, Derek Gregory, Patricia Owens and Josef Teboho Ansoorge, to name just a few. These scholars have used directly or indirectly several insights from Said's works to probe how orientalist perceptions and ethnocentric representations of the enemy influence strategic outcomes and impact "metropolitan" identities enduringly.

In the same spirit, the present article is intended as a contribution to the conceptualization of "Military Orientalism," based on the analysis of the importance of orientalist representations in the construction of oriental enemies along with the repercussions of these representations in terms of strategy and identity politics.

### 3. Military Orientalism

In terms of definition, Military Orientalism can be roughly outlined as the insights of Edward Said's *Orientalism* applied to the military realm. Indeed, orientalism as a cultural apparatus is pervasive to all domains of human endeavors involving oriental others, including war. In this sense, the concept of Military Orientalism serves to highlight the tendency of Western identity to make the East a foil to its self-perceived superiority even in the scrum of war, irrespective of History's ebbs and flows. However, the forceful emergence of the concept almost forty years after the publication of *Orientalism* is certainly due to latest international developments particularly those associated with the US military campaigns in the Middle-East where Orientalism as a mode of perception has had several marked implications for the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. As a concept, Military Orientalism serves to analyze and explain the failures, actions and reactions both rhetorical and doctrinal that marked late modern wars and will definitely mark future "small wars" in the Orient. As

such, the advent of the concept has been welcomed by both the critics and advocates of military intervention. It is simply a “topic whose time has come” [8], as it will be developed hereafter.

The unabated debate about Orientalism has stimulated new approaches to the study of many subjects. One of the latest fields to be concerned by this debate in the first decade of the 21st century is War Studies. Critical War Studies has in fact evolved into a full-fledged discipline mainly as a result of the developments in the 2003 Iraq War and the “Global War On Terror.” Tarak Barkawi and Shane Brighton [14] have discussed the possibility of a specific discipline under such a name only in 2011 as literatures began to cluster around it [13]. The same dynamic has quite simultaneously given rise to critical security studies [15] and critical terrorism studies [16], all of which have drawn variably on the insights of Said. For what accounts for the extraordinary impact of *Orientalism*, as Gyan Prakash points out, is “its repeated [and continuous] dissolution of boundaries” drawn by old and modern forms of Western hegemony [17]. And some of the latest of such boundaries are located within the military realm.

In fact, having demonstrated what they call the generative powers of war which “operate through the production of systems of knowledge and their institutionalization in the academy, the state and wider society” and vulnerabilities of such systems of knowledge to the contingencies of war, Barkawi and Brighton have identified complex relations between war, knowledge and power [18]. And it is such realizations that have cleared the ground for Critical War Studies. Tarak Barkawi having in mind this triptych which comprised already the basic constitutive elements of discourse, i.e., power and knowledge, highlights the orientalist dimension instilled by war into a setting in which a powerful Western protagonist is pitted against an oriental recalcitrant other [19].

Having pioneered research in this regard, Tarak Barkawi was among the first to point, in 2004, to “a significant and underremarked military dimension of Orientalism.” This is so much so the case since, among elites and in popular culture, representations of Western military action in the extra-European world “overwhelmingly invoke various historical incarnations of humanitarian war, wars that seek to liberate and civilize” [12].

Based on this realization Barkawi has been keen to conceptualize, as lately as 2006, Military Orientalism. He describes this novel concept as one which “identifies a linkage between Western military strategies in the non-European world and constructions of Western identities. The assumed

superiority of the West is placed at risk in battles against supposedly inferior, irrational, weak and uncivilized opponents. When these opponents fail to be defeated as expected, there are cultural as well as political and military consequences” [12]. Elaborating further on Barkawi’s concept, Patricia Owens builds on Said’s assertion, that Orientalism as a “mode of discourse” has been central to military, economic and cultural dominance by justifying domination [20], to state that Military Orientalism concerns “the effect and coherence of a particular binary --Orient/Occident-- on the conduct and justification of modern war, that is, on how ‘the West’ dominates and restructures ‘the East’ through its constitution and use of organized violence, and how ‘the West’ defines itself through this process.” [21]. In other words, military orientalism accounts for the way the constructed oppositions and representations are used in both the justification of the war and the way warfare is conducted against oriental others. I would even add to these definitions that Military Orientalism covers also the way unexpected reverses are explained and overcome through what Edward Said calls “flexible positional superiority” [20]. More explicitly, oriental others because of what they are or rather what they are made to stand for are expected to play the role ascribed to them in the orientalist script which assumes overwhelming triumph versus total acquiescence. In numerous cases, orientals fail to conform to the script of the narrative by striking back, showing resolve and resourcefulness in battle. When the outcome of the armed confrontation does not conform to orientalist narratives about superiority and weakness, discipline and slackness; defeat, setback or simply failure to achieve decisive victory, these narratives are susceptible of generating cultural disruption, contestation or self-doubt [19]. As Metropolitan identity wavers, Orientalism is pressed again into service to reinterpret the native’s attitude so that the stronger belligerent never loses what Said calls the “relative upper hand” [20]. This is an unrelenting process of discursive re-articulation and alignment of the war narrative to factual developments until dislocation point of discourse is reached and strategic defeat ensues. Dislocation refers here to “the destabilization of a discourse by events it is unable to integrate, domesticate or symbolize” [22]. According to Ernesto Laclau, dislocations disrupt discourses and identities, but at the same time, become the breeding ground for the creation of new identities [23].

The novel concept of Military Orientalism is equally relevant to war time identity politics since, in the absolute, war as military organized violence cannot be considered in isolation from the belligerent’s representations of the people against whom it is waged. In this sense, the concept helps

highlight how representations of the “oriental” other which are already inimical and degrading in time of peace, due to “peace time” orientalism, become extremely exacerbated in the context of war. In this context, representations are brought to the highest point of hostile otherization (involving passion, enmity and hatred as outlined above) so as to naturalize the bombing, destruction and killing of recalcitrant oriental adversaries or innocent collateral victims. In order to mobilize the collective will to spend “blood and treasure,” in pursuit of war objectives, no matter how morally questionable is the cause, the military more than the civilians --because they are the agents of armed violence-- must be induced into envisioning “something less than human, to overcome the terror and remorse of slaughter, to engage in killing that under usual circumstances would be prohibited by law and conscience” [24]. Such a process becomes easier in case of oriental enemies where War’s representations play a central role in the definition and construction of the glorified Self in contrast with the oriental other depicted as subhuman or even nonhuman.

The concept of Military Orientalism concerns as well the separation between Western and Oriental subjects when it comes to the reason why each party wages war. While the Westerner pride themselves on waging war as an instrument in the service of politics, in accordance with the famous Clausewitzian dictum “War as the continuation of politics by other means,” they relegate the Easterners’ motivation for war or any other form of armed violence to its primordial form, that is for “religio-cultural self-expression” [25]. By so doing, they clearly strip their oriental enemies of any political agency and thereby of humanity, given Aristotle’s definition of humans as “political Animals.” This implies that oriental are incapable of having political qualms and that their grievances are represented as simple manifestations of unintelligible cultural, fanatical or irrational gesticulations.

From a different perspective, Patrick Porter underscores another aspect of the concept of Military orientalism. He argues that Military Orientalism is not only about a cultural hierarchy in time of war in which attributes of the Western, modern, developed world are valued over, and defined against, the supposed attributes of the backward, non-Western world as Taraq Barkawi maintains [12] but it also involves instances where the Oriental warring tradition can be a source of envy, fear or even deceit for Westerners [10]. Porter’s approach to the concept is in line with David Spurr’s work on the rhetorical configurations of hegemonic discourse which highlights contradictory attitudinal trends ranging from aestheticization and idealization to debasement, abjection and negation [26]. However, Patrick

Porter’s interest in the concept of Military Orientalism does not arise from postcolonial concerns about such issues as the legitimacy of military interventions and humanitarian wars. His interests stem rather from his stated concern that traditional Eurocentric security studies, i.e., those of the powerful, preclude insightful comprehension of the real nature the armed struggle of the weak and therefore complicates efforts to combat them effectively especially in the contexts involving counterinsurgency operations [27].

#### 4. Conclusion

The present article has been intended as a tentative contribution to the conceptualization of Military Orientalism. This has been done based on the centrality of orientalist representations in the construction of oriental enemies and the conduct of war against them. In fact, Orientalism has re-emerged with a vengeance, through dichotomizing representations on the occasion of late modern wars/conflicts, especially as the latter have been taking place in areas traditionally belonging to the Orient, like the Middle-East.

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