

ISIM Journalists Day

In cooperation with the Scherpenzeel Media Foundation, the ISIM held its first Journalists Day on 5 June 2000 in Utrecht. Aimed at journalists with an interest in contemporary Islam, the main topic of the day was political Islam in the Middle East and Central Asia with a special focus on Iran and Afghanistan. The Journalists Day was unique in that it brought together scientists and reporters who work in the same field and under similar circumstances, though often with different goals. The input of the speakers – Salah Negm, Olivier Roy and Nazif Shahrani – gave substance to interesting discussions, although it became apparent that scholarly and media discourses do not always coincide. Bertus Hendriks (Radio Netherlands) chaired over all sessions.

Nazif Shahrani being interviewed by a student of journalism.

The programme consisted of two main parts: the first being a closed morning workshop dealing with political Islam and the second being an open forum on the Middle East and Islam in the Dutch media. Political Islam was chosen because it tends to dominate the media as well as recent academic studies. Iran and Afghanistan also offer a broad view on the subject, as recent developments here prove the diversity of political Islam.

The afternoon sessions were directed in particular towards students from the schools for journalism and offered two video-contributions: a public relations video of the Al-Jazeera channel and a short presentation on television coverage of Middle Eastern events by Jelle Visser (TROS



PHOTO: WIM VREEBURG

Broadcasting, Hilversum). A journalists' panel (in Dutch) concluded the programme.

The cooperation between the ISIM and the Scherpenzeel Media Foundation in organizing this event resulted from their shared goal of rendering non-Western societies more accessible to Western audiences. The Scherpenzeel Media Foundation was founded to improve the media representation of the South. The following issues were discussed: How can foreign Muslim political culture be rendered accessible to a wider audience, without becoming oversimplified and stereotyped? To what extent do journalists make use of the expertise of scientists, and vice versa? How are Western journalists and academics perceived in the countries concerned?

As the chief editor of Al-Jazeera channel in Qatar, Salah Kamel Negm presented a practical and up-to-date contribution on Middle

Eastern media. He discussed the expectations a Western journalist and a Middle Eastern journalist may have with regard to the authorities and the populace in Middle Eastern countries. How can both types of reporter function efficiently in areas where the prevailing rules and attitudes towards the press are unfavourable and censorship prevalent. He concluded his talk with tangible field experience of Al-Jazeera in Iran and Afghanistan – the channel just having opened an office in Kabul.

Less aimed at the practice of journalism, but more on the manifestation of political Islam in the Middle East, was the contribution of Olivier Roy (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS)). Roy argued that the wave of political Islam that seemed to have engulfed the Middle East at the end of the 1970s did not lead to the emergence of a new unified Islamic block. Instead of realizing the re-creation of a Muslim *umma*

above nations and ethnic groups, as the Islamist movements claimed to fight for, these groups turned into 'Islamist-nationalist' movements. 'Empowerment led to pragmatism', according to Roy, because the more Islamist movements integrated into national politics, the more they lost their ideological radicalism. However, one must not draw the conclusion that normalization of 'Muslim politics' automatically leads to the disappearance of ideological radicalism. There still remains enough space for outcast and uprooted militants who cannot identify with a state or nation, such as Usama Bin Laden and his network of itinerant militants who travel from one jihad to another. But Roy does not see in this group a strategic threat, because they are unable to root their fight in a society. Nazif Shahrani (Indiana University, USA) elaborated on the very specific case of the trajectory of political Islam in Afghanistan, culminating in the rise of the Taliban movement (see p. 20-21). Turaj Atabaki (Utrecht University) gave a short note on the way the European press covered the developments in Afghanistan from the Soviet invasion to the Taliban take-over. Paul Aarts (University of Amsterdam) and Jan Keulen (Scherpenzeel Media Foundation/University of Groningen) acted as discussants. ◆

Closing panel

- Hans Jansen (Leiden University, HP/De Tijd)
- Jan Keulen (Scherpenzeel Media Foundation/University of Groningen)
- Moustapha Oukbih (freelance/De Volkskrant)
- Carolien Roelants (NRC Handelsblad)