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As others see U.S. – the 'War on Terror'

The USA's mass media constantly tell us how Americans see the "war on terror." But the same outlets rarely tell us much about how the rest of the world sees it. Five years after 9/11, the gap between perceptions is enormous. Countless polls confirm the overall chasm. Yet, day to day, the media messages that surround us in the United States simply recycle American views for American viewers, listeners and readers.

But there are exceptions. A recent one aired on "PRI's The World," a co-production of Public Radio International, WGBH in Boston and the BBC World Service. "We decided to check in with people in different parts of the globe to get their perspectives on the White House's war on terror," the anchor said on the Sept. 5 broadcast.

And for the next six minutes, the American audience got an earful – from four speakers who were not just expressing their own views. Crucially, they were summing up the dominant outlooks in huge regions of the planet.

The most sympathetic view of the U.S. "war on terrorism" came from a senior manager with Ernst & Young Security and Integrity Services, based in the Netherlands. He said: "The Europeans are still somewhat confused about what the focus of the war is. They see a lack of clarity from the United States as to what the goals of this conflict are, as to what the strategy is, as to what the standards are that the U.S. applies, and as to what the controls are that the U.S. has placed on itself in waging this war."

By U.S. media standards, that's about the extent of mainstream critiques of the "war on terror." But outside the United States, that's about the mildest criticism you're likely to find. Consider the assessment that aired on the radio program from Rohan Gunaratna, author of the widely praised book "Inside al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror." Based in Singapore, he was principal investigator for the United Nations' Terrorism Prevention Branch.

In Asia, said Gunaratna, "the vast majority of the Muslims believe that President Bush's campaign against terrorism has in fact increased the threat of terrorism and extremism very significantly after 9/11. With regard to Iraq, what they're saying is that the terrorists have recruited more people, radicalized more people and raised funds from Muslims just

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by projecting U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq as an attack against Islam and as an attack against the Muslims."

Then came the assessment from Frank Njenga, a psychiatrist in Nairobi, who is president of the African Association of Psychiatrists and Allied Professionals. "The White House war on terrorism is generally viewed here in Kenya as a futile exercise that is exacerbating the insecurity across the world," Dr. Njenga said. "It is perceived from this end that the major perpetrators of terrorism in the world are the inequities that exist in the world – economic, social and political. Those people who believe that they are down-trodden will continue to perpetuate acts of terrorism."

And, Dr. Njenga added, "It is generally perceived that America has a major role to play in this inequitable distribution of resources across the world. In fact, the general perception is that the average American has no understanding, has no intention, has no will to understand anything that happens outside of the United States – and for that reason their war on terrorism is a total misconception without any relevance to the real world where the majority of the people live."

What about the predominant view from the Middle East? Rami G. Khouri is director of the Issam Fares Institute at the American University of Beirut and editor-at-large at the Daily Star newspaper, which is published throughout the region. On the radio segment, he said: "The American war on terror is perceived in Lebanon and much of the Middle East as a sign of the combination of arrogance and confusion that is driving American policy, not only in the Middle East but I think in much of the world."

What Khouri had to say, few American pundits seem to want to hear: "While there's agreement that terror is a problem that must be fought – and we have suffered from it much more than the United States has, we in this region in the Middle East – there's also a sense that the United States has mis-diagnosed the nature of the terror problem, exaggerated its threat, confused hopelessly a whole range of different groups, some of which are terrorists, some of which are doing legitimate resistance to occupation – and basically tried to come up with a new formula that substitutes for the cold war."

Lest there be any misunderstanding, Khouri added: "The United States calls 'terrorists' anybody that it doesn't like or that Israel doesn't like, because people like Hezbollah and Hamas who are fighting a war of resistance against Israeli occupation are labeled as 'terrorists,' while most of the world sees them as legitimate resistance fighters when they're fighting the Israeli army."

Such views are routinely expressed in news media almost everywhere in the world. But in the United States, our media insulation about the "war on terror" is extreme -- and dangerously self-deluding.