

SEEING ISN'T BELIEVING

These pictures of 12-year-old Mohammed al-Dura incited rage in the Palestinian streets.



Images of Mohammed's death reached the greater Muslim world at breakneck speed over the Internet.



When pictures become propaganda, history can take a wrong turn

BY VICKI GOLDBERG



But what if evidence could show that these pictures were staged? What if the boy wasn't really harmed?



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AN PHOTOGRAPHS make an impact on history, even alter the course of world events? Can images that tell lies do the same?

On May 1, three days after the pictures of American soldiers torturing prisoners at Abu Ghraib first appeared on CBS's "60 Minutes II," the *Daily Mirror* in London published photos depicting British soldiers abusing

an Iraqi prisoner. In one picture, a soldier appeared to urinate on a hooded man; in another, the same man was struck between the legs with the butt of a rifle. The pictures of American abuse had already become tools of protest in Baghdad. Soon the British pictures turned up in other parts of the Arab world, including the Gaza Strip, occupied by Israel. In Gaza, the images were fixed to the graves of

Commonwealth soldiers who died in the Middle East during both world wars. They bore a written message: "Curse will chase you forever." A British brigadier said the abuse photographs put the lives of British soldiers in danger and were an effective recruiting poster for Al Qaeda.

But, it turns out, the British photographs had been staged. The pictures weren't taken in Iraq but in Great

Britain, where they were presumably contrived to foment outrage at Britain's involvement in Iraq.

On May 12, *The Boston Globe* published a photograph of a city councilman and an activist standing beside a poster of four very graphic pictures of what the two men contended were American soldiers sexually abusing Iraqi women. The men said they were not sure the photos were legitimate,

and the *Globe's* article also questioned the authenticity of the photos. The *Globe* later apologized for running the graphic shots. Nonetheless, the alleged images of abuse swept across Arab nations on Islamist websites, infuriating an enormous audience.

But those pictures weren't taken in Iraq either. They were lifted from pornographic websites, one based in the United States and one in Hungary.

These were no ordinary scams. In both cases, they were incendiary propaganda dropped into a highly combustible mix. The images fanned the flames of hate and anger in hearts and minds that were already well prepared to despise America and Britain. And, quite possibly, they inspired some who were already on the edge of violence and were looking for an excuse to act. These are powerful photographs, even though they are lies. And they will not fade from view; the images will stick around and be duplicated time after time in the digital Wild West that is the Internet.

News organizations have been worried for some time about the potential for altering photos on computers. Imaging software makes manipulation easier than ever; any 15-year-old could concoct a photo that seemed to show

anything from Sean Connery marrying Briney Spears to Russia's president Vladimir Putin spitting on a Chechen civilian. But some of the abuse pictures didn't even require the latest software: Those photos were apparently play-acted or mislabeled, which did not diminish the potency of the images.

What's different now is not software, but our high-speed digitized world. Pictures go out instantly, on TV and in newspapers, but also onto the Internet, allowing photos to be called up at will worldwide. Amateur



London's *Daily Mirror* ran bogus prisoner-abuse photos.

shots, like those taken by the guards at Abu Ghraib with digital cameras and e-mail access, may be more widely distributed than pictures shot by professional journalists. Traditional media are now often left standing at the gate, scooped by the new instant media, and, as a result, don't always take the time to check authenticity. The effects are dangerous. One video that circumstantial evidence suggests was probably faked became an instrumental tool in continuing to thwart any lingering chance for an Israeli-Palestinian peace, and has possibly contributed to hundreds of deaths in the last four years. On September 30, 2000, a man and his 12-year-old son, Mohammed al-Dura, covered behind

PHOTOS: (KERRY) © KEN LIGHT/CORBIS; (FONDA) © OWEN FRANKEN/CORBIS



Fonda Speaks To Vietnam Veterans At Anti-War Rally



John Kerry in 1971 and Jane Fonda in 1972 appear to be speaking at the same rally.

a concrete structure in the Gaza Strip while Israeli soldiers and Palestinian fighters engaged in a gun battle. The boy was killed in the cross-fire; his father was wounded. A video of the boy's death as he crumpled into his father's lap was shown on TV worldwide; stills from it appeared on the front pages of newspapers.

Within hours, Mohammed's image became yet another rallying cry for the Palestinian intifada that plagues the region, and, for more than one billion people in the Muslim world, it was a symbol of what they saw as Israel's continuing atrocities. Riots broke out in the West Bank and Gaza the day after Mohammed died. Soon after, two Israelis were beaten to death—the motive claimed was revenge for the boy's demise—and violent anti-Semitic attacks occurred in Europe and North America. Later on,

one of Osama bin Laden's public messages warned George W. Bush not to forget Mohammed al-Dura. Between armed skirmishes and suicide bombings, who knows how many have died in retaliation for this child's death?

Disturbingly, there are many indications that the scene was staged—the boy may not have died at all. The local hospital did report that a dead boy was brought in at 1 p.m. that day—though evidence shows that the gun battle occurred two hours later. Also, in the video, the father's T-shirt remains white, without a spot of blood, after he was supposedly shot in the arm and hand and after his son, shot

in the belly, fell stomach down in his lap. Additionally, video taken shortly after the shooting shows no blood at all at the site, but the next day bright red blood suddenly appeared there.

Tapes of the scene raise even more doubts: A voice cries out more than once, "The boy is dead!" before the child has even been hit. Then, after he is supposedly struck, Mohammed turns to the camera and covers his eyes as he falls. Ambulances arrive for other wounded that day, but there is no video of one arriving for Mohammed. Edited or not, the deadly impact of this tape continues to be incalculable.

Americans, too, are perfectly capable of staging and inventing scenes for propaganda. It has been suggested that the signature image of the fall of Baghdad—the toppling of a statue of Saddam Hussein surrounded by a large, jostling crowd of celebrating Iraqis—was staged. Why else were American soldiers and equipment at the ready to pull down a statue the Iraqis could not manage by muscle alone? Whether the scene was staged or not, the crowd was not the "massive demonstration" that was widely reported, a depiction buttressed by the dense congestion in the close-up images. A Reuters long-distance shot of the entire square where the statue was downed shows the crowd was small, no more than about 200 people, but it was often made to look like many more when the empty space was cropped out and just

the area near the statue was filmed.

Digitization has, of course, made certain optical tricks easier than ever. A startling instance occurred last February when someone spliced a 1972 picture of Jane Fonda speaking at a Vietnam War protest in Miami Beach with a 1971 image of John Kerry preparing to speak at an antiwar rally in Mineola, New York. The composite photo was designed to suggest that Kerry and Fonda had been closely allied in the Vietnam antiwar effort, which they were not. This picture raced around the Web and possibly convinced any number of people of its legitimacy. Could images like this make the difference in a close election?

It's not that faking or staging photos is a new idea. There are many ways to fool the eye. But the stakes in recent times have been particularly high, and Western audiences as well as Middle Eastern ones have been taken in repeatedly by potent fictions with dangerous consequences. It's human nature to believe your eyes, giving photographs a visceral power words can't match. Photos are often the only account people will recall. The media and the public need criteria for judging the authenticity of photographs and video, as well as a healthy dose of skepticism. Otherwise, amateur or not, deceptions that look truthful and speed across the digital transom will continue to poison our sense of reality—and possibly create a new history.

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