

Post-9/11 challenge

Stereotyping Muslims and Arabs

As the “war on terror” entered into its sixth year, a new racial stereotype was emerging in America. Brown-skinned men with beards and women with head scarves were seen as “Muslims” -- regardless of their actual faith or nationality. At the same time Muslims are the object of a series of stereotypes, caricatures and fears which are not based in a reality and are independent of a person’s experience with Muslims.

Dehumanize a group first before attacking it

Dehumanize a group first before attacking it. Violent, catastrophic confrontations seldom occur unless the contending parties have de-humanized one another. Once this de-humanization occurs, opponents are seen as having no legitimate rights and any atrocities are considered justifiable. Thus the law was passed in the US congress regarding airport “profiling” which is really stereotyping and racism. (1) The idea is that you can identify “risky” people based on the countries they traveled to in the past – Arab and Muslim Americans - and search them more thoroughly than the “normal” people. Yes, your impression of a line at the airport for Arabs and Muslims and a line for others.

The Fox network 2006 Emmy award winning series entitled ‘24’ is perhaps the best example of de-humanizing Muslim and Arab Americans and promoting their racist stereotyping in the post 9/11 America. The controversial propaganda series won an acclaim from the self proclaimed scholar and Islamophobic Daniel Pipes who congratulated Fox for “not caving in to Islamists” in its decision to go ahead with airing the show.

The drama featured an upper-middle class Muslim family operating as a sleeper terrorist cell. A young man is seen helping his parents mastermind a plot to kill as many Americans by launching an attack on a commuter train. The drama showed the mother poisoning her son's non-Muslim girlfriend because she poses a threat to their plans. The US secretary of state is also seen taken hostage by the “Muslim terrorists.” It climaxes with the defense secretary shown on an Internet video tape.

The implication of the episode is that one can never be certain that the Muslim or Arab family next door are not terrorists. Episodes like ‘24’ perpetuate the stereotype that all Muslims are terrorists. How television influences viewers’ perception of Muslims and Arabs is shown by a public opinion survey conducted by Cornell University in 2004. The survey showed a correlation between television news-viewing habits, a respondent's fear level and attitudes toward restrictions on civil liberties for all Americans. Respondents who paid a lot of attention to television news were more likely to favor restrictions on civil liberties, such as greater power for the government to monitor the Internet. Respondents who paid less attention to television news were less likely to support such measures.

No doubt when average Americans don't have any personal interaction with Muslims, whether it be at work or at school, they base their perception of Islam and Muslims from what they see on TV.

Jack Shaheen who catalogs Arab and Muslim images in the U.S. media, is worried that “24” represents a new trend, where even the Muslim or Arab next door is a potential threat. Shaheen says, “To present a truly balanced image, why don't Fox and other networks create some Arab or Muslim characters who aren't building bombs? Maybe they're just an everyday family, like the Cosbys.” (2)

Stereotyping Muslims and Arabs [2]

The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) challenged the Fox network when it first aired the show. Fox agreed to remove some of the stereotypical scenes, and to broadcast CAIR public service announcements featuring American Muslims of European, African-American, Hispanic, and Native American heritage. Each person in the spots states how he/she and his/her family have served America and ends by saying, "I am an American Muslim."

In another gesture to the Muslims and Arabs the show was interrupted to present a short statement by the actor Kiefer Sutherland: "I'm Kiefer Sutherland. I play counter-terrorist Jack Bauer on Fox's 24. While terrorism is obviously one of the most critical challenges facing our nation and the world, it's important to recognize that the American Muslim community stands firmly beside their fellow Americans in denouncing and resisting terrorism in every form."

Kingdom of Heaven

Kingdom of Heaven is another example when the film director Ridley Scott tried to address the sensitivities of Muslims and Arabs about the historical movie story.

To assuage any Muslim and Arab concerns ahead of the Kingdom of Heaven release in May 2005, its director Ridley Scott and the studio behind the film, 20th Century Fox, arranged private screenings for Muslim and Arab organizations. Film Director Ridley Scott wrote in a letter to the American-Arab Anti Discrimination Committee (ADC), "while the primary focus of the film is one man's personal journey of faith, I have also given much care to addressing the very sensitive nature of the larger political and religious issues of the Crusades."

'Kingdom of Heaven' is an epic-scale historical drama inspired by the events of the third Crusade of the 12th century and is based on real characters, including Balian of Ibelin, a Crusader knight, and Salah El Din (Saladin), the renowned Muslim leader. The movie, a 20th Century Fox production with a \$130 million budget, was shot in Morocco with hundreds of extras, horses and elaborate costumes. The script, written by William Monahan, follows the story of Balian who rises to knighthood and embarks on a life-changing journey to find peace and a better world.

The ADC praised the portrayal of Arabs and Muslims in the movie. Its Communications Director Laila Al-Qatami said, "Scott's 'Kingdom of Heaven' presents a more complex and human representation of Muslim characters than is evident in most Hollywood films. "We definitely welcome 20th Century Fox and Ridley Scott's efforts to provide a fair and multifaceted portrayal of cultural and religious realities during the Crusades." (3)

Another major Muslim civil rights organization, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) pointed out that initial fears that the film offered stereotypical portrayals of Muslims were unfounded. "Our overall impression is that 'Kingdom of Heaven' is a balanced and positive depiction of Islamic culture during the Crusades. Muslims are shown as dignified and proud people whose lives are based on ethics and morality." (4)

No doubt, stereotypes about Islam and Muslims, which were once used to rally the Crusaders, persist to this day. These misperceptions are not mere footnotes in history but they continue to have a negative impact, sometimes influencing the US policies when dealing with Muslims both at home and abroad.

The word "crusade" itself remains a loaded term. In September 2001, President George Bush stoked resentment among Muslims when he described his campaign against terrorism as a crusade. Bush said later through a spokesman that he regretted using the word "crusade," which invokes images of religious wars against Muslims.

The West Wing

Yet in another recent incidence of stereotyping, the NBC series "The West Wing" showed storylines revolving around actual Middle Eastern countries, including negative portrayals of Saudi Arabia and Iran (May 1, 2002), the Sudan (Dec. 3, 2003) and Syria (Oct. 27, 2004). This happened despite a protest by the the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee.

In 1999, when the series first began Hala Maksoud, the ADC President, expressed "profound shock and dismay" over the first two episodes in which "the Republic of Syria had, for no apparent reason, shot down an unarmed American Air Force jet killing over 50 Americans." In a letter to NBC, Maksoud pointed out: "This storyline constitutes a slander and calumny against the Syrian nation and the Syrian people, who have never been involved in any way in such an incident....By creating a fictional story that blames a real and actually existing nation, government and people for such a heinous crime, NBC has slandered an entire nation in the most unfair manner possible...Moreover, this slander against Syria deliberately promotes fear and hatred of Syria, Syrians and Arabs in general. Why was Syria chosen as the villain in this instance? What would have prevented NBC from concocting a fictional nation to play this role? Why are we not surprised that, as usual, the villains in this fantastic scenario are Arabs? How would NBC, the producers, or the rest of American society react if Israel, not Syria, were accused of such a fictional crime?" (<http://www.adc.org/action/1999/7oct99.htm>)

In response to this criticism, from the third season, the creators of The West Wing did indeed create an ongoing storyline involving a fictional Middle Eastern country named Qumar, Qumar was portrayed as a country that abused its women and actively supported terrorism, and the President eventually approved a covert assassination of the Qumari leader (May 22,2002).

Muslims and Arabs have long been negatively portrayed in America

Muslims and Arabs have long been negatively portrayed in America. This negative stereotype is evident in songs, jokes, comic books, novels, Halloween masks, advertising, wrestling, television, cinema, and many other forms of American popular culture. It can be found even in media that are supposedly factual, such as school textbooks. In the post 9/11 America the stereotyping of Muslims and Arabs became even more negative. From political leaders to media and "experts on Islam" manipulate and mock American patriotism while using Muslims like magnets to attract fears and hatreds.

Not only Hollywood movies, television shows, and popular fiction have long dwelled on stereotypical portrayals of Arabs and Muslims, but similar typecasting, framing patterns and clichés are used in the news. The events of 9-11 affected the news about Islam and Muslims in terms of volume, themes, stereotypical references, frames, and viewpoints in several negative ways.

Long before the advent of radio and television, Walter Lippmann (1889-1974), observed that what people knew about the world around them was mostly the result of second-hand knowledge received through the press. If anything has changed, Americans in the late 20th and early 21st century have been less involved in community life than earlier generations and are therefore more susceptible to the news media's influence on "the pictures in our head" about events, developments, and people in their own communities. Moreover, people's perceptions about fellow-Americans around the country and people around the world are equally, and perhaps even more so, affected by the information provided by the mass media. (5)

The demonizing of Arabs and Muslims in America began well before the terrible tragedy of September 11, 2001. Popular fiction and Hollywood motion pictures have perpetuated the stereotype of Muslims and Arabs as villains and terrorists for many years. The news in the United States, too, has long displayed anti-Muslim and anti-Arab bias.

Stereotyping Muslims and Arabs [4]

When a powerful bomb destroyed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995, news organizations were quick to identify Middle Easterners as suspects and reported that the FBI was specifically looking for two men with dark hair and beards. Within hours, Arab and Muslim Americans became the targets of physical and verbal assaults. As it turned out, an American with European ancestors, Timothy McVeigh, committed what was said at the time to be the most deadly terrorist deed on American soil.

Reel Bad Arabs by Jack Shaheen

Stereotyping can be traced to deliberate mythmaking by film and media as documented by the Award-winning film authority Jack G. Shaheen in her book *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies* (2001). This is a groundbreaking book that dissects a slanderous history dating from cinema's earliest days to contemporary Hollywood blockbusters that feature machine-gun wielding and bomb-blowing "evil" Arabs. Noting that only Native Americans have been more relentlessly smeared on the silver screen, Shaheen pointed out that "Arab" has remained Hollywood's shameless shorthand for "bad guy," long after the movie industry has shifted its portrayal of other minority groups. In this comprehensive study of nearly one thousand films, arranged alphabetically in such chapters as "Villains," "Sheikhs," "Cameos," and "Cliffhangers," Shaheen documents the tendency to portray Muslim Arabs as Public Enemy #1-brutal, heartless, uncivilized Others bent on terrorizing civilized Westerners.

Professor Jack Shaheen concluded that the "vast majority [of Hollywood films]...portray Arabs by distorting at every turn what most Arab men, women and children are really like". Shaheen found that Islam in particular is targeted by "imagemakers (who) regularly link the Islamic faith with male supremacy, holy war, and acts of terror, depicting Arab Muslims as hostile alien intruders and as lecherous, oily sheikhs intent on using nuclear weapons."

Reel Bad Arabs begins with a quote from media analyst Sydney Harris: "The popular caricature of the average Arab is as mythical as the old portrait of the Jew. He is robed and turbaned, sinister and dangerous, engaged mainly in hijacking airplanes and blowing up public buildings. It seems that the human race cannot discriminate between a tiny minority of persons who may be objectionable and the ethnic strain from which they spring. If the Italians have the Mafia, all Italians are suspect; if the Jews have financiers, all Jews are part of an international conspiracy; if the Arabs have fanatics, all Arabs are violent. In the world today, more than ever, barriers of this kind must be broken, for we are all more alike than we are different."

Shaheen suggests that selective news coverage of "a minority of a minority of Arabs, the radical fringe" creates conditions that further these damaging stereotypes in the public mind. "The seemingly indelible Arab-as-villain image wrongly conveys the message that the vast majority of the 265 million peace-loving Arabs are 'bad guys'." He argues that ever since the late 1940s, "when the state of Israel was founded on Palestinian land," this image has intensified with selective news reports on wars, hijackings, hostage-taking and oil embargos that paint Arab people in a negative manner.

Stereotyping of Arab people in U.S. films has become a major issue after 9/11. In an article published by Pacific News Service Jack Shaheen wrote that Hollywood widens slur targets to Arab and Muslim Americans since Sept. 11. (6) "Our country's leadership has gone out of its way to distinguish between Islam and terrorism in the aftermath of Sept. 11. Yet, Hollywood has ignored that distinction completely," he said while adding that major television networks -- including NBC, Fox, ABC and CBS -- have not only gone to great lengths to vilify Arab Muslims since then, but have introduced a very dangerous new equation: Arab Americans and Muslim Americans equals terrorist.

"Hollywood has chosen to focus on a few stock caricatures and repeat these images over and over again. These images project American Arabs, American Muslims, Arabs and Muslims as

Stereotyping Muslims and Arabs [5]

members of a lunatic fringe. We come to think all "those people" are this way. We are never allowed to see, for example, Arabs and Muslims who do what normal people do -- go out on picnics, go to work, love their children.

He argues that showing only vilifying images of any group, incessantly, and after a while -- 100 years in the case of the Arab stereotype -- it becomes "natural" not to like certain people. It is a sin of omission -- we omit the humanity -- and of commission -- we show only hateful images that make a stereotype that injures the innocent.

Shaheen pointed out that one reason these images and stereotypes continue is politics. The Arab-Israeli conflict has played a paramount role in shaping these images. Many of the movies I write about in my book "Reel Bad Arabs" were shot in Israel, with the cooperation of the Israeli government. It is naïve to overlook this. Another reason is that there is no American Arab or American Muslim presence in Hollywood moviemaking.

Deconstructing Hollywood

In *Deconstructing Hollywood: Negative Stereotyping in Film*, Kim Deep points out that cinema pigeonholes Arabs in three main ways: the Arab as being wealthy, the Arab as terrorist, and the Arab as "the other" - one who is heathen, evil, and uncivilized. Popular western cinema also stereotypes the Islamic religion and portrays followers of Islamic faith as religious fundamentalists. (7) Dr. Mazin Qumsiyeh calls this the three B syndrome: Arabs in the media are portrayed as either bombers, belly dancers, or billionaires. (8)

According to Scott J. Simon of Northeastern University, Boston, the characterization of the Middle East and the Arab culture began during the silent movie era of the 1920s. Rudolph Valentino's roles in *The Sheik* (1921) and *Son of the Sheik* (1926) set the stage for the exploration and negative portrayal of Arabs in Hollywood films. Both *The Sheik* and *Son of the Sheik* represented Arab characters as thieves, charlatans, murderers, and brutes (Michalak 29). Numerous other films that graced the silver screen during the twenties seemed to hold the same low standard of Arabs. *The Song of Love* (1923) tells the story of a power-hungry Algerian chief who schemes to overthrow French colonial rule and make himself the king of all of North Africa; *A Cafe in Cairo* (1924) is about an Arab desert bandit who kills a British man and his wife but saves their daughter so that they may be wed; and *The Desert Bride* (1928) portrays an Arab named Kassim Ben Ali as the leader of a group of "Arab nationalists" who capture and torture a French officer and his lover. All of these movies portray the Arab as the villain and are sure to conclude with the victory of the good Western symbol: the Algerian chief in *The Song of Love* is killed by French troops; the girl who is to marry the desert bandit in *A Cafe in Cairo* is rescued by an Englishman, and *The Desert Bride* concludes with the escape of Ben Ali's two captives and the death of Ben Ali. Throughout the 20th century, little has changed regarding the stereotypes of Arabs in Hollywood. In recent years Arabs were still being characterized as villainous, deranged, and murderous. (9)

Many movies imply that the Islamic faith is closely tied with terrorists. In *Network* (1977), Arabs are seen as barbaric religious fanatics. *Rules of Engagement* (2000) was criticized because it portrayed Arabs as a senseless, extremist mob attacking the U.S. Embassy. Another film, *The Siege* (1998), tied Islamic practices, such as washing before prayers and the call to prayer, with violence. Thus, *The Siege* reinforces the idea that the Islam is closely associated with terrorism.

The image of the Arab terrorist is appallingly prevalent within the medium of film. These terrorist images lead to harassment, physical attacks, violence and distorted perceptions of Arab people. Arabs are seen as to be continually at war with Western concepts of politics, social economy and order. Frequently however, the Arab population is seen as the 'other' - an uncivilized, boorish people, who are loud, crude and irrational. In *The Mummy* (1999), one Arab character is described

Stereotyping Muslims and Arabs [6]

as a "smelly little friend" and a "stinky fellow," this shows that many films depict Arabs to be a people opposite to how the West perceives itself.

Here are few more take on stereotyping in movies:

In the 1997 movies "G. I. Jane" and "Operation Condor" viewers chant as a hero blows away Arabs marauding attackers. Demi Moore plays a Navy SEAL officer in the hit G. I. Jane gaining her stripes and feminist zeal, while killing Arabs. In "Operation Condor" starring Jackie Chan, we have Arabs as villains and a money grubbing inn-keeper (no good Arabs). Another scene shows Arabs praying and then cuts to an auction where Chan's women companions are being auctioned.

Operation Condor was a campaign of counter-terrorism and intelligence operations implemented by authoritarian right-wing governments that dominated the Southern Cone in Latin America from the 1950s to 1980s, heavily relying on numerous assassinations. It is not surprising then that Disney and Operation Condor received a "Dishonor Award" at the 2005 national convention of the American Arab Anti-discrimination Committee (ADC) which has been at the forefront in combating stereotypes and negative portrayal of Arabs in the media. (10)

In the 1994 feature film, Crimson Jihad, the character played by Arnold Schwarzenegger works for a super-secret government agency fighting terrorism. He and his wife are captured by Muslim extremists and taken to an island where the terrorists have nuclear warheads. In this scene, Aziz, the leader of "Crimson Jihad," who is nicknamed "Sand Spider" by the U.S. agents, is making a videotaped threat to the U.S. government. The film reinforces stereotypes that Arab and Muslim people are vengeful, hate the U.S., are terrorists, are intimidating and abusive, and are compliant to authority.

Movies, such as Into the Night (1985), associate Arabs with power and wealth, often through organized crime, such as smuggling operations. Other examples include Rollover (1981), where Arabs are seen as an evil force trying to bring ruin to the American economy, and the now famous The Sheik (1921), in which Rudolph Valentino plays a licentious sheik who captures a British woman and leads her to his wealthy residence in the desert. (11) The popular James Bond movie series, which is heralded on the official website as "one of the longest running and most successful film franchises in history," uses the stereotype of the wealthy, dangerous Arab in many of its films. In Octopussy (1983), the villain, Prince Kamal Khan, is described on the website as "an exiled Afghan prince with a penchant for fine food, jewels and atomic weaponry," who "teams with a power-crazed communist general in an attempt to unleash nuclear holocaust in Western Europe." Thus, the stereotype of the wealthy Arab is invariably tied to that of the Arab as terrorist. (12)

Children's movies

Stereotyping is not confined to general feature films. Even children's movies are not exempt from this negative portrayal of Arabs. The Disney movie Aladdin (1992) is one example of the idea of the Arab as "the Other". The original lyrics from the beginning number (before they were banned due to pressure from various Arab-American groups) were as follows:

*"Oh, I come from a land
From a far away place
Where the caravan camels roam.
Where they cut off your ear
If they don't like your face
It's barbaric, but hey, it's home!"*

Stereotyping Muslims and Arabs [7]

Although many popular movies are made for entertainment purposes, films, being a powerful and popular form of mass communication, invariably transmit social and political messages. By portraying Arabs and Muslims in a negative fashion, the Western film industry only serves to further the ideology of Western expansionism that has prevailed since the Middle Ages.

The former congressman, Paul Findley laments that Hollywood, where most movies and many documentaries are produced, the image of Muslim 'terrorism' keeps re-appearing. In early 2000, Paramount Pictures profited greatly from Rules of Engagement, a movie that maligned Muslims generally and Yemenis in particular and grossed over \$43 million. The most misleading and inflammatory part of the film was a voice recording played during an imaginary US court-martial trial of the Marine who ordered the counterattack. In the recording, the leader of the Yemeni mob exhorted his Muslim followers to "kill Americans," a call that he said came directly from Allah. (13)

News Media

The fictional world of Hollywood does not stop with films; even the news media uses the same stereotypes and images. News media play a role in cultivating this new racial image, consciously or not. The image of Muslims and Arabs is closely associated with conflict -- the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Israel.

The news cycle's barrage of images, from Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib to Iraq and Afghanistan, "gets transformed into an archetypal image of a terrorist," said Professor Jess Ghannam, chief of medical psychology at University of California, San Francisco. "That gets internalized very quickly into the 'Muslim/Arab' stereotype." This happens regardless of whether people know or meet individual Muslims, says Ghannam, affirming assertions made by several other scholars. (14)

Cartoons, another media to stereotype

Cartoons are another media to stereotype the Arabs and Muslims.

In 2006, during the controversy over Dubai ports deal, a series of cartoons appeared in the US media ridiculing the Arabs, Muslims and linked with terrorism. A series of cartoons were used to demonize Arabs and Muslims and ridicule their faith. This surely helped in mobilizing the public opinion against the abortive deal. Caption of one cartoon said: Just because you own the oil doesn't mean you have the run of this place. Another cartoon says: UAE Port deal = Arabs = Terrorists. "Dubai is anti-democratic. Its nationals were involved in 9/11...Its money supports terrorists..." (15)

In 2003, a series of advertisements appeared on College campus newspapers by a group calling itself "CampusTruth.org". The ads from these groups were overtly racist and inflammatory. All ads juxtapose two pictures and a caption. In one advertisement, the picture on the left was of an Israeli athlete with the caption on top: Israeli school children hero. The picture on the right was of a gun toting Palestinian militant and you guessed it: Palestinian school children's hero. Underneath it says: "There are two sides to each story but only one truth." (16)

The ads are produced by professional propagandists who are used to walking the fine line of libel and thus they certainly had their lawyers go over it. The results are ads that promote racism without being challengeable on the fine point of racism. One ad juxtaposes pictures about the World Trade Center attacks and uses: that says that "Israelis mourn" while "Palestinians celebrate." The absence of words like "all" or "the" obviously protects the advertisers from charges of overt racism. (17)

Stereotyping is a psychological assault on one's identity that has resulted in an increased number of Muslims suffering from anxiety, depression and traumatic stress. The phenomena has had other profound effects. Sixty percent of respondents to a national poll released in August 2006 by

Stereotyping Muslims and Arabs [8]

the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute in Connecticut said that authorities should single out people who look "Middle Eastern" for security screening at locations such as airports and train stations.

Another national study released in July 2006, by economics researchers at the University of Illinois, found that the earnings of Muslim and ethnically Arab men working in the United States dropped about 10 percent in the years after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.