

Hollywood's Muslim Arabs

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The Arab people have always had the roughest and most comprehending deal from Hollywood, but with the death of the Cold War, the stereotype has been granted even more prominence. In *The Mummy* [1999], I could hardly believe what I was watching . . . So, here's a party game for any producers with a Middle East setting in mind; try replacing one Semitic group with another -- Jews instead of Arabs -- and THEN listen for the laugh." (Anthony Lane, *The New Yorker*, May 10, 1999, pp. 104,105)

Regrettably, some Americans are still "imprisoned because of their prejudices. I know that Arab Americans still feel the sting of being stereotyped in false ways. The saddest encounter of course [was] the heartbreaking experience of Oklahoma City." (President Bill Clinton, Arab American Institute, Washington D.C. May 7, 1998)

"We are all diminished when a person is subject to discrimination." (Janet Reno, Attorney General, American-Arab Anti-Discrimination conference, June 11, 1998)

This essay presents an overview and analysis of selected media portraits, giving specific attention to television programs and motion pictures, and the impact the screen images have on Arab and Muslim identities. For more than two decades, I have been studying the manner in which purveyors of popular culture project Muslim Arabs, and the effect these images

tion, 1980); *Islam, Democracy, the State and the West*, a Round Table discussion with Dr. Hasan Turabi (Tampa, Fla., 1993); Fatima Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy: Fear from the Modern World*, tr. Mary Jo Lakeland (Reading, MA 1992); John L. Esposito and John O. Voll, *Islam and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Tawfiq as-Shāwi, *Fiqh al Shūra* (Cairo, 1993); *Islamic Resurgence: Challenges, Directions and Future Perspectives*, A Round Table Discussion with Khurshid Ahmad, ed. Ibrahim Abu-Rabi' (Tampa, Fla, 1995); *Shūra fi al-Islām*, 3 vols., Albait Foundation, Amman, Jordan, 1990; Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, (Princeton University, 1996).

18. John Esposito and John Voll, *Islam and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 41

19. Esposito and Voll, *Ibid*, 48-49.

20. *Ibid*, 41.

21. H.A.R. Gibb writes in *Modern Trends in Islam*, nationalism "... in its Western manifestation is confined to the intellectuals who are in direct and close touch with Western thoughts. As the nationalist idea penetrated into the popular mind, it was transformed and could not avoid to be transformed by the pressure of the age-long instincts and impulses of the Muslim masses." (*Modern Trends in Islam*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1947), 119. Wilfred C. Smith writes in *Islam in Modern History*: "No Muslim people has evolved a national feeling that has meant a loyalty to or even concern for a community transcending the bounds of Islam ... In the past, only Islam has provided for these people this type of discipline, inspiration, and energy." (Princeton, N.J., 1957), 77.

22. Filmer S.C. Northop, *Colloquium on Islamic Culture* (Princeton: University Press, 1953), 109.

23. Wilfred C. Smith, *Pakistan as an Islamic State* (Lahore: Ashraf, 1954), 50.

24. *Ibid*, 45.

25. Esposito and Voll, *op. cit.* 21.

26. Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton University Press, 1996), 164.

have on individuals. Examples here are drawn from more than 800 feature films, and hundreds of television newscasts, documentaries, and entertainment shows, ranging from animated cartoons to soap operas to movies-of-the-week. Not included, although in themselves an extremely important study, are print and broadcast news stories, editorial and op-ed pages, editorial cartoons, children's books, comic books, textbooks, print advertisements, toys, and games.

Explanations as to why disenchanting images exist, and some possible ways of curtailing the stereotyping, will be considered. My underlying thesis is that stereotypes can lower self-esteem, injure innocents, impact policies, and encourage divisiveness by accentuating our differences at the expense of those human qualities that tie us together.

In 1982, I began soliciting information about Muslim Arab images from a number of producers, writers, and network executives. I still recall the rationale for stereotyping offered by James Baerg, Director of Program Practices for CBS-TV in New York City: "I think," he remarked, "the Arab stereotype is attractive to a number of people. It is an easy thing to do. It is the thing that is going to be most readily accepted by a large number of the audience. It is the same thing as throwing in sex and violence when an episode is slow."¹ Not much has changed since then. Research verifies that lurid and insidious depictions of Arabs as alien, violent strangers, intent upon battling non-believers throughout the world, are staple fare. Such erroneous characterizations more accurately reflect the bias of Western reporters and image-makers than they do the realities of Muslim people in the modern world.

On the silver screen, the Muslim Arab continues to surface as the threatening cultural "Other." Fear of this "strange" faith keeps some people huddled in emotional isolation. As John Esposito says, "Fear of the Green Menace [green being the color of Islam] may well replace that of the Red Menace of world communism. . . . Islam is often equated with holy war and hatred, fanaticism and violence, intolerance and the oppression of women."² Esposito asserts that narratives about the Muslim world all too often assume that there is a 'monolithic Islam' out there somewhere, as if all Muslims believe, think and feel alike.

Research reveals the stereotypical Muslim presented to Americans resembles Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, Libya's Mu'ammarr Gadhafi, or Iraq's Saddam Hussein: Muslim and Arabs in this country, who overwhelmingly do not identify with these political leaders, believe that their fellow Americans assume they do. Explains 30-year-old Shahed Abdullah, a native Californian, "You think Muslim, you think Saddam Hussein, you think Ayatollah."³

Through immigration, conversion, and birth, Muslims are this nation's fastest growing religious group. Regrettably, the approximately five to eight million Muslims who live in the United States are confronted with a barrage of stereotypes which unfairly show them as a global menace, producers of biological weapons, zealots who issue *fatwas* or burn Uncle Sam in effigy. In reality, Muslims are an integral part of the American mainstream, people who contribute to their respective communities as teachers, doctors, lawyers and artists. They respect traditions, are committed to education, faith, family and free enterprise. Indeed, the community is generally a peace loving quilt of cultures: 25 percent are of South Asian descent, Arabs represent another 12 percent, and nearly half are converts, mainly African-Americans.

This mix of ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds offers a broad range of Muslim viewpoints. As Sulayman Nyang of Howard University explains, "Muslims can be compared to Catholics. They are as different from each other as Mexican American Catholics in Southern California are from Polish and Italian Catholics in Chicago or Philadelphia."⁴ Muslims are a diverse group: the "seen one, seen 'em all" cliché does not apply. Writes Steven Barboza in *American Jihad*, "There are more than 200,000 Muslim businesses [in the U.S.], 165 Islamic schools, 425 Muslim associations, 85 Islamic publications, and 1,500 mosques" spread from Georgia to Alaska.⁵ Many Muslims hold prominent positions in business and public service. They appreciate the religious freedom in America, freedom not always available in the lands they left. Nevertheless, although Muslim-Americans are an integral part of the American landscape, enriching the communities in which they live, the United States is seldom referred to as a *Judeo-Christian-Muslim* nation.

In a recent national survey, cited by John Dart of the *Los Angeles Times*, the Americans polled viewed Christians in general, Jews, and, on balance, Mormons, as good influences on U.S. society, but more than 30 percent regarded Muslims as having a "negative influence." Muslims maintain they are perceived as a "negative influence"⁶ for political reasons, ignorance and because producers of entertainment profit from vilifying them. As a result, image-makers tend to focus on a violent and extreme minority. On television and in feature films, they argue, you only see Arabs as bearded fanatics out to seduce blond, Western heroines. Chanting "Death to the great Satan," they appear as the enemy, as anti-Jewish, anti-Christian terrorists out to destroy the U.S. and Israel.

Motion Pictures

It seems that most people have difficulty distinguishing between a tiny minority of persons who may be objectionable and the ethnic strain from which they spring. "The popular caricature of the average Arab is as mythical as the old portrait of the Jew," writes columnist Sydney Harris. "He is robed and turbaned, sinister and dangerous, engaged mainly in hijacking airlines and blowing up public buildings."⁷ "If the Italians have their 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," says Harris. "In the world today, more than ever, barriers of this kind must be broken, for we are all more alike than we are different."

Virtually since its inception, the Hollywood film industry has promoted prejudicial attitudes toward numerous groups: viewers have seen the Asian as "sneaky;" the black as "Sambo;" the Italian as the "Mafioso;" the Irishman as the "drunk;" the Jew as "greedy;" the Indian as the "savage;" and the Hispanic as "greasy." In the year 2000, however, such offensive labeling is no longer tolerated. Now, "it appears that we're down to one group, the Arabs," writes columnist Jay Stone. "When was the last time you saw an Arab character in a movie who was anything but one of the three B's (billionaire, bomber, belly dancer)?"⁸ "One group should not be singled out as enemies of all that is good and decent and American," adds Stone. "Where are the movies about Arabs and Muslims who are just ordinary people? It is time for Hollywood to end this undeclared war."⁹ Sam Keen, author of *Faces of the Enemy* (1986), shows how Arabs are still vilified: "You can hit an Arab free; they're free enemies, free villains -- where you couldn't do it to a Jew or you can't do it to a black anymore."¹⁰

As President John Kennedy said, "The great enemy of truth is very often not the lie, deliberate, contrived and dishonest, but the myth, persistent, persuasive and realistic."¹¹ For more than a century, movies have created myths. Ever since the camera began to crank, the unkempt Muslim Arab has appeared as an uncivilized character, the outsider in need of a shower and a shave, starkly contrasting in behavior and appearance with the white Western protagonist. Beginning with Universal's *The Rage of Paris* (1921), in which the heroine's husband "is killed in a sandstorm by an Arab," Hollywood's studios have needlessly maligned Arabs. Motion pictures such as *The Sheik* (1921) and *Son of the Sheik* (1926), which starred the popular Rudolph Valentino as Sheikh Ahmed, displayed Arab Muslims as brutal slavers and promiscuous desert sheikhs. Of course, Valentino, as the hero, cannot really be an Arab; Diana, the heroine: "His [Ahmed's] hand is so large for an Arab." Ahmed's French friend: "He is not an Arab. His father was an Englishman, his mother, a Spaniard."

Hollywood's sexy sheikh of the 1920s became the oily sheikh of the 1970s and 1980s; concurrently, the industry's bedouin bandit of the 1920s became the "fundamentalist" bomber who prays before killing innocents. The cinema's sheikhs are uncultured and ruthless, attempting to procure media conglomerates (*Network*, 1977), destroy the world's economy (*Rollover* 1981), kidnap Western women (*Jewel of the Nile*, 1985), direct nuclear weapons at Israel and the United States (*Frantic*, 1988), and influence foreign policies (*American Ninja 4: The Annihilation*, 1991).¹² Then and now, Arab characters are carefully crafted to alarm viewers. Films project the diverse Muslim world as populated with bearded mullahs, billionaire sheikhs, terrorist bombers, backward bedouins, and noisy bargainers. Women surface either as gun toters or as bumbling subservients, or as belly dancers bouncing voluptuously in palaces and erotically oscillating in slave markets. More recently, image-makers are offering other caricatures of Muslim women: covered in black from head to toe, they appear as uneducated, unattractive, and enslaved beings. Solely attending men, they follow several paces behind abusive sheikhs, their heads lowered.

Mindlessly adopted and casually adapted, these rigid and repetitive portraits narrow our vision and blur reality. On screen, the Muslim Arab lacks a humane face. He/She lives in a mythical kingdom of endless desert dotted with oil wells, tents, run-down mosques, palaces, goats, and camels. These caricatures serve to belittle the hospitality of Arabs and Muslims, their rich culture, and their history. Functioning as visual lesson plans, movies, like books, last forever. No sooner do Hollywood's features leave the movie theaters than they are available in video stores and broadcast on TV. From 1986 to 1995, I tracked feature films telecast on cable and network channels in St. Louis, Missouri. Each week, 15 to 20 movies mocking or denigrating Arab Muslims were telecast. In numerous films such as *Navy SEALs* (1990), *Killing Streets* (1991), *The Human Shield* (1992), *The Son of the Pink Panther* (1993), *Bloodfist V: Human Target* (1994) and *True Lies* (1994), viewers could see American adolescents, intelligence agents, military personnel, even Inspector Clouseau's son, massacring obnoxious Arab Muslims.

Unightly Arab Muslims and prejudicial dialogue about them appear in more than 200 movies that otherwise have nothing at all to do with Arabs or the Middle East. In films such as *Reds* (1981), *Cloak and Dagger* (1984), *Power* (1986), *Puppet Master II* (1990), *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1990), *American Samurai* (1992) and *Point of No Return* (1993), Muslim caricatures appear like phantoms. Currently, Libyans are a favorite target. In films like *Back to the Future* (1985), *Broadcast News* (1987), and *Patriot Games* (1992), Libyan "bastards" shelter Irish villains, bomb U.S. military installa-

tions in Italy, and shoot a heroic American scientist in a mall parking lot. *The American President* (1995), an otherwise agreeable romantic comedy about a widowed president falling for a lovely environmental lobbyist, mentions Libyans who bomb a U.S. weapons system. In this case, at least, writer Aaron Sorkin softens the anti-Libyan dialogue by expressing sympathy for the Arab janitor and other innocents about to be annihilated.

Universal Studio's *The Mummy* 1999, an 80 million remake of the 1932 Boris Karloff classic, displays hostile, sneaky and lecherous Egyptians. Moving to romance the heroine is a dirty Egyptian jailer, tagged "a stinky fellow." Opening frames reveal Egypt, "a messed up country;" here the western protagonist and his legionnaire squad gun down scores of attacking bedouins. Assisting Imhotep, the revived attacking mummy, are gobs of saber-wielding mummies, and an Egyptian mob; carrying torches, they resemble zombies. In the end, the protagonist brings down all the bandaged wrapped curs, dispatching Imhotep back into his sarcophagus.

Motion pictures such as *Not Without My Daughter* (1990) show the Muslim male as a religious hypocrite, a liar abusing Islam and kidnapping his American wife and daughter. Not only does he imprison and abuse his wife in Iran, he seems to do so in the name of Islam as when he slaps her face, boasting, "I'm a Muslim!" After breaking an oath sworn on the Qur'ān, he brags: "Islam is the greatest gift I can give my daughter." When he departs the mosque followed by his relatives, the camera cuts to a poster of a grim Ayatollah Khomeini. The editing implies that the offensive actions of Muslims towards American women and the behavior of Iran's late Ayatollah are clearly connected.

Palestinians are characterized by Hollywood as religious fanatics, threatening our freedom, economy, and culture. Producers portray the Palestinian as a demonic creature without compassion for men, women or children. Palestinian Muslim images reflect a combination of past stereotypes, such as those which depicted Hispanics as "wet backs," Jews as insurgents, blacks as sexual predators, Asians as sneaky, and American Indians as "savages." The "Palestinian equals terrorist" narrative initially surfaced in 1960, in Otto Preminger's *Exodus*. In the 1980's ten features, including *The Ambassador* (1984), *The Delta Force* (1986), *Wanted Dead or Alive* (1987), and *Ministry of Vengeance* (1989), put into effect images showing the Palestinian Muslim as Enemy Number One. Feature films tag him as "scumbag," "son of a bitch," "the Guccifer Terrorist," "a fly in a piece of shit," "animals," "bastards," "f-in' pigs," and "stateless savages" who "massacre children." The slurs are not rebuked by other characters.¹³ Several made-for-television movies also paint the Palestinian as a despicable being, including TV movies such as *Hostage Flight* (1985), *Terrorist On Trial*

(1988), *Voyage of Terror* (1990), and Cinemax's April 1998 documentary, *Suicide Bombers Secrets of the Shabheed*.

Two 1990s box-office hits, *True Lies* (1994) and *Executive Decision* (1996), also portray Palestinian Muslims as screaming, murderous "terrorists" killing American innocents, including a priest. In *Lies*, Muslims ignite an atom bomb off the Florida coast. Avi Neshet, a former Israeli commando working in the Hollywood film industry, was "incensed by the sick humor of a [*Lies*] scene in which an Uzi tossed down a flight of stairs inadvertently mows down a roomful of Arabs." Neshet told *Jerusalem Report* correspondent Sheli Teitelbaum: "You were supposed to laugh? I fought Arabs and I had Arab friends, but this was completely dehumanizing a group."¹⁴

In *Decision*, Muslims hijack a passenger jet, terrorize the passengers, kill a flight attendant, and prepare to unload enough lethal nerve gas to kill millions in Washington, D.C., and along the East Coast. Throughout, Islam is equated with violence. Holding the Holy Qur'ān in one hand and a bomb in the other, a Palestinian Muslim enters the swank dining room of London's Marriott Hotel and blows up innocent couples. Four days after the film was released, employees of a Denver radio station burst into a mosque and began heckling worshippers while the station broadcast their antics. In Twentieth-Century Fox's 1998 feature, *The Siege*, Denzel Washington and Annette Bening portray F.B.I. and C. I. A. agents who track down and kill Palestinian Muslims terrorists. In the film, Arab immigrants, assisted by Arab-American auto mechanics, university students and even a college teacher, kill more than 700 innocent New Yorkers. The movie not only reinforces historically damaging stereotypes, but also advances a dangerously generalized portrayal of Arabs as rabidly anti-American.

Paramount's *Rules of Engagement*, one of the most blatantly racist movies of all time, encourages viewers to hate Muslim Arabs. Interestingly, the film is based on a story by former Secretary of the Navy James Webb, and was produced in cooperation with the Department of Defense and the U.S. Marine Corps.

Opening frames show U.S. Marines killing 83 Yemeni civilians -- men, women and children. The scenes suggest the Marine Colonel is at fault, that the gunned-down Yemenis were innocent, unarmed folk. But the final frames justify the Marine Colonel's decision to kill the Yemenis, as the camera reveals gun-toting Yemenis, even boys and girls, firing away at the Marines.

Even the Walt Disney Company, a self-professed family-friendly mega-company, is guilty of the vilification of Arabs and Muslims. Since 1992, Disney has released seven features with harmful caricatures. In

December 1995, Touchstone Pictures, a subsidiary of Disney, released a remake of Edward Streeter's 1948 book, *Father of the Bride*. In Disney's *Father of the Bride, Part II*, a sequel to the 1991 Steve Martin remake, disagreeable Mideast-Americans are introduced for the first time. (In the original 1950 Spencer Tracy - Elizabeth Taylor film and all the earlier *Father of the Bride* movies Muslims and Mideast Americans do not appear at all.) Steve Martin and Diane Keaton appear as the happily married George and Nina Banks; they have everything, including a wonderful "Brady Bunch" home. When George convinces Nina to sell the house, the crass Arab family of Habibs is introduced. The rich and unkempt Mr. Habib (Eugene Levy) smokes, needs a shave, and talks with a heavy accent. When Mrs. Habib attempts to speak, her husband barks mumbo-jumbo, a mix of Farsi and Arabic, at her. Cowering like a scolded puppy, Mrs. Habib becomes mute, perpetuating Hollywood's image of the Arab woman as a submissive nonentity. Habib is portrayed as sloppy, mean, and tight-fisted. After he purchases the house he demands that the Banks be out in ten days, crushing his cigarette on the immaculate walkway. The message is clear: there goes the neighborhood. Interestingly, no one working on *Bride II* denounced the stereotyping, nor did protests emanate from members of the Screen Writers', Actors', or Directors' Guilds of America.

Disney continues to demean Arabs in *Aladdin* (1992), the second most successful animated picture ever made, earning \$217 million at domestic box offices. After sensitivity meetings were held between some Arab-Americans and Disney executives in July 1993, Disney deleted two offensive lines from *Aladdin's* opening song before releasing the video. That was all. The line, "It's barbaric, but hey, it's home," remains. The storyteller is portrayed as a shifty, disreputable Arab, dastardly saber-wielding villains still try to cut off the hands of maidens, and a wicked vizier still slices a few throats. For generations, these scenes will teach children that Aladdin's home is indeed "barbaric."¹⁵ A *New York Times* editorial complained that "To characterize an entire region with this sort of tongue-in-cheek bigotry, especially in a movie aimed at children, [itself] borders on the barbaric."¹⁶ Professor Joanne Brown of Drake University agrees that *Aladdin* is racist. The villains display "dark-hooded eyes and large hooked noses," writes Brown. "Perhaps I am sensitive to this business of noses because I am Jewish." Brown explains how she would feel if Disney studios created a cartoon based on a Jewish folk tale that portrayed all Jews as Shylocks.¹⁷

Following the *Aladdin* discussions, Disney executives promised not to demean Arabs in the future, but then went ahead and featured hook-nosed, buck-toothed Arab "desert skunks" in their home-video release of *Aladdin's* sequel, *The Return of Jafar* (1994). *Jafar* sold 10 million copies to

rank among the 20 top-selling videos. That same year Disney also produced *In the Army Now*, in which “Glendale reservists” deride Arab cuisine, clobber desert Arabs, and encourage the U.S. Air Force to “blow the hell out of them.” Americans of Middle Eastern heritage are again targeted in a Disney children’s film called *Kazaam* (1996), starring Shaquille O’Neal, in which Malik, Hassan, and El-Baz, three dark-complexioned Muslim villains needing shaves and speaking with heavy accents, covet “all the money in the world.” Sloppy Malik gobbles “goat’s eyes” like a pig swallowing corn. He punches good-guy Americans and tosses Max, a twelve-year-old boy, down a shaft presumably to his death.

In 1997, Disney subsidiaries Miramax and Hollywood Pictures released *Operation Condor* and *G.I. Jane*. Set in the Arabian desert, *Condor* displays Jackie Chan battling scores of evil Arabs such as a money-grubbing innkeeper and bedouin white slavers. Chan also contests two hook-nosed Arabs, “Soldiers of the Faith,” who speak fractured English and wear checkered headdresses that look like tablecloths pinched from a pizza parlor. The duo mock Islam by spouting such lines as, “We will never give up the struggle for the holy battle,” and, “Praise Allah for delivering you (Chan) to us again.” Watching the film, I wondered why the talented Chan, whose 30 films are box-office hits here and abroad, would vilify anyone, especially since Asian performers are still trying to erase the Fu Manchu images. In *G.I. Jane*, viewers cheer as Demi Moore, a macho Navy SEAL officer, “guts it out” and kills Arabs. The Arabs surface only at the end, when the SEALs move to retrieve a U.S. nuclear-powered satellite containing weapons-grade plutonium off the Libyan coast. The camera reveals courageous Moore rescuing her drill sergeant’s life, then blasting pursuing Arabs. Since 1986, Hollywood studios have released 22 films showing our military units and agents killing Arabs.

The time is long overdue for Hollywood to end its undeclared war on Arabs. The industry should cease uniformly projecting Muslim Arabs as having a monopoly on terrorism. Producers should project them as they do others, no better, no worse. As *New York Times* columnist Russell Baker notes, Arabs are the “last people except Episcopalians whom Hollywood feels free to offend *en masse*.”¹⁸

Television

From 1950 until today, only one Arab-American and one Arab Christian immigrant have appeared as characters in a television series. The first was Uncle Tanoose, the Lebanese patriarch portrayed by Hans Conreid in “The Danny Thomas Show” (1953-71). Tanoose occasionally appeared in

episodes, visiting his relatives in the United States. The second was Corporal Maxwell Klinger, an Arab-American soldier in "M*A*S*H" (1972-1983), played by Jamie Farr, who tries to get himself discharged by wearing women's clothing. People modeled on such public figures as heart surgeon Dr. Michael DeBakey, UPI's White House correspondent Helen Thomas, or radio's Top-40 celebrity Casey Kasem never appear. This absence is wounding. There is not a single 1997-98 series featuring an Arab-American character. Surely image-makers know what happens to young people when someone in authority portrays their society as one in which they have no public presence. Such an experience, writes Adrienne Rich, can generate "a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in a mirror and saw nothing."²²

Since 1974, when I began to document images on entertainment shows, the rogues have often been Arab Muslims. A selective overview of more than 200 programs, including network newscasts, documentaries, comedies, soap operas, children's cartoons, dramas, and movies-of-the-week yielded the following results. Fanatical Muslims surface in several mid-1980s television movies such as *Hostage Flight* (NBC, 1985), *Sword of Gideon* (HBO, 1986), *Under Siege* (NBC, 1986), *The Taking of Flight 847* (NBC, 1988), *Terrorist On Trial: The United States vs. Salim Ajami* (CBS, 1988), and *Hostages* (HBO, 1993). These TV movies are now constantly rebroadcast on both cable and network systems.

In *Hostage Flight*, the protagonist says, "These [Arab Muslim] bastards shot those people in cold blood. They think it's open season on Americans." In *Under Siege*, the U.S. Secretary of State tells the Ambassador of a Muslim nation: "People in your country are barbarians." The FBI director in this film also scrutinizes Dearborn's large Arab-American community for terrorists who have blown up shopping malls and threatened the White House, telling his African-American colleague: "Those people are different from us. It's a whole different ball game. I mean the East and the Middle East. Those people have their own mentality. They have their own notion of what's right and what's wrong, what's worth living for and dying for. But we insist on dealing with them as if they're the same as us. We'd better wake up." In *Terrorist On Trial*, a Palestinian Muslim boasts that he ordered the deaths of American women and children and advocates the use of nuclear weapons, saying, "We will strike at them in their home country as well as overseas. Long live Palestine!"

What is so disturbing about these television movies is that they effectively show all Arabs, Muslims, and Arab-Americans as being at war with the United States. Accomplished Arab-American actors are obliged to

play terrorists and to demean their heritage. Nicholas Kadi, for example, a competent character actor, makes his living playing Arab Muslim kuffiyeh-clad terrorists. In 1990, Kadi lamented on the news show "48 Hours" that he seldom speaks in films. Instead of talking, directors tell him to impart "a lot of threatening looks, threatening gestures, threatening actions. Every time we [he and others playing heavies] said 'America,' we'd [be directed to] spit." Says Kadi, "There are other kinds of Arabs in the world besides terrorists. I'd like to think that some day there will be an Arab role out there."¹⁹ Kadi has played stereotypical roles in films such as *Navy SEALs* (1990), and in TV shows such as "Scimitar," a 1995 NBC *JAG* episode. In "Scimitar" the Iraqi-born Kadi impersonates a Saddam-like colonel holding Meg, an innocent U.S. army officer, hostage. The lusty Kadi tries to force himself on the attractive blond. One screen myth maintains that Arabs consider "date rape" to be "an acceptable social practice." The camera dwells on the drooling Kadi wielding a Damascus scimitar slowly to remove Meg's uniform. The rape is thwarted and Kadi is killed just in time.

The demonization of Muslim Arabs is reminiscent of that of American Indians. As commentator Pat Buchanan pointed out at the annual Arab-American Anti-Discrimination conference in Washington, D.C. on June 13, 1998: "The Arabs I see in Hollywood movies are like the movies I used to see with the cavalry and Indians." Clad in strange garb, Arabs are obliged to speak garbled English and to crave blond heroines. Just as screen protagonists call Indians "savages," they call Arabs "terrorists." The closing frames of "Scimitar" show an Iraqi helicopter pursuing Americans. When the chopper goes down in flames, the Marines cheer: "Yahoo. It's just like *Stagecoach* with John Wayne." Puzzled by the reference to Wayne, a motion picture idol, Meg asks the Marine: "John Wayne was killed by Iraqis?" He replies, "No, Indians!" In the Gulf war movie, *Hot Shots Part Deux!* (1994), U.S. soldiers prepare for an Iraqi attack. Warns one G.I., "Indians on the warpath."

A November 1996 segment of *FX: The Series* depicts Rashid Hamadi as a stereotypical Arab drug addict who deliberately runs over and kills a New York City police officer in cold blood. But when policemen move to apprehend him, Hamadi boasts, "I have diplomatic immunity. You can't arrest me." In the end, Hamadi is caught smuggling counterfeit plates into New York City; his "Lebanese" and "Iranian" friends in Beirut fabricated the bills. Final scenes show policemen seizing Hamadi, that "piece of garbage" and "slimeball bastard."²⁰ In 1998, two *Soldier of Fortune* segments, "Surgical Strike" and "Top Event," surfaced on the UPN's television network. Produced by Rhysher Entertainment, the "Strike" episode depicts Arab

Muslim “bastards” blowing up a passenger plane, killing all 230 passengers. And in Rhysher’s “Event,” Arab terrorists move to release three truckloads of poison gas “in the name of Allah,” killing thousand of Los Angeles residents. When asked who she works for, the female militant barks, “I work only for Allah.” On September 22, 1999, only several weeks prior to the 1999 the American arranged peace talks between Syria and Israel, NBC-TV’s highly acclaimed new series, *West Wing*, made its debut. Producers of the two-part fictional program, titled, “Proportionate Response,” targets real people, depicting Syrians as terrorists. Goes the scenario, Syrians shoot down an unarmed U.S. aircraft carrying 58 passengers, including the American President’s friend, an African-American physician. Angry, the U.S. President wants to retaliate; he seriously contemplates the “carpet bombing of Damascus,” and “creating thousands of [Syrian] civilian casualties.” In the end, the president’s aides convince him to relent; he reluctantly agrees only to “cripple Syria’s intelligence and their surface-to-air capabilities.” It should be noted that Syria has never been involved in any way in such an incident. Only three unarmed planes have been downed by surface to-air missiles: the United States downing of an Iranian airliner; the Soviet Union’s downing of a Korean airliner, and Israel’s downing of a Libyan airliner.

On the “Jon Stewart Show,” U.S. soldier puppets kill white-robed Arab puppets. Waving the American flag, one soldier boasts: “I killed many of them!” Says another: “I decapitated quite a few of them myself.” Stewart’s audience applauds.²¹ In “Twisted Puppet Theater,” Ali, the Muslim puppet sporting a black beard and turban, shouts: “There is only one God and Mohammed is his prophet!” Then he turns and shoots Kukla, the good clown puppet, dead.²² From December 1991 through early 1992, MTV featured “Just Say Julie” segments, sandwiched between music videos, showing Julie addressing unsavory Moroccan buffoons as “scum” and the “creep with the fez.” In one segment the two “fiendish” Arabs armed with explosives moved to blow up the television channel.

Cartoons

Over the years, I have viewed and studied scores of American cartoons denigrating the Arab, starting with the 1926 animated short, “Felix the Cat Shatters the Sheik.” In “Porky In Egypt” (1938), for example, Arab Muslims in prayer suddenly become Amos ‘n’ Andy shooting craps and a sexy harem maiden removes her veil, revealing an ugly face. Favorite cartoon characters such as Popeye, Bugs Bunny, Woody Woodpecker, Daffy Duck, Superman, and Batman have ridiculed and trounced Arabs.²³ Since 1975, more than 60 comparable cartoons have surfaced on television,

depicting Arabs as swine, rats, dogs, magpies, vultures and monkeys.

Writers give cartoon Arabs names like "Sheikh Ha-Mean-ie," "Ali Boo-Boo," "The Phoney Pharaoh," "Ali Baba, the Mad Dog of the Desert, and his Dirty Sleeves," "Hassan the Assassin," "The Desert Rat," "Desert Rat Hordes," "Ali Oop," "Ali Mode," and "Arab Duck." While monitoring cartoons on November 23, 1996, I saw "Well-Worn Daffy" on the Nickelodeon channel. Wearing a white *kuffiyeh* and armed with a shotgun, Daffy shoots at three winsome Mexican mice. The mice call Daffy, among other things, "Arab Duck!" Adult viewers may be able to separate fact from animal, but for many children the animated world of cartoons consists of good people versus bad people, the latter often Arabs.

Effects on Children

Viewing these cartoons brings back memories of earlier portrayals of stupid African-Americans, savage American Indians, "dirty" Latinos, buck-toothed "Japs" and hook-nosed Shylocks in burnouses. Jewish mothers in Europe of the 1930s and the 1940s, as well as African, Indian, Hispanic and Japanese mothers in the United States during the period, tried to shield their children from such imagery, but such hateful portraits cannot help but promote bigotry toward them. America's Muslim parents are increasingly aware of these dangers and work to counteract or eliminate them. Citing scores of old motion pictures being telecast on cable systems, along with cartoons, re-runs of television dramas and sit-coms, plus newly created TV programs and TV movies-of-the-week, they fear that stereotyping has become more pervasive than ever. Conversely, image-makers are now giving children of other ethnic origins positive roles models to identify with. Characters appear on the screen that make children feel good about themselves: American Indians, African-Americans, Hispanics, Asians, Jews, Italians, Polynesians, Irish, English, Poles, East Indians, Scots -- just about every racial and ethnic group on the planet, except the Arabs.

According to the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), many parents have complained that as a result of the pervasive stereotype, their children have become ashamed of their religion and heritage. Some have asked their parents to change their Arab names to something more American sounding. A Texas teen told his sister, "I lied about where our parents had come from." Especially alarming are the numbers of incidents targeting youngsters. After the Trade Center bombing several children of Arab descent in New York were told to "go back where you came from." They went home from school in tears, writes *New York Times* Melinda Henneberger. "Classmates told them they were responsible for the

attack. Muslim girls were taunted; schoolmates pulled off their head scarves."²⁴ At a suburban Muslim day care center in Texas the driver of a passing car shouted, "here's a bomb for you, lady!" and threw a soda can at a teacher and her students.

The *Anti-Arab-American Discrimination Hate Crimes* document, published by the ADC in November 1994, and CAIR's 1996 manual, *A Rush to Judgment: A Special Report on Anti-Muslim Stereotyping*, report many similar incidents. During the heartbreaking experience of Oklahoma City, Suhair al-Mosawia, a Muslim woman seven months pregnant, lost her son after teens purred her, hammering her home with rocks. Following Muslim custom she gave the stillborn a name, Salam, Arabic for peace. One Oklahoma City resident suggested putting Arab-Americans in internment camps.²⁵ In a *Cleveland Plain Dealer* op-ed essay, Palestinian activist Hamz Moghrabi reported that "in Detroit, home of the largest Arab-American population outside the Middle East, business owners, including the editor [Osama A. Siblani] of *The Arab American News*, were subjected to bomb threats" and trash was thrown at mosques.²⁶

Media Images and Prejudicial Responses

Media images, points out media critic Jerry Mander, "can cause people to do what they might otherwise never have thought to do."²⁷ Following the April 1995 Oklahoma city tragedy, speculative reporting combined with decades of stereotyping encouraged more than 300 hate crimes against America's Arabs and Muslims. Abuses took place even as Muslims mourned, along with other Oklahomans, the disaster.²⁸ Mohammed Nimer of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) told reporter Laurie Goodstein, "Most of these incidents have been completely unprovoked ... just mere encounters with a person who looks like a Muslim, or a person praying, have prompted bias and violence. That is alarming."²⁹

In Brooklyn, the police department reported that after the Oklahoma City bombing numerous Arab-American businesses received hostile calls and death threats. One caller said, "We're going to put a bomb in your business and kill your family." A San Francisco mosque received 35 bomb threats. In Toledo Ohio, the St. Francis de Sales High School yearbook, the 1995 ACCOLADE, printed in bold-letter capitals "**KILL ALL THE CAMEL JOCKEYS!**" The remark was part of a 500-word essay by a student. Officials immediately issued apologies, however, and the High School President, Rev. Ronald Olezewski, wrote to parents and friends saying that the "insensitive reference" should never have been either written or published. "We apologize," he said. "Please presume ignorance rather than mal

ice and be assured that all at this institution of learning will learn from the wrong.”³⁰

The day of the Oklahoma City explosion, Abraham Ahmed, a U.S. citizen of Jordanian origin, boarded a plane in Oklahoma City en route to visit his family in Jordan. Two hours after the bombing, it was reported that Ahmed was a suspect. Immediately, some people in Oklahoma City began dumping trash on his lawn; others spit on his wife. While Ahmed was in Chicago waiting to make connections, FBI authorities escorted him into a room and interrogated him for six hours. Missing his flight, Ahmed arrived late in London. There he suffered a humiliating strip-search. After five more hours of interrogation, the handcuffed Ahmed was sent back to Washington, D.C., for another day of questioning. More than a year after he was cleared, Ahmed, who has lived in Oklahoma City for 14 years, still receives suspicious stares from neighbors. He plans to move back to Jordan.

Hateful words and images have their impact on public opinion, and policies. There is a dangerous and cumulative effect when these repulsive screen images remain unchallenged. The negative images are sometimes perceived as **real** portrayals of Muslim culture, which come back to afflict Americans of Arab heritage as well as non-Arab Muslims in their dealings with law enforcement or judicial officials. For example, in January 1997, a judge in Dearborn, Michigan was asked to rule whether an attorney could show *Not Without My Daughter* to a jury deciding on a child custody case between an Arab-American father and a European-American mother. Incredibly, the judge allowed this defamatory film portraying an Iranian man as a child abuser and child-kidnapper to be introduced in court, influencing the judicial proceeding.³¹

The Arab Muslim image parallels the image of the Jew in Nazi-inspired German movies such as *Robert and Bertram* (1939), *Die Rothschild Aktien von Waterloo* (*The Rothschilds' Shares in Waterloo*, 1940), *Der ewige Jew* (*The Eternal Jew*, 1940), and *Jud Suss* (1940). Resembling the hook-nosed screen Arab wearing burnouses and thobes, screen Jews also dressed differently than the films' protagonists, wearing yarmulkes and black robes. They, too, appeared as unkempt money-grubbing caricatures that sought world domination, worshipped a different God, killed innocents, and lusted after blond virgins.³² The simultaneous barrage of stereotypical films, editorial cartoons, radio programs, and newspaper essays helped make Jews scapegoats for many of Germany's problems.³³ Concerned that misperceptions might hinder genuine peace in the Middle East, *Newsweek* columnist Meg Greenfield wrote, “Actually what I see coming is more like a reversion, a flight back to the generalized, hostile attitudes towards Arabs and/or

Muslims as a collectivity that prevailed both as government policy and as public prejudice for so many years." Although progress has been real, Greenfield remains concerned about the kind of blanket, indiscriminate anti-Arab sentiment so often expressed in public. "If anything," she writes, "we should be seeking to sharpen and refine our involvement with those Arabs who are themselves enemies and targets of the violent, hate-filled elements in the region. We should be making more distinctions and discriminating judgments among them, not fewer."³⁴

Why vilify people?

No single factor leads to stereotyping. Undeniably ignorance, the handmaiden of bigotry, continues to be a contributing factor. Most image-makers do not have the religious, cultural or language background to understand Islam. To my knowledge, not one university, including those with Middle East and Near East centers, offers courses focusing on Arab and Muslim images in popular culture; and no university actively seeks to recruit faculty members to address this issue, even though comparable subjects are offered for other ethnic groups. In classroom discussions and research works, all too few scholars are documenting and discussing media images of Arabs and Muslims. It may take decades of education before misinformation is depleted.

One of the reasons why America's Arabs are not yet able to define themselves may be because none belongs to America's "media elite." There are no Muslim communications giants comparable to Disney's Michael Eisner, Fox's Rupert Murdoch, or Time-Warner's Ted Turner. Few work as broadcasters, reporters or filmmakers. Until Arabs and Muslims achieve some influence, their voices will not be heard. As producer Gilbert Cates says: "It's axiomatic. The more power you have, the louder your voice is heard."³⁵

Inflexibility and indifference impact the stereotyping. Many Muslim and Arab leaders are reluctant to become involved. Although scores of films and television shows denigrating the Arab are purchased, rented, and screened throughout the western as well as the Muslim world, Muslim information officials and media syndicators often appear to be apathetic. Until very recently they have made little or no attempt to meet with image-makers to discuss those images ridiculing them and their neighbors. Politics and fear are other reasons. In spite of many noteworthy accomplishments, American Arabs and Muslims do not yet have sufficient political clout to effect fundamental change. Efforts initiated by various groups, such as the American Muslim Public Affairs Council, the Council On American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC,

an organization with 25,000 members and 75 campus and city chapters), however, have had some influence. Their efforts have resulted in limited apologies, minor edits, and some altered scenarios.

On June 11, 1998, Attorney General Janet Reno told Americans of Arab heritage attending an ADC conference that stereotypes should never influence policy or public opinion. Yet, when this writer asked CNN's Peter Arnett whether stereotyping had any impact on United States Middle East policies, he said: "The media elite follow U.S. policy," adding that those responsible for shaping policies are influenced in part by the stereotypical pictures in their heads.

Conclusion

Openness to change is an American tradition. There are numerous ways for image-makers to humanize the Arab Muslim. They could reveal in television shows, documentaries, and motion pictures the telling effects of hate crimes brought about by stereotyping. They could show the impact of such prejudices on children, especially how some are taunted during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, the time of purification and abstention. Although Ramadan has "a special meaning for Muslim children, their fasting makes them stand out in school," writes AP's Katherine Roth. Some children are distressed, saying, "they often have to contend with anti-Muslim slurs."³⁶

Although harmful caricatures may not disappear soon, those professionals engaged in addressing harmful portraits merit recognition. In early March of 1998, this writer and Hala Maksoud, President of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, informed Rosalyn Weinman, NBC-TV's Executive Vice President of Broadcast Standards and Current Policy, that the network's soap series, *Days of Our Lives*, was impugning Arab Muslims. Weinman followed up immediately on our concerns. For weeks prior to our conversation the soap had displayed a kidnapped blond U.S. heroine held hostage in the "harem" of the Sultan's desert palace. Her kidnapper, a bearded clad-in-black Arab, warned that unless she pleased the Sultan, her head would be "chopped off by an Arabian ax, one of those long, curvy sharp swords." Not only did Dr. Weinman issue an apology, NBC promptly dropped all images and references to Arabs from the soap's plot, and as of March 27, the heroine's captors began appearing as generic villains.

During Jay Leno's appearance on CNN's "Larry King Live" he was asked whether he ever apologized to anyone he had made fun of. Leno replied that he had. "I said something about Iran or something. And I said instead of chopping the arm off, they were doing it surgically, or something

[like that] now, to criminals. I made some jokes about it and I heard from some Arab-Americans. And I called them up and I apologized, admitting that Arab-Americans sometimes get a bad rap. "When you are wrong, you do apologize. And in that case I was wrong. And I have no problem with that." Though Leno mistakenly assumes Iran to be an Arab country, his insights and candor are refreshing.³⁷

In ABC-TV's May 4, 1995, *Nightline* segment, "Muslims in America," host Ted Koppel remarked that "Muslims are the stereotyped religion in the United States" and that Muslims are "often the first we think of when there's a terrorist incident." Koppel displayed news clips from the Oklahoma City bombing containing the speculative statements made by several network correspondents about the connection to Middle East terrorism. His interviews and footage humanized Muslims: like other American Arabs, he reported, those living in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, "home of the oldest mosque in America," were "made to feel like aliens when the bomb went off in Oklahoma City." And on April 18, 1997 Koppel hosted a telling religious segment entitled *The Hajj*, focusing on producer-writer Michael Wolfe's pilgrimage to Mecca. This landmark production, narrated by Wolfe, a Muslim, is one of the most watched segments in *Nightline's* history. Commenting on the success of *The Hajj*, Wolfe says, "I wanted to put front and center a very different view from the distortion that generally attends images of the Muslim world." And on March 12, 2000, PBS-TV's *Religion and Ethics* reporter, Anisa Mehdi, documented Abdul Alim Mubarak's pilgrimage to Mecca. Throughout Mehdi's in-depth feature, Mubarak, an African-American Muslim from New Jersey, addresses the peaceful and devout nature of Islam.

Some welcome exceptions to caricatures of women in Hollywood features are beginning to appear. Party Picture's 1995 *Party Girl* represents a first: Mustafa, a Muslim Lebanese schoolteacher, is the romantic lead. Selling falafel to earn his way through college, Mustafa wins the American heroine's heart, and helps her become a responsible person. Independent producer Michael Goldman's 1996 documentary film on singer Umm Kulthum, one of the most important figures in Arab popular culture (*Umm Kulthum: The Voice of Egypt*) was enthusiastically received at during New York City's Film Festival at Lincoln Center on October 9, 1996. Fox's 1996 *Independence Day*, a movie depicting earthlings about to be exterminated by space aliens, shows the world's armies, including both Israeli and Arab combat units, preparing to repel an alien attack. Following a quick shot of scrambling Israeli soldiers, and the Israeli flag, actor Sayed Bayedra appears as an Arab pilot. Speaking Arabic, Bayedra rushes to his plane to stop the

invaders. Coincidentally, during the summer of 1980, when I was interviewing executives and producers for my book *The TV Arab*, writer Jack Guss told me that perhaps the best way to contest the stereotype would be to show outer-space aliens attacking earth. This way, said Guss, even Arabs and Israelis could be together, fighting off the invaders.³⁸

Two other 1996 features, Paramount's *Escape From Los Angeles* and New Line's *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, briefly display Muslim Arabs as victims of prejudice. The films may solicit mild sympathy for Arabs and Muslims, and though not yet an established trend, the images mark the beginning of a much-needed change. In the 1998 feature, *A Perfect Murder*, a remake of the 1954 thriller, *Dial M For Murder*, actor David Suchet appears as a bright soft-spoken Arab American New York City detective, Mohamed "Mo" Karaman. Concluding frames show Mo, sympathetic to the heroine's ordeals, saying in Arabic, "*Allab ma'a kum*" (May God be with you). In English, the heroine replies, "And you, as well."

Also, in 1999, Disney Studios and Warner Bros. humanized Muslim Arabs in two telling motion pictures, *The Thirteenth Warrior*, based on Michael Crichton's book, *Eaters of the Dead*, and *The Three Kings*. Set ten centuries ago, Crichton's *Warrior* stars Anthony Banderas as Ahmed Ibn Fahdlan, a devout, highly cultured Arab Muslim champion. Ahmed travels to an unnamed northland and helps Nordic warriors defeat "a terror that must not be named." Explains Banderas, "This Arab guy I play gets caught by cruel Vikings, and their cultures clash completely. But they have a mission to carry out, and that starts pulling them together." Throughout this recommended film, the Vikings tag Ahmed, "friend," and "little brother." No clash of civilizations here; Arab and Aryan surface as friends.³⁹

Written and directed by David O. Russell, *The Three Kings* takes place in the Iraqi desert, immediately after the 1991 Gulf War. The telling scenario focuses on four American soldiers and their friendly, respectful relations with courageous Iraqi rebels intent on overthrowing Saddam Hussein. In this anti-war drama, Iraqi and American lives are, for the most part, given equal value. One empathizes with war victims, American and Arab. American soldiers are injured; one, killed. Saddam's followers are shot. Yet, U.S. bombs cripple an Iraqi officer's wife; another bomb destroys a building; falling masonry crushes an Iraqi boy in his bed. No faceless or nameless Arabs here; instead, Iraqis are individualized, projected with dignity.

Former Disney Chairman Jeffrey Katzenberg has said, "Each of us in Hollywood has the opportunity to assume individual responsibility for cre-

ating films that elevate rather than denigrate, that shed light rather than dwell in darkness, that aim for the common highest denominator rather than the lowest."⁴⁰ On December 6, 1996, Katzenberg, who is now one of the three executives in charge of DreamWorks entertainment, solicited opinions from Arab and Muslim American specialists about DreamWorks' upcoming animated feature, the *Prince of Egypt*. The four-hour session included a presentation of the film in progress, followed by a candid question and answer session.

Regional and national Muslim organizations and agencies are beginning to pay increasing attention to the ways in which Arabs, Muslims and Islam are portrayed in the public media. They point out instances of prejudicial depiction, and are working with non-Muslims in schools and other public arenas to help provide a more balanced, and accurate, picture of persons who have for so long been misrepresented and maligned in the news and in various forms of entertainment media. It seems reasonable to hope that as they become more vigilant, and as the American public is gradually made aware of the hurt that is caused by such unfortunate representations as have been visible through much of this century, Arabs and Muslims may enjoy at least relative immunity from prejudicial portrayal and see themselves depicted at least as fairly as are members of other minority groups in America.

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