Conflating Arab and Muslim Identities

Arab and Muslim identities have long been conflated in U.S. government and media discourses, as well as in popular culture. Since Arabs and Muslims are usually represented as one and the same, it is difficult to write about representations of Arab Americans without also addressing representations of Arabs and Muslims. All too often, representations of Arabs and Muslims have served to racialize Arab ethnicity and vilify the religion of Islam. In this chapter, I review the entangled U.S. media representations of all three groups—Arabs, Muslims, and Arab Americans—noting the history of these representations, their various manifestations in current popular culture, and their enduring, harmful effects. Throughout, I use the notation “Arab/Muslim” not to perpetuate the conflation of categories, but rather to highlight and critique it.

Though much scholarship has examined the racialization of Arabs and Muslims following the events of September 11, 2001 (“9/11”) (e.g., Bayoumi 2006; Naber and Jamal 2007; Puur 2007; Razack 2008; Maira 2010; Cainkar 2011), the racialization of Arabs and Muslims did not begin with 9/11. Rather, such representations have a much longer heritage of government and media narratives that construct Arabs and Muslims as outside of the purview of Americanness. Well before 9/11, scholars of Arab-American Studies noted that Arab Americans are located within a racial paradox, in which they are simultaneously racialized as white and non-white. Not legally recognized by the United States government as a minority group, and unable to fit into the racial and ethnic categories used by the United States Census—black, white, Asian, Native, and Hispanic—Arabs have not been legally “raced” and are therefore “outside of the boxes” and presumably white (Naber 2000; Samhan 1999). Nonetheless, as Nadine Naber writes, the Arab-American racial paradox before 9/11 was constructed through a distinct process of racialization in which Arab Americans were racialized primarily according to religion (vis-à-vis Islam) and politics (vis-à-vis the Israeli/Palestinian conflict), as opposed to phenotype. After 9/11, Naber argues that “the post-9/11 backlash has been constituted by an interplay between two racial logics, cultural racism and nation-based racism” (Naber 2008: 279). Naber defines cultural racism as “a process of othering that constructs perceived cultural (e.g., Arab), religious (e.g., Muslim), or civilizational (e.g., Arab and/or Muslim) differences as natural
and insurmountable” (Naber 2008: 279). In other words, justifications for discrimination and violence come to be based in culture, religion, or notions of civilization, as opposed to biology or phenotype. In contrast, nation-based racism is a process of othering based on notions of citizens versus foreigners, where foreignness is inscribed with criminality and therefore marked as undesirable and unassimilable in the US. Naber argues that a convergence of cultural racism and nation-based racism has enabled the resurgence of domestic policies targeting immigrant exclusion and foreign policies involving military deployment and war (Naber 2008: 280–1).

But if the racialization of Arabs and Muslims remains somewhat ambiguous in the legal-political realm, U.S. mass media and Hollywood films in particular have been far less equivocal. Ella Shohat, for example, demonstrates that Arabs have been racialized via Eurocentric narratives in terms of visual representations, troping, and narrative positioning (Shohat 1991) while Jack G. Shaheen examines Hollywood’s creation of an Arab phenotype over the last century (Shaheen 2000). The on-screen Arab has dark features (skin, hair, eyes), a distinguished hook-nose, “exotic” clothing (veil, bellydancing outfits, keffiyeh, etc.), and conforms to a limited number of cultural tropes (greedy, rich, corrupt oil sheik, fanatical, violent, religious beliefs, terrorist, etc.) (Shaheen 2000). In reality, of course, Arab and Muslim “looks” span the racial spectrum and cannot be reduced to one “type.” The ironic result is that the U.S. media has produced a conflated Arab/Muslim “look” that is both narrow enough to mark people for exclusion and discrimination yet also expansive enough to erroneously include Indians, Pakistanis, and Iranians—as evidenced by “mis-directed” hate crimes during the Gulf War and after 9/11.

Casting for TV dramas and films has historically contributed to this conflation and confusion. TV dramas participate in the construction of a phenotype and the fiction of an Arab or Muslim “race” and hence the notion that Arabs and Muslims can be racially profiled. In *Sleeper Cell*, the lead terrorist is Arab/Muslim but portrayed by an Israeli-Jewish actor, Oded Fehr, who has played Arab roles before, most notably in *The Mummy* films (1999 and 2001). In season 2 of *24*, the Arab terrorist is played by Francesco Quinn, who is Mexican American (his father, Anthony Quinn, also often played Arab characters). During the fourth season of *24*, the Arab/Muslim terrorist is Marwan Habib, played by Arnold Vosloo, a South African actor who also appeared (as an ancient Egyptian) in *The Mummy* (1999 and 2001). Terrorists on other shows have been portrayed by Nestor Serrano who is Latino, Tony Plana who is Cuban American, and Anil Kumar who is South Asian. *24*’s “good Arab-American” counter-terrorism agent, Nadia Yassir, is played by Marisol Nichols, who is Mexican-Hungarian-Romanian. Most of the actors who have played Arab/Muslim terrorists, at least in the last decade, are Latinos, South Asians, and Greeks. Junaid Rana examines how Pakistanis have been conflated as Middle Eastern in post-9/11 visual culture through the construction of a racialized Muslim that both produces and contains the threatening Muslim figure (Rana 2012). Through a critical analysis of visual technologies of racialization, Rana demonstrates how the figure of the Muslim is rendered as a geographically and historically legible racial target, which is then deployed to depict Pakistani migrants in the West as potential terrorists.

The point here is not that only Arabs should portray Arab characters, but rather that casting lends itself to the visual construction of an Arab/Muslim race that supports the conflation of Arab and Muslim identities. As a result, it is commonly assumed among the U.S. populace that Iranians and Pakistanis are Arab and that all Arabs are Muslim and all Muslims Arab, despite the fact that there are 1.2 billion Muslims worldwide and that only about 15–20 percent of them are Arab. This construction of a conflated Arab/Muslim
“look” in turn supports (intentionally or not) policies like racial profiling by doing the ideological work of matching certain “looks” with categories deemed threatening and dangerous. Such representations make it difficult to disentangle the Arab/Muslim conflation and to speak with more precision.

Why are these categories interchangeable when most Muslims are not Arab? This conflation enables a particular racial othering that would not operate in the same way through another conflation, such as, for example, Arab/Christian, Arab/Jew, or Indonesian/Muslim. The result is particularly damaging because it flattens the inherent—and enormous—variety of the world’s Muslim population, projecting all Muslims as one very particular type: fanatical, misogynistic, anti-American. This recurring conflation, advanced by United States government and media discourses, both historically and in the long aftermath of 9/11, constructs an evil Other that can be powerfully and easily mobilized during times of war. The Arab/Muslim conflation has been strategically useful to American empire building during the War on Terror precisely because it comes with historical baggage. It draws on centuries-old Orientalist narratives of patriarchal societies and oppressed women, of Muslim fundamentalism and anti-Semitism, of irrational violence and suicide bombings. This already-established conflation, in turn, makes possible the portrayal of the US as the inverse of everything that is “Arab/Muslim”: the United States is thus equal and democratic, culturally diverse and civilized, home to progressive men and liberated women, and violent only when attacked or protecting democracy.

Regarding the overall impact of such representations, Tim Jon Semmerling argues in ‘Evil’ Arabs in American Popular Film that portrayals of Arabs in U.S. cinema reveal more about American Orientalist fears than about actual Arabs (Semmerling 2006). Karin Gwinn Wilkins’ Home/Land/Security: What We Learn about Arab Communities from Action-Adventure Films conducts focus groups to determine how Americans perceive Arab villains in action-adventure films, and particularly their perception of Arabs as threats to U.S. national security, fear of the Middle East, and U.S. heroes who conquer the Arab threat (Wilkins 2008). She reveals the undisputable link between media representations and their lived consequences in terms of discriminatory perceptions and practices.


Over the last century, Arab/Muslim men have most often been represented as romantic sheiks, rich oil sheiks, and most notably, terrorists. Arab/Muslim women have been portrayed as sultry belly dancers, harem girls, and oppressed women. Early silent films that represented the Middle East, such as Fatima (1897), The Sheik (1921), and The Thief of Baghdad (1924), portrayed the region as far away, exotic, and magical; a place of Biblical stories and fairy tales; a desert filled with genies, flying carpets, mummies, belly dancers, harem girls, and rich men living in opulent palaces (or equally opulent tents). In Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People, Jack G. Shaheen documents nearly 1,000 Hollywood films and their representations of Arabs and Muslims. He describes the “fictional Arabia” projected by Hollywood in the 1920s–60s as consisting of deserts, camels, scimitars, palaces, veiled women, belly dancers, concubines held hostage, slave markets, and Arab men who seek to rape white women (Shaheen 2000: 8). Films during this period—notably, made while parts of the Middle East were colonized by European powers—reflect the fantasies of the colonizers and a logic that legitimizes colonialism (Shohat and Stam 1994). It was not unusual for both “good” and “bad” Arabs to be represented and for a white man...
to save the day by saving the good Arabs from the bad, freeing the female Arab slaves from their captors, and rescuing white women from Arab rapists.

The year 1945 was an important historical moment that marked the decline of European colonialism at the end of WWII, the beginning of the Cold War, the creation of Israel (in 1948) in the shadow of the Holocaust, and the emergence of the United States as a global power. As the United States began its geopolitical ascendancy, representations of the “foreign” contributed to the making of American national identity; the projection of erotic and exotic fantasies onto the Middle East began to shift to more ominous representations of violence and terrorism (Edwards 2005). Representations of Arabs/Muslims as terrorists emerge with the inauguration of the state of Israel in 1948, the Arab-Israeli war and subsequent Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories in 1967, and the formation of Palestinian resistance movements. As Jack G. Shaheen writes:

The image began to intensify in the late 1940s when the state of Israel was founded on Palestinian land. From that preemptive point on—through the Arab-Israeli wars of 1948, 1967, and 1973, the hijacking of planes, the disruptive 1973 Arab oil embargo, along with the rise of Libya’s Muammar Qaddafi and Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini—shot after shot delivered the relentless drum beat that all Arabs were and are Public Enemy No. 1.

(Shaheen 2001: 28–9)

From the late 1940s into the 1970s and 1980s, images of Arab men shifted from romantic and dangerous sheikhs to new images of rich, flashy oil sheikhs who threaten the U.S. economy and dangerous terrorists who threaten national security (Shaheen 2001: 21). These images, Shaheen writes, “regularly link the Islamic faith with male supremacy, holy war, and acts of terror, depicting Arab Muslims as hostile alien intruders, as lecherous, oily sheikhs intent on using nuclear weapons” (Shaheen 2001: 9). As for representations of Arab women, before WWII, they were portrayed as alluring harem girls and belly dancers (Jarmakani 2008). After WWII, images of Arab women largely disappeared from the representational field, but in the 1970s they reemerged as sexy but deadly terrorists and in the 1980s as veiled and oppressed (Yunis and Duthler 2011). After the 1990–1 Gulf War, Arab women were rendered invisible once again in the U.S. media. Therese Saliba writes that this was effected in two ways: they were either not represented, or when they were, it was only to accentuate their invisibility and therefore to support “neocolonial interests of the new world order and the U.S. media’s repression of the war’s destruction” (Saliba 1994: 126).

As for primetime television, Jamie Farr on M.A.S.H. (1972–83) and Hans Conreid on The Danny Thomas Show (1953–71) are the only consistent and non-stereotypical Arab-American characters in the history of U.S. television (until more recently, as I will discuss at the end of this chapter). Arab-American actors, such as Wendy Malik, Kathy Najimy, F. Murray Abraham, and Tony Shalhoub, appear on television and film, but rarely in roles as Arab Americans. Representations in television mirror those in film and other mediums of popular culture. In The TV Arab, Jack Shaheen examines children’s cartoons, police dramas, and comedy shows on U.S. television from 1975 through 1984, identifying depictions of Arabs as billionaires, bombers, and belly dancers. He writes, “Television tends to perpetuate four basic myths about Arabs: they are all fabulously wealthy; they are barbaric and uncultured; they are sex maniacs with a penchant for white slavery; and they revel in acts of terrorism” (Shaheen 1984: 4).
Significant shifts toward portraying Arabs and/or Muslims as terrorists in the 1970s are not only evident in Hollywood filmmaking and TV shows but also in the U.S. corporate news media. Melani McAlister in *Epic Encounters* argues that Americans’ association of the Middle East with the Christian Holy Land or Arab oil wealth shifted to a place of Muslim terror through news reporting on the Munich Olympics (1972), the Arab oil embargo (1973), the Iran hostage crisis (1979–80), and airplane hijackings in the 1970s and 1980s (McAlister 2001). Between 1968 and 1976, Palestinians and Palestinian sympathizers led 29 hijackings, forming a central part of the U.S. news cycle and becoming a popular theme in Hollywood films in the 1970s and 1980s (McAlister 2001: 182). The news media came to play a crucial role in making the Middle East, and Islam in particular, meaningful to Americans as a place that breeds terrorism.

The Iran hostage crisis was a key moment in conflating Arab, Muslim, and Middle Eastern identities. Though Iran is not an Arab country, during the hostage crisis Iran came to stand for Arabs, the Middle East, Islam, and terrorism—all of which came to be used interchangeably. Edward Said’s examination of how the news media reported the Iran hostage crisis demonstrates case after case of biased portrayal of Islam: “During the past few years, especially since events in Iran caught European and American attention so strongly, the media have therefore covered Islam: they have portrayed it, characterized it, analyzed it, given instant courses on it, and consequently they have made it ‘known’” (Said 1997: i). “Knowing Islam” in the US came to mean knowing fundamentalism and terrorism. The monolithic portrayal of Islam as threatening reduces a diverse and dynamic Islam, including its varied followers and their experiences, into something unknown and unknowable.

This genealogy of the emergence of the Arab terrorist threat in the U.S. commercial media reveals that while 9/11 is a new historical moment, it is also part of a longer history in which viewers have been primed by the media for decades to equate Arabs and Muslims first with dissoluteness and patriarchy/misogyny and then with terrorism.

**Representations Post-9/11**

Many authors note a more ambivalent portrayal of Arabs and Muslims post-9/11; specifically, some notable improvements on the one hand, but the continuation of harmful stereotypes on the other. In *Guilty: Hollywood’s Verdict on Arabs after 9/11*, Jack Shaheen acknowledges some films (e.g., *Babel* (2006) and *Rendition* (2007)) for their relatively more complex portrayals of Arabs and Muslims, but also notes more ominous portrayals in Hollywood films and TV dramas in which Arabs and Muslims are turned into the new “bogeymen” (Shaheen 2008). He argues that such depictions have facilitated U.S. interventionist policies in the Middle East, such as going to war in Iraq in 2003. Brigitte Nacos and Oscar Torres-Reyna in *Fueling Our Fears: Stereotyping, Media Coverage and Public Opinion of Muslim Americans* show how the news media after 9/11 was responsible at times for promoting stereotypes and discriminatory policies (e.g., referring to torture at Abu Ghraib prison as “abuse” instead of “torture”), while at other times attempting to increase cultural understanding (e.g., emphasizing the need to protect Muslim-American civil rights and an increase in stories about everyday Muslim-American life) (Nacos and Torres-Reyna 2006).

My own book, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media*, explores how the multicultural movement of the 1980s and 1990s is a crucial turning point in the history of Orientalist representations of Arabs and Muslims. This period saw the introduction of sympathetic representations, a mode that has become standardized after 9/11 (Alsultany 2012). The post-9/11 shift is not one in which Arabs once represented solely as terrorists are now
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represented only sympathetically—far from it. Rather, the shift is from a few exceptional, sympathetic representations of Arabs and Muslims to a new strategy of making sympathetic representations a stock feature of media narratives. A few films in the 1990s—particularly *The Siege* (1998) and *Three Kings* (1999)—challenged the trend of representing Arabs and Muslims as one-dimensional stereotypes; these films offered a multidimensional terrorist character and included a “good” Arab or victimized Arab American for (almost) every “evil” Arab. In *Three Kings*, the “good” Iraqi character was educated in the US; in *The Siege*, the “good” Arab American works as an FBI agent. A similar trend is spotted in *Not without My Daughter* (1991) in which a “good” U.S.-educated Iranian helps Betty escape Iran. Crucially, the “good” Arab or Muslim characters are always either American-educated or choose to dedicate their lives to helping the U.S. government fight terrorism. When these films were produced during the era of the multicultural movement, these strategies were considered “new” and as “exceptions.”

After 9/11 these representational strategies, particularly including a “good” Arab/Muslim American to counteract the “bad” or terrorist Arab/Muslim, came to define the new standard when representing Arabs and Muslims. The TV drama, *24*, in particular, proved innovative in portraying the Arab/Muslim terrorist threat, while seeking not to reproduce the stereotype of the Arab/Muslim terrorist. *24* used a range of representational strategies to accomplish this, including portraying Arab and Muslim Americans as patriotic Americans or as innocent victims of post-9/11 hate crimes, humanizing portrayals of Arab/Muslim terrorists, and fictionalizing the country of the terrorist.

On the surface, such innovative strategies seem to effectively subvert stereotypes. However, a diversity of representations, even an abundance of sympathetic characters, do not in themselves “solve” the problem of racial stereotyping. As Ella Shohat, Robert Stam, Herman Gray, and other scholars have shown, focusing on whether a particular image is either “good” or “bad” does not address the complexity of representation (Shohat and Stam 1994; Gray 1995). Rather, it is important to examine the ideological work performed by images and the storylines beyond such binaries. If we interpret an image as simply positive or negative, then we can conclude that the problem of racial stereotyping is over because there have been sympathetic images of Arabs and Muslims during the War on Terror. However, an examination of such an image in relation to its narrative context reveals how it participates in a larger field of meaning about Arabs and Muslims. Despite such notable efforts, combating stereotypes is more complex than including positive and nuanced Arab/Muslim characters and storylines. In short, such efforts have a minimal impact so long as the underlying premise of the story hinges on an Arab/Muslim terrorist threat. While I acknowledge that shows like *24* and others seeking to balance negative representations with sympathetic ones took important steps to diversify their portrayal of Arabs and Muslims, we cannot go as far as assuming that such efforts actually solve stereotyping. Indeed, interpreted too rosily, such “positive” representational strategies can even become part of the problem if and when they suggest that racism is not tolerated in the US, despite the slew of policies that have targeted and disproportionately impacted Arabs and Muslims.

Many other post-9/11 TV shows use these strategies of sympathetic representation, from terrorist-themed shows like *Sleeper Cell* (Showtime, 2005–7) and *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011–present) to broader shows with occasional terrorist themes like *Law and Order* (NBC, 1990–2010) and *The Practice* (ABC, 1997–2004), reflecting the standardization of this representational practice. Still, representations of Arab and Muslim identities in contexts that have nothing to do with terrorism remain strikingly unusual in the US.
commercial media. There have been a few sitcoms and reality television shows that aim to break out of prevailing molds: *Whoopi* (NBC, 2003–4), *Aliens in America* (CW, 2007–8), *Community* (NBC, 2009–present), *Little Mosque on the Prairie* (2007–12), *All-American Muslim* (TLC, 2011–12), and *Shahs of Sunset* (2012–present) all offer broader portrayals of Arabs and Muslims. While the extent to which some of these shows challenge stereotypes has been debated, they are nonetheless examples of representations of Arabs and Muslims outside of the context of terrorism and homeland security.

What cannot be forgotten, however, is that at the same time that representations that challenge the stereotyping of Arabs and Muslims were being broadcast, circulated, and consumed, real Arabs and Muslims were being detained, deported, held without due process, and tortured by the US. According to the FBI, hate crimes against Arabs and Muslims multiplied by 1,600 percent from 2000 to 2001 (FBI 2001). Throughout the decade following 9/11, hate crimes, workplace discrimination, bias incidents, and airline discrimination targeting Arab and Muslim Americans have persisted. In addition to individual citizens taking the law into their own hands, the U.S. government passed legislation that targeted Arabs and Muslims (both inside and outside the US) and legalized suspending their constitutional rights. The USA PATRIOT Act, passed by Congress in October 2001 and renewed multiple times since, legalized the following (previously illegal) acts and thus enabled anti-Arab and Muslim racism: monitoring Arab and Muslim groups; granting the U.S. Attorney General the right to indefinitely detain non-citizens suspected of having ties to terrorism; searching and wiretapping secretly, without probable cause; arresting and holding a person as a “material witness” whose testimony might assist in a case; using secret evidence, without granting the accused access to that evidence; trying those designated as “enemy combatants” in military tribunals (as opposed to civilian courts); and deportation based on guilt by association rather than actions (Council on American-Islamic Relations 2002). To put it mildly, the explicit targeting of Arabs and Muslims by government policies, based on their identity as opposed to their criminality, contradicts claims to racial progress.

Certainly not all Arabs and Muslims were subject to post-9/11 harassment. Nonetheless, these multiple representational strategies do not in themselves solve stereotyping and racism, and can actually perform the ideological work of producing the illusion of a post-race moment that obscures the severity and injustice of institutionalized racism as outlined above. Such TV dramas produce reassurance that racial sensitivity is the norm in U.S. society, while simultaneously perpetuating the dominant perception of Arabs and Muslims as threats to U.S. national security. Though some television writers certainly have humane motives, and though some producers honestly desire to create innovative shows, devoid of stereotypes, such efforts are overwhelmed by the sheer momentum of our current representational scheme. So long as Arabs and Muslims are represented primarily in the context of terrorism, our current crop of representational strategies—for all of their apparent innovations—will have a minimal impact on viewers’ perceptions of Arabs and Muslims, and far worse, will perpetuate a simplistic vision of good and evil under the guise of complexity and sensitivity.

Notes


References


Further Reading