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# Behind the Scenes of the American Dream: Identity Struggles of Arab and Muslim Minorities in the U.S.

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Waiting for the lights to dim and the show to start, I shifted in my seat at the movie theatre in anticipation of a thrilling experience. After several weeks of endless class work I finally managed to find one weekend to satisfy my curiosity about a new horror film recently released. As it turns out, the film itself was not that scary. A preview of another film at the beginning of the show, however, was horrifying and left me in a state of uneasiness. My moment of thrilled anticipation died down prematurely as the trailer for the film, *The Dictator*, started playing. At first I was intrigued; the preview begins with clips of President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton giving speeches about nations living under the tyranny of a ruler. I obliviously thought to myself this might be an enticing documentary addressing the uprisings in the Middle East. But seconds later, I found out that my thoughts were so far from the truth. Clinton's speech is abruptly interrupted to show actor Sacha Cohen in a long beard and colorful clothing singing and making moves that can readily be identified as a mockery of Near-Eastern cultures, a blend of condescending misrepresentations of Middle Eastern and Indian people. As other spectators laughed out loud, I found myself raising my hand to my face, shading my eyes, as if ashamed of how my culture is misunderstood and misrepresented. I left my hands there as the preview continued to play more scenes oversaturated with stereotypical material about Muslims and Arabs. That film preview heavily weighed on my thoughts at that moment—and continues to do so today—bringing to the foreground issues that usually reside in the back of my mind. *The Dictator* is not that different from many other Hollywood productions that depict Arabs and Muslims with the most demeaning stereotypes. The new thought that came to me this time was about the effect of such portrayals on those of Arab and Muslim decent who live in America. As a US citizen myself, recently 'naturalized', I could not have felt more alienated from the American culture than at that moment when I watched the preview for *The Dictator*.

Over the course of almost seven years now living in the United States as a Muslim Arab immigrant, I have not been able to escape feelings of isolation within American society. Despite its

celebration of diversity, America pays attention to shallow details of cultures and disregards their particularities. It fails to acknowledge individual differences among members of those cultures, and traps them into two dimensional frames according to its limited vision of how a culture should manifest. Edward Said, a dislocated Palestinian who later became a US citizen and renowned scholar, described this feeling of not belonging within the American society as being “out of place”, a phrase he chose as the title to the memoir he wrote while suffering through his last years of Leukemia. Said had definitely been a leader in speaking out about the immigrant experience in the US, specifically about the Western view of the Middle East, or the “Oriental”. Through subsequent decades, many other writers ventured into this field, their literature shaped by developing events and shifts within the social and political terrains. Nonetheless, the challenge does not stop at being an outsider; adopting the U.S. as a new home brings with it complex questions between one’s identity and citizenship. Specifically, the Arab immigrant must struggle with the conflict between two irreconcilable identities, the Arab and the American.

A combination of personal experiences, my own ethnic origin, and various academic experiences I have encountered over the years have contributed to my interest in issues concerning Muslims and Arabs in the US. Without question, this is a broad, extensive topic; thus, the scope of this paper will be limited to three central questions. First, I ask to what extent are Arab and/or Muslim minorities challenged in the US, how did this challenge come about, and why does it persist today? Second, and stemming from those challenges, I ask what are the contradictions within the label ‘Arab American’ that deem the two identities irreconcilable? Lastly, I ask what attributes of the American identity further complicate the struggle of the Arab American? Resources used for this paper come from different discourses and research studies conducted over a stretch of time almost equal to a century. I will cite literature by notable scholars in the field whose expertise range from social theory studies to political science and anthropology. Since this topic pertains to individual identities, it is important to look at

personal experiences of Arab Americans documented professionally through case studies and edited books. As far as terminology, several wordings will be used to refer to the Arab/Muslim minority in the US such as Arab Americans, Arab-Americans, Arab American Muslims, and Arab immigrants.

Aside from the elements mentioned earlier that guided my interest to this topic, there are some other crucial factors that demand further examination of these issues. Notably, there is an obvious lack of in-depth research and awareness investigating the Arab American minority and the experiences of its members. This is rather surprising considering how prominent this group is, both as a population and in terms of impact on the global stage. Worldwide, there are approximately 300 million Arabs and 1.5 billion Muslims with an estimated 3.5 million Arab Americans and 9 million Muslims living in the US<sup>1</sup>, however, they are not fully-explored compared to other minorities. Lack of knowledge about this group could lead to misunderstandings escalating to hate crimes and prejudiced behaviors towards them. Not fully exploring this group ignores a vast part of the population and robs them of their place in society and a voice to assert their needs and concerns. Stereotypes expressed through the media tend to shape the attributes of this group rather than the people themselves. Governmental policies are also allowed to target this group merely for their backgrounds and physical appearances, victimizing by such acts lawful citizens with clean records who ironically respect the US for its popular values of freedom and equality. Moreover, the youth of this minority are specifically challenged—at schools and within society at large—because of the burden of being misunderstood at a time when they are forming their identities, thus, not unlike any other child it is crucial to care for their wellbeing.

Given these dynamics, I will emphasize throughout this paper that a fundamental shift needs to take place to improve understanding of this minority and the context they live in. Specifically, I will argue that this can be achieved through an increase in educational material that is broad and up-to-date

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<sup>1</sup> Ayish, 2006, p.103.

on this group, and in general, curricula that promotes respect and appreciation for all the different races in American and recognizes them as essential building blocks of the American nation. Furthermore, awareness of the gap between American ideals of freedom and equal rights for all and the American reality today could be treated starting by eliminating racial profiling through ineffective governmental policies such as the Patriot Act. Also, diversity needs to be redefined allowing for a better understanding of Arab Americans and other minorities by celebrating differences instead of suppressing them through permanent procedures (e.g. prayer accommodations at school/workplace) not occasional methods such as diversity fairs or an 'awareness month'. And last but not least, the media will probably prove hard to change but aggressive spread of awareness about the stereotypical images promoted through news reports, television shows, and films might be helpful.

### The Challenge of Racial Classification

As immigrants flowed into the United States from all around the world, they were labeled according to their race or country/region of origin, e.g. German American, Irish American. Earlier waves of Arab immigrants arriving in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, reaching about 206,000 by World War II<sup>2</sup>, did not carry the label 'Arab American'; they were called Syrians, sometimes also named Ottomans since the Ottoman Empire was still in power then<sup>3</sup>. As such, Arab immigrants ended up assimilating to a great degree within the American society, and it wasn't till after World War II that problems began to surface. By the 1950s, Arab diversity had exponentially grown such that classifying them as 'white' within the American racial system, while it may or may not fit their physical attributes, definitely was a misfit when it came to the cultural and social implications accompanying the white label. Moreover, a main factor that added to the Arab misfit within the U.S. social system was the rising conflict between American and Arab political views especially with the rise of Israel, the US becoming its

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<sup>2</sup> Naff, 1994, p.24

<sup>3</sup> Suleiman, 1994, p.38

number one ally, and the political turmoil in the Arab region prior to and post-independence of its countries. As the Arab American identity was adopted, and more immigrants poured in from Arab countries of different religions, mostly Muslim compared to the predominantly Christian waves of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, conflicts began to arise. The American system of racially classifying minorities saw a shift in categorizing Arab Americans because of their increasing diversity on all levels; previously, the mostly Christian Syrians fit the white category easily. Furthermore, stronger affiliations with the Arab identity along with the increasing number of Muslims (Arab and non-Arab) majorly contributed to the dilemma.

The diversity of the Arab and Muslim populations and lack of understanding by outsiders of the different cultures within those populations creates ambiguity when it comes to identities of Arabs and Muslims. Aside from the geopolitical conflicts, there has been an image implemented in the American imagination about the Arab that portrays the latter as a backward, barbaric, decadent, and inferior other. This ideology is called American Orientalism and it builds on British orientalist accounts of what the orient is and how the West is superior, shouldering the burden of spreading civilization to those eastern nations. This view of the Arab became sharply inscribed in the minds of the American public, perpetuated by arts, literature, and media; it became implicit knowledge transferred over generations and an unquestionable truth. The historical account of Western oriental view of the East is best discussed in the light of Edward Said's book *Orientalism*. Said related that the concept of Orientalism originated within the European West, and the term within the American context has a different association likely with the Far East (mainly Japan and China)<sup>4</sup>. More specific to the French and the British, Said described the Orient as "not only adjacent to Europe; it is also a place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest most recurring images of the Other"<sup>12</sup>. Said saw that historical writings within the

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<sup>4</sup> Said, 1978, in *The Edward Said Reader* p.68

European culture not only expressed a will to understand what was non-European but also to manipulate and control what was manifestly different<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, hegemony disseminated this notion of the Orient within Europe, and subsequently in the Western world, not through forceful means but as tacit knowledge that is passed off as common sense, acting as a relentless force through political and cultural Western media that continue to spread implicit stereotypical images of Arabs and Muslims till this day<sup>13</sup>. In recent history, while colonial powers have still been major players on the scene in terms of viewing Arabs and Muslims as the inferior 'Other', the American presence has taken a central role since its emergence in a powerful position post World War II. This is noted by Said where he explained his narrative in *Orientalism* as heavily focused on the French and British accounts in the first place, but found it inescapable to discuss later the American Oriental role. Said believed that role fits, self-consciously, in the place of the prior pioneering powers especially with the consistency between Oriental narratives among the three: the British, French, and American<sup>6</sup>. The orientalist account, therefore, acted like an infectious disease, spreading a demeaning view of Middle Eastern cultures from Europe to the United States and efforts to heal it or at least contain it have been insufficient. This flawed view took over the minds of the American public deeming those of Arab and Muslim cultures to suffer from discriminating, degrading views till current times.

A conflation of different attributes –some not related to these groups but based on stereotypes– is used to solve the problem of identifying who the Arab is. One category with one label are constructed to classify all individuals that exhibit any of these attributes. In this case, the Arab, Middle Eastern, and Muslim identities are combined, distorting what each of them entails. Therefore, classifying Arab Americans has been challenging over the years. The American racial classification system depends mostly on phenotype; racial groups are built in strong relation to biological characteristics e.g. white,

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<sup>5</sup> Said, 1978, in *The Edward Said Reader* p.64

<sup>6</sup> Said, 1978, in *The Edward Said Reader* p.84

Asian, African. According to Directive 15 of the US Census the 'white' category is used to describe people having origins from Europe, North Africa, or the Middle East<sup>7</sup>. This includes Arab countries that encompass populations with a wide array of physical attributes, considering the wide terrain the Arab region covers. Arab physical attributes range from European-like whiteness and features to dark skin and African features. The inadequacy of the American racial classification system does not stop here; it is the notion of whiteness and 'privileges' associated with it that complicate the matter.

While some Arabs adopt their white classification—either because they identify with it or simply want to steer away from racial problems—many Arabs choose to identify with other labels to distinguish their ethnic background from the others. For some, however, it is not a choice; their physical appearance puts them out of the category the racial system classified them under (white) and there isn't another adequate label to define them. Therefore, neither do they reap the rights of being white nor the rights of belonging to an identifiable minority category, they rather become the 'invisible' race<sup>8</sup>. The dilemma for Arabs sometimes is that they are classified and treated as white, but when they display other racial traits through cultural or religious affiliations, they find themselves behind an invisible barrier separating them from the rest of society; they look like they can assimilate but their inner identities puts up that barrier to integration. So being physically white does not eliminate that conflict of assimilating into the American society it actually makes it more challenging because of going against the assumed expectations of what a white person is like or what kind of background he has. As racial identity is accomplished through interaction with others not through skin color alone, white identity arises from physical traits and ideological and cultural premises<sup>9</sup>, thus, it becomes apparent why the Arab does not fit the shallow 'white' classification.

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<sup>7</sup> [http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/fedreg\\_notice\\_15](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/fedreg_notice_15)

<sup>8</sup> Nadine Naber (2000) centers her article on this matter around the idea of the 'ambiguous', 'invisible' race Arab Americans have become through their existence in the US.

<sup>9</sup> Ajrouch & Jamal, 2007, p.3.

The blurring of lines between different identities often leads to the common misconception that all Arabs are Muslims and vice versa. In reality, this is far from the truth—the largest population of Muslims resides in a non-Arab country, and there are Arabs of Christian and Jewish religions. This misconception has been popular in the West for decades and to this day stereotypes of Arabs depend heavily on association with Islam. The problem is further complicated through the flawed Western view of Islam. Muslims are constantly depicted within negative frames whether as savages through Hollywood accounts, or as radical terrorists through news reports<sup>10</sup>. This slanted view does not encounter enough oppositional power that modifies it to reflect reality. The reality that those images are not representative of all the Muslim and Arab populations, rather, like any other group, there is an isolated minority committing violent acts while the majority is composed of moderate, peaceful people. As such, Islam is viewed as oppositional to modern liberal social and political structures, which are likely to be secular and, therefore, backwards and inferior<sup>11</sup>. As I will discuss later, this is a great obstacle in the lives of Arab Americans because the religious aspect is a major component of an Arab's identity.

Another category that is primary in the definition of the Arab American identity is politics. This is undeniable first of all because, as mentioned earlier, the rise of the Arab American label came about mainly as a consequence of rising sentiments of Arab nationalism especially in the aftermath of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Since then, American political involvement in the Middle East continued either directly, e.g. the Gulf War, or indirectly through continuous support of the state of Israel. What this entails for Arab Americans is that not only are they discriminated against for their religion, appearance, or racial classification, but they are also subjected to political racism. This type of racism has its roots in anti-Arab attitudes and behaviors that seek to marginalize Arab Americans and obstruct

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<sup>10</sup> Naber, 2000, p.9-11.

<sup>11</sup> Naber, 2000, p.17.

their participation in the political process<sup>12</sup>. The birth of the 'Arab American' label under political tensions relating to the oppositional political views of homeland and the U.S. meant that Arab Americans started to come together not only for their cultural commonalities but also to advocate for their political causes amidst a mainstream with opposing views. And that is when attacks on Arab Americans became more than racial discrimination targeting those actively working for Arab and Palestinian causes more so than the general Arab American population<sup>13</sup>.

In addition, media accounts have contributed greatly to the challenges Arab and Muslim Americans face. Hollywood has been doing its fair share of this task over the years through films such as *The Sheikh* (1921), *Harem* (1985), *The Siege* (1992), and even films aimed at children, *Aladdin* (1998). All these films were produced around periods of escalated political clash between the US and the Arab region. For example, during the 1990s, events such as the Gulf War, continued American support for Israel, and the bombings in Lebanon (allegedly accidental) propagated the release of such films<sup>14</sup>. *The Siege* in particular brought the threat of Arab and Muslim terrorism to the inside of the US intensifying the idea of the 'Arab enemy' and the Muslim and Arab threat to US security<sup>15</sup>. Such acts on behalf of American media continue to this day, maybe more so in 'comical' frames, such as in the film *The Dictator*. The impact of such images on Arab Americans is great because it is a resilient weapon that could act in implicit ways and under the claim of operating within the lines of fiction, it results however in a brainwash effect on the American public who is mostly ignorant about this powerful influence.

Although the American view of the Arab as an inferior has existed for centuries now, it has been brought under the spotlight recently, due several political escalations, popularizing the idea that now it is Arab Americans' turn to be the 'Other' in the American and Western context. Many have repeated

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<sup>12</sup> Naber, 2007, p.7.

<sup>13</sup> Naber, 2000, p.7

<sup>14</sup> Naber, 2000, p.10-11

<sup>15</sup> Naber, 2000, p.11

that back in times when African Americans were subjected to more discrimination the phrase 'driving while black' indicates how they were targeted as possible criminals due to common stereotypes. Now, the popular phrase 'flying while Arab' indicates how Arabs continue to be among the ranks of those treated as the threatening Other. There has been a trend since the beginnings of immigration to pose those who are not European whites as the inferior race; e.g. Asians, Africans, Mexicans. This is evident through laws passed over the decades to deal with the 'problem' of immigration such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 that barred Asian immigrants from entering the US until 1965, also the movement during the early twentieth century that deemed Jews and immigrants of eastern and southern European countries as racially inferior to European-Americans<sup>16</sup>. Arab immigrants' experience was not any different; residing in the US around the World War I time period they were considered "an inconvenience at best" to European-Americans and "a threat to the purity of the white race and US moral and public order at worst"<sup>17</sup>. Till that point, Arabs were suffering from the same prejudices other non-white minorities were subjected to. Discrimination against Arabs, however, adopted a unique journey later over the years with strongly coined stereotypes by the West since ancient times about the exotic oriental up until this day focusing on associations with skewed religious and political framings.

As the world started to open up to diversity, promote equality among whites and people of color, and condemn acts of racism, the Arab American situation did not genuinely improve; if anything it went further south. The issue of religious and political racism discussed earlier and the deeply embedded corrupt images of Arabs, Muslims, and Middle Easterners did not receive sufficient positive efforts to counter the unyielding negative forces reinforcing those images. Many Arab Americans did change some views of those within their social circle, be it college or the workplace, and on a larger scale in their communities through organizations such as the Arab-American Antidiscrimination

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<sup>16</sup> Behdad, 2005, p.11

<sup>17</sup> Suleiman, 1994, in *The Development of Arab-American Identity* p.40

Committee (ADC) and the Arab American Institute. Those, however, remain fragmented efforts that do not stand much chance against giant players in the media such as Hollywood or news networks such as *Fox News*, not to mention powerful political figures with anti-Arab attitudes. Rates of hate crimes towards Arab Americans skyrocketed post 9/11, so did discrete demeaning behaviors that are harder to report, especially when framed within the context of humor. Have such acts been committed towards other minorities, they would not have been accepted so easily. For example, one respondent to a study conducted by scholars on the subject spoke of his encounter with discrimination at the workplace saying:

I always witnessed discriminatory phrases from people around me when it comes to my religion or nationality. Once I was called to the office in [a fast food restaurant chain where he worked] in one of the managers' meetings. We were discussing positions in the restaurants and which person fits the most for a certain job. One of the managers said that I only know how to build bombs and blow up cars. That really upset me. What surprised me the most was the store manager who laughed and added her own comment instead, saying that hopefully, I am not planning to do something in the store.<sup>18</sup>

Such stories do not receive sufficient coverage; they are rather mostly discussed within institutions and among groups whose members are affiliated with similar issues, the problem usually fails to reach the American public and spread awareness about this form of discrimination residing and thriving in-between the lines of equality and antiracism defining the US nation. Now that the challenge for Arab Americans is established it is necessary to look further at the differences between the two identities, the Arab and the American, to place this challenge in a dynamic context and show how those identities are irreconcilable.

### The Contradictions in 'Arab-American'

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<sup>18</sup> Jadallah & El-Khoury, 2010, p.13

The identities of Arab Americans are too many to configure and lay out in detail, but there are foundational elements that affect, in a way or another, the identities of all Arabs living in the US. The interesting points lie in the details of what constructs each of the Arab and American identities, and those are definitely related to the racial, political, and religious frames mentioned earlier and will be elaborated on shortly. As is the case with all immigrants, an individual leaving his homeland to a new country will bring along values and behaviors, some he's aware of and some not. Similarly, an individual in a host country, such as an American, draws upon several contingencies in order to construct his identity and that of the alien Other residing next door, belonging and not belonging at the same time.

The Arab immigrant's understanding of the social system differs from that of the American. The reason behind this difference that still resides in contemporary times stems from historical events that go back to the Ottoman era. The Ottoman Empire used systems of religious identification for configuring social classifications<sup>19</sup>. Despite the emergence of independent nation-states the same system is still used to this day by Middle Easterners, therefore, it is common to identify oneself in terms of religion rather than race in Arab countries. In fact, in Arab countries there is a category for religion on personal identification cards, something would never be used in the US. In the US, the racial system is used with no relation to religious affiliation, and religion is not actively discussed like in Arab countries where it is even added as a subject to school curricula. Therefore, when the Arab immigrant arrives in the US he starts looking for groups to identify with usually joining a church or a mosque, but he also becomes aware of the racial system and tries to find a classification to occupy leading him to confusion over his identity; is he White, Caucasian, Other? This renders the Arab American group 'invisible' due to lack of fit for them within the racial system<sup>20</sup>. This is different for other hyphenated American groups where

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<sup>19</sup> Naber, 2000, p.18

<sup>20</sup> Naber, 2000, p.19

their categories of classification are easily defined (Asian, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, etc.), therefore, the disjuncture found in 'Arab-American' is not as pronounced for other minority groups.

American politics, especially the US foreign policy in the Middle East, has been identified as the main reason Arab and American identities stand in oppositional positions. Despite their diversity, one of the strongest binding forces among Arab Americans is their disdain for American foreign policy, which was not the case at all for early waves of immigrants during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries<sup>21</sup>. Early immigrants did not showcase close ties to their origins because the Ottoman Empire's control over their homelands did not give them much hope of going back; they needed to find a stable place to settle and raise their children. The conflicts among early Arab immigrants were mostly sectarian and they were in a race to show loyalty to their new homeland and did so by voting and participating in US politics, they even joined American forces during World War I mostly out of hatred towards the Ottoman Empire<sup>22</sup>. A sense of an Arab-American community began to form post World War I, especially after isolation from their homeland and introduction of the immigration quota system in the 1920s that established the size of the community, the realization there is no likelihood of going back home began to set in on a greater conscious level<sup>19</sup>.

By World War II, the Arab minority had been so greatly assimilated into the American society that the Arab ethnicity was weakening and even threatened of extinction; aside from occasional efforts to spread awareness about the Palestinian situation the Arab political identity was wholly American<sup>23</sup>. A major turning point came about with the establishment of the state of Israel, and not only did that arouse patriotic feelings in Arab Americans but it also brought some dislocated Palestinians to take refuge in the United States. Furthermore, the turmoil in the Arab region around that time produced highly educated yet discontented professionals in a search for a place to seek a more stable life and

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<sup>21</sup> Aboul-Ela, 2006, p.7

<sup>22</sup> Suleiman, 1994, p.43-44

<sup>23</sup> Suleiman, 1994, p.45

many of them found a promise of that in the US. Building up the courage to voice their political opinions, this wave of immigrants found themselves in an entangled position in the wake of the 1967 war that brought devastating outcomes for Arabs, and to Arab Americans' dismay the US position, Democrat and Republican, was fully and undeniably in support of Israel. This could be identified as a turning point where the Arab and the American political positions have been slowly shifting, splitting what used to be a similar direction to finally finding themselves conflicted each going in a contradictory way of the other.

Since that period, the Arab and the American political positions have been escalating in conflict through an era burdened with all sorts of clashes. In 1973, the oil embargo was yet another turning point to the worst where it encouraged the ordinary American consumer to imagine Arabs as a domestic threat. Then the situation slipped further downhill when the 1979 Iran hostage crisis reinforced American public perceptions of the dangers related to the Islamic world despite the lack of involvement of the Arab region in this occurrence<sup>24</sup>. Political turbulences inflicted the social context deeply were Arab and Muslim Americans became conscious of their isolated positions from the American mainstream. At best, the rest of the citizenry may be at moments engaged with the US activity in Middle Eastern politics but are rather quickly distracted by national issues, while the Arab American is continually involved in his homeland matters for it became an inescapable and an inseparable component of his identity<sup>25</sup>. To illustrate the disconnection felt on the political, and inevitably social, levels, Edward Said provides a personal account from his experience as a dislocated Palestinian residing in the US, saying:

I was at Columbia in the summer of 1967, and I had been awarded a fellowship at the University of Illinois, where I spent 1967 and 1968 at the Center for Advanced Study. Around that time I was serving on a jury. The day the war began, June 5, was my first day as a juror. I listened to the reports of the war on a little transistor radio. "How were 'we' doing?" the jurors would ask. I found I wasn't able to say anything—I felt embarrassed. I was the only Arab there, and

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<sup>24</sup> Aboul-Ela, 2006, p. 9

<sup>25</sup> Aboul-Ela, 2006, p.7

everybody was very powerfully identified with the Israelis. . . . My project for Illinois was to be a book on [Jonathan] Swift. But when I arrived in Illinois, I found myself in a difficult situation because of the war, I became increasingly concerned about my family still in the Middle East, and became increasingly aware of a part of the world that now had been thrust upon me<sup>26</sup>.

Said here provides a live example of the disgruntled, educated, Arab professional residing in the US who is suddenly jolted to face a battle that brings all the troubles of his homeland to the forefront and places them at odds with his new home, framing all his encounters within the Western context and penetrating to the deepest corner of his being, molding his identity into a shape that will always posit him as 'out of place'.

Through more recent history, political fractures between the US and the Middle East continued through the Gulf War, the Iraq War, escalations with Iran, and the events of 9/11. Furthermore, the persistent support for Israel tarnished the American image in the Arab World beyond restoration. Life for the Arab and Muslim immigrant became more and more challenging everyday with every news broadcast and every breaking story reaching the headlines. The incident that Said lived during the 1967 war got to be repeated over and over with every bubbling political event concerned with the Middle East and with each and every Arab immigrant living in the US. The public became so involved in those events, especially 9/11 that occurred within American domestic boundaries, and the impact became explicit socially through the public's responses which were in-line with political responses of increasing scrutiny over Arab and Muslim immigrants by rounding them up with laws that unapologetically targeted them in isolation of the rest of citizenry. A small fraction of the public chose not to go mainstream and instead learned more about who Arabs and Muslims are and found the acts of the government and the public to be spreading a radical image of a minority over a majority of billions. After such events the Arab American became too locked into this position defined by politics and the noise of propaganda to be able to identify with the American half of his identity. The American part of him is

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<sup>26</sup> Said quoted by Aboul-Ela, 2006, p.9

heavily involved in sorting people into categories as a method of configuration of his interactions with them, and his other half, the Arab, falls into one of these categories, a very unfavorable one in fact. Therefore, the Arab American is not left much choice; he's left at a fork in the road with one path leading to living in "unresolved sorrow" and the other to "mentally divid[e]" as a way to patch those two identities together<sup>27</sup>.

### Between the Preached and the Practiced

Aside from the deep fracture between the Arab and American identities, there is a paradoxical nature within the American identity itself that deems the life of any immigrant in the US more challenging. As Arabs and Muslims have been occupying the number one spot for many years in being the 'threatening Other', many members of this minority fail to resolve the mayhem they have been thrown into when dealing with the influx of negative images concerning their backgrounds and the violent acts that target them although they have been living the average life of any other American. They cannot fathom how the American government and the American nation who worship equality and freedom can commit extreme acts that push the immigrant, once welcomed with hospitability, to be among the ranks of those treated with hostility and categorized as a threat instead of a respectable member of the larger American community. Immigration has been at the core of the structure of the American identity, and ambivalent feelings and practices towards immigrants lend the American identity its paradoxical nature of welcoming and fearing the Other at the same time, torn between notions of xenophobia and xenophilia<sup>28</sup>.

The popular idea of the American 'melting pot' has been employed as quick-fix to the multi-faceted issue of incorporating the different ethnicities and races in the US into one nation. While it is used to showcase the diverse nature of the American nation, it hides implied notions of assimilation and

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<sup>27</sup> Aboul-Ela, in reference to Edward Said's identity struggles, 2006, p.15.

<sup>28</sup> Behdad, 2005, p.16-20

'domestication' of the variant cultures and characteristics of these races. As Ali Behdad states in his book, *A Forgetful Nation*, the idea of assimilation "as a more subtle denial of difference has been integral to how the United States has imagined itself as an immigrant nation"<sup>29</sup>. He continues to describe the function of assimilation where "cultural and ethnic differences were tolerated only to the extent that they could be melted into a single national form"<sup>25</sup>. Indeed this describes the situation for Arab Americans where only shallow ideas about the Arab culture are celebrated, from the tanginess of hummus to the exoticness of belly dancing, while the real essence of the Arab identity and its experience among different historical, political, and religious levels is overlooked and left to dissipate among the remnants of other cultures weaved into the fabric of the American nation. Aboul-Ela describes the specifics of an outsider's view of the Arab American culture saying it is one that:

sees it as music, poetry, fiction, and other fine writing infused with ethnic color, treating Arab American experience as a set of specific anthropological details related to cuisine, courtship, religion, language, and various social practices... it also underscores a basic form or structure holding these details together that parallels all other ethnic American groups and places Arab Americans into a vague American melting pot.<sup>30</sup>

Therefore, the idea of promoting diversity that manifests itself in such shallow images portrays minorities within two dimensional frames bringing the exact opposite result of what's hoped for pushing minorities further into isolation.

The American identity has long stood on the basis of America being the land of the free and an asylum for the oppressed. Over the course of its formulation and growth as a country however, there has been a legacy that continues till today of targeting minorities and subjecting them to aggressive means of control under the banner of maintaining the nation's security and prosperity. Those behaviors that have been marginalizing the other are tucked away while the thoughts of the US nation's hospitality are regenerated over and over to maintain a sense of national pride. Behdad describes this as historical "amnesia" toward immigration that is essential to the construction of the myth of

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<sup>29</sup> 2005, p.12

<sup>30</sup> 2006, p.2.

“immigrant America”<sup>31</sup>. He also asserts the importance of forgetting to the political project of founding a nation saying:

The benign myth of democratic founding refuses to acknowledge how the formation of the American polity was achieved through the violent conquest of Native Americans, the brutal exploitation of enslaved Africans, and the colonialist annexations of French and Mexican territories.<sup>32</sup>

It is not that these happenings are omitted or denied within the American history, they are rather rationalized through the fact that they happened a long time ago undercutting their relevance to the present; it is a sort of “cultural deletion”<sup>28</sup>, according to Behdad. The truth is, such acts against minority races still occur today but are accepted because political claims necessitate them for the sake of preserving national freedom and security. One example of this is the explicit adoption of racial profiling tools in the aftermath of 9/11<sup>33</sup> that openly targeted minorities for their names and appearances which posit them as possible threats to the American nation. The public rationalize the use of such measures for it became a necessity according to governmental and political accounts. Racial profiling, the way it became embedded in U.S. policies can be defined as:

...essentially a method of inscribing racism so it became the new norm that is the political rationality of the state. This is evident in the focus on "security," as well as the pervasive and widely disseminated terminological framing of the issues, for example "fighting the War on Terror," "preserving our way of life," and "protecting our freedoms." This type of inscribed racism in the state brings war to the interior of society.<sup>34</sup>

In expressing his frustration with racial profiling, author Moustafa Bayoumi in his book, *How Does It Feel To Be A Problem? Being Young and Arab in America*, ponders:

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<sup>31</sup> 2005, p.3.

<sup>32</sup> 2005, p.6

<sup>33</sup> This happened through the passage of the Patriot Act in 2001, and continued despite the ban on the practice of racial profiling in 2003 with “exceptions permitting the use of race and ethnicity to combat potential terrorist attacks.”(Bayoumi, 2008, p.4.) Also, “a substantial part of the Patriot Act was devoted to enhancing immigration procedures by denying to foreigners, immigrants, and permanent residents the rights of habeas corpus and due process and permitting indefinite detention of those who had violated any immigration codes, including those guilty of such minor offenses as overstaying a visa. The act also implicitly depicted the brown-skinned immigrant-including Middle Easterners, as a threat to the democratic nation, so much so that apocalyptic measures on the part of the state were required to eradicate the (terrorist) foreigner.” (Behdad, 2005, p.170).

<sup>34</sup> Jadallah & El-Khoury, 2010, p.5

But what exactly is a profile? It's a sketch in charcoal, the simplified contours of a face, a silhouette in black and white, a textbook description of a personality. By definition a profile draws an incomplete picture. It substitutes recognition for detail. It is what an outsider from the street observes when looking through the windowpane of someone else's life.<sup>35</sup>

While active members of their societies, highly educated individuals that lead successful lives or simply retired and retreating to their dwellings wishing for a quiet, normal life, Arab Americans are constantly subjected to racial profiling not just at airports and borders, but also at the workplace, in the media, and within their neighborhoods, through the looks and comments of those who cross roads with them and are apprehensive of this minority's intentions. Representing the Arab American label, how is it that an individual of this minority can be both, the fearful and the feared, the stereotyped and the stereotyper? He's the good citizen looking out for his country yet what he's monitoring is his own behavior and tendencies. The contradiction is evident again when this citizen is given the right to his freedom yet is boldly stripped of it at the will of the government, whenever it chooses to employ its apparatus of security. The Arab minority in the U.S. is still incapable of grasping where the other half of his identity really puts him, within the boundaries of the American nation or as a rejected body at its periphery? In search for their place in society, Arab Americans today are "...compelled, time and again, to apologize for acts they did not commit, to condemn acts they never condoned and to openly profess loyalties that, for most US citizens, are merely assumed."<sup>36</sup>

It could be argued that the biggest struggle the Arab American faces in trying to reconcile the two parts of his identity is that the American society, at different levels, obviously commits discriminatory acts towards Arab Americans without even acknowledging that the behavior could be offensive or racially biased. This is due to the normalization of these acts; the public is brainwashed with the biased images of Arabs and Muslims that not much questioning occurs to investigate their truth. The internalization of norms is a necessary stage in the socialization process, as it also builds solidarity in

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<sup>35</sup> 2008, p.4.

<sup>36</sup> Howell and Shryock as quoted by Bayoumi, 2008, p.5

group formation<sup>37</sup>, therefore, if one norm that shapes the American society is the acceptability of racial profiling and other acts marginalizing Arab Americans, how can an individual of an Arab minority claim affiliation to this group that has deeply embedded skewed images of his background and attaches demeaning labels to him without acknowledging any wrong doing? Arab Americans face such paradoxical aspects of the American society continuously; in fact one respondent to the same study mentioned earlier on this topic relates one such encounter:

Respondent #7 experienced these socially diffuse racisms at her university... "[one] time, and very ironically, a Vietnamese-American guy said to me 'Oh, [name], you could really pull off a suicide bombing here and no one would know because you look so innocent.'" She was outraged and responded that he was crossing a line, but that individual was completely oblivious that she may "really mean it." In this example, the non-Arab (ironically, a minority himself) could not conceive that his comments may be hurtful.<sup>38</sup>

I have personally experienced the confusion regarding the fracture between what American values are and how, when the notions of Arab and Islam are involved, these values retreat and a behavior telling of different morals arises. It happened during the years 2007-2009, around the time when then Senator Barack Obama was running for the U.S. presidential election. It struck me the way his opponents challenged him; they kept mentioning how his middle name is Hussein, and how he had Islamic roots. Obama and his proponents, in his 'defense', reiterated how he's Christian and his name is due to his Kenyan origin, not Arab. Not only were the 'accusations' ridiculous, but the fact that they were regarded as convictive and there was a need for Obama and his proponents to steer away from such claims that could taint his image is outrageous. As far as I knew, there were not any provisions in the qualifications for presidency that deal with the religion of the candidate nor are there any restrictions on the candidate's ethnic background as long as he/she is American-born. Until this day I cannot understand how the dynamics of that situation were not met with any strong reactions that would expose how discriminating against Arabs and Muslims have become such a norm that extends to

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<sup>37</sup> Jadallah & El-Khoury, 2010, p.18

<sup>38</sup> Jadallah & El-Khoury, 2010, p.14

prevent them from their legal rights as citizens. How would, for example, an attempt by an American citizen with affiliations to these minority groups yet with all the right qualifications to run for presidency be met? If not by total ridicule, with no buy-in or votes from the public. The odds will likely become more favorable however if the candidate was a Jew, a Buddhist...etcetera, with a Chinese, German, African...etcetera ethnicity. That definitely was the case for President Obama; the whole nation was enthused on the day of his inauguration, proud of the fact that he is the first African American President of the United States. Will a similar moment come for an Arab American? Probably not any time soon, the Arab American minority may need to live through another century or two, as African Americans have, waiting for their marginalization and depiction as the dangerous, inferior Other to subside.

#### Concluding Thoughts

The Arab American population continues to grow and complexity of its life in the US is far from diminishing. This group is working hard to dispel all the wrong images and beliefs associated with it and with the Arab and Islamic world in general. As made evident through the course of this paper, nonetheless, a rigid shield stands between those minorities and the American public. It is a barrier that has been built brick by brick over the years through misrepresentations reinforced time and again by those who have personal interest in doing so consciously or simply due to plain ignorance. The Arab American story is unique compared to that of other minorities because it is entangled in a web of political and religious influences and is majorly shaped by continuing wars and other violent conflicts. The Arab American also finds it hard to define his place within the U.S. society due to his diverse composure that deems the American racial system obsolete in defining where he fits among the ranks of the nation. An Arab could be white, brown, or black, Muslim, Christian, or Jew, originating from a country on the Asian or African continent. Such diversity is beyond the bounds of being confined within one label: Arab, Middle Eastern, or Muslim. Nevertheless, such diversity is dismissed in the American context and rather reduced to an oversimplified, mystical, and flawed representation that is easier to

deal with. Such attitudes are concerning and alarming; not only do they dehumanize this minority but they also push a sizable population of the American nation estimated in millions to the periphery, deeming them to a life full of continuous struggles on a land where they have been legally allowed to live and they regard as home.

Concurrently, the Arab-American label itself, while at face value seems adequate to describe this group, inherently is laden with contradictions. Other than the reality of disjointedness between the two identities, the Arab and the American, the thought of assigning different races constructing the American nation hyphenated labels is in and of itself misguided. This is no new thought; in 1916 John Dewey discussed the issue of what really constructs an American identity and how the society can best handle it in his published work *Nationalizing Education*. Dewey asserts:

In what rightly objected to as hyphenism the hyphen has become something which separates one people from other peoples-and thereby prevents American nationalism. Such terms as Irish-American or Hebrew-American or German-American are false terms because they seem to assume something which is already in existence called American, the typical American, is himself a hyphenated character. This does not mean that he is part American, and that some foreign ingredient is then added. It means that, as I have said, he is international and interracial in his make-up. ...The point is to see to it that the hyphen connects instead of separates.<sup>36</sup>

If this mentality was implemented in the American culture since its formation, minorities might have had a different journey navigating their new homeland, a less difficult one that is. What would be beneficial now, however, is to reflect upon these matters and assess what could be done differently in order to promote the right kind of inclusion and diversity among all races and ethnicity. It is easier said than done no wonder, but a first step needs to be taken and it's probably best to do so through education.

To overcome a problem there needs to be awareness about its existence. In the context of the struggles of Arabs Americans, there is definitely a lack of awareness about the issues this minority faces and major actions need to take place within communities to start bridging the gap between what the American public thinks and what the reality of the Arab American experience is like. Educational institutions would be one place that could host such actions. Dewey again provides useful insights on

this matter concerning American education, he explains: “In short, unless our education is nationalized in a way which recognizes that the peculiarity of *our* nationalism is its internationalism, we shall breed enmity and division in our frantic efforts to secure unity.”<sup>39</sup> Isn't it true this is what is happening in the U.S. today, as different measures are hastily implemented and changed in order to accommodate all the ethnicities in America yet the chaotic nature of these attempts are only producing hit and miss results? The educational curriculum concerning different races and ethnicities, from elementary schools to higher level institutions needs an overhaul to see impactful results that are more successful when dealing with diversity issues. Not only do such curricula need to provide more in-depth information about different nations but also cover a wider scope of years, relating history yet keeping the present relevant. Also, in the studies of American history itself, there is little if any mention of the Arab immigrant groups that arrived into the states, how they were treated, and what kind of experiences they lived. The lack of the inclusion of the Arab and Islamic cultures in educational materials not only leads to misinformed generations but also affects the youth of these minorities; it leads them to feel they are outsiders to the American structure and that a significant part of their identities is ignored<sup>40</sup>. Furthermore, the lack of inclusion of Arab and Islamic contribution within the American story contributes to the perception that these groups are not part of what it means to be an American<sup>36</sup>.

There are countless agonizing instances that Arab American youth experience due to the ignorance about their backgrounds in their environments. This adds a burden on these children and young adults of constantly having to explain integral parts of their personalities. For example, one Arab American Muslim related the following concerning his fasting of the holy month of Ramadan and what kinds of reactions he gets at school, he says:

They always make the same ignorant comments every year- like, “That’s crazy that you starve yourself” and “if you eat lunch nobody’s going to find out.” They just don’t get why we are supposed to fast and pray, so I have to explain over and over to them. I mean, I get tired of

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<sup>39</sup> 1916, in *The Essential Dewey: Pragmatism, Education, Democracy*, volume 1, p.267

<sup>40</sup> Ayish, 2006, p.92-3

explaining all the time, but I guess it's okay as long as they listen. It's important to show them what we believe.<sup>41</sup>

Another common misconception that can be corrected through more valuable education relates to the hijab or headscarf worn by many Muslim Arab women. There is a common belief that the hijab is a clear sign of oppression of women in the Arab and Islamic cultures, while if any individual who believed so bothered to ask a woman wearing it why she did, will find out that not only is it a religious and cultural garment but also, and most importantly, is regarded as a liberating practice for those women who choose to wear it.

While education can make a massive contribution to solving some ignorance problems related to Arab Americans it still needs to be supplemented with other non-academic tools to make an even greater impact. These tools relate to what has been called the "societal curricula"<sup>42</sup>, prominent in environments outside schools and dominated by popular culture, that is instrumental in shaping stereotypes and implementing them as mainstream thought within societies. The role of media, as has been emphasized early on, is major in constructing societal curricula; movies in particular have been recognized as "the most powerful tool to shape peoples' understanding of others."<sup>43</sup> In fact, the head of Paramount Pictures once said that "as an avenue of propaganda, as a channel for conveying thought and opinion, the movies are unequaled by any form of communication."<sup>44</sup> Therefore, the issue of continuous demeaning depiction of Arabs and Muslims in all sorts of films and television programs is a dangerous weapon that cultivates ignorance and even feelings of hostility towards those minorities, especially when depicting them as threatening, inferior, and unsophisticated. Due to strong players such as Hollywood and big production companies that do not cease to support the negative stereotyping of Arabs and Muslims, it might be hard to change what types of films or programs are produced and what

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<sup>41</sup> Ayish, 2006, p.90

<sup>42</sup> Cortes as referenced in Ayish, 2006, p.99.

<sup>43</sup> Ayish, 2006, p.86.

<sup>44</sup> Adolph Zukor as cited by Shaheen in *Reel Bad Arabs* and referenced by Ayish, 2006, p.86.

kind of images they convey. Nevertheless, whenever biased productions are popularized Arab and Muslim Americans should voice their concerns as loudly as possible, whether through sophisticated criticisms of scholars within these groups, or simply within each individual's immediate social circle at school, work, or any other environment, through written material or informed conversations.

Extra-curricular activities within and outside educational institutions are also crucial in shaping attitudes toward diversity. While all over the U.S. so many different initiatives are organized to spread awareness and tolerance among a wide array of ethnicities, many of them fall short. It does not do much for an Arab American to see shallow signs of his culture celebrated a few days out of the year when he still needs to correct views about his background on a regular basis and seek accommodation for events particular to his ethnicity that the majority of the public don't understand. As Arabs, the minority needs more exposure and opportunities to teach the public about Middle Eastern politics and views that are highly underrepresented through Western media. Muslims as well are in need of the same teaching opportunities to aid the public in understanding specifics of the religion and the people who practice it, instead of merely teaching basics like the five pillars of Islam, eradicating the ambiguity about who the Muslim is as a person. Furthermore, Muslims will have stronger feelings of inclusion if simple acts were implemented such as putting Muslim holidays on calendars and providing accommodations for conducting prayers at the workplace and at schools. Unfortunately, there is a barrier of fear that halts public institutions from carrying out such behaviors for the sake of persevering equality among students or employees, but the reality is this abstention is itself a dividing practice that prevents people from showcasing their differences, repressing integral parts of their personalities and breeding feelings of isolation that lead to the disengagement of those minorities from the public.

The disconnect between foundational American values and political and governmental practices in conflict with those ideals is hinted upon in different contexts, shining at times then fading away along with variant events happening on the local and international levels. This issue however needs to be

addressed from a new angle, one that frames it as a crucial matter concerning the social make-up of the American nation. Since the U.S. is built through contributions of citizens and immigrants coming from virtually every point on earth it would be unwise to break down the nation to a mainstream category dominated by white Europeans and have other races represent minorities, then, try to bring everyone back together under the umbrella of diversity and nondiscrimination. This social classification system itself in the way it's constructed is based on the notion of division among the people of one state. It is true that the American people have come long ways in implementing equality, but there still remain many problematic situations for minorities such as those faced by Arab Americans. If the American government, and in turn the American public, choose to collaborate with Arab and Muslim Americans instead of challenging them, understanding in the process what their concerns and aspirations are and spreading more in-depth awareness about their cultures, some challenges for these groups may lessen. This could be beneficial to the U.S. as well in salvaging its ailing relationship with Middle Eastern countries and mending its international reputation. The biggest hurdle to reconciling the Arab and the American identities will always reside in politics where challenges are wide spread over the years and in terms of the scope of conflicts the two sides are involved in. It is a complication that has been nurtured by several prominent figures and global events, and inflated through social entanglements and cultural clashes, but other minorities that managed to improve their interactions with the American public have gone through similar problems. Thus, hopes are not to be completely disregarded for Arab Americans, yet intense efforts need to be invested in order to start shifting the odds of this group towards a future less laden with challenges and promising of more understanding, respect, and inclusion.

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