

The Minority of Suspicion: ARAB AMERICANS

By Tami Al-Hazza and Bob Lucking

Introduction

In February of 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which labeled Japanese Americans unfit for service in the military of the United States, and this 4-C assignment left them with a designation as “enemy aliens.” Approximately 110,000 people of Japanese descent, mostly U.S. citizens, were forcibly moved from their homes to ten internment camps scattered throughout rural areas of this country. First made to live in temporary quarters of every description, they were later housed in barracks surrounded by barbed wire and armed guards. They were incarcerated without due process of law—even though no one was arrested for, or found guilty of, committing a crime. More than 60 years later, a congressman from North Carolina who heads a homeland security subcommittee said on a radio call-in program that he agreed with Roosevelt’s action. Although he disagreed with a caller’s suggestion that Arabs in America should be confined, Rep. Howard Coble, R-NC, insisted that Roosevelt had to consider the nation’s security (Associated Press, 2003).

While the vast majority of American citizens have no thoughts of reliving the past, these events remind us of the tendency of humans to vilify an entire people to define an enemy. We naturally feel more comfortable if we can identify, even if in the most exaggerated terms, those who would oppose us in the world order, and we are presently edging closer to a country with a minority of suspicion: Arab Americans. Through the development of stereotypes and myths, we have become, subconsciously and gradually, a society in which we are unsure of our neighbors but categorically certain of the perceptible breadth of our enemies. These broad brushstrokes of condemnation become more stark in light of a dreadful attack on innocent citizens, followed by a war in which America’s young men and women are dying all too frequently. And raising questions becomes eerily unpatriotic.

Yet confronting our own generalized stereotypes—the purpose of education—sets us free of imprisoning points of view. The notion that Arabs are terrorists and Muslims are fundamentalists is not new; renowned scholar Edward Said (1978) argues that these impulses have served the interest of colonialism in the West for over a hundred years. Said insists that orientalists historically targeted many dimension of Arabs’ way of life as a way of justifying their own political and economic interests. More recently, Neil Clark (2003), a British commentator, has called present-day events “The Return of Arabophobia,” in which Arabs are universally assigned as terrorists, anarchists, and criminals. Clark writes:

Arabophobia has been part of western culture since the Crusades...For centuries the Arab has played the role of villain, seducer of our women, hustler and thief—the barbarian lurking at the gates of civilization.

Arabs: A Diverse People

Contrary to this singular view of Arabs, a great deal of diversity exists within the community. Many false perceptions surround Arab cultures. For example, it has been inaccurately presumed that all Arabs are Muslims, that all Muslims are Arabs, and that the two terms are interchangeable, which they are not (Adeed & Smith, 1997). Islam is the predominant religion of the Middle East, and most Arab countries are located in the Middle East, but only 20 percent of Muslims are Arabs (Suleiman, 2000). The vast majority of Muslims are in South

Asia, Malaysia, and Indonesia. At the same time, there are significant Arab populations of Christians, Melokites, Maronites, Jews, Druze, and Copts residing in the Middle East.

The term *Arab* refers to individuals who speak Arabic and belong to the Semitic people with geographic roots in the Arabian Peninsula (Suleiman, 2000). Arabs constitute a diverse mixture of people. They originate from more than 20

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countries in Northern Africa and the Middle East (Schwartz, 1999), with their total population approximating 300 million (Elmandjra, 2004). Geographically Arabs are divided into three distinct regions: Northern Africa, Mediterranean countries excluding those in Africa, and the Arabian Gulf Region and Saudi Peninsula. Although each of these populations is Arab, they speak Arabic with different dialects and have slightly different traditions. Iranians, Turks, Armenians, Kurds, Afghans, and Pakistanis are not Arabs, although they reside in the same part of the world.

These regions also have a variety of climates and landscapes. The Arabic countries' climates range from soaring desert temperatures to cool mountains. Their governments also range from various stages of republican governments to emirates, socialist governments, and dictatorships.

Arabs also have a diversity of physical attributes. Arabs can be olive- or light-complexioned and have red, blond, brunette, or black hair. They can have any eye color.

Arabs make up all strata of society. The image of the fabulously wealthy oil sheik characterizes only a few elite members of society or members of royal families. Yet with all this diversity, Arabs are still united by a common thread of identity and a bond of heritage based on culture and tradition that dates back thousands of years.

Arab Americans: A Historical Perspective

Arabs have long-standing historical ties to America. According to Haddad (1983), the first recorded Arabs came to America to take advantage of the Homestead Act in the 1860s. Some Yemenis came after the Suez Canal opened around 1869, and other Arabs came for the Centennial Exposition held in Philadelphia in 1876 and remained. Aside from the trickling immigration of these scattered Arabs, there were three distinct waves of Arab immigration to the United States: pre-World War II (1878-1924), post-World War II (1948-1966), and 1967 to the present (Orfalea, 1988).

Pre-World War II (1878-1924)

The first wave of Arab immigration to America began in the mid- to late 1800s and consisted mostly of Christian farmers and villagers from the Lebanese-Syrian region called Mount Lebanon, who were motivated by economic stagnation in their homelands. They were not highly educated; however, they were not destitute in their country (Naff, 1983; Saliba, 1983). Their motive for leaving was not political or religious; they were drawn to America by the promise of riches. Most planned to remain in America for several years, long enough to make their fortune and send money to their families to help raise their economic and social status (Naff, 1994; Saliba, 1983). Some immigrants remained in America and brought their families over. These immigrants often opened businesses and became established merchants. Their children attended public schools and were raised speaking Arabic at home and English at school. In the after-school hours and in the summer, children helped in the family business by performing chores and running errands. Children

were shown how to succeed by thrift and hard work. They also learned the benefits of the extended family (Naff, 1985). Most families were very interested in their children becoming educated (Shakir, 1997). After the turn of the century more and more Arab-American children finished school, and with the progression of each generation some were able to continue to trade school and college (Shakir, 1997).

Post-World War II (1948-1966)

During this time, immigration slowed considerably due to strict quotas; however, after World War II, a second wave of Arab immigrants flowed into America. A large number of them were Palestinians displaced after the creation of Israel; Egyptians who lost land to the Nasser regime; and Syrians, Yemenis, and Iraqis fleeing political turmoil (El-Badry, 1994). Political and economic uncertainties characterized many Arabian countries during this time period (Naff, 1983).

1967 to the present

The third wave of Arab immigration, which began in the 1960s, has been called the "brain drain" (Naff, 1983). There were numerous factors, both in America and abroad, contributing to this influx of Arabs from around the world. In 1965 the loosening of U.S. immigration laws allowed Arabs to enter the country more easily, all the inducement many Arabs from war-torn countries needed to immigrate (El-Badry, 1994). These newcomers were more educated, often college graduates, bilingual, and more politically inclined. The vast majority were the "educated elite" in their country and somewhat Westernized. Many had received education abroad and decided to seek higher education in the United States. Many Arab professionals came to America under the auspices of the professional-preference clause of U.S. immigration laws (Naff, 1983). When they arrived in America, they established churches, mosques, newspapers, and meeting centers and emphasized the value of education to their children.

Current Demographics

The 2000 U.S. Census special report on ancestry entitled "The Arab Population: 2000" indicates that there were 1.2 million persons of Arab ancestry in the United States, an increase of approximately 40 percent over the last two decades. The Arab group with the largest population in the United States is Lebanese, with a total of approximately 440,279. There are also large numbers of Egyptian and Syrians, with each group totaling around 143,000 (U.S. Census, 2000).

Arab Americans tend to reside in five main states—New York, Michigan, California, Florida, and New Jersey (U.S. Census, 2000)—and to form communities based on nationality, village of origin, and religious orientation (El-Badry, 1994).

Previously many Arab communities were intent on assimilating, which resulted in the next generation being unable to speak Arabic. A growing movement toward ethnic awareness has developed in more recent times, which has helped to revive Arab Americans' interest in their cultural heritage. This

revival has resulted in more and more mosques being built in America and a renewal of interest in the Arabic language. Arab Americans are beginning to teach the next generation about their heritage, songs, food, dance, and language. Many college-age Arab Americans are taking graduate courses to learn Arabic and study Arab history. These students have pursued research topics and approached schools to teach about Arab history and cultural contributions as well as to combat ethnic stereotypes.

Before the Arab-Israeli War of 1967, Arab Americans were not a cohesive group, due to national and religious divisions as well as their own individualism. Since the war and in response to what some Arab Americans feel is anti-Arab sentiment, they have formed organizations such as the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, the Association of Arab American University Graduates (AAUG), and the National Association of Arab Americans. Three main research organizations represent Arab interests in this country: Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Research Institute, Institute of Arab Studies, and the Middle East Research Group. Research publications include *Arab Studies Quarterly*, *Arab Perspectives*, *Journal of Arab Affairs*, and *American-Arab Affairs*.

Arab-American Education

Arab Americans have traditionally been successful in the classroom. Overall, the Census Report on Ancestry (U.S. Census, 1990) indicates that Arab Americans as a group are more educated than the average American, with 36.3 percent of Arab Americans holding bachelor's degrees and 15.2 percent holding graduate degrees. The national average for all Americans is 20.3 percent earning bachelor's degrees and 7.2 percent earning graduate degrees. The educational attainment for Egyptian Americans is exceptionally notable, with approximately 60 percent earning bachelor's degrees and 26 percent earning graduate degrees.

The 1990 Census reports that 53.6 percent of Arab Americans are of public school age. A review of the literature reveals a scarcity of research about Arab-American students and their academic achievement.

Until the events of September 11, 2001, Arab Americans had been considered an invisible minority. Nieto (1992) attributes this to the fact that Arab Americans historically have not experienced educational failure to the extent of other minority groups. Other factors include the following: First, for a variety of reasons, Arab Americans immigrated by choice in smaller waves instead of in one massive influx. Their immigration has been relatively quiet with little media attention, and most Arab Americans have made a smooth transition to American society. Additionally, Arabs are not easily distinguishable physically. A study conducted by Al-Khatah (1999) of Arab-American schoolchildren from three major cities revealed that Arab-American students have had overall positive self-concepts. However, after the events of 9/11, this may have changed due to excessive stereotyping and constant negative images in the media.

Stereotypes

In an article entitled "100 Years of Anti-Arab and Anti-Muslim Stereotyping," Qumsiyeh (2004) points out that as early as 1897 Thomas Edison made a short film for his patented Kinetoscope in which "Arab" women with enticing clothes dance to seduce a male audience. This clip was entitled "Fatima Dances," and it marks the first of many instances in film of negative images of an entire subpopulation. Contemporary Hollywood films are replete with stereotypes of Arab villains; these predate the events of 9/11. *G.I. Jane*, *Operation Condor*, *Iron Eagle*, *Navy SEALs*, *Patriot Games*, *American President*, *Delta Force 3*, represent but a short list of films depicting swarthy Arabs causing mayhem. In yet other examples, *Executive Decision* boasted top-named stars in its depiction of venal Arabs, and Arnold Schwarzenegger made one of the most transparent and blatantly stereotypic films of the decade, *True Lies*. Although many American kids will remember this film from the vast number of times it has played as a rerun on television, few will even know that the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee attacked the movie for its depiction of Middle Easterners as homicidal religious zealots.

This consistent treatment of Arabs in films has become the trademark of the American film industry to such a degree that youngsters are likely to not even be aware that they are observing a dramatically lopsided pitting of good versus evil. Not since cowboys roamed the range killing bad Indians have such stereotyped images been a part of popular culture, and this idea seldom is raised in American classrooms. An even more egregious portrayal of the wild-eyed, evil terrorist can be found in *Siege*, starring Denzel Washington, Annette Bening, and Bruce Willis. This film shows FBI and CIA counter-intelligence leaders resorting to martial law in the form of U.S. troops (led by Willis) in the streets of New York City attempting to round up an entire people, shades of events of World War II. This film has spawned several prime-time television imitators.

Despite this plethora of negative images, positive, nuanced, and realistic images of Arabs can be found in "high culture" such as literature; the works of Nobel Prize-winning Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz serve as just one example. However, popular culture is more directly profit driven. Makers of Hollywood thrillers, like all shapers of popular culture, have resorted to easily identifiable antagonists who are at once immediately villainous and yet remotely plausible in the present geopolitical world. Rainey (2004) holds that part of the reliance on formulaic villains is the simplicity: "When writers want to portray a terrorist, or someone who is threatening, they put them in Middle Eastern attire, give them an accent, and make them look Arab. That's a stereotype used often because it's very quick and easy."

Arabs in Textbooks and Literature

Negative images of Arabs abound in print, and more significantly, in the print found in the classrooms of this

country. A venom-ridden debate rages beneath the surface of school politics over portrayals of Arab and Muslims in textbooks. The Middle East Outreach Council conducted a review of 80 social studies textbooks in the 1990s and concluded that many overrepresented Arabs as nomads, living in the desert in tents using camels as their major method of transportation (Barlow, 1994). While these living conditions were the case historically, less than two percent of Arabs now reside in the desert; the overwhelming majority live in modern cities with modern amenities. Textbook reviewers for the Middle East Outreach Council also found that in some texts Israel is portrayed as modern in comparison to its backward and nomadic Arab neighbors. The majority of textbooks also failed to recognize Arabs' contributions to society, science, medicine, and mathematics and the fact that Arabs sustained ancient Greek and Roman knowledge, translating it and preserving it for the rest of the world. These vital translations later helped trigger the European Renaissance.

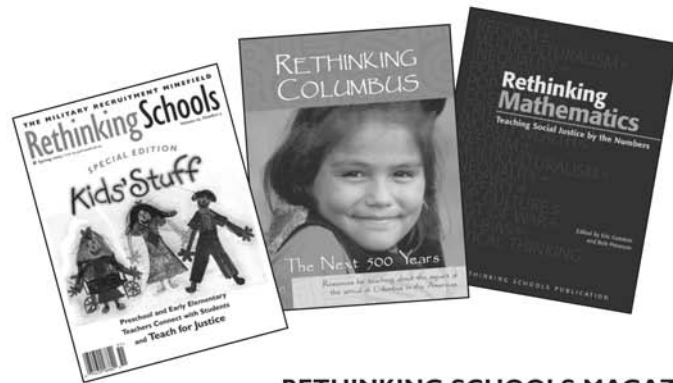
From a different perspective, one of the most ill-tempered attacks on textbooks' portrayal of Islam can be found in a report by Gilbert T. Sewall (2003) entitled "Islam and the Textbooks: A report of the American Textbook Council." This report accused high school world history textbooks as being too soft on Islam. The report continuously makes oblique references to "Islamic aggression" and the "militant goals" of Islam, which the author contends are unrecognized in textbooks. He also asserts that positive coverage of Islam and other non-Western civilizations is "plaguing the teaching of Western civilization" (23). Sewall, the director of the American Textbook Council in New York City, is no stranger to brawls over what students read. As a contributor to such publications as the *National Review* and the *Texas Education Review*, Sewall has proclaimed that textbooks are the product of "Venal publishers [who] cater to any bankable curriculum trend" (Sewall, 2004; 1).

Bias can also be found in adoles-

cent literature. A close examination of two books with the same settings and similar story lines helps illuminate the issues of biased and prejudiced portrayals of a cultural group. *One More River* (1992) by Lynne Reid Banks and *Habibi* (1997) by Naomi Shihab Nye both explore relationships between young Arab and Israeli adolescents; however, their approach and treatment of each

culture vary dramatically. *Habibi* has a recurring theme of cultural acceptance, religious tolerance, and visions of future peace. The protagonist is a young Arab girl who listens intently to her father's stories of growing up in Palestine where his neighbors were Jews and Greeks residing peacefully together. The father and his neighbors traded desserts every evening, always preferring a new des-

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sert to their own traditional one; this evening ritual helped to promote understanding and acceptance of other cultures. The girl muses:

My father used to wish the politicians making big decisions would trade desserts. It might have helped. He would stand on his flat roof staring off to the horizon, thinking things must be better somewhere else. Even when he was younger, he asked himself, "Isn't it dumb to want only to be next to people who are just like you?" (29)

In stark contrast, *One More River* revolves around a theme of hatred and mistrust. Arabs are presented as cruel and insensitive to female family members, animals, and each other. The Arab father in the story leaves at one point in the narrative, and the reader is told:

He left his wife and five small daughters behind in the village without thinking twice. They were women and hardly counted. He took his eldest daughter because he would need a female to look after him in his brother's house, so as not to have to depend entirely on *his* women. (225)

Arabs are presented as full of hatred and young boys inclined to daydream about, or to engage in, terrorist activities.

Other works of young people's literature portray Arabs and Arab culture in a more positive light. One accurate and positive portrayal is in *The Ugly Goddess* by Elsa Marston. A skillful and prolific writer, the author has recreated a remarkably accurate historical setting for this book about ancient Egypt. The story revolves around a strong-willed young woman named Meret and her struggles between doing what society expects of her and following her heart. Marston has written numerous other highly regarded books with similar positive images of Arab life for readers of various ages.

Another outstanding book that provides an accurate and unbiased image of Arabs is *Sitti's Secrets* by Naomi Shihab Nye. This story depicts a young Palestinian-American girl's first visit to Palestine to meet her Arab relatives. The story is told without cultural misrepresentation and with a realistic depiction of the people and traditions. *The House of Wisdom* by Florence Parry Heide and Judith Heide Gilliland is a delightful picture book that presents the rarely told story of how Arab scholars undertook cataloging and preserving ancient Greek knowledge. *Sitti and the Cats* by Sally Bahous is a beautifully illustrated and moving tale about an elderly woman in a magical land called Palestine. This woman shows kindness to a cat, and in return, the cat's family bestows a magical gift on the woman.

Educational and Online Resources

A plethora of other outstanding books and educational resources are available from numerous sources, ranging from online web sites to established organizations. Middle East Books offers a variety of books about Arabs and Arab Americans and traditional folk tales and stories. Among the hundreds of choices available are *Goha* and *Animal Tales from the Arab World*, both by Denny Johnson-Davies, and *The Travels of Ibn Battuta* by Abd al-Rahman Azzam.

Amideast, headquartered in Washington, D.C., is another organization that offers educational materials. Established in 1951 as a nonprofit organization to promote understanding of Middle Eastern cultures, this organization offers a variety of books and resources for educators. Among the books at the elementary level are *Cleopatra* by Diane Stanley and Peter Vennema, *Gods and Pharaohs* by Geraldine Harris, and the In Ancient Egypt series by Salima Ikram, which includes a set of five reference books. Log on to www.amideast.org for information about the organization and resource materials.

For interested educators, a variety of other sources of valuable information can be found on the web. *The New York Times*, for example, maintains a web site that provides lesson plan ideas for middle school and high school teachers with topics that address Arab Americans and other Middle Easterners. These lessons include investigating American policies after 9/11 and using skits to examine individual views toward Arabs. The web site is located at www.nytimes.com/learning/index.html.

Another web site to help students become more aware of the dynamics of cultural bias is sponsored by the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee at www.esrnational.org/teachersvsantiarabprejudice.htm. It offers ideas on how to offset the anti-Arab rhetoric that is saturating television and newspapers and intruding into the schools.

For teachers interested in factual information about Islam and Muslims, the Council on Islamic Education maintains a web site to provide accurate information on various Islamic holidays such as Ramadan, Eid, and Hajj. They also offer teachers' guides on Islamic traditions and holidays. This information can be found at www.cie.org/resources.asp.

Arab-American Cultural Resources

To provide accurate information to educators, Arab Americans, and the public at large, numerous organizations exist. The Association of Arab American University Graduates, for example, is a nonprofit organization founded in 1968. Its mission is to promote understanding and foster positive relations between the Arab community and the broader American society. This organization publishes *Arab Studies Quarterly*, hosts an annual conference on Arab issues, and offers study visits to the Middle East. To access a wide range of relevant information log on to www.araboo.com.

Another interesting cultural organization, the Arab Theatrical Arts Guild, was formed in 1997 and is comprised of professional actresses and actors performing classical theater in both English and Arabic. For details on performances and upcoming cultural events, visit www.arabtheater.org.

Arab Women Solidarity Association (AWSA) is an organization that promotes the participation of women of Arab descent in cultural, social, economic, and political life. This organization was founded in Egypt in 1982, and its primary objectives are to establish an international network of Arab women through general meetings and conferences, publish a magazine, offer social services to Arab women, provide for the welfare of Arab children in need, and increase the visibility of Arab women in the social, political, and cultural spheres. This information can be obtained on their web site at <http://awsa.net>.

Several Arab-American magazines and journals are available to broaden interested teachers' perspectives. *Al Jadid: A Review and Record of Arab Culture and Arts* is a journal written in English and includes art reviews, interviews, poems, and feature articles. More information can be found online at <http://aljadid.com>.

The *Arab American Journal* is published by a nonprofit professional association that fosters trade between Arab Americans and Arabs in other parts of the world. This online journal features links for children, poetry, news from the Arab world, and other items of interest to educators and the Arab-American community. The journal can be accessed at www.arabamerican.com.

Solutions to Combat Bias

To increase fair treatment of all minorities, teachers and administrators should try to ensure that Middle Easterners are represented fairly in textbooks and other reading material throughout the school curriculum. There must be a vigilant and ongoing evaluation of materials for negative stereotypes. While many textbooks in use by school systems contain misinterpretations and inaccuracies (Wingfield & Salam, 1993), reliable information concerning textbooks can be obtained from organizations such as the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee that have evaluated textbooks for accurate Arab portrayals. The Text Evaluation Project, conducted by the Middle East Studies Association and the Middle East Outreach Council, has evaluated textbook depictions of Arabs.

Teachers can make accurate information available to their students concerning Middle Eastern cultures. A list of organizations that supply prepackaged teaching units can be found through the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee. Racism, stereotyping, discrimination and human rights should be addressed in sociology, government, and civics courses (Wingfield & Salam, 1993).

Today's Arabs trace their roots to the Middle East and claim many different religious backgrounds. Though Muslims come from all over the world, these distinctions are blurred, and negative images about either Arabs or Muslims are often attributed to both groups. In arguing that today's treatment of Arab Americans parallels that of Japanese Americans during World War II, Saito (2001) asserts that the two groups were "raced" as "foreign, disloyal, and imminently threatening." The teacher's responsibility, therefore, is to critically examine existing cultural generalities and move students to a richer understanding

of all human contributions to contemporary life.

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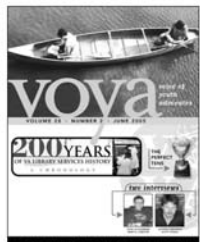
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Tami Al-Hazza is an assistant professor of education, curriculum, and instruction at the Darden College of Education at Old Dominion University.

Bob Lucking is a professor at the Darden College of Education at Old Dominion University. 

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