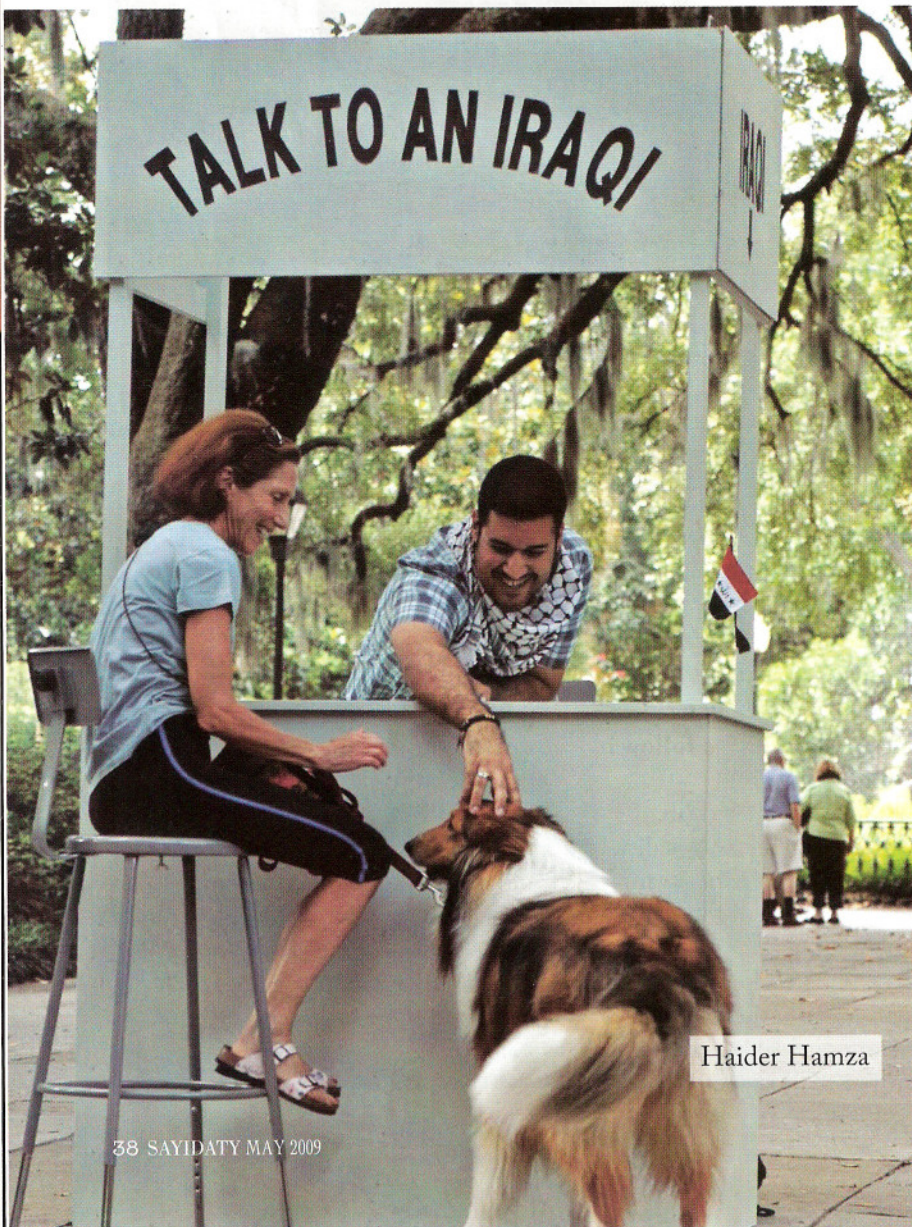


# ARABS STILL BATTLING THE MISCONCEPTIONS OF

# 9/11



Haider Hamza

In 2007 Haider Hamza, then 23 years old, arrived in the United States as a Fulbright Scholar from Iraq and immediately encountered the most prevalent misconception about Arabs in the US: that most Arabs are terrorists. At border control, they asked me: Are you a terrorist? Do you know anyone who's a terrorist? Is anyone in your family a terrorist?" he says. On a different occasion, a woman at an airport saw Hamza writing in Arabic and called a security guard over. "He's writing Islamic!" she told the guard.

**T**he widespread ignorance about the Middle East and the false portrayals of Arabs and Muslims in the American media has led to racism and discrimination against people like Hamza and even Arabs who were born and raised in the United States. In most instances the prejudice manifests itself in subtle ways, but sometimes it takes more drastic forms. That summer Hamza packed his luggage, left his apartment in New York, and drove across the United States, setting up "Meet an Arab" booths in 35 states and talking to locals in the American South, the Midwest and the West Coast. "The reason I did it is I figured that most people in the Midwest had never met an Arab before, and the only connection they have to Arabs is what they see on the news which is not a fair or accurate representation," he explains.

The people he encountered "were willing to talk and ask questions and they wanted me to listen to what they had to say," says Hamza. "They asked about everything from the dating scene in Iraq to religion to the US troops to

Saddam to Islam." Hamza adds. "I wanted to humanize my regional and racial and religious identities to them and separate them from other labels like terrorist, radicals, backwards or primitive or whatever other labels that have been imposed by the media or government propaganda."

The trip made Hamza realize how big the United States is. "When you talk about America and what America thinks - who are Americans after all? Who are you talking about? Are you talking about Ivy League people? West coast fashionistas? Recently arrived immigrants? Born again Christians? I don't want to generalize that Americans think that or Americans think this. But generally there are misconceptions built up by the media."

Many Arabs have never experienced such prejudice in the United States. Reem Jaghli of Chicago is one example. "I've lived in this country for almost 14 years and I cannot remember an incident where I was directly affected by discrimination or racism," she says. But "the fact that Arabs/Muslims are Hollywood symbols

of terrorism and violence makes me really sad." Unfortunately, Hollywood is not the only media outlet that portrays Arabs as backward and fanatical.

## The Role of the Media

Just before the November elections, 28 million copies of the movie *Obsession: Radical Islam's War against the West* were distributed by 70 newspapers as advertising inserts. The movie portrayed Arabs and Muslims as terrorists, and questioned whether any of them can be trusted in the US. Even though the movie claimed to be focusing only on the radical minority, the movie shows Walid Shoebat, "former PLO terrorist," stating that there are as many Muslim supporters of terrorism as there are Americans.

The New York Times, which was one of the newspapers that distributed this movie, ran a similar advertisement on January 20, 2007. The advertisement appeared on the newspaper's website for a CNN investigative series, reading: "Young Muslims

living in democracies using free speech to spread hate. Christiane Amanpour uncovers their plan." The name of the segment





was “The War Within.” The image behind the text was of a veiled woman. This month Fox News cited a study by the American Textbook Council, which argued that some American textbooks portray an inaccurate picture of Islam because they define jihad as “a struggle within each individual to overcome difficulties and strive to please God. Sometimes it may be a physical struggle for protection against enemies.” Daniel Pipes was interviewed as an expert on Islam, and he insisted that this is not the true meaning of jihad. “There is a history of nearly 1400 years of violent jihad that led to warfare, destruction, enslavement, devastation. It is a fact, it is a reality, and for history books in the United States and in public schools to ignore this is to ignore not just historical fact but the main security problem of the

United States today.” He says. Daniel Pipes became a household name after September 11, appearing frequently on Fox News and other television networks, writing for the neo-conservative FrontPage Magazine, and recently becoming a syndicated columnist for The New York Times. He is the director of the Middle East Forum, a right-wing think tank in Philadelphia which runs Campus Watch, a program that intimidates and discredits professors who do not condemn Islam, Arabs and Palestinians. Campus Watch contributor Eric Golub attacked a symposium on “Human Rights and Gaza” at the University of California-Los Angeles with an article he entitled “Jew-Hate at UCLA” in which he described the event as instructing “attendees on how best to spread anti-Zionism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Americanism.”

With Campus Watch, Pipes and his followers claim to “addresses five problems: analytical failures, the mixing of politics with scholarship, intolerance of alternative views, apologetics, and the abuse of power over students,” but their own work is often neither objective nor tolerant. In a recent article on Dubai, Pipes wrote, “Unable to impose their way, Persian Gulf Arabs are retreating into a Muslim ghetto with its own economics (including Shari’a compliant tools), consumer goods, media, transportation, fast foods, sports competitions, search engines, and even systems of keeping time.” Even though Pipes’ statements are clearly flawed, he is taken seriously in the mainstream media, despite the fact that hate speech and inaccurate reporting are normally unacceptable.



Lorraine Ali

Lorraine Ali, Contributing Editor at Newsweek, says “There are hardcore agenda groups in this country that put a lot of pressure on publications when they write anything that is perceived as slightly pro-Islam, anything that is basically pro-praying Islam in any other way than being a religion of fanatics.” “There’ve been misconceptions about Arabs going back really to the turn of the century,” Ali says. “Part of it is due to ignorance but at this point there’s been enough time to do the research.” Ali says that despite the political tensions between the US and the Middle East, Muslims and Arabs should still be portrayed as humans.

# Effects of Prejudice

The skewed media coverage of Middle Eastern issues has effected the lives of Arabs and Muslims in the United States in different ways. The Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee sees many cases each year where Arabs are harassed in the workplace because of their race or religion. An Arab American Lieutenant Colonel in the US military reported to the ADC that he “was questioned about his loyalty and harassed for his perceived faith of Islam” even though he is Christian. In another case an Arab woman in Philadelphia received a letter from her employee, Kia Reid, saying “you and your kids will die like dogs” and “Remember 9/11.” The ADC contacted the FBI and Reid was charged with committing a federal hate crime.

Even when racism does not translate into direct acts of hate or violence, it still impacts Arabs in the US. Omar Cheta, an Egyptian graduate student at New York University, says that he was never discriminated against in terms of opportunities, but “sometimes I didn’t feel that I was just accepted as another regular person, but as someone who has an exceptional background somehow.” Cheta says he does not follow the mainstream media, where prejudice is more “blunt,” but about the alternative media he says “There is a strong awareness about how people coming from this region are different in their worldview and the way they think. Sometimes this is apparent in the way that these programs are very cautious when they come to speak to Arabs. They want to be very sensitive but this oversensitivity is telling something.” “The desired situation in a society like this which is an open society and multi-ethnic and multi-religious is that individuals have some choice over which groups they want to be identified with,” Cheta says. “We have the right as individuals to reinvent ourselves, to belong to multiple groups at the same time. And to be constantly identified as one thing more than another, as being, say, an Arab more than being an academic or as being a Muslim over being American, this is a form of injustice. It’s not something physical or material but this tension is something that I’m sure

people feel sometimes.” Cheta says that he thinks about these issues often, and has found it easy to bring them up in discussions in academic circles.

## How should Arabs respond?

Cheta says that Arabs have many options in dealing with prejudice: they can assimilate, or they can assert their Arab identities. Alternatively, Arabs can be more aware of how they see themselves and their roles in society. “Our identities are constantly changing in different contexts. This awareness in itself might lead to better understanding. It might alert other people around us that they shouldn’t take our identities for granted.”

Ilham Soffan, who was born and raised in Massachusetts and now lives in Georgia, has noticed people treating her differently after they find out that she comes from an Arab background. She has also seen veiled women being treated rudely in stores and hospitals. “It got progressively worse. I don’t see it getting better,” she says. “I don’t think a lot of Arabs get involved in activism. I think if more did there would be more of an opportunity for there to be change. Many are very afraid. They’re afraid of being arrested. Everything is being monitored.” Arabs are also afraid of deportation.” She says. Laila Al-Qatami, Communications Director of the ADC, agrees. “Some people are afraid to report discrimination for fear of losing their jobs,” she says. “Some people don’t report it because they are afraid of retribution.” A family in Montgomery, Maryland has been harassed repeatedly and their house egged, but reporting the incidents to the police has not resulted in the end of these incidents.

Almost everyone agrees that there needs to be more accurate portrayals of Muslims in the mainstream media, and that Arabs should be more involved in making that happen. “How many [television] channels do we have in the Arab world, and none of them are in English,” Hamza says. “We are very enclosed within our own selves.” Instead he suggests that we take a more proactive role in educating others about the Middle East and Islam, and presenting the image of ourselves that we want others to see. One way to do that, he says, is by setting up cultural institutes where Americans can go to learn about the Arab world.

Lorraine Ali thinks that Arabs in the US should be more involved in the media despite the challenges. “I want all the mothers and fathers to hear this: It’s important for your children to be doctors or lawyers, but journalism or the media or TV journalism—these are really important as well,” she says. “I don’t think it’s something that’s been encouraged in our culture.” She also encourages Arabs to write to newspapers

and magazines that publish stories about the Middle East and Islam. “One of the frustrating things about writing is that you rarely get any feedback from the Arab and Muslim community.” If the article is accurate, she suggests that people write to the author and thank him or her, and if it is inaccurate, she recommends writing to the magazine and explaining why they see the story as unfair. “I grew up here with my dad screaming at the news in anger,” Ali says, “but I feel positive about it and I do have hope because it’s better than it was ten years ago. I feel like it’s inching along and its getting better and better but it’s taking a long time.”

