

All-American Muslim: Reinforcing One Stereotype, Challenging Another

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All-American Muslim, a reality show that follows five Muslim families in Dearborn, Michigan, premiered on the TLC network in November 2011. The show was met with protest from the [Florida Family Association](#) (run by David Caton and known for its anti-gay activism) who accused the show of hiding the danger that Islam poses to America and pressured advertisers to pull their commercials. In other words, since there are no terrorists in the show and Muslims are depicted as ordinary people, these right-wing activists see the show as deceptive propaganda “attempting to manipulate Americans into ignoring the threat of jihad.” [Lowe’s Home Improvement](#) and [Kayak.com](#) subsequently pulled their commercials, leading to much controversy.

All-American Muslim is unprecedented in its focus on Muslim Americans on US television and in deviating from stereotypical representations of Muslims as terrorists. At the same time, however, *All-American Muslim* conforms to some of the new representations of Muslims that have become standard since 9/11, namely the Muslim or Arab American ‘patriot’ and/or the ‘victim’ to post-9/11 hate crimes. Between 2001 and 2009, writers of television increasingly created “positive” Arab and Muslim characters to show that they are sensitive to negative stereotyping. This character most commonly takes the form of a patriotic Arab or Muslim American who assists the US government in its fight against Arab/Muslim terrorism, either as a government agent or civilian. Some examples of this strategy include Mohammad “Mo” Hassain, an Arab-American Muslim character who is part of the USA Homeland Security Force on the show *Threat Matrix*. On season 6 of *24*, Nadia Yassir is a dedicated member of the Counter Terrorist Unit. Similarly, among the cast members of *All-American Muslim* are a police officer, football coach, county clerk, and federal agent fulfilling the requisite “patriotic” American representations on US television. These portrayals, while certainly “positive,” reinforce narrow conceptions of patriotism and American identity.

The other common post-9/11 positive Arab/Muslim character on US television is that of the ‘victim,’ specifically of hate crimes. Multiple stories appeared on TV dramas with Arab/Muslim Americans as the unjust targets of hate—as victims of violence and harassment. The viewer is nearly always positioned so as to sympathize with their plight. In an episode of *The Practice*, the government detains an innocent Arab American without due process or explanation and an attorney steps in to defend his rights (“Inter Arma

Silent Leges”). On *7th Heaven*, Ruthie’s Muslim friend, Yasmine, is harassed on her way to school, prompting the Camden family and their larger neighborhood to stand together to fight discrimination (“Suspicion”). On *All-American Muslim*, we witness similar discrimination towards the Arab/Muslim families. One of the married couples leaves Dearborn to have breakfast in a neighboring town – only to be ignored while other customers are offered seating. Students at Fordson High School recount how they are called camel-jockeys when playing football with other schools.

These representations of ‘patriot’ and ‘victim’ are undoubtedly improvements over past representations as terrorists, oil sheiks, belly dancers, and oppressed veiled women—and *All-American Muslim* conforms to these two new standard representations. However, the show also deviates from them in two fundamental ways: by not representing terrorists and by including and moving beyond these standard Muslim characters. Many shows that portray a patriotic or victimized Arab/Muslim American do so in the context of Muslims as terrorist threats. *All-American Muslim* is about the everyday lives of five families and has very little to do with terrorists. The events of 9/11 are relevant in so far as they have impacted the lives of the cast members who have to contend with stereotypes of Islam condoning violence.

Furthermore, the show includes cast members who break the mold of the ‘patriotic’ and the ‘victimized,’ including a woman entrepreneur who wants to open a night club in Dearborn and a woman who marries an Irish Catholic American – neither of whom wear the hijab. *All-American Muslim*, in some ways, expands the field of representations of Muslim identities on US television. Apparently, this expansion is of concern to the right-wing activists who believe that representing Muslims outside of the context of terrorism constitutes “deception and obfuscation.” The backlash against the show demonstrates resistance to seeing Muslims outside the context of terrorism.

In response to Lowe’s pulling their advertising, a grassroots movement, the [National Lowe’s Boycott Campaign](#), was launched and hip-hop mogul, Russell Simmons bought up the advertising space. The controversy around the reception of this reality show reveals that while some media producers and viewers are ready to see Muslims as human beings, a segment of the population remains resistant to non-stereotyped images of Muslims in the US.

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