

Arab and Muslim American Civil Rights and Identity: A Selection of Scholarly Writings from the Decade after 9/11

Editor - Alyaa El-Abbadi
Assistant Editor - Deena Faruki

Contributors
Evelyn Alsultany
Abed Ayoub
Kenneth Ayouby
Sahar Aziz
Anny Bakalian
Khaled Ali Beydoun
Mehdi Bozorgmehr
Louise Cainkar
Hayan Charara
Gary David
Amaney Jamal
Sunaina Maira
Alia Malek
Nadine Naber
Lori Peek

Designer - Laila Mokhiber

Special thanks to
Middle East Research and Information Project
Syracuse University Press
Temple University Press
University of California Press
Voice of Witness
Wayne State University Press

Representations of Arabs and Muslims in Post-9/11 TV Dramas*

Evelyn Alsultany

In 2004, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) accused the TV drama *24* of perpetuating stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims.ⁱ CAIR objected to the persistent portrayal of Arabs and Muslims within the context of terrorism, stating “repeated association of acts of terrorism with Islam will only serve to increase anti-Muslim prejudice.”ⁱⁱ CAIR’s critics have retorted that programs like *24* are cutting-edge, reflecting one of the most pressing social and political issues of the moment, the War on Terror. Some critics further contend that CAIR is trying to deflect the reality of Muslim terrorism by confining television writers to politically correct themes.ⁱⁱⁱ

The writers and producers of *24* have responded to CAIR’s concerns in a number of ways. For one, the show often includes sympathetic portrayals of Arabs and Muslims, in which they are the “good guys,” or in some way on the side of the U.S. Representatives of *24* state that the show has “made a concerted effort to show ethnic, religious and political groups as multi-dimensional, and political issues are debated from multiple viewpoints.”^{iv} The villains on the eight seasons of *24* come from around the globe, and include Russians, Germans, Latinos, Arabs/Muslims, Euro-Americans, Africans, and even the fictional president of the United States. Rotating the identity of the “bad guy” is one of the many strategies used by TV dramas to avoid reproducing the Arab/Muslim terrorist stereotype (or any other stereotypes, for that matter).^v

After September 11, 2001, a slew of TV dramas were created with the War on Terror as their central

* This is an excerpt from a forthcoming article that will appear in *The Cultural Politics of the Middle East in the Americas*, edited by Evelyn Alsultany and Ella Shohat (University of Michigan Press, 2012) and an excerpt from Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the U.S. Media Post-9/11* (NYU Press, 2012).

theme. Dramas such as *24* (2001-2011), *Threat Matrix* (2003-2004), *The Grid* (2004), *Sleeper Cell* (2005-2006), and *The Wanted* (2009) depict U.S. government agencies and officials heroically working to make the nation safe by battling terrorism.^{vi} A prominent feature of these television shows is Arab and Muslim characters, most of who are portrayed as grave threats to U.S. national security. But in response to increased popular awareness of ethnic stereotyping, and the active monitoring of Arab and Muslim watchdog groups, television writers have had to adjust their storylines to avoid blatant, crude stereotyping.

24 and *Sleeper Cell* were amongst the most popular of the fast-emerging post-9/11 genre of terrorism dramas. *24*, broadcast on FOX from 2001 to 2011, was a popular action drama centered on Jack Bauer, a brooding and embattled agent of the government’s Counter-Terrorism Unit, who raced a ticking clock to subvert impending terrorist attacks on the U.S. The title refers to a 24-hour state of emergency, and each of a given season’s 24 episodes represented one-hour of “real” time. *Sleeper Cell* was not as popular as *24*, partly because it was broadcast on the cable network Showtime, and therefore had a much smaller audience. While *24* lasted for 8 seasons, *Sleeper Cell* lasted for 2 seasons. *Sleeper Cell*’s storyline revolved around an undercover African American Muslim FBI agent who infiltrates a group of homegrown terrorists (the “cell” of the show’s title), in order to subvert their planned attack on the U.S. This essay draws from the many TV dramas that either revolved around themes of terrorism or the War on Terror or included a few episodes on these themes, and particularly *24* and *Sleeper Cell*.

In this essay, I map the representational strategies that have become standard since 9/11/01. I examine the representational strategies used by writers and producers of TV dramas in representing Arabs/Muslims as terrorists and also in seeking not to reproduce the stereotype of Arabs/Muslims as terrorists. I identify a list of representational strategies used in TV dramas, to illustrate how schematized they have become, and discuss the ideological work performed by them through what I am calling “simplified complex representations” – the appearance of seemingly complex images and storylines that are in fact quite predictable and formulaic. Ultimately, my objective is to investigate how TV dramas have been important sites for

mediating the War on Terror and how representational strategies that avoid stereotyping nonetheless participate in making racism acceptable.

Simplified Complex Representations

Simplified complex representations are comprised of strategies used by television producers, writers, and directors to give the impression that the representations they are producing are complex. While my focus is on television, these strategies can also be found in film. Below I lay out what I have found to be the most common ways that writers and producers of television dramas have depicted Arab and Muslim characters after 9/11 – both in representing them as terrorists and also in seeking to avoid the terrorist stereotype. While some of these were used more frequently (and to greater narrative success) than others, they all help to shape the many layers of simplified complexity. I argue that simplified complex representations are the representational mode of the so-called “post-race” era, signifying a new era of racial representation. These representations appear to challenge or complicate former stereotypes and contribute to a multicultural or post-race illusion. Yet at the same time, most of the programs that employ simplified complex representational strategies can promote logics that legitimize racist policies and practices, such as torturing Arabs and Muslims. I create a list of some of these strategies in order to outline the parameters of simplified complex representations and to facilitate ways to identify such strategies.

Strategy 1: Inserting Patriotic Arab or Muslim Americans

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 U.S. 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.^{vii} In Sleeper Cell, the “good” Muslim is the lead African American character, Darwyn Al-Sayeed, an undercover FBI agent who proclaims to his colleagues that terrorists have nothing to do with his

faith and cautions them not to confuse the two.^{viii} In a fourth-season episode of 24, two Arab American brothers express that they are tired of being unjustly blamed for the terrorist attacks and insist on helping to fight terrorism alongside Jack Bauer, the lead character who saves the U.S. from danger each season.^{ix} Islam, at times, is portrayed as inspiring U.S. patriotism as opposed to inspiring terrorism.^x This bevy of characters makes up the most common group of post-9/11 Arab/Muslim depictions. This strategy challenges the notion that Arabs and Muslims are not American and/or are un-American. Judging from the numbers of these patriots, it appears that writers have embraced this strategy as the most direct method to counteract potential charges of stereotyping.

Strategy 2: Sympathizing with the Plight of Arab and Muslim Americans After 9/11

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.^{xi} 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.^{xii} This emphasis on victimization and sympathy challenges long-standing representations that have inspired a lack of sympathy, and even a celebratory sense when the Arab/Muslim character is killed.

Strategy #3: Challenging the Arab/Muslim Conflation with Diverse Muslim Identities

Sleeper Cell prides itself on being unique among TV dramas that deal with the topic of terrorism because of their diverse cast of Muslim terrorists. Sleeper Cell challenges the common conflation between Arab and Muslim identities. While the ringleader of the sleeper cell, Faris al-Farik, is an Arab, the other members of this Los Angeles sleeper cell are not: they are Bosnian, French, Euro-American, Western European, Latino, and a gay Iraqi-Brit. Portraying diverse sleeper cell members strategically challenges how Arab and Muslim identities are often conflated by government discourses and media representations by demonstrating that all Arabs are not Muslim and all Muslims are not Arab and, even

further, that not all Arabs and Muslims are heterosexual. Furthermore, Sleeper Cell highlights a struggle within Islam over who will define the religion, thus demonstrating that not all Muslims advocate terrorism. For example, in one episode, a Yemeni imam, or religious leader, comes to Los Angeles in order to deprogram Muslim extremists and plans to issue a fatwa (religious ruling) against terrorism.^{xiii} These diverse characters, and their heated debates for and against terrorism, indeed distinguish Sleeper Cell from its genre. But this strategy of challenging the Arab/Muslim conflation is remarkable in part because of its infrequency.

Strategy 4: Flipping the Enemy

“Flipping the enemy” involves leading the viewer to believe that Muslim terrorists are plotting to destroy the U.S., and then revealing that those Muslims are merely pawns or a front for Euro-American or European terrorists. The identity of the enemy is thus flipped: viewers discover that the terrorist is not Arab, or they find that the Arab or Muslim terrorist is part of a larger network of international terrorists. During season two of 24, Bauer spends the first half of the season tracking down a Middle Eastern terrorist cell, ultimately subverting a nuclear attack. In the second half of the season we discover that European and Euro-American businessmen are behind the attack, goading the U.S. to declare a war on the Middle East in order to benefit from the increase in oil prices. Related to this subversion of expectations, 24 does not glorify the U.S.; in numerous ways the show dismantles the notion that the U.S. is perfect and the rest of the world flawed. FBI and CIA agents are incompetent; other government agents conspire with the terrorists; the terrorists (Arab and Muslim alike) are portrayed as very intelligent. Flipping the enemy demonstrates that terrorism is not an Arab or Muslim monopoly.

Strategy #5: Humanizing the Terrorist

Most Arab and Muslim terrorists in films or television shows before 9/11 were stock villains, one-dimensional bad guys who were presumably bad because of their ethnic background or religious beliefs.^{xiv} In contrast, post-9/11 terrorist characters are humanized in a variety of ways. We see them in a familial context, as loving fathers and husbands; we come to learn of their backstory, and glimpse into the moments that have brought them to the precipice of terror. In 2005, 24 introduced viewers to a Middle Eastern family for the first time on U.S.

network television (in a recurring role for most of the season as opposed to a one time appearance). In their first scene they seem like an “ordinary” family preparing breakfast—mother, father, and a teenage son. It is soon revealed, however, that they are a sleeper cell; in the episodes to come, each family member’s relationship to terrorism is explored. The father is willing to kill his wife and son in order to complete his mission; the mother will reconsider her involvement with terrorism only to protect her son; and the teenage son, raised in the U.S., is portrayed with an evolving sense of humanity that ultimately prevents him from being a terrorist. This strategy—humanizing the terrorists by focusing on their interpersonal relationships, motives, and backstories—is also central to Sleeper Cell. Each sleeper cell member has their own motivation for joining the cell: from rebelling against a leftist liberal parent (a professor at the University of California at Berkeley) to seeking revenge on the U.S. for the death of family members (one character’s husband was killed by U.S. forces in Iraq). Adding multiple dimensions to the formerly one-dimensional bad guy has become increasingly common since 9/11.

Strategy 6: Projecting a Multicultural U.S. Society

Projecting a multicultural U.S. society is another strategy to circumvent accusations of racism while representing Arabs and Muslims as terrorists. In Sleeper Cell, the terrorists are of diverse ethnic backgrounds and Darwyn, the African American FBI agent, is in an interracial relationship with Gail, a white woman. For several seasons of 24, the U.S. president was African American, his press secretary Asian American; the Counter Terrorist Unit is equally diverse, peppered with Latinos and African Americans throughout the show’s eight seasons. The sum total of these casting decisions creates the impression of a United States in which multiculturalism abounds. The projected society is one in which people of different racial backgrounds work together and racism is socially unacceptable.

Strategy #7: Fictionalizing the Middle Eastern or Muslim Country

It has become increasingly common for the country of the terrorist characters in television dramas to go unnamed. This strategy rests on the assumption that leaving the nationality of the villain blank eliminates potential offensiveness; if no particular country or ethnicity is named then there is less reason for any

particular group to be offended by the portrayal. In season four of 24, the terrorist family is from an unnamed Middle Eastern country. They are possibly from Turkey, but where exactly is never stated; it is, we assume, intentionally left ambiguous. In The West Wing, the fictional country, "Qumar" is a source of terrorist plots; in season eight of 24, it is "Kamistan." (This is also done with other ethnic groups. For example in season seven of 24, the African country, "Sangala" is an important source.) Fictionalizing the country of the terrorist can give a show more latitude in creating salacious storylines that might be criticized if identified with an actual country.

The seven representational strategies I have found are not exhaustive, nor are they all new to our post-9/11 world. Rather, these strategies collectively outline some of the ways in which writers and producers of television (and film) have sought to improve representations of Arabs (and other racial and ethnic groups). These strategies are an astounding shift in the mass entertainment landscape. They present an important departure from stereotypes into more challenging stories and characters. This new breed of terrorism shows reflects a growing sensitivity to the potential negative impact of stereotyping. These new representational strategies seek to make the point – indeed, often with strenuous effort – that not all Arabs are terrorists, and not all terrorists are Arabs. However, for all their innovations, these shows remain wedded to a script that represents Arabs and Muslims only in the context of terrorism and therefore they do not effectively challenge the stereotypical representations of Arabs and Muslims.

Stuart Hall has claimed that even those with the best of intentions, liberal writers and producers who seek to subvert racial hierarchies, can inadvertently participate in inferential racism. Hall defines inferential racism as "apparently naturalized representations of events and situations relating to race, whether 'factual' or 'fictional', which have racist premises and propositions inscribed in them as a set of unquestioned assumptions."^{xv} The persistent unquestioned assumption in these TV dramas is that Arabs and Muslims are terrorists, despite writer's efforts to create a wider range of Arab and Muslim characters. The primary objective

of writers of commercial television is not education, social justice, or social change. Rather, the goal is financial, to keep as many viewers watching for as long as possible. Television must therefore strike a balance between keeping its products as engaging as possible while not offending potential viewers. Writers thus seem to be constrained and influenced by two factors: viewers have been primed to assume that Arabs/Muslims are terrorists and therefore writers create what viewers expect and what will sell. At the same time, some viewers are particularly sensitive and fed up with stereotypes and therefore writers are faced with creating a more diverse world of characters. The results are some modifications to avoid being offensive while perpetuating core stereotypes that continue to have cultural capital.^{xvi} Post-9/11 television is testimony to the fact that the stereotypes that held sway for much of the twentieth century are no longer socially acceptable – at least in their blatant forms. But this does not mean that such stereotypes (and viewer's taste for them) have actually gone away; they have only become covert. Simplified complex representational strategies reflect the commodification of the civil rights and multiculturalist movements. The commodification of multiculturalism, while reflecting the sensibilities of some viewers, is submerged under the more prominent consumable message that Arabs and Muslims pose a terrorist threat to American life and freedom.

These strategies result in simplified complex representations, which produce the illusion of complexity and sensitivity while continuing to perpetuate stereotypes. They attempt to make representations complex yet do so in a simplified way; they are predictable strategies that can be relied on if the plot involves an Arab or Muslim terrorist, but are a new standard alternative to (and seem a great improvement on) the stock ethnic villains of the past. Under the guise of complexity, these representational strategies construct a binary between "good" and "bad" Arabs and Muslims, reinforcing a narrow conception of what constitutes a "good" Arab or Muslim. As Mahmood Mamdani has written, the public debate post-9/11 has centered on this binary, and all Muslims are assumed to be bad until they perform and prove their allegiance to the U.S. nation.^{xvii} In TV dramas, this framework is similarly relentless. "Bad" Arabs or Muslims are the terrorists, and their "good" counterparts are those who help the U.S.

government fight terrorism. Despite the shift away from the more blatant stereotypes of previous decades, Arab and Muslim identities are still understood and evaluated primarily in relation to terrorism. This binary focus, in turn, overpowers the above strategies. Though some television writers might certainly have humane motives, and though some producers might honestly desire to create innovative shows, devoid of stereotypes, any such efforts are overwhelmed by the sheer momentum of our current representational scheme. Thus, representations of Arab and Muslim identities in contexts that have nothing to do with terrorism remain strikingly unusual in the U.S. commercial media.^{xviii} Arab and Muslim identities are rehabilitated as legitimate through rigid notions of either patriotism or victimization.

Inserting a patriotic Arab or Muslim American or fictionalizing Middle Eastern countries are ineffectual devices if Arabs, Muslims, Arab Americans, and Muslim Americans continue to be portrayed through the narrow lens of good or bad in the fight against terrorism. Casting actors of color to give the impression of a "post-race" society propagates the comforting notion of an enlightened society that has resolved all of its racial problems. The various strategies used in the first decade of the War on Terror are akin to a bandaid over a still-festering wound. They give the impression of comfort, perhaps even of cure, but the fundamental problem remains.

While these representational strategies that challenge the stereotyping of Arabs and Muslims were being broadcast, circulated, and consumed, real Arabs and Muslims were being detained, deported, held without due process, and tortured. Certainly not all Arabs and Muslims were subject to post-9/11 harassment. Nonetheless, what I am arguing is that simplified complex racial representations – a new representational mode collectively constructed by these multiple representational strategies – performs the ideological work of producing a post-race moment in which denying the severity of the persistence of institutionalized racism becomes possible. These TV dramas produce reassurance that racial sensitivity is the norm in U.S. society while simultaneously perpetuating the dominant perception of Arabs and Muslims as threats to U.S. national security.

These complex characters and storylines fall short of subverting stereotypes: Fictionalizing Arab and Muslim countries, for example, tends to add to the conflation and generalization of Arab and Muslim identities by implying that terrorism originates from a fictional country that could be any of a number of Arab/Muslim countries. The specificity of the context becomes irrelevant. Furthermore, viewers are well aware that the fictionalized country is supposed to be Arab or Muslim. These fictionalized countries operate as allegories – standing in as doubles for the "real" – and in turn illustrate how the real sites in which the U.S. is waging its War on Terror (Iraq and Afghanistan) often feel like abstract or even fictional locations for viewers.

Simplified complex representations are also deceptive: they offer a limited field of explanation on the War on Terror under the guise of an expanded field of explanation. Audiences are given the impression that multiple positions and perspectives have been considered, for example by exploring the motives of terrorists. Terrorism, according to *Sleeper Cell*, is caused by disaffected non-Arabs who turn to fundamentalist Islam, and Arabs who embrace fundamentalist ideologies. Consistent with what Mamdani calls "culture talk" – the notion that terrorism can be explained merely by examining Arab or Muslim "culture" – the series perpetuates the idea, circulating in popular culture since at least the 1970s, that Arabs and Muslims have a monopoly on terrorism.^{xix} The motives for terrorism that are presented often lack real depth or exploration. These plotlines are, however, gripping, making it is easy to ignore all that remains unchanged and how these shows maintain the dominant discourse of the U.S. as an innocent victim of the War on Terror.

Reliving the War on Terror

The television landscape shifted on 9/11 as the vague, ominous threat to U.S. national security took center stage. The storylines in TV dramas, such as *24* and *Sleeper Cell*, reinforce the government's need for a War on Terror; these shows have, innumerable guises, replayed the tragedy of 9/11 weekly to U.S. audiences, keeping the trauma fresh in the collective memory. These cultural productions, despite employing a range of strategies to avoid reproducing stereotypes, offer a very specific story that keeps viewer-citizens living and re-living the War on Terror. There is a fundamental

contradiction between representational strategies that project an enlightened, post-race culture and the very same TV dramas that maintain the relevance of the threat. So long as Arabs and Muslims are represented primarily in the context of terrorism, our current crop of representational strategies – for all of their apparent innovations – will have a minimal impact on viewers' perceptions of Arabs and Muslims, and far worse, will perpetuate a simplistic vision of good and evil under the guise of complexity and sensitivity.

Above all, what is depicted through these TV dramas, is a nation in perpetual danger. Audiences re-live the necessity of the War on Terror and the inevitability of the Arab/Muslim threat despite the appearance of a few good Arabs or Muslims. As Melani McAlister has written, "the continuing sense of threat provides support for the power of the state, but it also provides the groundwork for securing 'the nation' as a cultural and social entity. The 'imagined community' of the nation finds continuing rearticulation in the rhetoric of danger."^{xx} Writers and producers create an "imagined community"^{xxi} of virtual viewer-citizens, many of whom are interpellated^{xxii} into a sense of impending threat that supports the state. Television is the fundamental way that such a threat can be conveyed to a nation. In addition to being the disseminator of this threat, television also capitalizes on it, keeping viewers both fearful and captivated.