

# ARGO TRIES BUT FAILS to Defuse Stereotypes

By Evelyn Alsultany

In my book, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11*, I discuss my surprise at finding an increase in positive portrayals of Arabs and Muslims after 9/11. To be more specific, what I found in my research was a new mode of representation that I term “simplified complex representations.” For example, if a television show or movie is focused on terrorism perpetrated by Arabs or Muslims, then to defuse the stereotype, the production team typically includes some kind of positive representation of an Arab or Muslim, usually a patriotic U.S. citizen or innocent victim of hate crimes. I argue that while this is certainly an improvement over past representations of one-dimensional villains, it is far from ideal since such representations often seem gratuitous, thrown in to appease Arab and Muslim watchdog groups such as CAIR and MPAC as well as those of us who are sick and tired of the same old stereotypes.

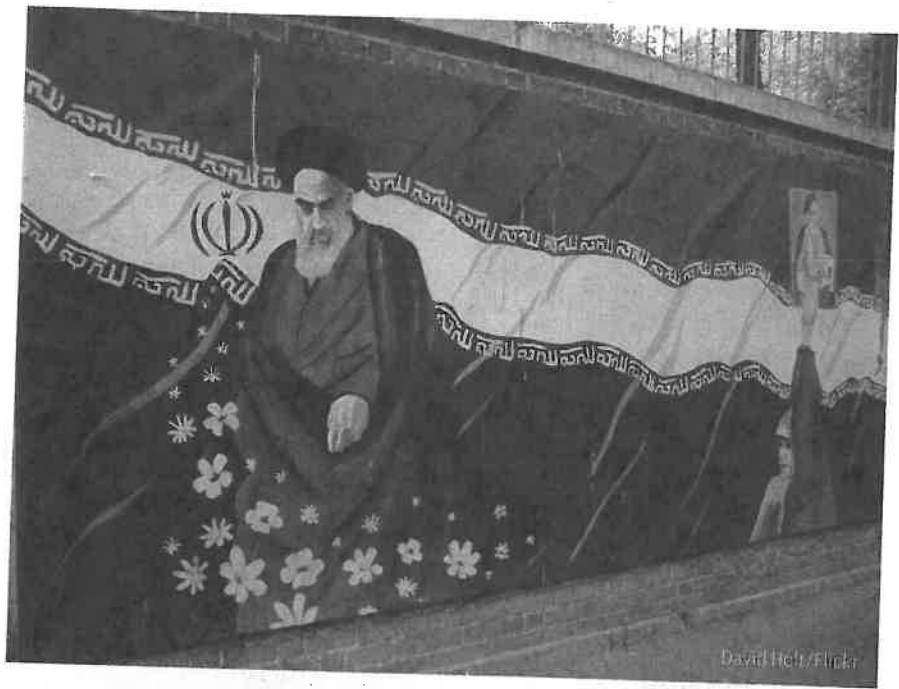
The film *Argo*, which is about the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis, has received critical acclaim and won an Academy Award for best picture. The film is a case study in how writers and producers seek to defuse stereotyping, yet fail. It includes several moments of simplified complex representations—the context that serves as the preface to the film, the Iranian housekeeper at the Canadian ambassador’s compound and statements made by one of the hostage-takers are important moments with the potential to offer a complex storyline and point of view. Unfortunately, each time an effort is made to make the story more complex, it is quickly undone by overpowering stereotypes of Iranians.

The film’s most important gesture toward complexity is its opening: a two-minute visual montage partly animated by narration that provides context to the Iranian hostage crisis. It explains that in 1953, the U.S. and the U.K. got rid of the democratically elected leader, Mohammad Mossadegh, because he did not serve their oil interests, and replaced him with Reza Pahlavi, who lived in opulence while Iranians starved and were tortured. The context ends with the following narration about Pahlavi, aka the Shah: “He then began a campaign to westernize Iran, enraging the mostly traditional Shiite population. In 1979, the people of Iran overthrew the Shah. The exiled cleric, Ayatollah Khomeini, returned to rule Iran. It descended into score

settling, death squads and chaos. Dying of cancer, the Shah was given asylum in the U.S. The Iranian people took to the streets outside the U.S. embassy demanding that the Shah be returned, tried and hanged." And seconds later, the words, "Based on a true story," appear on the screen.

This incredibly brief context is followed by an opening scene that undoes it with its emotional force. Thousands of Iranians are protesting outside the U.S. Embassy: An American flag is set on fire; a man is shown stabbing something that looks like a pillow with an image on it, and they are shouting something in Farsi. A few men begin scaling the wall of the American Embassy while a man manages to cut the lock to the gate, unleashing this Iranian mob into the embassy while American government workers try to burn confidential documents. The Iranians are relentless, violent and unreasonable. The Americans fear for their safety. One American says he is going outside to reason with them and he becomes the first hostage taken. He is immediately blindfolded with a gun pressed against his neck. The Iranians storm the building and start taking hostages—blindfolding them and threatening them with guns—while six of them manage to escape and find refuge at the home of the Canadian ambassador. It is a chilling scene, undoing the historical preface and what little impact it may have had.

The context of U.S. intervention in Iranian internal affairs does not offer any insight into what drove the Iranian hostage-takers to such extreme action. Any moment that acknowledges the hostage-takers' point of view is fleeting and quickly undone through repeated portrayals of Iranians as threatening and unreasonable. In another scene reflective of simplified complex representations, an Iranian woman in a hijab articulates the demands of the hostage-takers: "extradition of a man who has for over 37 years with the United States' support has killed months-old babies in the arms of their mothers." This moment with potential to offer an alternative point of view is followed by a news report that hostage-takers will blow up the embassy and kill all the hostages if Americans use military force to rescue them. Throughout the film, there are recurring scenes of Iranian mobs protesting violently on the streets, carrying guns, burning flags, seething in anger. We see Iranians terrorizing American hostages by faking an assassination at gunpoint. We



Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini Mural

see three Iranian soldiers kill a civilian in an alleyway. When Ben Affleck's character arrives at the airport in Tehran, the first thing he sees is a man accosted by security while a woman screams and a girl cries. In a taxi from the airport, he sees a hanged man dangling from a construction crane on the street. There is nothing in the Iranian response that seems justified, even if we are given vague reasons. The implication is that violence permeates daily life in Iran, and Iranians know only anger and aggression.

We do not get to know any Iranians or get a glimpse into what would drive them to such horrific action. We do not see any debate among the hostage-takers regarding an appropriate or inappropriate course of action. Did the hostage-takers ever have a meeting where they debated what they believed would be the appropriate course of action? Or did one man dictate how things would go while others mindlessly followed? Did ALL Iranians participate in violent and unreasonable behavior? There is the one exception, the housekeeper at the Canadian diplomat's house, who serves this function: To be able to say that not ALL Iranians were depicted stereotypically. We do not get to know her in any way. We are suspicious of her throughout the film and what makes her "good" is that she is willing to betray her nation to protect Americans. This is the most common technique of simplified complex representations: The

insertion of a "good" Muslim who is defined as good because of their allegiance to the United States.

Critics and viewers have debated the extent to which the film provides unusual complexity for a Hollywood film, particularly because of the opening context to the Iranian revolution. I agree with Canadian radio host Jian Ghomeshi, who writes: "[W]hile the filmmakers try to contextualize things ... those efforts are soon undone."<sup>2</sup> I also agree with Middle East scholar and blogger Juan Cole, who writes: "Although the film begins with an infodump that explains that the US screwed over Iran by having the CIA overthrow the elected government in 1953 and then helped impose a royal dictatorship in the form of the restored shah, that part of the film is emotionally flat. It tells, it doesn't show. It is tacked on. It does not intersect with the subsequent film in any significant way. It therefore has no emotional weight and does little to contextualize the Iranian characters (none of whose names I think we even learn)."<sup>2</sup>

However, many online commenters disagree with the criticism that the opening context accomplishes very little, if nothing at all. In one online comment responding to an article in *The Guardian* about the film, "londonzak" states, "The opening to *Argo* does a great job in explaining the source of



Director and star of *Argo*, Ben Affleck attends the premiere of his film at the Toronto Film Festival.

Iranian ire towards the US, with a wonderful animated history of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Iran including the US overthrow of Mossadegh's democratically elected government in 1953. If that doesn't question US foreign policy, then I don't know what else Affleck can do to satisfy anti-American viewers ... *Argo* is not even an Iranian story. It's a story about a group of Americans held hostage in Iran and the CIA's attempt to pull them out by using a film crew as a ruse. There is no Iranian character at the center of that story.<sup>3</sup> And "starsgoblue" states, "The film begins with a very thorough explanation of the history of the antagonism between the USA and Iran prior to the hostage crisis. It also framed some shots to mimic exactly how the US Embassy was stormed. I think it's fair to say, that some Iranians at the time were very angry indeed—so that is how they were portrayed in the film."<sup>4</sup> The fact that the film won an Academy Award and that some viewers do not take offense at the stereotypical depiction of Iranians shows how comfortable we still are with some stereotypes, and how far we have yet to go.

Many critics have applauded the film for its direction, production and suspense, some even applauded it for being based on real events. The late Roger Ebert wrote, "Countless movies are 'inspired by real events,' but this one truly took place."<sup>5</sup> Some critics, however, have pointed out that despite being based on a true story, the film crew created and altered scenes for dramatic effect. A scene in which a storeowner becomes angry that a photo was taken without his permission, for example, never happened. Nor did a scene in the airport in which Revolutionary Guards seek to detain and question Americans, who escape by only a few seconds.<sup>6</sup> Juan Cole says Iranians were not piecing together shredded documents to target the escaped diplomats, but rather were "looking for evidence of the ways the intelligence officials under cover at the embassy had been monitoring them and their friends and putting them in torture cells."<sup>7</sup> There is a debate among viewers regarding the extent to which *Argo* as a Hollywood film should be held up as factual. Some online commenters state that this is not a documentary but rather a Hollywood film, so it should not be held to truth standards. "John" best sums up this point of view: "Something 'based on a true story' isn't necessarily a true story. It's Hollywood, for Pete's sake."<sup>8</sup>

My objective is not to belabor or prove that *Argo* is not historically accurate. The issue is not that the writers took creative liberties for dramatic effect, but rather it is the impact of the changes made for dramatic effect. The impact is that Iranians are stereotyped as being part of a mindless, threatening, irrational mob. What makes this stereotyping all the more dangerous is

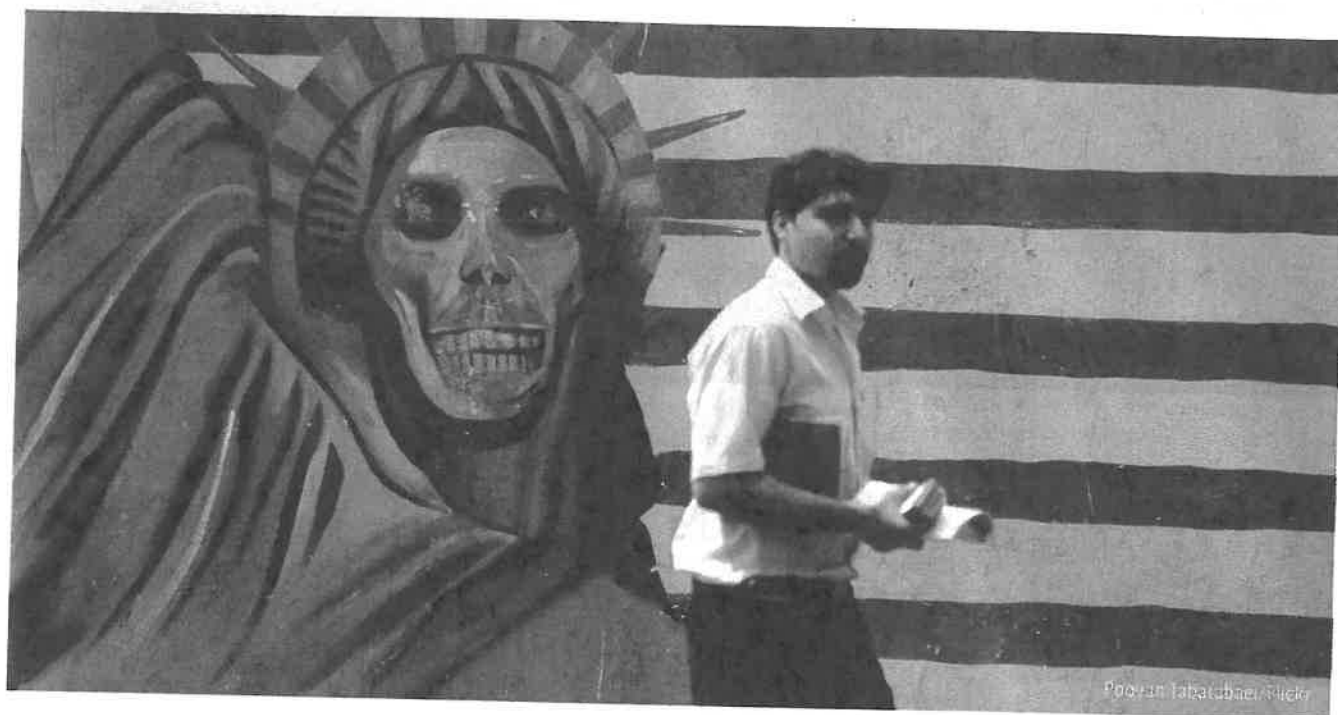
the claim to truth the film makes. Creative liberties or not, that *Argo* is based on a true story makes Iranians *truly* appear insane. *Argo* is an updated version of a previous popular Hollywood film "based on a true story" in Iran, *Not Without My Daughter*. *Argo* might as well be re-titled, *Not Without My Daughter 2*.

What might a more complex film look like? It would have allowed the viewer to get to know some Iranian hostage-takers and gain insight into their reasoning and internal debates. Cole says the film could have been "a moment when Americans come to terms with their Cold War role as villains in places like Iran. It could have been a film about what intelligence analysts call 'blowback,' when a covert operation goes awry."<sup>9</sup> Ghomeshi offers another imagined alternative: "Would it be instructive to learn more about why young Iranian people were resentful of the United States housing the dictatorial Shah they'd worked to overthrow? Might it be helpful to explain that not all Iranians were Islamic formalists who supported Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini? Or that the revolution was a popular one that originally included liberal democrats, feminists, nationalists, socialists and workers—a revolution that was co-opted by the mullahs and extremists to lead to the Islamic Republic that we know today? Even if the film's scope is reductive in its treatment of the revolution, the individual Iranian characters themselves might have been written with a lighter hand, leaving room for nuance."<sup>10</sup>

Would the film have been better off without gestures toward complexity? Not



The Iran Hostage Rescue Mission Memorial at the Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia.



A mural painted on the US Embassy in Tehran, circa 2006.

exactly. *Zero Dark Thirty* would have benefited from an opening contextual moment that explained that, in an effort to win the Cold War, the U.S. engaged in proxy wars that included assembling a militia group in Afghanistan, recruiting Osama bin Laden to be its leader and President Ronald Reagan referring to them as “freedom fighters.” *Zero Dark Thirty* would have benefited from beginning the story during the Cold War rather than on 9/11/2001. Similarly, *Argo* would have offered a more nuanced story had it begun earlier. Simplified complex representations should be recognized as better than the blatant stereotypes that preceded this approach (or worse, given its illusive quality) and not lauded as a model for other films to follow. The point is that how we tell stories matters. Where we begin the story matters. Whose point of view we allow audiences to identify with matters. Simplified complex representations do not challenge stereotypes. They only affirm them in the guise of cultural sensitivity.

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<sup>1</sup>Jian Ghomeshi, “Argo is crowd-pleasing, entertaining—and unfair to Iranians,” *The Globe and Mail*, November 2, 2012, [www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/jian-ghomeshi-argo-is-crowd-pleasing-entertaining-and-unfair-to-iranians/article4855769/](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/jian-ghomeshi-argo-is-crowd-pleasing-entertaining-and-unfair-to-iranians/article4855769/) (accessed June 9, 2013).

<sup>2</sup>Juan Cole, “‘Argo’ as Orientalism and why it Upsets Iranians,” *Informed Comment* blog, February 26, 2013, [www.juancole.com/2013/02/orientalism-upsets-iranians.html](http://www.juancole.com/2013/02/orientalism-upsets-iranians.html) (accessed June 9, 2013).

<sup>3</sup>Saeed Kamali Dehghan, “Why Argo is hard for Iranians to watch,” *The Guardian*, blog, reader comments, londonzak, November 13, 2012 8:55 p.m., November 13, 2012, [www.guardian.co.uk/world/iran-blog/2012/nov/13/argo-iranians-ben-affleck](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/iran-blog/2012/nov/13/argo-iranians-ben-affleck)

<sup>4</sup>Saeed Kamali Dehghan, “Why Argo is hard for Iranians to watch,” *The Guardian*, blog, reader comments, starsgobluce, November 13, 2012 5:47 p.m., November 13, 2012, [www.guardian.co.uk/world/iran-blog/2012/nov/13/argo-iranians-ben-affleck](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/iran-blog/2012/nov/13/argo-iranians-ben-affleck)

<sup>5</sup>Robert Ebert, “Argo,” October 10, 2012, [www.rogerebert.com/reviews/argo-2012](http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/argo-2012) (accessed June 9, 2013).

<sup>6</sup>Hosam Abu-Ela, “Ben Affleck’s ‘Argo’: A Movie about a Movie,” *Jadaliyya*, February 12, 2013, [www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/10150/ben-afflecks-argo\\_a-movie-about-a-movie](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/10150/ben-afflecks-argo_a-movie-about-a-movie) (accessed June 9, 2013); Stanley Fish, “The ‘Argo’ Capers,” *The New York Times*, Opinionator, October 29, 2012, [www.opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/10/29/the-argo-caper](http://www.opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/10/29/the-argo-caper) (accessed June 9, 2013).

<sup>7</sup>Juan Cole, “‘Argo’ as Orientalism and why it Upsets Iranians,” *Informed Comment*, blog, February 26, 2013, [www.juancole.com/2013/02/orientalism-upsets-iranians.html](http://www.juancole.com/2013/02/orientalism-upsets-iranians.html) (accessed June 9, 2013).

<sup>8</sup>John, February 26, 2013, at 5:58 p.m., reader comments: Juan Cole, “‘Argo’ as Orientalism and why it Upsets Iranians,” *Informed Comment*, blog, February 26, 2013, [www.juancole.com/2013/02/orientalism-upsets-iranians.html](http://www.juancole.com/2013/02/orientalism-upsets-iranians.html) (accessed June 9, 2013).

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