

Introduction

Racial stereotypes against Arabs, Muslims and people from the Middle East have certain commonalities with other minority groups, but also distinct roots and manifestations that merit attention. Anti-Arab and Muslim stereotypes remain persistent in American popular and political culture, fueled by foreign policy attitudes and assumptions, competing domestic constituencies and public ignorance about this population.

Anti-Arab stereotypes do share some foundations with attitudes towards other non-European immigrants. As people of color with non-Western customs, language, names and in some cases religious affiliation, Arabs present a cultural and historical tradition unfamiliar to most Americans. While the majority of Arab immigrants have historically been of the Christian faith, the association of Arab culture with Islam has also resulted in a cultural disconnect between the Middle East and America's Judeo-Christian foundations.

Orientalism

This historical tension between the West and the East predominantly Islamic roots of Arab civilization gave play to portrayal in popular western culture of the Arab as the barbarian, the villain, the seducer of women, or the passive backdrop (Casablanca-style) to European or American adventures. "Orientalism," where eastern culture and history are presented through the eyes of western values and assumptions, was the predominant venue that informed America and Europe about the Middle East and its people.

Terrorists and Sheikhs

Cross cultural awareness and scholarship no doubt has minimized stereotypes of the orientalist persuasion, but popular images of the Arab in recent decades have probably deepened them. Two interlocking themes emerged in the 1970s to create a public association with Arabs as the "enemy." The most prevalent one to this day is the Arab as terrorist. The other, the greedy oil sheikh, was especially dominant during the oil crisis of the 70s and 80s. Cartoons were not uncommon depicting fat men in headscarf conspiring to disrupt the U.S. economy. A study of these cartoons revealed disturbing similarities to European anti-Jewish propaganda of the 1930s, prompting the observation that this represented "the other anti-Semitism."

Stereotypes and Policy

The dangerous intersection of popular stereotypes and official policy is perhaps the greatest concern of the Arab and Muslim communities in America. Without discounting for a moment the scourge of terrorism or security needs of our society, our constituencies have been alarmed by disparate treatment they have received by government agencies in the name of counter-terrorism. In several cases, programs and policies targeting our communities in the attempt to monitor terrorist activity have themselves contributed to deepening the association and create negative bias in the public eye. The rush to judgement in Oklahoma City or the anti-Arab backlash when a crisis occurs in the Middle East brings to light the ramifications of these associations.

Loyalty in Question

Perhaps the most grating stereotype for any American ethnic constituency to deal with is when their loyalty is put into question. Not unlike the Asian American experience with campaign fundraising in 1996, donors with Arab surnames were similarly questioned and ethnic fundraisers scrutinized. It was not long ago that candidates returned donations from citizens of Arab descent fearing a reaction from Jewish supporters. Similarly, crises involving American interests in the Middle East have historically invited backlash against mosques and Arab-owned stores, and occasional bigotry. Even native born Americans of Arab descent who are vocal on political issues have been asked, "why don't you go back where you came from?" Further, during the Gulf War, prominent activists and even elected officials of Arab descent were targeted by the FBI to inquire if they knew of pro-Iraqi terrorism being planned in the U.S.

Antidotes to anti-Arab Stereotypes

In many ways, the mission of our Institute has been to reverse the negative stereotype of Arabs in America by promoting programs of inclusion: through voting, electoral politics, civic initiatives and community work. While involvement in the local affairs of the community does not eliminate prejudice, it serves to introduce civic and community leaders to the concerns and assets of the ethnic constituency and reinforces the values and priorities shared by all ethnic and racial groups.

Education and public information are also key to eliminating stereotypes. Textbook review and the extra curricular materials can challenge misconceptions and biased information about Arabs and Muslims. During the recent standoff with Iraq, a member of a local human relations board, in response to concerns of Iraqi-American families about bias in the classroom, prepared a fact sheet about the history and civilization of Iraq for social study teachers throughout the school system. Similarly, providing journalists, teachers and policy makers accurate information about our population's demographics and contributions to American society has been one way to challenge negative stereotypes.

Challenging media typecasting of Arabs in villain roles, especially with Hollywood movie producers, has been a priority for the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee which has monitored this phenomenon for 15 years. Incremental victories have included replacing inflammatory lyrics in the Disney movie "Aladdin" and receiving a pledge from Warner Brothers to consider a positive role model in a future feature film.

Lastly, it is important to widen the circle in existing programs that promote diversity and reduce stereotypes to include representatives of communities who may not qualify as protected minorities, but who face similar intolerance and exclusion. Ensuring our place at the diversity table, and offering the benefit of our experience and research, has been a special focus of our attention in recent years, and one that we wish to develop in forums like these across the country.

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