

United We Stood

On September 11, 2001, at 8:46am EST, American Airlines flight 11 flew into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Windows burst into millions of little pieces showering confetti-like bits of glass onto New York City. The nation watched in horror and sadness as a plume of black smoke gushed into the sky. Seventeen minutes later, United Airlines flight 175 struck the World Trade Center's south tower. It then became clear these events were no accident, but an act of terrorism that scared the United States into a state of panic. Americans united in the wake of 9/11, caring for victims, victims' families, neighbors, and strangers. This, however, shifted when it was announced that al-Qaeda operatives, who stem from the Middle East, were responsible for these acts of terrorism. The mix of confusion and sadness then shifted to anger and outrage. This anger leaked into the lives of Arab Americans. The stereotype of the bloodthirsty, evil, and brutal Arab solidified for some Americans, exposing Arab Americans to a great deal of discrimination. These stereotypes existed before 9/11 due to events such as the Persian Gulf War in the 90's, and then carried over into the twenty-first century. "Ultimately, though, it can be said that no single event shaped the destiny of Arab Americans more than 9/11" (Salaita, 2005, p. 151). Arab Americans were seen as doubly victimized because they were victims of the terrorist attacks, and also targets of the discrimination that was born through the backlash of 9/11. The lives of Arab Americans had to be compromised in the sense that they needed to assimilate and become more American to avoid being punished by other American civilians. However, this did not

always run smoothly. Arab Americans were exposed to an indelible amount of scrutiny post-9/11. Hate crimes, employment discrimination, and immigration reform are a few things that affect their lives in American society today. United we stood, for a short while, before the backlash began, which has left Arab Americans' lives and identities different, misunderstood, and highly compromised in a country that claims to embrace its ethnic diversity.

Arab American stereotypes originated long before 9/11. During times of crisis, Americans tend to place blame on foreigners, mainly immigrants. Because of this, ethnic or racial groups tend to become victimized and constructed as enemies and threats to American well-being. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as scapegoating. Negative images of Arabs began to surface during the Persian Gulf War. On the cover of the September 1990 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, "...titled 'The Roots of Muslim Rage,' featured the image of a large, turbaned, slanty-eyed man whose angry eyes had irises in the shape of the American flag. There is nothing to suggest that the man has any humanity; rather, what is important is that he is 'unlike us. We need have no sympathy, no guilt, when we destroy him'" (Merskin, 2004, p. 162). This stereotypical portrayal displays a negative image for Arabs and shows how the media influences, creates, and sustains American views of a race of people. Because of this, Arabs are stereotypically seen as bloodthirsty enemies: "By far, the stereotype of brutal enemy Arabs is the one most commonly written-about and most salient for scholars who study representations of Arabs in media. Scholars note that Arabs are depicted in news and entertainment media as brutal, violent, dangerous, evil, and fanatical" (Oh, 2006, p. 17). The Persian Gulf War made Arabs and Arab Americans visible to the American public, and "By then, the

construction of an enemy ‘of Middle Eastern descent’ was well established, as evidenced by the rush to judgment when an Arab American man (Abraham Ahmad) was arrested only a few hours after the April 19, 1995, Oklahoma City bombing. Ahmad said that he was singled out, ‘because of his Middle Eastern appearance and name and because he was flying to Jordan’” (Merskin, 2004, p. 165). This is evidence of racial profiling due to stereotypical misrepresentations of Arabs. Had Ahmad not been Jordanian, he would not have been questioned at all. But because of the media’s ability to sustain negative stereotypes of Arabs and Arab Americans, he became a suspect for a crime he did not commit or have relation to in any way at all. This example of racial profiling is “...a reflection of a lack of awareness on the part of many Americans and the perpetuation (and sometimes manipulation) of negative stereotypes in the media and by political figures” (Nagel and Staeheli, 2005, p. 496). Had these stereotypes not been relevant and displayed by the media, Ahmad would not have been falsely accused for the Oklahoma City bombing.

Along with the *Atlantic Monthly* cover, other media sources have published articles that breathe life to the lies that stereotypes perpetuate. For example, *New Republic* editor, Martin Peretz, in 1995, claimed that “[S]o much of the spate of terror the world has witnessed [in the past] had been wrought by Arabs” (Salaita, 2005, p. 158). And in 1999, Joshua Muravchik echoed Peretz in an article titled “Terrorism at the Multiplex” by saying that “the image of Middle Eastern terrorists wreaking havoc in the streets of America is both compelling and only too plausible” (Salaita, 2005, p. 158). For those who believe what they read, these types of articles and media portrayals of Arabs keep stereotypes fresh. A lack of awareness reinforces these stereotypes as true

and by then the media can take control by manipulating images of Arabs and Arab Americans to sway the public to think one way or the other.

Like the media, political figures offer a great deal of sustenance to Arab stereotypes. In several of George W. Bush's addresses to the nation, he used his words to construct a good versus evil and us versus them relationship between the United States and the Middle East. He also brought religion into the conflict by referencing Islam and reinforcing the fact that the 9/11 terrorist attacks were carried out by al-Qaeda, terrorists of Middle Eastern descent. On September 14, 2001, Bush had a Washington Prayer Service. In this speech, Bush used the word "evil" to represent a threat to the United States. He did this "By referring to the enemy as a dark, faceless, soul-less source of evil, and referencing the forthcoming war as a 'crusade,' Bush positioned the retaliation as a battle between the forces of good and evil. Although this kind of discourse is thought to bring a nation (tribe) closer together, it instead tends to have a polarizing effect" (Merskin, 2004, p. 168). The unification that followed the attacks diminished as a result of guilt by association.

By using the word "crusade" alone gives rise to a religious difference between Americans and Muslims, who are often lumped into category with Arabs. Bush chose his words to create a unification of Americans, when in fact it only put targets on the backs of Arabs, Arab Americans, Muslims, and Muslim Americans. Bush established an enemy in Middle Eastern representation: "The construction of all Arabs as terrorists and all Muslims as Arab terrorists—through political rhetoric reducing vast populations into a single dark image—has significant consequences not only for the civil rights of individuals living in the United States but also for many other citizens of the world"

(Merskin, 2004, p. 172). An image has been created, and that image is one of a Muslim Arab terrorist. Because Bush endorsed these stereotypes, they become more prevalent, and eventually emanate into an issue that stands between the civil rights of individuals and safety of the nation.

When Bush referred to the war in Iraq as a “crusade,” he intentionally referred to Islam, which, along with the enemy construction of Arabs, gives the religion a bad name: “...Arabs are seen as being fundamentally linked to Islam, which is itself represented as a repressive, backwards religion” (Oh, 2008, pp. 16-17). Since the religion has been represented as repressive, negative images are what surround Islam and its followers. In a survey taken in September 2001 and again in June 2002 by the Wirthlin Worldwide and Harris International organizations found “...that about 40 percent of Americans feel that that the attacks on 9/11 do represent ‘the true teachings of Islam’ ‘to a great degree’ or ‘to some degree.’ In addition, opinion poll data between January 2002 and September 2003, show the percentage of respondents who believe that ‘mainstream Islam encourages violence against non-Muslims’ grew from 14 percent to 34 percent” (Panagopoulos, 2006, p. 611). This sharp increase shows a misunderstanding of Islam and a level of ignorance for those who were polled. Then again, these opinions were influenced by media representation of Islam and Muslims. Furthermore, most people lack education about Islam in general making it easier for the media to sway the public’s view of Islam. In general, “anxiety over Islamic fundamentalism appears to be on the mount” (Panagopoulos, 2006, p. 611).

Most of the media’s representations of Islam are negative stories involving Islamic extremism. In addition to a lack of education about Islam, Americans only see

one side of Islam in the news. For example, Lori A. Peek conducted interviews with 68 Muslim students in New York City, and several of them blamed the media for inaccurate representations of Muslims and Islam, attributing this misrepresentation to the discrimination that emerged. One thing that bothered them was "...the continual misuse of the term *jihad* (almost every group of interviewees explained that the literal translation is 'to struggle, strive, and exert effort' not 'holy war') frustrated the students" (Peek, 2003, p. 280). Along with *jihad*, "The students were also frustrated that news anchors would refer to Allah as 'their God', as if Allah is some strange being ('Allah' is simply the Arabic word for 'God')" (Peek, 2003, p. 280). These types of Islamic representations show a complete lack of understanding for the religion. The terms used by the media and news anchors were not only misleading, but incorrect as well. This put an extremely foreign flavor to the religion and its followers and "...a 2004 poll found that over 25% of Americans continue to hold negative stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims" (Nagel and Staeheli, 2005, p. 490). Islam has not been completely understood, and as a result, it is misrepresented in the media. Because of this, "...large majorities of Americans feel that immigration laws should be tightened in order to restrict entry from Arab and Muslim countries" (Panagopoulos, 2006, pp. 612-613). Arabs and Muslims are continuously lumped into a single group making the misrepresentations a catalyst in stereotypical discrimination of anyone who looks Arab.

The mix of negative images, misunderstanding, media misrepresentation, and strong emotions have resulted in several hate crimes directed at Arab and Muslim Americans: "In a report by Human Rights Watch (2002), the FBI reported a 17-fold increase in Anti-Islam hate crimes, rising from twenty-eight in 2000 to 481 in 2001,

including several killings” (Oh, 2008, p. 15). The sharp increase in hate crimes is an indicator of post-9/11 backlash: “Incidents have included the firebombing of mosques, temples, and *gurdwaras*; attacks with fists, guns, knives, and Molotov cocktails; acts of vandalism and property destruction; and numerous instances of verbal harassment and intimidation” (Ahmad, 2002, pp. 103-104). However, the number of hate crimes is likely to be higher depending on who is reporting the crime. For example, “In 2003, the UCR [Uniform Crime Reports] data showed 150 anti-Islamic bias related incidents, while in the same year, the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) reported receiving 1,019 cases of civil rights discrimination and harassment against American Muslims (Hendricks, Ortiz, Sugie, and Miller, 2007, p. 97). Muslims who are new immigrants or undocumented may be afraid or hesitant to report hate crimes due to fear that their status would be discovered and that it would involve negative repercussions, including deportation. Also, some police do not count all reported hate crimes as hate crimes while Arabs and Muslims and Arab and Muslim community leaders do consider certain acts hate crimes. This difference in the definition of hate crime is an indicator to the difference of reported hate crimes for organizations like CAIR and UCR.

The 17-fold increase of hate crimes reported shows that they were prevalent both before and after September 11. However, they were received differently before the terrorist attack. Most people believe that the hate crimes are seen as more justified post-9/11 because of the sustenance of stereotypes and continuous negative imagery surrounding Arab Americans. The criminals feel less guilty for the harm they cause (a result of desensitization by the media of Arab Americans as bloodthirsty enemies): “The perpetrators of these crimes, then, were guilty not of malicious intent, but of expressing a

socially appropriate emotion in socially inappropriate ways. To borrow from criminal law, the hate crime killings before September 11 were viewed as crimes of moral depravity, while the hate killings since September 11 have been understood as crimes of passion” (Ahmad, 2002, p. 108). Patriotism can have its downsides. Death, unfortunately, is often a result of hate crimes due to the fact that Arab Americans were the target of enemy construction. They were displaced by America socially and the sense of pride that criminals attain is not only disturbing, but also a show of ignorance, malicious intent, and therefore hypocrisy.

Hate crimes were not only a problem in the general public sphere, but also in private sectors of Arab American lives such as work and school. Employment and workplace discrimination became a subject of matter for Arab Americans, resulting in a hindering job loss in the wake of 9/11. This was often due to their racial or ethnic identities: “Over 800 incidents of workplace discrimination took place between September 11, 2001, and October 11, 2002. During this time approximately 80 Arab American and/or Muslim passengers were illegally removed from airplanes. In addition, an increase in institutional discrimination occurred as evidenced by FBI and INS misconduct, which included instances of racial profiling and stereotyping, indefinite detention of foreign nationals, and suspension of U.S. citizens’ constitutional rights without due process” (Awad, 2010, p. 61). Events of racial discrimination in the workplace often go unreported because, similar to hate crimes, people may be unaware of their legal rights or fear repercussions from their employer, the government, or both. A solution to discrimination becomes difficult to attain when these series of exploitations go

unreported or are carried out by individuals related to governmental organizations and federations.

An example of workplace discrimination can be made from *Omari v. Waste Gas Fabricating Co.* (Bethlehem, PA, 2005). Omari, a Muslim Berber originally from Algeria, received retaliation from his employer after filing an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) complaint based on race, religion, and national origin. He was protected under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act and under section 42 U.S.C. (U.S. Code) §1981, which basically grants him equal rights despite racial or ethnic differences in the workplace. Omari filed a lawsuit against his company because “Substantial evidence emerged of changes in his treatment after the World Trade Center bombings on September 11, 2001 despite his having had no problems prior to that time. For example, Omari was repeatedly called Osama, terrorist, cave-dweller, camel driver, immigrant, accused of making a bomb, asked if he knew how to drive a plane into a building, and shown a cartoon of Afghan soldiers launching missiles while being told ‘this is you, this is how you guys are fighting back home’” (Malos, 2009, p. 303). Omari was eventually terminated based on lack of performance in the workplace, however, based on his account, the reasons for his termination were clearly prejudicial. On a positive note, he received a monetary award plus costs and attorney’s fees for hostile environment and retaliation. A second example of workplace discrimination can be found in *El Sayed v. Hilton Hotels Corp.* El Sayed is a naturalized U.S. citizen, and a practicing Muslim of Egyptian descent. Sayed was “...verbally abused and referred to by a supervisor as ‘Muslim Taliban’ at staff meetings and other company events” (Malos,

2009, p. 303). Like Omari, Sayed was protected under Title VII and 42 U.S.C. §1981. He also won his court case.

It is evident that Arab Americans had a tough time keeping their jobs because of discrimination claims in the workplace. Just as it was difficult to remain employed, finding employment was also a hardship. In a 2008 study composed by Daniel Widner and Stephen Chicoine, two résumés were sent to employers to measure employment bias and discrimination. The basis for their study was their finding “...that after the attacks, Arabs’ and Muslims’ real wages and weekly earnings decreased by 9-11% below what they would have been had the terrorist attacks not occurred” (Widner and Chicoine, 2011, p. 809). This workplace discrimination led them to send out two identical résumés and measure the number of callbacks each résumé received. The only differences between the résumés were the names; one résumé had a name associated with Arab race/ethnicity, while the other possessed a name associated with white race/ethnicity. The résumés contained equal experience, but their own unique templates to avoid employer suspicion; this was done to attribute any kind of bias to the name only (since both of the applicants had equal experience). The résumés were then sent to employers looking for Customer Service Managers and Office Managers. Widner and Chicoine found that Arab applicants were required to send two résumés to every one résumé a white applicant would send. However, “The largest discrepancy in callbacks was found in the office manager jobs; for this job, Arab applicants received only 0.66% callbacks for an interview compared to an equally qualified white applicant, who received 5.26% callbacks for an interview, a statistically significant difference of 4.60%” (Widner and Chicoine, 2011, p. 816). This difference in number of callbacks can be attributed to the

names on the résumés. Often times both applicants received equal treatment, but this was because neither applicant received a callback. All in all, there was a low rate of callbacks for both ethnic groups. Widner and Chicoine deem this a result of the economic downturn at the time the study was taken. However, they do believe that this study provides insight and is preliminary for future studies with the same incentives.

Even though the rights of working Arab Americans were protected under government documents in terms of employment, they faced a new type of discrimination when legislation passed the Patriot Act: “In short, under sections 206 and 207 of the Patriot Act, the CIA and FBI are now allowed to conduct wiretaps in a wide range of jurisdictions and to carry out expanded physical searches against persons not specifically covered by a warrant” (Sekhon, 2003, pp. 125-126). The act, under section 412 also allows “...the Attorney General of the United States to take into custody any foreign national whom he has ‘reasonable grounds to believe’ is ‘engaged in any activity that endangers the national security of the United States...’” (Sekhon, 2003, p. 128). With the Patriot Act in play, the civil rights granted by the First, Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Amendments disintegrated. The Patriot Act was created to target Arab Americans and they were the group most vulnerable to its merciless command. Instead of apprehending suspected terrorist threats in an individual and legal manner, the United States government responded with an approach that has been repeated often in American history: “...they ostracized and prosecuted those considered to be ‘others’ in society, violating the civil rights of thousands of innocent Arab and South Asian Americans in the name of national security” (Sekhon, 2003, p. 146).

The nation found itself in a fragile state in the years following 9/11. As a result, desperate measures were taken to ensure safety for Americans. However, this was done at the expense of the civil rights of Arab Americans, who were detained and watched closely by the government making it hard for them to trust the U.S. government. For example, “On December 14, 2001, the FBI arrested Rabih Haddad, co-founder and board member of the Global Relief Foundation (GRF), and the assets of the GRF were immediately frozen on suspicions that the foundation had been used as a mode of funneling money to terrorist organizations” (Sekhon, 2003, p. 121). Paranoia breeds racial profiling, and in the case of Rabih Haddad, he was singled out because of his name and ethnic identity. This is an example of the Patriot Act in action. The government used the Patriot Act to ensure safety, yet it resulted in distrust by Arab Americans toward the U.S. government. With the infringement upon their rights, Arab Americans seem to be completely justified with their mistrust, but that does not mean they are terrorists or a threat to the safety of the nation.

However, the Patriot Act was not the first case of government mandate that singled out Arab Americans and infringed upon their amended rights. The McCarran-Walter Act allows the prosecution of undocumented immigrants if they circulate material that is suspicious. For example, in 1987, the INS (U.S. Immigrations and Naturalization Service) charged seven Palestinians with infringement upon the McCarran-Walter Act. This was done with nothing more than the discovery of copies of *Democratic Palestine* in possession of the individuals charged (Suleiman, 1999, p. 40). During the hearings for what is called the “L.A.8 Case,” a reporter for the Los Angeles Times uncovered an INS “contingency plan.” This plan allowed, in the state of emergency, the placement of visa

and green card holders from Iran and some Arab countries into special internment camps, labeling them “potential alien terrorists and undesirables” (Suleiman, 1999, p. 40). This in turn bred fear into the minds of individuals that belong to the Arab/Muslim community because they were being singled out on the basis of ethnic background.

With this fear in place, “...Arab, Muslim, and South Asian communities in the United States have in recent months become more American, and September 11 and its aftermath constituted the citizenship ceremony by which this was accomplished” (Ahmad, 2002, p. 102). The backlash forced Arab Americans to assimilate to mainstream American culture. Otherwise they would be seen as foreign, which leads to stereotypical images of Arabs, which leads to discrimination, and eventually a permanent “other” status. To avoid discrimination, Arab Americans “...seized the American flag as their own, waving it more fervently, and indeed, preemptively, embracing the flag as a shield (Ahmad, 2002, p. 110). In doing so, Arab Americans prove U.S. loyalty because that has been in question since the terrorist attacks made obvious by the invasive Patriot Act. Not only did Arab Americans have to assimilate toward an American image, they also had to change their appearances if they appeared to be Arab. Men were told to shave or trim their beards to appear less “Arab” or “Muslim.” Women said that their parents wanted them to wear their *hijabs* in a less “Muslim” way or to stop wearing a *hijab* entirely (Peek, 2003, p. 276). Other assimilation techniques practiced by Arab and Muslim Americans is to speak English or mix languages (Arabic) with English in public settings. It was necessary for Arab and Muslim Americans to compromise their cultures in order to fit in, however, they should not have to because the United States claims to

value its diversity. This makes the demand for Arab Americans to assimilate a case of hypocrisy.

As a generally invisible ethnic minority, Arab Americans became visible in the wake of 9/11. This did not reflect positively for the Arab community. They became visible because of notable differences, but these differences needed to vanish if they wanted to avoid discrimination: “Before 9/11 scholars examined Arab American invisibility or marginality—or whatever other term they employed to denote peripherality—but after 9/11 they were faced with a demand to transmit or translate their culture to mainstream Americans” (Salaita, 2005, p. 149). They were forced into losing the culture that makes them different. This happens all too often with minority races in America. The ability to assimilate is highly valued by Americans.

According to Germiné Awad, two types of assimilation exist: dominant society immersion and ethnic society immersion. “Dominant society immersion refers to the extent to which individuals adopt or adhere to dominant society values, beliefs, and behaviors whereas ethnic society immersion refers to the extent to which individuals hold on to or adopt beliefs, values, and behaviors believed to be a part of their ethnic heritage” (2010, p. 60). For Arab Americans, “...experiences of discrimination can increase in-group identification among ethnic minority groups. The rejection-identification model posits that discrimination happens first and as a result members of the discriminated group increase their identification with their social group” (Awad, 2010, p. 65). When discrimination occurs, Arab Americans find comfort in familiarity, leading to greater in-group identification. This is “Because individuals strive to protect their self-esteem and well-being,” and as a result, “they may seek out others with whom they perceive to be

similar to increase the feeling of connectedness and belonging” (Awad, 2010, p. 61).

Arab Americans did not find a feeling of belonging after 9/11. The only place where they felt connection to others was within their own minority group of individuals. This increases alienation.

As a whole, Arabs found it difficult to fit into the United States. However, some Arabs had it easier than others, which is a reflection of Islam and its “incompatibility” with the West. Christian Arabs tend to have an easier time assimilating because they are not obviously marked by difference. They have higher rates of dominant society immersion. Whereas Arab Muslims face a tougher time in fitting in, showing higher rates of ethnic society immersion. Again, this can be attributed to the connectedness they feel within what is familiar. Even though Arab Americans as a whole were targeted, complexities within the ethnic group show differences in assimilation techniques and success.

Arab Americans are often seen as failures of assimilation because of cultural differences. This in turn affects their rates of immigration to the United States: “Many Arabs believe they are the subject of racial profiling, and over one-third have changed their travel plans in responses to fears about what will happen to them if they attempt to board a plane. It is increasingly difficult to send remittances to families in the Middle East, particularly in Palestine and Lebanon, as some banks refuse to handle the transfers” (Nagel and Staeheli, 2005, p. 490) because they are afraid of being seen as funding networks that support terrorist organizations. A rise in airline security is necessary after such a mishap as 9/11 slipped through. Yet a rise in security discourages Arab Americans from coming to the United States. Moreover, in September 2001, 83% of

Americans agreed that U.S. immigration laws should be tightened to restrict the number of immigrants from Arab or Muslim countries into the United States. The numbers slightly decreased to 76% less than a year later (Panagopoulos, 2006, p. 623). This is a discouragement of immigration because the discrimination of Arab Americans in the United States branches across the globe affecting those in the Middle East. This shows how these stereotypes can span worldwide blossoming into larger issues that affect Arabs as a whole.

When the news spilled that the World Trade Center was a target of terrorist activity, several Arab and Muslim Americans thought, “Please God, don’t let it be a Muslim’ because they feared what would happen to their community” (Peek, 2003, p. 277). The hatred, discrimination, and violence that resulted were not part of the image Americans wanted to construct for the nation in its fragile condition. Unfortunately, the unification did not survive as the stereotypes from the Persian Gulf War solidified for some Americans when the media announced that the terrorists stemmed from the Middle East. At the same time, fear and anxiety clouded the minds of Arab Americans. A negative image of Arab Americans has been reborn and it is one of a bloodthirsty, brutal, terrorist Arab: “The conclusion, then, is that Muslims/Arabs or Muslim/Arab Americans are not and perhaps cannot be presented in a good light or as heroes so long as the dominant and persuasive image which American society has of them is negative” (Suleiman, 1999, p. 38). The continuum of negative images and stereotypes stirred up by the media and political figures only makes matters worse for Arab Americans. This then affects their assimilation and immigration patterns, increasing their alienation and “otherness.” The lives of Arab Americans have undoubtedly changed since September

11, 2001. History has repeated itself with the ostracism of an ethnic group in times of national instability. This brings to light the idea that any ethnic group can collectively become susceptible and constructed as American enemies. It has been over ten years since the attacks, yet fear still looms in the hearts of Americans. But the greatest fear is the one that Arab Americans covet deep within—the fear of being misunderstood and misrepresented in a nation that can embrace its diversity one moment and ostracize and disparage a minority group the next.

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