The Muslim Other: An Analysis of American Filmic and Televisual Representations of Muslims and Arabs

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The Muslim Other:
An Analysis of American Filmic and Televisual Representations of Muslims and Arabs

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Abstract

When Edward Said published his book *Orientalism*, he revolutionized academia, changing the way that the Middle East is studied and perceived by academics. However, several decades later, Orientalist visions and tropes have yet to change in popular imagination, the rise of terrorism allowing for the reinforcement of the dichotomous relationship between the East and the West that Said criticizes. Popular narratives, especially those projected by Hollywood, regurgitate the same representations that Orientalist art during the Colonial period popularized, underscoring the endurance of Orientalism as a system of knowledge. Through the lens of Edward Said’s conceptualization of Orientalism and its relation to narrative and race theory, this study analyzes movies and TV shows produced by Hollywood post-9/11 to showcase the persistent idea of the so-called Orient as an eternally existentially threatening Other. The study primarily focuses on the narratives of *24, Homeland, American Sniper, Sand Castle,* and *Lost,* contextualizing those works in relation to each other and in relation to other, similar narratives.
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In 2014, *Homeland*, a TV show produced by Showtime, released the poster for its fourth season. At the heart of the poster, Carrie Mathison, the main protagonist, is looking back at the audience, her face a mixture of alertness and concern. Her hair is half-covered with a bright red shawl, styled purposely to indicate a hijab. And she stands amidst a flock of burqa-clad women, all dressed in black, all with their backs to the viewer. Carrie becomes a defiant, bright, and slightly threatened figure in the middle of a sea of faceless black Muslims. There is hardly any question about the topic of the show: faceless Muslims and defiant Americans.

*Homeland*’s poster best embodies Hollywood’s general attitudes toward the so-called Muslim world. A distinct American figure, stark, bold and defiant, against swathes of faceless (presumably Arab) Muslims. The figure is both strikingly different, and threatened to be engulfed, fighting against the dark and dangerous path that the black burqas lead towards. The image of the East, then, which has become synonymous with the concept of the Muslim world, synonymous with the politically charged Middle East, and collapsed to mean Arab and Muslim always and at the same time regardless of its gross overgeneralization, is set up as an opposite of sorts, a looming, but curious, threat. Much like other contemporary depictions of Arabs and/or Muslim characters, *Homeland*’s poster has strong overtones of Orientalism. Far from being a long gone historical concept, Orientalist tropes continue to manifest themselves in pop cultural narratives involving the East.

In 1978, Edward Said published his infamous book *Orientalism*, in which he defines Orientalism as a system of knowledge that allows only certain ideas about the vague Middle East and its peoples to trickle to Western imagination. Indeed such ideas are so persistent that it seems difficult even for well-intentioned writers and artists to break out of their mold and imagine an Arab and/or Muslim individual outside of such perceptions. The post-9/11 era illustrates with
reinvigorated force the system of knowledge that Said speaks of. The persistence of images of
the middle-east, the persistence of such a system of knowledge, generates a cultural
understanding of the West in opposition to the East. It creates a democratic, free, sexually
liberated, gender-egalitarian West in sharp contrast to an authoritarian, oppressed, sexually
prude, patriarchal East. The West, then, engages in a master narrative that creates, and maintains,
its image not only of itself but also of the Arab and the Muslim world, an image that it has the
power to project, to represent, to maintain and to narrate. This image, then, engages in a cycle
with the Arab and Muslim world as it reacts. The West’s core identity becomes heavily
dependent on an understanding of itself in opposition to the East, in opposition to what it
perceives as backwards values. It understands itself as being in a heroic battle against yesterday’s
primitive religious fundamentalism, a holder of tomorrow’s secular, enlightened ideals.
Orientalism, then, becomes far more relevant to the West’s identity of itself than it is concerned
about a truthful or factual representation of the East.

    It is through this lens of Orientalism and its relation to narrative and race theory that I
analyze contemporary Hollywood narratives and their representation of Muslims, Arabs, and
Islam. My particular choice of movies and TV shows coming from Hollywood might seem odd.
After all, much of what Hollywood produces is oftentimes considered as merely passable.
However, Hollywood’s influence cannot be dismissed. People consume popular media on a daily
basis, whether in the United States specifically, or in the rapidly booming global market. Popular
media has become an integral part of many people’s lives. They create reference points and make
up an agreed upon cultural capital. They also have the ability to change minds and shape
understandings of the world and one’s self, regardless of what might be thought of their artistic
value. And since Orientalism tells us more about the West’s perception of itself, then examining
what these narratives have to tell us about the way we perceive the world around us is of utmost importance.

This project is divided into four sections. The first lays out the theory through which the narratives at hand are examined, borrowing from Lyotard’s ideas in *The Postmodern Condition*, Charles Mills’s *The Racial Contract*, and, of course, Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. The second section deals with depictions of Arabs and Muslims in the context of thriller TV shows about terrorism and homeland security and war movies, focusing primarily on *24, Homeland, American Sniper*, and *Sand Castle*. This particular section is the longest and most detailed simply because it is this genre that involves the Middle East most often. The third is a close examination of the Good Arab trope, looking at narratives that do not explicitly involve the region, and therefore are not necessarily about war, but that include a Muslim and/or Arab character. *Lost*’s Sayyid Jarrah is a primary example of such depiction, and his character showcases the difficulty of breaking out of the Orientalist framework even for well-intentioned writers. The last section is a brief analysis of the East’s reactions to Orientalist images. I give an overview of intellectual trends, and look at the implications of recent mainstream narratives coming from the East.

I. Theoretical and Historical Framework

In his work on *The Postmodern Condition*, in which he challenges the continued relevance of metanarrative, Jean-Francois Lyotard argues that knowledge is a question of government (9). “Knowledge and power,” then, “are simply two sides of the same question: who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided?” (Lyotard 9). The phrasing of knowledge as a question of “government” rather than just power is particularly interesting. It takes the argument from the generic idea of knowledge as power, or possessing
knowledge means you are in possession of power, to make it a question directly related to
government, i.e. an institutionalized and legitimized power structure. Knowledge, then, becomes
a question of how to govern and how to use knowledge to further one’s government. Further,
government is an institutionalized, legitimized form of power. The power of knowledge is not
only politicized but also institutionalized. This relationship of knowledge to power makes it so
that it is power, or institutional power, that not only decides what knowledge is but also what, in
the first place, needs to be studied and therefore “known”. Indeed, Lyotard makes explicit the
relationship between knowledge and institutions. An institution constrains its statements,

The constraints function to filter discursive potentials, interrupting possible
connections in the communication networks: there are things that should be said.
They also privilege certain classes of statements [...], whose predominance
characterizes the discourse of the particular institution: there are things that
should be said and there are ways of saying them. (Lyotard 17)

In other words, institutionalized knowledge systemizes knowledge, dictating what is to be
considered knowledge, what is necessary to look into, and how it must be formulated in order for
it to be considered knowledge. The institutionalization implies a hierarchy that decides what is,
or is not, valid. Further, institutionalized knowledge creates a closed system, one that operates
within its own internal logic, barring forms of knowledge outside of this closed system to enter
into it, let alone outside criticisms.

Lyotard argues that authoritative, institutional, hierarchical knowledge is arrived at
through the concept of consensus. A person can achieve legitimacy for their statement through
the acceptance of their peers within the institution of knowledge. And this consensus “that
permits such knowledge to be circumscribed and makes it possible to distinguish one who knows
from one who doesn’t (the foreigner, child) is what constitutes the culture of a people” (Lyotard 19). Culture, here, is the accepted practice of the knowledge institution. However, it can also be understood as the culture of a people at large, who, through an implicit form of consensus come to understand themselves, their roles, what is “normal” and what is “deviant,” in a certain light. Cultural competency becomes a part of this system of knowledge. In large part this cultural competency is formulated through narrative. Popular stories, according to Lyotard define competence through “successes or failures” undertaken by the hero, to “bestow legitimacy upon models” (20). Those popular stories are told by narrators whose “only claim to competence” for telling the story “is the fact that he has heard it himself” (Lyotard 20). In other words, the storytellers are those who have entered into the culture of a community, whose belonging to an institution of knowledge made it possible for their telling of the stories to narratees who will eventually be able to be a part of those stories and transmit them. This form of knowledge transmittance “determines in a single stroke what one must say in order to be heard, what one must listen to in order to speak, and what role one must play to be the objective of a narrative” (Lyotard 21). As a matter of fact, then, an unborn child “is already positioned as the referent in the story recounted by those around him, in relation to which will inevitably chart his course” even by the simple fact of the child’s name (Lyotard 21). The child, i.e. the member of society, is immediately placed in relationship to the transmitted narrative of knowledge. The name, within which the social position is embedded, determines whether this person can belong to the system of knowledge, and whether they (he) would be capable one day of being the narrator who is capable of distributing the popular stories.

Lyotard argues that this “traditional” form of transmitting knowledge through narrative is no longer applicable to “developed” Western countries and is instead the mode of knowledge
production in “undeveloped” countries. The idea here is that scientific knowledge has taken the place of this narrative knowledge. Instead, the claim is that scientific knowledge is engaged in a kind of tense relationship with narrative as a legitimizing force of scientific knowledge. The distinction of the “developed” Western countries in relation to narrative knowledge is overstated. Perhaps the time of publication can account for the shift. A post-9/11 world has seen resurgence of nationalist ideas, and further defined the boundary that Edward Said speaks of between the East and the West. Much of our current day reality has not managed to shake off the effects of the incident. The political fallout, in the subsequent war on Afghanistan and Iraq for example, is enough of an indication of the monumentality of the event, as it re-established clear lines between the East and West, lines that were never quite done away with as it is.

Lyotard’s assertion that such form has fallen out of legitimacy for the West is further problematized by Charles E. Mills’s writing in The Racial Contract. Mills is skeptical of the absence of the grand narrative in Western thought. After all, the entirety of contemporary Western civilization has been built on the distinguishing ideas between who belongs and who does not, who is civilized and who is not. He locates the foundation of the modern state in the idea of the Social Contract put forth by infamous philosophers Locke and Hobbes, which “is not a contract between everybody (“we the people”), but between just the people who count, the people who really are people (“we the white people”) (Mills 3). Indeed, the people who were included in, say, the constitution of the United States, those who could receive rights and were able to be a part of the political system, were only a select few: white, male, and property owners. From the onset, the social contract decided who is and who is not a part of it. While the language seems neutral, its practice did not have such neutrality. The conception of the social contract is based on the Othering of certain people, then, who, also by virtue of a given
(metaphorical) name, could not belong to society and have no say in society’s narrative and
cannot be seen as its protagonist. The narrative that imbues a white male, for example, with a
certain social status, is denied to the Others of society. Ideas of racism and Othering, then, as
Mills points out, are not a violation of the social contract, but are a part of it and a natural result
from its history (4). This social bond that exists between Western white men\(^1\) implies that it is
only this group that has full personhood and therefore is able to be a part of the social bond.
Certainly, this applies to non-white communities within Western cultures, but the so-called East
is an expansion and an emblem of that exclusion as well. The West’s definition of itself, of its
social contract is contrasted with what it sees of the East, an East that has become racialized and
therefore cannot be a part of the West’s narrative of the inception of its civilization. Hence, the
West, for example, bypasses the advancement of the Islamic communities during the medieval
period. The extent of this acknowledgement is admittance of the East’s transference of Plato’s
and Aristotle’s works “back” to Europe. And even this is framed in the context of just
transference. There is nothing more that the East has done, no addition and no modification. The
very idea that the East has had a hand in new discoveries seems to escape Western imagination.
At the heart of this issue is who is a part of the narrative, who is worthy of the social contract and
who gets autonomy. Indeed such questions are so entrenched within the West’s post-
Enlightenment thoughts, the ideas of the West’s superiority, that even progressive philosophers
like John Stuart Mill argued that everyone had a right for autonomy and self-determination,
except for children and barbarians (Mill 14). "Barbarians" here, of course, is a code for Othered,
racialized non-white people. The Orient, then, would certainly fall under that category. The
personhood of the people there is disregarded.

\(^1\) Interestingly, Mills borrows the structure of his ideas from another work, *The Sexual Contract*, which speaks of the
inherent exclusion of women from the social bond.
Lyotard undermines his own statement about the traditional transmittance of knowledge as he argues for the new ways in which the West perceives itself. The West has become concerned with science as an institution for producing knowledge. And it is this tense relationship between narrative knowledge and scientific knowledge that sets Western imperialism apart from all other forms of imperialism: “it is governed by the demand to legitimation” (Lyotard 27). The suggestion here is that legitimation cannot be achieved by the simple existence of scientific institutions. Instead, the Western empire needs narrative in order for it to legitimize itself. In other words, it needs to consolidate its scientific knowledge by narrativizing it. In such an instance, philosophy becomes of utmost importance.

Philosophy must restore unity to learning, which has been scattered into separate sciences in laboratories and in pre-university education; it can only achieve this in a language game that links the sciences together as movements in the becoming of spirit, in other words, which links them in a rational narration, or rather meta-narration. (Lyotard 33)

Philosophy’s consolidation of scientific knowledge seems not to be completely different from the earlier form of narration that Lyotard describes. This meta-narrative, perhaps seen as the theoretical work that many philosophers attempted to explain the advancement of the West, maintains much of the basis for the traditional form of knowledge. It is still the case that there is a narrator who belongs to an institution, legitimized by his peers, who puts forth statements that are a part of the institution of knowledge, who suggests and decides what is Western and what is not, and so on. By extension, there are still narratees who can belong to the narrative, depending on their name and social position, and that would necessarily be to the exclusion of others. Perhaps this becomes a question of diverging institutions, academic or otherwise, who would
necessarily need to legitimize themselves as well. Yet it is still the case that those institutions are a part of a larger understanding of legitimized knowledge in a strictly Western narrative. Hence, course curriculums, the normalcy of certain identities and the deviance of others, and so on.

It is within this framework that Edward Said defines Orientalism. Said defines Orientalism as an “enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period” (Said 3). Orientalism, then, according to this definition, is its own institutionalized, systematic form of knowledge. Its existence, importantly, is a method by which Europe both controls and creates the Orient in all its facets. Orientalism, then, is “a product of certain political forces and activities” (Said 203). The political production of the Orient links it directly to a power dynamic.

The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony […]. The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be “Oriental” in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because it could be—that is, submitted to being—made Oriental. (Said 5-6)

In other words, the Orient is Orientalized because the West could make it Oriental, could create it as Oriental, because it had the power over it to do so, not because the Orient existed objectively waiting to be discovered. At the very least, the Orient that the West wrote about does not exist objectively as such. Further, this gets at a larger issue when it comes to Orientalism. Orientalism is not so much about the East as much as it is about the West. The invention of the East in a particular image says more about the West’s perception of itself, its definition of itself in contrast with other, than it tells us about the East.
The power hierarchy implied within the relationship between the Occident and the Orient relates to Lyotard’s idea of knowledge being primarily a question of governance. If Orientalism is a way through which the West can manage and control the Orient, then it is a discipline which means to govern the Orient. The production of knowledge about it, then, serves a certain purpose of governance, namely the Colonial project. After all, the existence of the study itself is dependent on the fact of Colonialism. From the outset, Orientalism gained traction because of European presence in the region. Said locates this particular renewed interest in Napoleon’s initial conquest of Egypt which brought researchers and other scholars with the specific intent to study Egypt (Lockman 70-71). Colonial presence continued afterwards and furthered those efforts. The production of the Orient as a field of study, then, is directly related to power and governance. And the power to colonize and conquer gives the power to represent.

The point about power cannot be overemphasized. The question of Orientalism, as Edward Said sees it, is not a simple case of one culture's perverted fascination with another. It is not a commentary on how people will always Other one another and make them foreign, although that is certainly embedded. Rather, it is a question of power. In his book *Contending Visions of the Middle East*, Zachary Lockman surveys the large literature written about the East from the West from as early as the Greeks’ interactions with Asia. The book points to the shift in tone as we enter into the Colonial period and growing global Western hegemony. Early medieval European writers viewed Muslims as an ethnic rather than a religious group, referring to them as “Saracens,” and had a rather distorted image of Islam where they did not seem to even comprehend that it is a monotheistic religion (Lockman 24). After the Ottomans seizing of Constantinople, European writers began to better understand and define the religion, but only to a somewhat greater degree than before, and still with a general sense of Islam as a threat.
(Lockman 29). That, frankly, is not all that unwarranted considering the Islamic empire's rapid advancement and the Ottomans' quick expansion into Eastern Europe. Their military force was seen as undefeatable, a clear looming threat over European lands that was only enhanced after the destruction of the Roman Empire by the Ottomans’ seizing of Constantinople (Lockman 41). 2

Indeed, Lockman argues that the East had always produced a “profound sense of cultural difference and a deep sense of threat” (37). Yet, the formulation of such images maintained a simple fact: this other might be different and dangerous, but they are essentially equal. There was no assumption of superiority, except, perhaps in terms of religious understanding, which could be easily fixable through the simple act of conversion. But there was no pretension of a distinct, essential difference that made one group, at its core, inferior to the other. However, the post-Enlightenment period saw the categorization of peoples into races that were essentially and inherently different, and therefore essentially and inherently unequal (Lockman 59). With the creation of the Aryan race, the African, and so on, came the creation of the homo islamicus, the Latin term for the racial designation, the Muslim Man (Lockman 74). It is within this context that Orientalism arose, within this dynamic where the superiority of the West became accepted as a core difference between Caucasians or Aryans (i.e. white people) and everyone else. The scholar Ernest Renan, for example, in a lecture where he began by criticizing the idea of unchanging races and nations, still made an exception for Muslims. “The actual inferiority of Mohammadan countries,” he says, “the decadence of states governed by Islam, and the intellectual nullity of the races that hold, from that religion alone, their culture and their education” is clearly essentialist

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2 It is interesting to note that in spite of Europe’s sense of the threatening Ottoman Empire, there are writings that locate an almost begrudging admiration towards the Empire, calling it a meritocracy where one is judged by skill rather than lineage or generational social status. Yet, the same qualities for which it was praised were seen as reason for revulsion with the start of the Renaissance era. This particular development is interesting to trace (Lockman 42-48).
By the fact of conversion to Islam, in fact, people doom themselves to this state of inferiority (Lockman 79). And it is, perhaps, this form of need for legitimation that Lyotard speaks of. The Colonial project needed to make sense of the world around it, its interactions with it, and its own existence. Theories of race were in large part conceptualized due to a misunderstanding of Darwin’s theory of evolution, seeing racial hierarchies and Western imperialism as a product of natural selection, and those theories filled the vacuum of legitimation that the scientific knowledge needed. The scientific knowledge, then, became narrativized into a coherent theory that made sense of the world (Lockman 81).

The systemization of Orientalism as a field of knowledge, necessarily points to institutionalization. It is a “corporate institution” that deals with the Orient, “dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 3, my emphasis). The authorization of the knowledge is, as Lyotard argues, through consensus, the consensus of those concerned with the field, those who created it, those who have a vested interest in it, and those who have the ability to be a part of it. None of those categories, of course, include an actual person from the Orient. The general perception being that those people are not capable of representing themselves, and even if they did, what they have to say is not truly authorized to be a part of the Orientalist mode of thinking. An example of the institutional force of Orientalism is shown in history. Edward Gibbon’s influential and popular historical work *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, a six-volume work published in the late 17th century, combs through characteristics of the Romans, claiming some as a part of the Western heritage while dismissing others that did not quite fit (Lockman 15). The less pleasant aspects are relegated to the Romans’ “affectation of the courts
of Asia” (qtd. Lockman 15). The two operating factors here which are certainly related, are what can be, what is allowed to be Western, and what is assigned as Eastern. The above example operates within the system of Orientalism that allows “certain things, certain types of statements, certain types of work” to seem correct for the Orientalist (Said 202). This kind of statement, this knowledge “has no final legitimacy outside of serving the goals envisioned by the practical subject, the autonomous collectivity” (Lyotard 36). In other words, the legitimacy is created through consensus.

Knowledge’s legitimacy being determined by its serving of goals for the collective in question is certainly not conscious. If we look at this through the lens of Orientalism, then it becomes a subconscious framework that assumes a set of facts and becomes a servant of a larger implicit ideology. Everything that goes into this framework contributes to this implicit framework and ideology. If one is to understand the world through strictly Western vs. Eastern boundaries, and if those two are opposites, if the west is rational and reasonable, if the West is advanced, if the West is morally superior, then the East is anything but that. All of one’s statements about the East, then, become wholly dependent on this manufactured dichotomy.

Further, if one’s yardstick for understanding the world and its development, if one’s understanding of history takes the form of the West’s Enlightenment, with its idea of history’s forward motion, and human liberalism as the instillation of progress and the ultimate goal for all nations, then one’s understanding of the East, and everywhere else, will necessarily find itself dependent on that. We see this manifest not just in the gross simplification of the brown terrorist arc (as will be discussed below), but also in the images of good Arabs and the understanding of them as secularized, Westernized individuals. Because the understanding of the Orient is seen strictly through a Western lens, the legitimacy of such understandings of the supposed Orient,
then, become wholly dependent on whether or not they fit a certain image as opposed to another. Said further emphasizes this point: it is not the case that “Orientalism unilaterally determines what can be said about the Orient, but that it is the whole network of interests inevitably brought to bear on (and therefore always involved in) any occasion when the peculiar entity 'the Orient' is in question” (Said 3). In other words, Orientalism becomes a consistent frame of reference for anything that might involve the East.

The question becomes: What, exactly, is this image that Orientalism projects? This question is more difficult to answer than one might think. If Orientalism is “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and [...] 'the Occident’” (Said 2), then the Orient is perceived primarily in terms of being the Occident’s antithesis. The Orient became a place of erotic sexual fantasies, of fascinatingly backwards Muslims who are hot-blooded and incapable of reason, of hypersexualized women and crude men whose actions carry homoerotic undertones; Muslims who are stagnant, whose civilization came and went and was just a dot on the West’s map toward becoming the civilization. Essentially, they were everything that the West was not and therefore they were inferior. After all, what makes European (and by extension American) “culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe [is] the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures” (Said 7). Built into that distinction, then, is the inferiority of the East. Unlike the historical perception, then, being different no longer meant maintaining one’s essential equality.

With time, the projected image of what has turned from the Oriental to the Arab, became that of threatening menace. This especially happened as the United States became the dominating force of the West, and, to an extent, globally as well. The Arab turned from sexualized and
incompetent to threatening and menacing (Said 285-286) but certainly not less incompetent. The West’s preoccupation of the Arab as a figure of interest is not an acknowledgment of the Arab’s value or humanity or the possibility for his integration into the modern world. Instead, the interest in the Arab is, as Said puts it, negative in value. He (and the Arab is considered as primarily male) disrupts peace and threatens Western values and civilization (Said 286).³ The European tradition of Orientalist scholarship was “accommodated, normalized, domesticated, and popularized” by studies of the Near East in the United States at the beginning of the latter half of the twentieth century, and gave rise to “coherent attitudes among most scholars, institutions, styles of discourse, and orientations, despite the appearance of refinement” i.e. in spite of the appearance of rising above past prejudices. The emergence of this new vocabulary of Orientalism only served to reiterate past dogmas in new contexts:

[There is an] absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, [and] inferior […]. Abstractions about the Orient, particularly those based on texts representing a “classical” Oriental civilization, are always preferable to direct evidence drawn from modern Oriental realities […]. The Orient is eternal, uniform and incapable of defining itself; therefore it is assumed that a highly generalized and systematic vocabulary for describing the Orient from a Western standpoint is inevitable and even scientifically “objective” […].

³ Fully historicizing this shift is an interesting subject of study in itself but goes beyond the purposes of this particular study. It is enough to mention, however, that the construction of the state of Israel and the emergence of the so-called Arab-Israeli conflict contributed in no small part to this conception of Arabs as threatening and violent caricatures (Said 284-290). This becomes especially relevant in terms of perceiving Palestinians, in particular, in American popular culture. While recently the issue has fallen to the side, and popular productions concerned themselves more specifically with places like Iraq, Afghanistan, or the undefined Middle East, it’s still the case that Palestinians are perceived and given a special malice in American imagination. Edward Said’s *The Question of Palestine* offers an intriguing and thought-provoking account of the issue at hand.
The Orient is at bottom something either to be feared […], or controlled. (Said 300-301)

The images of the Orient, then, do not truly change with time. It is not the case that there is a clear subversion of past images that give rise to new images. Rather, the idea remains that the Orient has some essential quality which is not subject to change: an image of peoples stuck in the past (in tents, wearing sandals, riding camels, with sexually oppressed women who are therefore hypersexualized) and unable to become a part of the present. And this inability to become a part of the present represents a real, mortal threat to the advanced Western civilization, since Islam, according to this view, means to take over. Indeed, Samuel Huntington, in his influential book *The Clash of Civilizations* published in 1996, asserts that the main antagonist to the so-called Western Civilization is the so-called Islamic Civilization. The basic premise of his idea is that Islamic Civilization is inherently antithetical to the West and therefore will present an eternal divide between the East and the West that is irreconcilable. This struggle will supposedly be the West’s biggest challenge and biggest war going forward.

None of this is to say that the Orientalist’s ideas were perpetuated with clear malicious intent. As stated above, knowledge’s serving of power is not a conscious or explicit one. Lockman points out that scholars, like Ernest Renan, saw themselves as objective, disinterested researchers, whose methods and contributions to scholarship are important (and indeed some of them truly are), and who had no direct or indirect hand in policymaking. Regardless of what they thought, however, or their intent, ideas do not exist in a vacuum. Culture, academia, and politics feed off each other in a cycle. And what ended up being produced by Orientalist academics inevitably had an effect on several facets of the West’s conception of itself, and certainly had direct effects on people in this Orientalized Orient. The persistence of the field’s objective,
disinterested scholarly mindset was so great that it took Edward Said bluntly stating that Orientalism is “less objectively true than we often like to think” (Said 202) to bring that idea into question.

The question of the objective West here is of utmost importance. There is an implicit sense within European and American academia that their study is the most valid, and the most scientific. This isn’t simply because of an idea of their objectivity, which is seen as the objectivity; after all, much like most aspects of Western civilization, European and American academia holds itself as the standard by which all other methods of learning and research should be measured. Rather, this is a part of a larger issue of the normalization of European and American culture and experience. In this vein, it would be particularly important to return to Mills’s arguments in *The Racial Contract*. According to Mills, it is not only the case that the Social Contract is built on the exclusion of people, but also that the most important political system of the past two hundred years, (white) Western hegemony, has been made apolitical (1-2). This de-politicization takes Western culture from the realm of descriptive to prescriptive and therefore normative (Mills 10). The West’s culture, and therefore its experience of itself in the world, is held as the normative, universal experience, against which all other cultures, trends of thought, intellectual traditions, and so on, would be evaluated as deviant and political. In other words, the normalization of the West’s experiences not only leads to its judgements about the East being filtered through a Western perception that is unable to see the East outside of that perception but also makes its paradigm seem so normalized and natural that it does not fully realize the maintenance of the Western framework, even in more progressive writings and depictions.
Indeed, herein lies the biggest criticism of Edward Said: at the end of the day, he still maintains the West as the paradigm against which the East needs to be understood, and does not take his argument to its logical conclusion so that it might critique the paradigm itself. In her book *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition*, Samira Haj argues that “while striking a powerful blow to the essentialist totalizing methodologies,” Said’s *Orientalism* fell short “of a more radical critique of liberal humanism and, in particular, its intrinsic connection with the expansion of Western hegemony worldwide” (Haj 3). According to Haj, Said, instead of viewing Orientalist discourse “as inherent to the Western humanist tradition [, he] considers it a deviation from that tradition’s grand narratives and emancipationist politics” (Haj 3). Unlike Mills’s assertion that the Social Contract was founded on the exclusion of others and therefore the resulting racism and sexism is a part of it, Said is not willing to submit that Orientalist discourse is intrinsically a part of a Western tradition that upholds itself as superior. Haj argues that this shortcoming on the part of Said’s work can be detected in later works about the Middle East operating within Said’s framework. “The revisionist historiography on Islam,” Haj writes, “continues to invoke the humanistic, secularist, and anti-traditionalist assumptions of the post-Enlightenment period. [Those] analytical frameworks [tend] to assess the modernity of Islam in terms of how closely it conforms to Western cultural and institutional arrangements” (4). This study will deal with similar issues of tradition vs. modernity and secularism vs. religiosity, even in examples of good representations of Arabs and Muslims. The measure of goodness is almost always determined by how secularized and Westernized the character in question is. Further, this will present an interesting challenge in the section about reactions, especially in terms of intellectual trends of the first half of the 20th century, since Arabs and Muslims are prone to buying into the narrative
set forth by this tradition. The paradigm for one’s progressiveness becomes how similar they are to the West, almost to an uncritical point.

Thus far, the current analysis has focused on Orientalism as a political and intellectual discipline. However, politics, academia, and culture are intricately connected together. It would be tempting to assert that Orientalism as political thought is reflected onto art and other cultural productions passively. The matter, however, is never that easy. To suggest that the origin of this discourse is within politics or academia is to cleanly and simplistically place an origin point at which one can return and undo the problem. It suggests that artistic and cultural creations, including the ones that this study will reckon with, would change through a simple change in politics or in academic fields. This, of course, is not the case. After all, while Said’s work might have to a certain extent revolutionized the field, it did not enter mainstream dialogue. Movies, like Disney's infamous Aladdin was created two decades after Said’s work but showed no self-awareness whatsoever in regard to the region or its people. It is true, indeed, that politics, especially, tend to exasperate certain images or enflame certain sentiments; there is no separation there, certainly. Nonetheless, the relationship is not that clearly linear or one-directional: culture can and does enable politics. The way that I think of it is in terms of a circle where intellectual thought, politics, cultural production feed off each other. Albeit it is an inelegant circle at best. Said, perhaps, puts this point about the scope of Orientalism best:

[Orientalism is a] distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, philological texts. It is an elaboration not only of a basic geographical distinction […], but also of a whole series of “interests” which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates
but also maintains; it is, rather than expresses, a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is [a] manifestly different [...] world; it is, above all, a discourse that is by no means in direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with power political [...], power intellectual [...], power cultural, [and] power moral [...]. Orientalism is—and does not simply represent—a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with 'our' world. (Said 12)

Orientalism then, is not only about the political power dynamic. But also, it is about a power discrepancy within cultural production as well, a power discrepancy that is made possible, certainly, by the political power hierarchy. After all, the power to represent, to silence some narratives and value others, is also inherently political.

The power of representation is made evident by the position of the artist writing about the region and its people. The author of a text about the Orient, by virtue of what and how he writes about the Orient, “is meant to indicate that the [author] is outside the Orient, both as an existential and as a moral fact” (Said 21). That is to say, an author about the Orient, by virtue of his position as a part of a Colonial power, sets himself apart from the region that he means to write about as well as its people. He is an observer of a strange, erotic and exotic culture, taking in its vibrant colors and veiled maidens with rapt attention. This fact is bluntly evident in works by Nerval, who writes about his experience in Egypt, a half fictional, half non-fictional report, through positioning himself as a white European man looking to buy a slave to appease the neighbors’ anxiety over his singleness and maleness. Flaubert’s writings, with their oversexed
Arabs, the sensitive but sensual courtesans whom he penetrates and dominates, are similar. Delacroix places himself as a spectator in *Women of Algiers in their Apartments*, looking at the mysterious sexual aura about the women’s movements in the privacy of their harem and the central figure’s sharp, almost challenging gaze. This voyeurism becomes especially relevant in regards to women and sexuality at large. Jean-Jule-Antoine Lecomte de Nouy’s *L’Esclave Blanche*’s depiction of a solitary naked Arab woman, as Rana Kabbani points out in her book *Imperial Fictions*, “leaves the woman free for the abduction of the viewer’s gaze since she is not attached within the painting” (131). Similarly, Gerome’s *Snake Charmer*, with a naked boy whose back is to the viewer whilst he faces an audience of other men, invites the viewer to perceive the mysteriousness of the scene, since the boy is turned away, while marveling at the erotic sensuality of it (Kabbani 116). The author of the text about the Orient, then, even in his involvement within the Orient, remains outside of it, removed and superior, but fascinated by its perceived sensuality and exoticism.

Nor does this position of authorship fade with our contemporary moment. The director of *American Sniper*, Clint Eastwood, positions not only himself outside of Iraq but also his main protagonist, Chris Kyle. Chris Kyle is an American looking out for Americans, who are nothing like the Iraqis. The movie, as will be discussed later, is clear about that difference. Further, the movie’s narrative through Chris Kyle’s perspective places the audience, too, in opposition to the Iraqis being murdered on the screen. This positioning is a point that could be made about any of the works of the colonial era and might indeed, be the point. Narratives about the Orient given through the lens of a European or American, then, serve to distance the Western audience from the narrative.
A part of this intermingling of power and politics comes from the basic idea that artistic cultural production does not exist in a vacuum. Even the works of the most eccentric artist “are constrained and acted upon by society, by cultural traditions, by worldly circumstance, and by stabilizing influences […] both learned and imaginative writing are never free, but are limited in their imagery, assumptions, and intentions” (Said 201-202). All artistic endeavors, then, are informed by a societal and cultural context. Moreover, not only are those works influenced by those forces, but also they, themselves, become influencers. To put it in Lyotard’s terms, the statements that the artist has to make about the region look for legitimized statements within the system, and ultimately gain legitimacy and access to the institution of knowledge depending on the extent to which it can garner consensus of their legitimacy. After all, “the possibilities for work present in the culture to a great and original mind are never unlimited” (Said 202), so much so that it makes it impossible for any artist or writer to fully escape its clutch. The works analyzed in this study showcase the strain of this tradition which still occupies much of the imagination of popular culture. As mentioned above, these ideas are so entrenched that even instances of “good” representation cannot seem to escape the framework of Orientalism, not to mention the effect of social and economic circumstances that might affect a work (Said 202). This situation, after all, cannot be divorced from the economic situation. Certain ideas, certain statements, such as those presented in American Sniper, are far more favored than statements made by a movie like Sand Castle. Economic politics go into the process of making either movie. Depending on which studio accepts which idea to begin with, the movie is given a certain budget, which from the outset affects the movie’s making process, then its distribution, and its subsequent reception and, therefore, its impact. This marriage of politics, art, and economics is further problematized when considering the fact that the Department of Defense funds certain
movies, and not without influencing the creative process, demanding script changes and sometimes even influencing the general direction of a movie (Steuter and Martin 93-119).

In this project, I will investigate Hollywood’s movies and TV shows of the post-9/11 era through the framework of Orientalism as a systematic, institutionalized system of knowledge, one that is primarily based in power hierarchies and embedded into a social and cultural system that legitimizes certain statements over others, a discipline that has much more to tell us about the West’s perception of itself and the world around it than it does about the Orient itself. The choice of timeframe, here, is based on relevance. 9/11 has had an immense effect on the world and that extended, perhaps especially, to Hollywood.

The extensive theoretical framework is helpful in two ways. First, it helps underscore the importance of the issue at hand. This is not a simple case of isolated narratives which can be dismissed after a brief acknowledgement of their problematic depictions of Arabs or Muslims. Rather, these narratives are a part of a larger institutional system of knowledge and power that perpetuate certain images to the detriment of primarily the East, as will be evident in the reactions section, but also the West itself, since it limits understandings and therefore potentials. This is not to suggest that pop cultural movies are the sole manifestations of the system, but to suggest that they are, in fact, one of those manifestations, and they might be one of the most important manifestations. Regardless of what one might think about the quality of the work that Hollywood presents and where it might fall on the spectrum in terms of artfulness or lack thereof, it still remains that Hollywood has immense influence on the conception of society’s understanding of itself. Those TV shows and movies are watched by millions within the United States and many, many more within a larger global audience. Hollywood has managed to
become one of the most influential cultural producers in our current day and age. What it has to communicate about certain topics and certain peoples, then, is of utmost importance.

Second, this framework sets the kind of questions to be asked of those narratives. It takes this study out of just literary analysis, though there is a large share of that. Literary analysis is indispensable in this instance. However, the framework manages and directs the analysis towards specific aspects according to specific questions. The main questions this framework asks of the analyzed narratives are: What is the representation of the Arab and the Muslim like? How does it compare to the white American and what kind of relationship is set up between the two? What are the implications of the representation at hand in relation to the described system? And what does this tell us about how we view ourselves as opposed to others? In other words, how does this explain our worldview?

This isn’t the first attempt at deconstructing Hollywood’s vision of Arabs and Muslims. Jack Shaheen, did an enormous survey of over 300 Hollywood movies in his book *Reel Bad Arabs*, and found only about 39 that he deemed good or positive. His work, however, is quantitative, which means not much close analysis is provided for any of the works, and the categorization of good or bad is straightforward. The study at hand means to investigate even the depiction of the good Arab. Shaheen’s study is also outdated, the most recent edition released in 2009. And it does not include TV shows. TV shows, I think, present a particularly interesting case. The set-up system of multiple seasons means that the most successful TV shows can run for years or even decades. The audience grows an emotional attachment to the characters presented. And, watching from the comfort of one’s home, the experience becomes more personal, complicating the shows’ influence.
Considering the depth of the analysis required, then, I aim to take certain works as emblematic of their genre or the prototype they represent. Instead of superficially surveying a large body of work, I focus on particular narratives, analyze them according to the presented questions, and briefly examine them against similar works. Since the main concern is the legitimacy of statements and the breadth of their influence, choosing by popularity seems to me the best approach. Taken into account are ratings, target audience, box office returns, awards won and so on in determining popularity.

II. Muslims and Arabs in the Context of War and Homeland Security

During the first few seconds of American Sniper, the sound of the ‘adhan, the Muslim call to prayer, accompanies the production companies’ logos. The ‘adhan says ‘Allahu ‘Akbar, or God is greater, several times, a phrase that indeed kicks off the call to prayer, one that many Muslims are quite accustomed to. But one that for an average American is nothing but a threat. There is nothing melodic or beautiful about this ‘adhan, not as it plays to gloomy, grey colored logos and seems to penetrate a tense silence. Before the movie officially starts, the viewer is placed in the setting, stealing their nerves for what they now know to be a Muslim threat. It comes as no surprise then, that the opening shot in the movie is that of a tank rolling across a sandy street somewhere in Iraq, mounted by fully armed American soldiers who are then subsequently threatened by a Hijabi woman and her son.

The opening sequence of American Sniper is by no means exceptional in its immediate placement of war and insecurity in an “exotic” middle-eastern, Islamic setting. The movie operates within a larger understanding that equates Muslim countries with war and destruction, and Muslim bodies with terrorism and insecurity. The United States’ military involvement in the
region generates a plethora of war narratives that places the East as a site of danger, a danger to the United States, the West at large, and, perhaps, even itself, although that final aspect is often downplayed or ignored altogether. The problem with this threat is that it can be transferred from its dusty place of origin to our booming metropolises. The war might be happening in a distant, vague land, but its violence can immediately affect our people and civilization. After all, as these narratives tell us, terrorists are not bound by artificial political borders. Their ideologies are not contained within a certain region. And their violence is primarily concerned with the complete destruction of the West and its civilization. In other words, terrorism threatens all the enlightened ideals that the West stands for, and all the human progress that comes with it. It ultimately wants to set us back centuries. And while wars are being fought to cut the problem from its supposed roots, it is only a matter of time before terrorism inevitably trickles through our borders. Another war needs to be fought in this case, a war that is depicted by TV shows like *Homeland* and *24*. The message, then, becomes “we go to war there, we sacrifice our time and energy to stop them from decimating us. And if a few of them slip by our efforts nonetheless, the likes of Jack Baur and Carrie Mathison will keep us safe.” The threat within is direct, but insidious. It festers and proliferates all facets of society, allowing no one to escape it. The average citizen may not know the hysterical paranoia that Jack Baur and Carey Mathison have to go through in order to keep us safe. No one is beyond suspicion, certainly no Muslim and no Arab. But the stealth of these organizations can proliferate even the minds of average (white) patriotic Americans.

It is no surprise, then, that Arab Muslim characters in movies and TV shows become almost exclusively viewed through the lens of national security. The very mention of an Arab begets all the political baggage of the area, all concerns of terrorism, and all images of war. No Arab is allowed to exist peacefully, apolitically, without being placed under suspicion. This
section examines the representations of Muslim Arab characters in thriller shows *Homeland* and *24*. Almost all Arab and Muslim characters seen on either of these shows are terrorists, potential terrorists, cooperators, or a subject of suspicion all the same. If none of the above, then they are doomed to die a few episodes after their introduction. This goes hand in hand with representations of Muslim Arab characters in war movies, specifically in examples like *American Sniper*, which I will also extensively analyze in this section. Those representations often do not go beyond villainizing or erasure of any humanity that those individuals might possess, treating them as livestock that are there to die. Exceptions, like the far more nuanced and interesting *Sand Castles* are the minority. Oftentimes, this minority is far less widely distributed or acknowledged; they do not quite fit the narrative.

*Homeland* can be seen as a more recent rendition of *24*. The two shows, at their core, share the same basic premise: a rogue, slightly unstable but incredibly good-at-their-job agent takes unorthodox measures to stop terrorists while making countless sacrifices along the way, all of which are for the greater good of their country, even if they are to the detriment of the agent. The differences and deviations between the two shows do not amount to a significant enough difference for one of them to warrant an analysis separate from the other. The end result is a paranoid vision of the world, one that is utterly preoccupied with the question of terrorism. Indeed *Homeland* thrusts its hysterical fixation on protecting us from the terrorists, on “making sure that we don’t get hit again,” as agent Carrie Mathison says in the opening credit montage of every episode. And *24* mirrors *Homeland*’s sentiment in its catchy acronym CTU: Counter-Terrorism Unit and Jack Baur’s unrelenting willingness to “get his hands dirty” for the sake of his country (2x01 47:00-47:09). This terrorism, of course, comes almost exclusively from the Muslim world, whether it is enacted by white terrorists converted to the dark side by the
insidious forces of the likes of al-Qaeda, or by brown, Muslim Arabs who, at best, are placed under suspicion, and at worst, revealed as bloodthirsty terrorists. But, the fact remains that there is a rather significant difference between a white terrorist and a brown one. The former is allowed to have a reason, a very good and humane one. The latter, well, there’s something about their religion and culture that makes them inclined towards violence. The work of fiction, then, doesn’t feel the need to address their narrative or motivation. The assumption here is that it is quite evident.

The White Terrorist.

*Homeland*’s first season and initial premise might seem unconventional at first glance. Rather than start with an obvious foreign threat to the United States, it takes a more convoluted route by placing an American prisoner of war, an American hero, under suspicion from the first episode. Carrie, the protagonist, ignores direct orders and manages to extract information from a prisoner in Iraq that “an American prisoner of war was turned” (1x01, 7:00). When a year or so later everyone is elated at having retrieved Nicholas Brody, Carrie is distressed. Once again, she ignores conventional, legal methods, and spies on Nicholas Brody’s family, placing cameras and speakers around their house in hopes of collecting sufficient evidence for an official warrant. The viewer is dragged along a journey of is-she-right or is-she-wrong for the better half of the first season. Brody’s involvement with ‘Abu Nazir, a notorious terrorist and the leader of al-Qaeda in the show’s canon, does not become clear until the 8th episode of the season.

Throughout the season, however, before we definitively know of Brody’s involvement, his placement as a suspect revolves around two key points. The first is Carrie’s suspicion. The case of Carrie’s character and its presence on TV is interesting in itself and will be handled in
fuller details further down in this section. She is constantly brought into question by her superiors. Since her disregard for her commander’s instructions a year prior, we are told that she has been placed at a desk dealing with paperwork instead of being out in the field. Her boss does not seem to trust her judgement anymore, dismissing her attempts at trying to pry into Brody’s life, scolding her when her interrogation of Brody seems too pester ing (1x01 33:00-36:36).

Further, we are largely made unsympathetic towards her when she makes an advance on her supervisor, Saul Berenson. Early on, the audience is introduced to her dynamic with Saul as that of long-term mentorship turned friendship. Saul is one of Carrie’s mentors. Their relationship surpasses that of mere colleagues in the CIA. When he finds out that she has been spying on Brody, he lets her know that he’ll have to report her to the authorities. In a moment of desperation, Carrie makes an advance on him. Saul is beyond indignant at her attempt to seduce him. And the viewer is left to question Carrie’s methods since she seems less than decent in that moment. This suspicion only escalates as the audience sees Carrie’s swallowing pills from an aspirin bottle that don’t particularly look like aspirin. Carrie’s suspicions, then, are just as suspect to skepticism as Brody’s potential involvement with ‘Abu Nazir’s organization. Carrie’s judgment, then, cannot be the only driving force surrounding Brody’s possible criminality. Something else needs to supplement the suspense.

The second point that puts Brody under the viewer’s scrutiny is the revelation that he has converted to Islam. Over the course of the pilot, Carrie watches Brody through the cameras that she has placed throughout his house. She notices that every night he goes into the garage, the only place where she has no cameras placed. The audience is as curious as Carrie as to what Brody might be up to in the garage so late at night, and then early on in the morning the next day. Those questions are put to rest, or perhaps further inflamed, when towards the end of
episode two we follow Brody into the garage where he stands on a rug, raises his hands, and utters “Allahu Akbar,” the haunting threatening two words. The scene as he begins to pray, reciting the Quran loudly even though he’s praying alone, is mostly bathed in silence besides Brody’s words. The lighting is dark, and there are undertones of ominous suspense. Low, dragging tunes play towards the end of the scene, as Brody lifts up his palms, upturned towards the sky to finish his prayer (1x02 46:30-48:46). Never mind the fact that the actual act is not accurately depicted, or that the timing of the prayer is nonsensical. Inaccuracies are a major factor in the canon of the show and will be dealt with more extensively later on in this section. What’s truly important to note is the framing of this religious act as one that warrants suspicion. The revelation of his conversion cannot be read as a simple presentation of new information about Brody. The ominous framing of the scene makes it difficult to shrug off Brody’s new religion. Brody hides the fact of his conversion from everyone, including his family, implying that there is something in that conversion that warrants suspicion, especially in its indication of his involvement with terrorists. The show suggests that for one to be a terrorist one needs to be a Muslim first. The framing of the scene as a shocking revelation after placing Brody’s actions in the garage as concerning clearly indicates that the writers are relying on garnering cheap suspense through exploiting prejudices about Muslims, something for which Hollywood is notorious. Muslims are constantly put in a position of suspicion, especially prior to any real knowledge about who they are. To add to that, he is actually revealed to be a terrorist eventually, solidifying the correlation that the show bought into. It is not the case that Nicholas Brody turns out to be innocent. Brody turns out to be, indeed, a terrorist. The suspicion is affirmed and justified. The audience, then, do not need to be uncomfortable with their prejudiced reaction to Brody’s conversion. Their fear of him is completely justified in the logic of the show.
The placement of a white terrorist, one who has converted to Islam, as opposed to a brown or Arab terrorist, at the heart of the show’s conflict is interesting for several reasons. Perhaps the most obvious reason is to showcase excessive paranoia. The danger of this terrorism, the truly harrowing part of it, is that it can take over, not just by grotesque violence, but also by manipulating the minds of (white) Americans. The scare here is beyond the immediate danger of death or mutation or physical entrapment. Just as much of a threat, or perhaps even more of a threat, is their ability to twist the minds even of people like patriotic, courageous Nicholas Brody. Their take-over of Western civilization, of American values, is not simply a physical one, but an ideological one as well. The result here would be nothing short of annihilation. After all, they can turn one of our own against us, then have him infiltrate our soil, turn his back on us and plan to devastate our political scene. This sense of paranoia is only heightened by the fact that Nicholas Brody is a veteran, a respected, idealized hero figure, much like any veteran in the United States. To have even the protectors of our society be vulnerable to the advances of the terrorists’ savagery is frightening, and certainly warrants caution in all its extreme measures.

There is another factor at play here. Having a white terrorist on the show is not equal to the average brown, Arab terrorist. The white terrorist’s story arc requires an explanation, a fleshing out of character in a way that is not warranted with an Arab terrorist. Simply put, the main antagonist of any self-respecting TV show of our time cannot be reduced to a caricature of what being a villain means. The flattening of people into archetypes is no longer in fashion. Or so one is led to believe. The antagonist, especially one in an unsettling show dealing with real world problems, needs to be complex and interesting. However, Hollywood has long had a problem of making characters interesting or complex if they belonged to a minority. It isn’t much of a stretch to think that the writers simply could not picture an interesting, complex antagonist if
they were not a white person. This is coupled with the suspense factor that the show means to amplify. If Nicholas was, say, Muhammad then most of the suspense would be rendered for naught.

What comes along with the absolute necessity of making the main antagonist a white terrorist is the fascinating phenomenon of white terrorists reclaiming their humanity in a way that brown, Arab terrorists are never permitted. This idea rests on the assumption that a white person can’t be a terrorist unless there is a tragic or humane justification to their terrorism as opposed to brown, Muslim Arabs, whose very existence within the Islamic culture means their tacit involvement in terrorism. While Nicholas Brody is given a heart-wrenching storyline about the murder of his captor’s son, the son he taught English and had a fondness for during his captivity, as the trigger for his decision to join terrorism, someone like ‘Abu Nazir, the boy’s father himself, is given no such justification. The extent to which ‘Abu Nazir is given a justification is when he says, “and they call us terrorists” when the American Prime Minister denies the drone strike that killed ‘Essa. Nothing further is offered on the subject. This sheds Brody in the light of a person, a human being, who lost his way in a moment of vulnerability, whose weakness in that moment was exploited. ‘Abu Nazir is not given such dimension.

Brody is not the only justified terrorist in the show, however. Another white terrorist, this time a woman, is given just as much reasoning and sympathy. Aileen is captured in the seventh episode of the first season after a lengthy chase by the CIA and the terrorist organization she was working with. Through a drawn-out conversation between her and Saul, we discover the real reason why she would be persuaded to the other side of the conflict. She apparently lived in Saudi Arabia as a child and watched the segregation between the poor locals and the rich Americans. Outraged at this injustice, especially after falling in love with a Saudi man, she
joined a terrorist organization as a way to fight for her ideals. The entire conversation revolves around her choosing the wrong path for the right cause. Saul is all calm tone and sympathetic eyes (1x07 19:07-21:55). He treats her with dignity, giving her food, letting her sit in the passenger seat next to him (1x07 16:03-17:50). He talks to her and relates to her as a person instead of an interrogator (1x07 26:03-29:16). And eventually, she cracks down and helps them out by telling them what she knows of the plan (1x07 42:09-43:33). Compare that to what happens to her Saudi lover, a professor who also turns out to be a terrorist: he is violently murdered at the hands of the organization that employed him to begin with (1x06 20:00-22:00).

Throughout his presence on the show, he gets very little dialogue. There is no reasoning for him. No his side of the story. He does not get to speak of his poverty, of the injustice that has befallen him, personally. That doesn’t seem to matter. Not in the way that Aileen’s story matters. In an equally comparable situation, a Syrian terrorist who gets captured is held hostage, humiliated and interrogated. There is hardly any attempt at relating to him. And eventually he kills himself instead of helping out. Aileen, on the other hand, is a rational person who can see the errors of her ways and repent. And that is worthy of our forgiveness.

The phenomenon of white terrorists is not exclusive to Homeland. In a similar, yet far more simplified, storyline, 24 picks up this line of thought in season 2 with the character Mari Warren. At first, Mari is not at all placed under suspicion. Instead, the audience is led to suspect her “Middle-Eastern” fiancé, Reza. Throughout the first few episodes, her fiancé is placed under scrutiny. He might seem like a well-adjusted, fully integrated, wealthy Middle Easterner who is about to marry a wealthy white American, but the show suggests that what’s happening underneath the surface might be more dangerous than we think. It’s not until midway through the season that we find out it was actually Mari who was cooperating with the terrorists planning to
detonate a nuclear bomb over L.A., not Reza. She simply exploited his Middle-Eastern-ness to lead the investigation back to him, and link his name to the terrorists instead of hers.

Immediately after revealing her cooperation, Mari shoots Reza. He dies before he can even fully express his shock at having been used by his fiancé.

Mari’s sister, Kate, is beyond devastated by her sister’s radicalization. Throughout her conversation with Jack, they are able to pin-point Mari’s involvement to the three-to-four-week period after her mother’s death, when she disappeared. Her mother’s death was not easy for her, her father informs us. Jack explains later on that “those people” exploit moments of vulnerabilities to turn people to their side (2x14 28:57-32:16). We are also told that Mari, prior to her involvement with terrorism, was politically active. The indication here being that much like Aileen, she had principles that she stood by and those led her down a dangerous path.

Admittedly, Mari is not given the same level of nuance that either Aileen of Brody are given. Her story is brushed over as a cautionary tale and, unlike Brody and Aileen, she holds tight to her loyalty to terrorists, refusing to give any information even as she is put through physical torture. Nonetheless, the backstory she gets is far more nuanced and existent than that of any brown, Arab Muslim terrorist. The difference between Homeland and 24 in handling this situation is most likely due to the time elapsed between the two. Perhaps distance from the immediacy of 9/11 has allowed Homeland a somewhat more nuanced approach to the issue. The themes, however, are consistent.

Giving a more nuanced, more directly political and circumstantial reasoning for acts of terrorism is not only favorable but also necessary. Thus far, the way in which this issue has been dealt with has reduced it to generalizations about the so-called Eastern, Islamic culture and its inherent opposition to the West. Vague assumptions about Islam and Muslims, ideas that were
mainly put forth and populated by the likes of Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations*, gave way for the easy, one dimensional understanding of terrorism as a manifestation of culture as opposed to reactions to very real political and circumstantial atmosphere. This line of thought is reductive at best, and destructive at worst. It allows for laziness when dealing with the issue of terrorism, contributes to the loop of violence and counter-violence, and prevents any truly proactive solution from being considered.

The appeal of Huntington’s idea is undeniable. After all, it is vague and generic enough that at the surface level it would seem to be a perfect fit for contemporary conflicts. It is much easier to paint an entire culture with a broad brush than to understand historical, political and societal factors that played the biggest role in the fostering of terrorist ideas. Further, it is much easier to claim that Islam is inherently violent than it is to confess that the United States and its allies had a rather significant role in the rise of al-Qaeda during the Cold War, and through its response to al-Qaeda, created an appropriate atmosphere for its predecessors. The influence of simplistic ideas from the likes of Huntington lingers in much of the current discourse regarding the issue. Battling that, creating nuanced narratives, then, is crucial for a truly proactive dialogue about the issue.

Ideally, then, neither *Homeland* nor *24* are mistaken in their attempt to give justification to their antagonists. Certainly, the likes of Brody’s stories are abundant. As one interview reveals, an ISIS fighter did not actually join them for any specific fondness to their ideology. He was a young man, 27 years old, who worked as a carrier. He hurt his back on the job and could no longer handle the heavy weight that his work required of him. He mentioned having a wife and four kids, and being unable to feed them. When someone approached him with a job offer with ISIS, he was desperate and didn’t think much of it. Officials said when they first captured
him, he immediately broke down and confessed everything (Wilson, The Nation). This is one instance that showcases that ISIS fighters tend to be less and less educated in Islam and generally, and that many of them were exploited at a moment’s weakness. Political intervention, warfare, tyrannical regimes, and economic depression all contribute to the creation of a soil fertile for the kind of ideas that hinge on extremism and single-mindedness. Lack of education in a war torn country and lack of future prospects can set people immediately onto a dangerous route. Brody finding himself with vengeful tendencies, then, is closer to reality than one might think. The problem does not lie in the choice to humanize Brody’s actions. The problem lies with the fact that Brody, the white terrorist, is the one who gets to tell his story. A part of it, surely, is because of the above mentioned reason of Hollywood’s inability to imagine a complex character who belongs to a minority group. But another, perhaps bigger part of it, is the assumption that Brody’s violence is justified. It follows a rational, coherent thought process that is related to very real human emotions and provoked by soul-wrenching anger. This kind of justification, or any that might be similar to it, however, is not allowed to be found in the mind of brown terrorists. Their very belonging to that culture is the only justification they need. Brody’s issue can be addressed in a political way. Brody’s mistake reflects a larger injustice that needs to be fixed, namely the American government’s deception. But the terrorism of a brown Arab cannot be solved by anything except his total annihilation. After all, their terrorism comes from a root beyond our reasoning, “beyond human comprehension” (the Reluctant Fundamentalist 54:58-55:38). Franz Fanon perhaps puts it best when he proclaims the simple fact that the Colonizer’s violence is depicted as always justified and rational, while the violence of the colonized is perceived and painted as savage and irrational, as the quintessence of evil (6-9). By analogy, here, the violence of the white American is based on rational, humane judgment even when it
finds refuge in monstrous ideology, while that of the Arab or brown Muslim is based in a bloodthirsty and sick culture. Because “it is all in their book. Their fucking book. The only book they ever read […] they’re there for one reason and one reason only: to die for the Caliphate and usher in a world without infidels. That’s their strategy and it’s been that way since the seventh century” (Homeland 5x01 10:30-14:09). And if this has been their strategy since the seventh century, then who are we to think that there is anything that we can do to stop this timeless struggle through anything but extreme, yet fully justified, violence of our own?

It is important to note that Homeland reveals another unexpected terrorist in its first season, Brody’s partner, Tom Walker, who happens to be a black man. Brody thought that he was forced to beat his partner to death by his captors, only for the audience to find out later, through Aileen, that Tom Walker is alive and that he has been turned by ‘Abu Nazir as well. Unlike Brody, Tom Walker actually performs the operation that he was given, detonating a suicide bomb. Also unlike Brody, Tom Walker gets only a few lines before his demise. Once again, no information is given regarding his journey or his reasons for turning. He does not come back to the United States as an American hero. Instead, he slinks through the shadows and stays there, homeless and silent until he detonates that bomb. The only glimpse offered of his inner world is when he calls the number of his old home just to hear his family’s voice over the answering machine. And that is still more than most Arab terrorists are offered.

There is a fundamental flaw of logic that follows from having a white American terrorist. This is not to suggest that white terrorism does not exist. Quite the contrary, it is rather frequent. We simply refuse to label it as terrorism as such. The flaw here is related to this particular brand of so-called Islamic terrorism. The idea that it is easy to radicalize Mari, a wealthy, Oxford graduate, white woman in the span of three-to-four-weeks, that it is easy to convince her to
abandon her family, her country, her affluent life, just because of her grief is a stretch at best. There is a reason why such organizations thrive in war torn places. They exploit people’s lack of sense of purpose, their vulnerabilities when living under a war that leads to poverty, lack of education, a toxic environment, and their hatred for a foreign invasion that could be perceived as having torn the country apart. The idea that the death of an innocent child or grief for a mother or love for a Muslim man would make Brody, Mari, or Aileen willing to kill their families, willing to injure their country does not add-up. Especially since all three of them go back to the United States, live with their families and enjoy a relative affluence in their country. For the writers to jump through hoops for the shock factor confirms that the paranoia of having our own turned against us is intended.

**Suspicious Muslim, Terrorist Muslim, Dead Muslim, or all three.**

Unlike the aforementioned white terrorists in *Homeland* and *24*, it is difficult to pin-down concrete individualized examples of Muslim or Arab terrorists. Instead, the two shows present us with a plethora of Muslim and/or Arab terrorists with no real defined features or characteristics. In best case scenarios, those not-characters are put under suspicion, only to turn out to be innocent and die. Otherwise, they are savage terrorists who commit heinous crimes before dying. There seems to be no need to give them dimensionality or to try to give them a backstory, as in the case of the white terrorists. They are either there to enhance suspense, be villains, or quickly die. The most prominent examples of Muslim Arab terrorists might be ‘Abu Nazir and Syed ‘Ali, both of whom are presented as a looming threat, neither of whom is given the same depth and dimensionality as the above-mentioned white terrorists.
Syed ‘Ali’s introduction in 24 to the audience is when he and his right-hand man kidnap Kate and her Private Investigator in 2x08. The audience has been exposed to his name in several instances before in the context of the nuclear attack. Syed ‘Ali has been a menace from the moment the season started, but the audience does not see him until he kidnaps Kate in search of her sister. He wears all black, has a typical sadistic smile, and in his first scene where he speaks, he’s ordering his unnamed right-hand man to torture Kate’s Private Investigator as motivation for her to speak up on the whereabouts of her sister. The torture scene is difficult to watch, certainly for the gratuitous violence displayed within it, but also for the sheer pleasure that the Muslim terrorists “from the Middle East” seem to be deriving from it. Neither Syed ‘Ali nor his right hand man seem to particularly go through any kind of moral dilemma over their actions. The show means to tell us that the savagery of their actions does not at all phase them. They strip down the Private Investigator, opting for extreme violence immediately, so much so that when Kate insists she knows nothing they immediately decide to cut off the Private Investigator’s penis using a chainsaw (2x09 24:30-27:13). Compare this display of gruesome violence to Jack’s subsequent torture scene of Syed ‘Ali only three episodes later. At first, Jack asks the mosque’s ‘Imam to talk some sense into ‘Ali, an interesting scene that will be addressed in more detail further down. When Syed ‘Ali refuses to cooperate, Jack finds himself compelled to intervene in less-pleasant ways. Jack threatens ‘Ali that he’ll give him a more painful death than that by the nuclear bomb he is willing to detonate, and Syed ‘Ali’s response is “then I’ll have much more pleasure in paradise” (2x12 14:40). Deciding that personal physical injury will not make him budge, Jack resorts to threatening his family. Through a livestream, he shows ‘Ali his wife and two kids held captive and surrounded by American agents alongside agents from the family’s undetermined hiding-place government. If Syed ‘Ali does not tell them where the location of the
bomb is, Jack threatens, then they will kill his eldest son. Jack tells Syed ‘Ali that he does not want to do any of this, insists that this brings him no satisfaction, but that he’ll do it if he must (2×12 28:06-29:19). The moral dilemma that Jack is going through is evident. Especially when President Palmer, having been told of Jack’s intentions, calls Jack and tells him to call off the interrogation. He is outraged at Jack’s actions, telling him that they would not resort to such tactics. Jack seemingly ignores President Palmer, making a show of telling Syed ‘Ali that he has the president’s support (2×12 29:20-30:28). And, indeed, he goes through with the killing of the eldest son, which leads to ‘Ali’s breakdown and confession of the bomb’s location (2×12 32:59-34:06). Kate, who’s been saved by Jack earlier, sees the streaming video with the dead boy and the captured family. “You’re worse than they are” she says, outraged (2×12 39:00). Only it turns out that she spoke too soon. A moment later, we see one agent helping up ‘Ali’s son. The threat was staged just to break down ‘Ali. Unlike Syed ‘Ali and his followers, then, not only is Jack willing to rationalize and talk those people down without real resort to violence, but also his torture and manipulation tactics have no real harm and produce real results. He takes no pleasure in them, but sees the necessity of them.

Syed ‘Ali is killed shortly after the investigation at the hands of a sniper. His actual screen-time is not extensive. It is limited to him watching his right-hand man torturing Kate’s Private Investigator, a scene of him praying, a sequence of his attempted escape, subsequent captivity and torture, and his eventual death. Throughout those scenes, Syed ‘Ali’s shining moment of humanity is the murder of his son. This moment of humanity, however, does not culminate in giving ‘Ali reasoning to his turn towards Radicalism, unlike Mari whose mother’s death turned her towards terrorism and whose conversation with Kate illuminates to the audience that she sees the United States as an evil entity (2×14 16:32-19:00). Instead, Syed ‘Ali comes
across as a brainwashed fool who is looking for the pleasure that paradise promises him. And the show does seem to suggest that Syed ‘Ali is brainwashed. His conversation with the mosque’s ‘Imam is one of the show’s attempts at balancing out the negative images it associates with Islam and Muslims. It is far too important not to be fully quoted here:

‘Imam: The Quran clearly forbids the killing of innocents and noncombatants.

You know this as well as I do.

‘Ali: We have different interpretations of the Quran.

‘Imam: You’re misguided. Someone has twisted the words of the prophet. Allah does not love aggressors. Listen to me, the murder of one innocent, let alone millions will not get you into paradise.

‘Ali: We will continue this debate when I see you there, Imam al-Fulani. (2x12, 18:00-21:00)

The conversation illuminates a different vision of Islam. Unlike Homeland’s unnamed ‘Imam, who will be discussed shortly, al-Fulani is not implicated with terrorism. On the contrary, he is horrified by Syed ‘Ali’s actions. “If the man you are looking for has murdered an innocent, he is as guilty in the eyes of Islam as he is in yours,” he tells Jack when he storms with his co-agents into the mosque (2x14 2:21-2:30). He offers to help, asking to speak to ‘Ali. Through his conversation, he offers a different image of Islam than the one ‘Ali and his likes have put forth throughout the season. Even though ‘Imam al-Fulani does not manage to win over Syed ‘Ali, at the very least he is meant to shake up the one-dimensional view that the audience has been offered of Islam. Here we have a religious person, one that in a lot of American people’s imagination might be the equivalent of a priest, denouncing ‘Ali’s claims, cooperating with Jack and company, and refusing this man’s vision of Islam. True, this scene might not amount to
much in comparison with the images of Muslims seen throughout the show as menacing figures. Nor is the scene perfect. It suggests that just like there are bad Muslims there are also good ones. It’s reductive and lacks nuance, giving off the impression that the struggle is merely ideological, stemming from the strange religion that is Islam which inspires both the ‘Imam and Syed ‘Ali to think and act differently. Nonetheless, asking more nuance of a show like 24 is unwarranted considering the other instances of representations of Muslims it has. At the very least, this scene suggests a self-awareness on the part of the writers of the problems within their own narrative.

Homeland’s ‘Abu Nazir is a somewhat more interesting case, largely due to the fact that he remains the show’s villain for longer than Syed ‘Ali, which allows more room for dimensionality. Through flashbacks to Brody’s time in prison, the audience is introduced to the menacing figure of ‘Abu Nazir, Carrie’s archenemy and one of the leaders of al-Qaeda. Unlike Syed ‘Ali, ‘Abu Nazir’s first appearance on the show is through a flashback of him helping Brody drink water (1x01 35:38-35:50). In another flashback, we see him comforting Brody when he believes that he has killed his own partner, Tom Walker (1x01 52:48-53:21). In fact, ‘Abu Nazir is not seen perpetrating any violence against Brody throughout the flashbacks of Brody’s journey. Physical and emotional injuries are reserved to ‘Abu Nazir’s lackeys who are nameless and somewhat faceless. ‘Abu Nazir takes Brody in to a house and asks him to teach his son, ‘Essa, English. He offers him clean clothes, lets him bathe and shave his beard (1x09 11:55-16:25). Brody even tells Carrie that ‘Abu Nazir was kind to him, and that he actually loved him (1x07 49:49-51:01). He is given a human moment as he grieves his son ‘Essa following the drone strike that killed him. In a particularly poignant moment, ‘Abu Nazir and Brody, while preparing ‘Essa for burial, each take hold of one end of a white sheet to cover ‘Essa’s body (1x09 40:43-41:51). The memorable shot seems to suggest that both parties, from opposite sides
of the world, are responsible for the death of this innocent boy. The aforementioned scene when ‘Abu Nazir says “and they call us terrorists” upon the Prime Minister’s denial of the drone strike serves to further the significance of Essa’s death and the two men’s shared grief.

Nonetheless, ‘Abu Nazir is far from having a complex inner world. For one, there is disproportionate emphasis on Brody’s grief in comparison to ‘Abu Nazir. Brody discovers the boy’s body after the bombing, cradling it in his arms as he lets out heart-wrenching cries of grief (1x09 37:04-39:39). The scene is complete with mournful music and dramatic slow motion. Later on, he has a moment alone with ‘Essa’s body before ‘Abu Nazir walks in to take him to the burial. One wonders why it could not be ‘Abu Nazir shedding tears over the loss of his son and giving a long monologue about him instead of giving that quiet moment of grief to Brody. The emphasis on Brody’s grief results in the impression that ‘Abu Nazir took advantage of Brody’s moment of weakness to recruit him for his own schemes, almost as if the death of his son is convenient in one way or another. Further, the show does not allow the viewer be fooled by ‘Abu Nazir’s kindness. ‘Abu Nazir is merely attempting to break down Brody’s defenses. He’s not to be confused with a person genuinely capable of kindness. Simply speaking, he’s grooming Brody to his eventual sacrifice in the name of his cause. Carrie makes this very argument clear to Brody in season two as his betrayal of his country is discovered and he is interrogated. Brody’s final realization that ‘Abu Nazir is nothing but a monster who attempted to manipulate him results in his breakdown (2x05 30:21-34:00). His interrogators offer him comfort as he breaks down in tears at having been taken advantage of (2x05 34:01-38:42). ‘Abu Nazir is killed at the end of season two, but not before he manages one last scheme, detonating a bomb that kills the prime minister, and another at his memorial service, and managing to pin the latter on Brody (2x12). ‘Abu Nazir, then, becomes nothing but a cruel, scheming, violent terrorist, too blinded by
his ideology that he manages to take advantage even of his son’s death. Brody, on the other hand, is a kind-hearted, principled American, who had good intentions but chose the wrong path, a path that ‘Abu Nazir pushed him towards through manipulation that masked itself as kindness.

Brody’s love to ‘Abu Nazir was naïve and unwarranted. After all, ‘Abu Nazir’s humanity towards Brody was never prompted by a genuine care for Brody’s person or a genuine streak of kindness. It was merely the result of his goal to use him.

There is something to be said about the method that each of the white terrorists’ story ends in comparison to the above mentioned two main antagonists. Syed ‘Ali is killed. Mari simply fades from the narrative after one final, unfruitful, confrontation with her family (2x24 10:27-13:26). The audience is left to assume that she was imprisoned afterwards. ‘Abu Nazir is also killed violently while praying (2x11 38:51-39:51). Aileen, after her confession, also disappears from the narrative, her fate left up to the audience’s imagination. Brody does, in fact, die. He is publically hanged in Iran of all places, his death evidently sanctioned by the American government, amidst cohorts of blood-thirsty Iranians calling for his demise (3x12 34:15-38:07), which seems to be more of an accusatory finger to Iran than anything else. Even in eventual fate, then, Muslim terrorists “from the Middle East” are not equal to their white counterparts.

The main antagonist Muslim terrorists are not the only Muslim terrorists that the viewer encounters. There are many other unnamed pawns, there to simply detonate a bomb, say ‘Allahu ‘Akbar and die. They are so unremarkable and forgettable that it’s hard to pinpoint an example of a petty Muslim terrorist. After all, how is one supposed to refer to them when they have no names? Perhaps a somewhat specific case is that of the aforementioned Syrian terrorist in Homeland. Much emphasis is put on his religiosity. Brody says he remembers seeing him pray when he is asked whether he can identify him or not. Saul asks him whether he has read the
Quran or not, only to answer his own question by “of course you have” (1x05 18:29-22:27). Throughout his captivity, the Syrian terrorist does not speak at all. There is hardly any memorable moment from him except his suicide. That and the laughable claim that the CIA does not resort to torture during interrogations. Those non-characters’ deaths are so commonplace in both shows that it quickly becomes difficult to notice when one of them is killed.

Equally as damaging as the image of the Muslim terrorist is the image of the suspicious Muslim Arab or Muslim “from the Middle East”. In almost no case in the either TV show is Islam or Arabism allowed to exist without being the immediate subject of scrutiny. Muslim and Arab characters, those who have the opportunity to exist at all beyond the immediate death of a suicide bomber, are presented as suspicious, as a threat, guilty till proven innocent, if ever proven innocent. And in any case, doomed to die violently.

In the case of the second season of 24, the show does not shy away from introducing its Arab villains, or suspected villains, in the first episode. Within the first twenty minutes, we are introduced to Reza, Mari’s fiancé. While, eventually, it becomes evident that Reza is innocent, and that the perpetrator has been Mari the entire time, the show places Reza under scrutiny, painting him as a suspicious terrorist from the very beginning. Reza’s first appearance is in a red Porsha, gliding through the driveway of a beautiful mansion (2x01 19:20). He is speaking a foreign language on his cellphone. Ominous music accompanies his entrance. This ominous music spills over from the previous scene when the president of the United States had an intense conversation with the Prime Minister of an undefined Middle-Eastern country regarding the nuclear bomb to be detonated over Los Angeles. At that point, the audience is aware of the situation. They are on alert, especially since the Prime Minister was not cooperative. The scene exploits this tension and enhances it as Reza is introduced. Once he steps out of his car, he
slowly sneaks up on Mari as the viewers brace themselves to witness Reza threatening a young, pretty white woman. The scene is doused with so much intensity that the revelation of Mari as his fiancé and her playful giggle when he sneaks up on her comes off as startling (2x01 19:30-20:01). But the worries are not banished at this revelation. Instead, the show chooses to embody the perspective of Kate Warner, Mari’s older sister. It is obvious from moment that Kate walks out onto the porch that there is no love lost between her and Reza. She regards him with scrutinizing eyes and judgmental stares (2x01 20:06-20:36). The following scene, Kate confides to her dad that she is not fully comfortable with Mari choosing Reza as her husband. Her father asks her why, because he “can’t believe it’s because he’s from the Middle East,” to which Kate answers dismissively, “dad, please, you brought me up better than that” followed by “I don’t know. It’s something else” (2x01 20:56-21:21). It should be noted that there was nothing objectively suspicious about Reza. Excluding the show’s attempt to place him under scrutiny, Reza is a normal, so-called Middle-Eastern man who drives a nice car, has a cellphone, is in a loving relationship with his fiancé whom he’s hours away from marrying. The only moment that seems a little disheartening in his introduction is his antagonistic relationship with Kate. Kate, then, has no real reason to doubt Reza, except for the fact that he’s “from the Middle East,” which means that her father, in fact, did not raise her better than to think that, even if the show attempts to tell us otherwise.

Nor is the audience meant to take Reza’s side in this particular conflict, either. The show is clear about that with its representation of him. But we’re certainly not meant to think that Kate suspects him because he’s “from the Middle East.” After all, Kate is supposed to be an enlightened American. The entire Warner family is supposed to be as such. They are welcoming this man “from the Middle East” to their family, embracing him. If Reza is suspicious, then
that’s a fact entirely independent from any personal prejudices that Kate holds. When it is finally revealed that Reza did not, in fact, have anything to do with the terrorist attack on Los Angeles, Kate’s unjustified worry about him is not at all addressed. The show could have turned this into a teachable moment, but opted to brush the issue aside. Instead, Reza is killed by his fiancé moments after his innocence is proven definitively and his death does not seem to truly affect anyone. The audience is not even offered his parents’ reaction to it. And all the horrified conversation about his murder revolves around the fact that pretty, innocent Mari is the killer.

Yusuf Auda is another Muslim man “from the Middle East” that the show presents. Yusuf is sent by his country to help the United States investigate the attempted detonation of the nuclear bomb in Los Angeles. Much like Reza, however, he is not viewed favorably. Even though he is supposed to cooperate with CTU, agents ignore him and push him out of the investigation (2x15). Eventually, when Jack goes rogue, Yusuf follows him. Up until that point, the viewers are unsure of whether they can trust Yusuf or not. The camera focuses on him from far angles, showing him only through Tony Alameda’s, the head of CTU at this time and Jack’s dear friend, point of view. And it is clear that Tony does not trust Yusuf. It’s not until Jack finds Yusuf tailing him that we’re clued in to his motivation: to find evidence to clear his country’s name and stop the United States from attacking. Jack confronts him about an audio recording they found where the leader of Yusuf’s country met with Sayid ‘Ali, the organizing terrorist. Yusuf, fed up, says “Why would we help ‘Ali when we know it will eventually decimate us?” (2x17 10:05-10:59). Jack decides to trust him following that exchange. And Yusuf, for the remainder of his very short life, is depicted rather favorably, at least in the sense that he supports Jack’s efforts in finding the truth and saves Kate Warren from a gunshot (2x17 20:15-20:58). However, yet again, Yusuf is not allowed to live for long. Two episodes later, Yusuf is brutally
beaten by a group of three white American men. They attack him and Kate when they are on the way to CTU to give crucial information for the investigation. The three men call Yusuf a “towelhead,” hiss that he tried to kill them once and that he won’t be given another chance to do so (2x19 37:18-37:29). When Kate attempts to stand up to them, she is knocked unconscious. One of the men asks her why she was with Yusuf, his tone accusatory, “the only people worse than those bastards in our country are people like you” (2x20 09:20-09:29), that is, people who befriend, engage with, or interact positively with people “from the Middle East”. They then proceed to kidnap her. Yusuf meets his untimely demise in Jack’s arms, as he begs Jack to save Kate and find the chip (2x20 30:51-31:48).

The depiction of Yusuf’s death is interesting. On the one hand, hate crimes do happen and sometimes they do, indeed, lead to murder. The show at the very least attempts to tackle the issue of prejudice by having three white men beat to death a character that the audience trusts and is growing to like. It is wrong to generalize, the show seems to suggest. It is wrong to hold everyone responsible for the acts of a few. But, of course, this doesn’t negate the other message. Some Muslims are and should be subject to suspicion. It’s only once they prove that their interest aligns with ours that we can mourn them, as the characters mourn Yusuf for a total of five seconds.

Nonetheless, even without taking the final point into consideration, Yusuf’s murder remains problematic. It begs the question: was it necessary? Did the writers and producers really have to kill him? Further, did they really have to do so in such a brutal way? Granted, the show is filled with graphic scenes of torture. Violence is commonplace in the show’s universe. Yet the kind of brutality communicated in Yusuf’s death is a little off-putting for two main reasons: his death does not, in fact, seem necessary, nor is the fleeting message the show attempts to put forth
justification enough for the method of his death or his murder to begin with. If the point is to comment on the dangers of prejudice, then the show did not in fact need to sacrifice Yusuf. In an earlier episode, following the chaos that has erupted from the almost-attack, President Palmer and his team watch TV news reporting that hate crimes have spiked in neighborhoods populated predominantly by people “from the Middle East.” President Palmer is outraged, “we will not put up with racism and xenophobia,” he says (2x18 16:34-18:39). Later on, a report says that a Muslim, Middle-Eastern boy was killed in a crossfire between rioters and the National Guard. The president is beside himself with sadness. His face falls at the news, and he orders his staff to leave him alone for a minute (2x18 36:40-38:44). Arguably, this incident could have fully addressed the issue of prejudice without having to kill off Yusuf. There have been riots. People were killed. The president expressed his upset. And while, true, none of these sufficiently address the issue, adding Yusuf’s murder to it does not, in fact, enhance the commentary nor give it depth. Yusuf was not an integral part to the story: the audience has yet to identify with him in any significant way. His death, then, would not have made an already-made point stronger. If the idea was to further stall the heroes and their plans to save the world, then any other plot device could have been used. In fact, the very hate crime could have been used as a tactic for tension without having to lead to Yusuf’s death. The choice to kill him off, then, while on the surface seems to attempt to prove a point, in actuality only allows the writers to kill off another “good” Arab character before he gets the chance to develop a voice, let alone tell his story.

*Homeland* does not fare better than *24*. It, too, depicts most Arab and Muslim characters it comes across as possible suspects. Other than the obvious case of Brody as discussed above which is not quite comparable due to its unique complex position, the show introduces minor
characters of Middle-Eastern origin or descent. One of the most prominent examples of the first season is the Saudi Prince. Not much is seen of the Saudi Prince, but he’s one of the first Arab characters to be introduced. Our first interaction with him is not an interaction with him at all. Instead, we meet Lynn Reed, his main escort, for lack of a better word, interviewing women for recruitment in the Prince’s harem (1x02 14:16-16:00). The strangeness of the idea of the Prince running around the world and creating a literal harem aside, this initial non-introduction, as Lynn orders the young women to strip and tells them to fully wax their privates to better suit the Prince’s taste, does not place him in a positive light. Further, Lynn steps out of one of the interviews and calls Carrie, revealing that she has been working for the CIA as see-eye, a secret agent on the inside who closely works with one primary agent, this whole time (1x02 16:39-17:00). She tells Carrie that she saw suspicious activity from the Prince that might link him to ‘Abu Nazir (1x02 24:01-26:27). Before even meeting this Prince, he is positioned as a suspect and inspires revulsion. The Prince is hardly ever on-screen, however. We only see him twice: while having sex with Lynn Reed and during a brief interrogation scene after Lynn Reed is murdered (1x03 40:38-41:33). Yet, the Prince is so effectively framed as a suspect that when it is revealed that the Prince is not, in fact, working with ‘Abu Nazir, and that he did not, in fact, order Lynn’s murder, it comes as a rather startling revelation. And even though the Prince does not have much to do with terrorism (but a lot to do with women apparently), it’s a member of his own personal team who works with ‘Abu Nazir, a vaguely-Middle-Eastern stoic, silent man, who is largely forgettable. Nonetheless, the threat to this patriotic, beautiful, young white woman comes from Arabs. Whether it’s the threat of being a part of the Prince’s harem and facing the risk of stoning, as she puts it, if anyone ever finds out that she works for the CIA, or through the threat of extreme fundamentalists who will kill her to advance their own operations.
Later on in the season, two Muslims are killed in a mosque during a chase between the FBI forces and Tom Walker (1x08). They were victims of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. To investigate Walker’s reasons for entering the mosque for protection, Carrie talks to the ‘Imam of the mosque. The ‘Imam is not cooperative. He’s a lot more concerned about the two worshippers who were killed in his mosque while praying than he is with telling Carrie whether or not he has any connection with Tom Walker. He will not cooperate unless the FBI publicly apologizes for the murder of the two Muslims and offers compensation to their families (1x09 08:40-10:37). The ‘Imam’s lack of cooperation culminates in his wife, Zahira, calling Carrie to give her the information she needs. It turns out, the ‘Imam does, indeed, know Walker who has been recently visiting the mosque frequently to visit a suspicious man, visits that the ‘Imam was certainly aware of but refused to communicate (1x09 31:13-32:42). What starts out as a refusal to cooperate based on a simple principle of justice turns out to be an attempt at hiding his involvement with terrorism. Sympathy for his cause, for the men that were murdered, is obscured by the fact that he knows Walker and yet refuses to cooperate. Carrie’s conversation with him, her sympathetic understanding, his advocacy for justice all turn out to be for naught. Instead, the viewer is left with the words of the head of the FBI on the matter: “two innocent people were caught between a terrorist and the people whose job is to defend America” (1x09 17:09-18:30). Read: the two people were collateral damage. The people will and should understand, because they want to be protected. The ‘Imam is not seen again. That is, until American Sniper where the same actor plays the main villain.

Danny Galvez, a CIA analyst is revealed to be half-Lebanese half-Guatemalan in a conversation with his boss. For the most part, Galvez plays no real role in the show other than as a background character that the creators can pat themselves on the back for adding. His most
memorable moment, which is not saying much, is when he helps Carrie during her investigation with the mosque’s ‘Imam. He tries to appeal to the ‘Imam by saying, in an accented Arabic, “I’m a Muslim, too” to which the ‘Imam responds, in much better Arabic, “you should be ashamed of yourself, then” for working for the CIA (1x09 08:59-09:30). Certainly, this could have been an interesting conversation. The question of loyalties, how to navigate being a stranger in a strange land, how different immigrants belonging to different religious or ethnic or racial communities deal with their demonization and maltreatment in different ways is extremely important and too underrepresented. But, of course, for Homeland writers the non-conversation ends there. Nothing really comes out of it except to show that the ‘Imam shames Danny for choosing this particular career. Danny dies at the end of season two.

Similarly, in the third season Homeland introduces Fara Sherazi, an American Muslim from an Iranian family. She wears the hijab and works for the CIA behind her father’s back. She is somewhat viewed with suspicion but ultimately becomes an integral, trusted part of the team. Unlike Danny, she plays a bigger role in the storyline and stays in it for longer. Nonetheless, she is violently killed at the hands of terrorists during a takeover of the American embassy in Islamabad (4x10).

Mansour al-Zahrani is a Saudi Diplomat, also introduced in season one of Homeland. Carrie suspects his entanglement with al-Qaeda. Because of his diplomatic immunity, she has to resort to less direct methods to coerce information out of him. Upon further investigation of his life, she finds out that he is gay. She threatens to expose him to his three wives, smugly stating that “a gay Saudi man is like the anti-Christ for them” (1x10 22:29-25:09). This does not really phase him, since his wives know that he’s gay. Carrie, instead, threatens his favorite daughter. She tells him that if he does not cooperate then she will make sure that his daughter, who is
attending Harvard, is deported and sent back to Saudi Arabia and “gets fat and wears Burqa for the rest of her miserable life” (1x10, 25:13-26:18). Carrie here is basing this threat on the assumption that a Saudi woman cannot find ways to achieve agency, and that the Burqa is the worst thing that can possibly happen to a woman. The truthfulness or lack thereof of Carrie’s assertion is not up to this study to determine. As Edward Said points out, the facticity of the belief is not the point. Rather, its persistence and its inability to imagine an alternative to itself are far more telling. Certainly, it could have been an interesting question for the narrative to explore, views and counter-views, but once again, the show sidesteps this conversation and gives Carrie the final word, since al-Zahrani gives in to Carrie’s request. This is not the first time that Homeland makes an off-handed comment about the situation of women in Saudi Arabia. The same casual conversation is employed around the Prince’s harem. The show seems to feel it necessary to point out to the situation of women in the Middle East. This necessity, this fascination, is not particular to Homeland. The intrigue of the Middle East’s gender relations and sexuality is always embedded within narratives involving the region. In this storyline, Homeland managed to comment on both sexuality and gender in Saudi Arabia. And while al-Zahrani does not respond to threats of his exposure, he caves when his daughter is threatened and decides to cooperate with the CIA. Al-Zahrani is killed by the bombing that Tom Walker executes.

Perhaps the need to treat Muslim Arab characters as suspects is symptomatic of achieving what Barthes describes as reality effect. The idea here is that fiction needs the insertion of certain details to give verisimilitude to its world. Barthes mainly argues for this idea in the context of adding seemingly insignificant details to the fictional work. This idea might be applicable here. After all, it is true that Muslims and Arabs are subject to suspicion within the American or, more broadly, Western context. This ranges from profiling in airports to
suspicious glances when walking down the street. Nonetheless, the attempt to achieve the reality effect does not make the association of Muslims with danger any less damaging. In fact, it might be even more damaging. This gets at a larger question of how reality is constructed and how certain images inform and reinforce this reality. After all, is it truly accurate to suggest that the suspicion is a mere reflection of the current reality? Or does it not also actively create and maintain and normalize this reality? It is inaccurate to suggest that works of fiction are mere passive reflectors of culture, society, or reality. They also shape, create, and reinforce the real world, for better or for worse. Further, as discussed above, some of those characters placed under suspicion do, in fact, turn out to be terrorists. If not, then they are brutally killed, as if to be punished for their being Arab Muslims, or, as in the case of the Saudi Prince, they simply fade from the narrative, never mentioned again. The end result does not allow for any images of Arabs or Muslims to exist without having to prove their innocence from acts they had nothing to do with in the first place. Nor does it allow them to be seen as people without undergoing a form of Othering that sets them in opposition with the main protagonists. And as soon as their cooperation with the protagonists is made explicit, when their innocence is proven, they are killed off before truly having the opportunity to be fully fledged people and characters, or having the opportunity to speak.

**Research Gets You Everywhere**

Reza’s first few seconds of screen time has him speaking on the phone as he drives his red Porsha through his in-laws’ driveway. But he does not speak in English. Instead, as the ominous music plays in the background, he speaks a foreign-sounding language. Except what he

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4 This assertion does not necessitate citation in my mind, since it is a lived part of mine and my family’s daily routine.
is speaking is not a language at all. What Reza says is gibberish trying to pass for Arabic. At first, I thought I had misheard, that the intended language might be Farsi or even Turkish, but upon rewinding the scene, it still sounded like gibberish. Eventually, I turned on the closed captioning, which simply read [speaking Arabic] (2x01 19:00). But he was not, in fact, speaking Arabic. As a native speaker of the language, well-versed in understanding all dialects, I heard nothing but strange noises that sounded foreign enough to pass for Arabic. This instance was hardly shocking, though. Disregard for the Arabic language is rampant throughout American movies and TV shows whenever a portrayal of the region or its peoples is involved. 24 and Homeland are no different. Both works seem to disregard research when it comes to language, religious practices or cultural practices. The mistakes in themselves are ludicrous oftentimes, easily fixable by either simply consulting an Arab or a practicing Muslim or even by hiring an actor who can speak Arabic. But the kind of casualness with which those shortcomings are dealt point to the simple fact that creators don’t care much, or at all, for the fact that they are misrepresenting people’s cultures and religions or that they are trying to pass off gibberish as their language.

One of the most laughable aspects of this inability to properly research is when characters are referred to as “from the Middle East,” as if the Middle East is a clearly defined, single country with homogenous languages, cultures, ideologies, and peoples. Bob Warner refers to Reza as such during his conversation with Kate. Later on, we find out that Reza has lived his whole life in London, but the point is that he is originally from this mystical place called the Middle East. This seems to be coded language for Arab rather than anything else, which, in all honesty, would be better. At the very least, Arab is more specific. The Middle East oftentimes includes Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan, or in some odd, rare cases India. One cannot be
from the Middle East. This trend of people being “from the Middle East” continues throughout the season. Syed ‘Ali is also not assigned any nationality. When Jack is chasing after him, he announces a “Middle Eastern” man, wearing all black, as the threat to look out for (2x11 24:46-24:54). According to Fandom Wiki, a mostly reliable website that charts character profiles for various TV shows and movies, Syed ‘Ali is from Afghanistan which, if true, would be puzzling since he speaks with his right-hand man in Arabic, specifically in a hybrid version between Iraqi dialect and Modern Standardized Arabic (“24-Syed Ali,” Fandom Wiki). This specific information is never given within the canon of the show, however, making it unreliable at best. Perhaps when the profile was put together, it was assumed that Syed ‘Ali is from Afghanistan given al-Qaeda’s connection to the country. Nonetheless, the fact that there is confusion regarding his place of origin reflects the show’s inability to commit to a specific country instead of drawing on generalized assumptions about the region. It should also be noted that Reza is played by Philip Rhys and Syed ‘Ali is played by Francesco Quinn, neither actors have so-called Middle Eastern origins, but both can pass for Arabs in terms of appearance. This particular problem does not plague Homeland. It doesn’t shy away from naming its main terrorist, Abu Nazir as Palestinian, even though the actor has more of an Iranian accent and is, in fact, played by an actor of Iranian origins, nor does it shy away from assigning nationalities to the Saudi Prince, the Syrian terrorist, Danny Galvez or Fara Sherazi. Perhaps this is one instance in which the time lapse between the two shows better informed the creators, or perhaps emboldened them to be specific, unlike 24’s shyness from implicating certain countries.

Homeland does not manage to accurately depict Islamic rituals, however. Brody’s prayer times are far from accurate. We see him praying early morning and late at night. While the night prayer can pass for evening prayer, though it’s a bit too late for it, the morning prayer, on the
other hand, fits nowhere. It is neither the early prayer at dawn, nor is it the noon prayer around midday. Further, Brody recites his prayers loudly, which is a common misconception about Muslims’ prayers. If the prayer is being performed by one person, then it is performed silently with the worshipper reciting it quietly to themselves. Even in instances of prayers at mosques, it’s only at specific times that it’s recited loudly by the ‘Imam. Otherwise, the ‘Imam simply guides the prayers. There is no reason for Brody to pray loudly, then.

*Homeland*’s mishap in prayers is relatively minor in comparison to that of *24*. In *24*, the afternoon prayer lasts almost an entire hour, if not more. Jack and his fellow agents chase after Syed ‘Ali to the local mosque where he is supposed to be. By the time they get to the mosque and surround it, the prayer had already begun. Yet, they still have the time to dress Kate in a full burqa attire to have her walk into the mosque and identify Syed ‘Ali, run out of it, report back to Jack, all while the prayer is still going. Jack says that the “prayer service lets out in seventeen minutes” (2x11 26:20). The afternoon prayer takes so long that by the time worshippers leave the mosque it is dark and past the time for the dusk prayer. Just how much time do the creators think Muslims spend on praying? No prayer lasts this long, not unless it’s the evening prayer in Ramadan. Afternoon prayers are read silently, even at the mosque, and the longest they can possibly take is ten minutes. Any practicing Muslim could have easily answered this question if confusion was the cause of this major mishap. By all means, the show might have done it to hype up its drama, thinking that it can get away with tweaking practices to conveniently fit the plot. But the fact of the matter is that it’s plain disrespectful to twist around the religious practice of millions of people for the story’s convenience, just as it is disrespectful and insensitive to suggest gibberish as a part of a spoken language purely out of laziness and indifference.
Syed ‘Ali’s name is confusing. It suggests that he is Shiite when major terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda and ISIS identify as Sunni, especially those who have in fact committed crimes on American soil. And while the name ‘Ali is not exclusively Shiite, Syed is, especially when put together with ‘Ali. The name would make sense if the show is suggesting the Second Wave is a Shiite terrorist organization, but that assertion would be odd and questionable in itself. If not, and the name was picked haphazardly, then there is definite inconsistency. *Homeland* falls into a similar pitfall by suggesting that ‘Abu Nazir, a Sunni terrorist belonging to al-Qaeda, a Sunni terrorist organization, works with Hezbollah. No self-respecting Sunni terrorist would work with the Shiite political party Hezbollah. On the one hand, the show might have wanted to take a jab at Hezbollah and suggest its involvement with terrorism. On the other hand, it could also be genuine confusion since Hezbollah is oftentimes referred to as a terrorist organization in mainstream rhetoric. In either case, a leading member of al-Qaeda would not deal with a Shiite organization, even if one is to assume that Hezbollah is also a terrorist organization.

The above mentioned are the more major problems of research, but minor ones litter the narrative as well, making it difficult to suspend disbelief for a viewer who, like myself, is a native speaker of the language and is well versed with the culture. For example, in both shows, the mosque’s ‘Imams are referred to as ‘Imam as if it’s a proper way to address the ‘Imam of the mosque. In reality, an ‘Imam would be referred to either as Sheikh or ‘Imam [Name], as in ‘Imam Khaled or ‘Imam Omar. Simply speaking, ‘Imam is a name in and of itself, as in the case of the famous actor Adel ‘Imam. To call someone ‘Imam is to suggest that their name is ‘Imam.

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5 It should be noted that Hezbollah is not framed as a terrorist organization in mainstream Arab media. Hezbollah is a genuine political party with an agenda and participation in Lebanon’s parliament. Equating it with organizations like al-Qaeda and ISIS is problematic to say the least, regardless of what one might think of their practices and agendas.
24 almost sidestepped that mistake when Syed ‘Ali addressed the mosque’s ‘Imam as ‘Imam al-Fulani, except that al-Fulani is not a name. It’s merely an equivalent to John Doe. Another constant problem is that when characters do, in fact, speak Arabic, the dialects are a strange confusing hybrid and heavily accented, which immediately indicates that the actors are not, in fact, Arabic speakers. One rare instance of well-spoken Arabic is in the case of the unnamed ‘Imam in Homeland, probably due to the fact that the actor is Egyptian. Other instances are related to what the writers think Muslims do, such as having two characters exchange the unlikely farewell “Allahu Akbar” which is not a form of greeting but is familiar and menacing enough for the average American viewer.

The disregard for accuracy, whether in terms of language, religious practice, places of origin, or even not hiring appropriate actors relates to Edward Said’s point about the East as an imagined place. Here we have narratives that employ vague generalizations to create an image of what it’s like to be Muslim or Arab. Neither narrative cares much for accuracy for the simple fact that the East they are creating through those images is not an objective entity, but one that exists within the creators’ minds. The extremely long prayers and the use of Allahu Akbar as greeting refer to what Muslims are imagined to be like, how they speak and how much of their time they burn in worship. The confused dialect, the insistence that one can be “from the Middle East” indicate a collapsing of an extremely diverse region into a single entity that can be defined by a political term that doesn’t really mean anything. Certainly, there is also the added factor that the narratives’ disregard for accuracy stems from the inability to respect the cultures and religions of other people, or perhaps from viewing the culture and religion at hand as unworthy of respect.

Kumail Nanjiani, in his SNL monologue, says “if you’re going to be racist, then at least do it right” referring to people who yell at him, a Pakistani, to go back to India (Saturday Night Live
“Kumail Nanjiani Standup Monologue –SNL”). On a similar note, if shows like 24 and Homeland are hell-bent on depicting Islam, Arabs, and Muslims, and doing so mostly in a negative light, then at least do it right. One must wonder, why is it important to depict Muslims as suspicious to achieve the reality effect, but not important to accurately depict cultures and languages so that they accurately correspond to the real world? This also perfectly illustrates Said’s point that the Orient is Orientalized and not simply discovered as Oriental. The Orient and its peoples that those depictions make does not correspond to a real place that exists in the world. Instead, it is a cluster of images imagined and projected onto the region.

The Curious Cases of Carrie Mathison and Jack Bauer

No analysis of 24 or Homeland would be complete without the discussion of the main protagonists. On the surface, Jack Bauer has very little in common with Carrie Mathison. He’s a man, married but widowed by the end of the first season, a father to a young woman, typically characterized by rash decisions and bursts of anger, his work is hands-on and dirty, and he looks like he’s perpetually in a hurry. Carrie is a single woman, plagued by bipolar disorder, her main pastime activity is listening to jazz and having one-night stands, and her work is clean and removed, focused on investigations rather than the physical fighting of it all. Jack is a torturer. Carrie is an investigator. Nonetheless, there is a striking similarity between the two characters and their function within the context of their narratives. Both Jack and Carrie are neurotic, paranoid vigilantes, finding necessity in disregarding or even breaking the law under the name of protecting the country. Neither Carrie nor Jack are upright citizens. Neither of them goes through due process in order to capture the bad guys. Instead, they use torture, manipulation, illegal spying and violence to reach their goal. And, yet, the audience is meant to root for them
and their twisted personalities. After all, one thing remains true: Jack and Carrie are always right.

Jack Bauer’s above mentioned quote “that’s the problem with people like you, George. You want results but you’re never willing to get your hands dirty” (2x01 47:00-47:09), is essentially Jack Bauer’s most defining mantra. Results, in his doctrine, can only be achieved through getting one’s hands dirty. He says this on the heels of killing a criminal in witness protection in cold blood after extracting information from him. And while the death is shocking, one is hardly inspired to sympathize with the murdered. He is nothing but an obnoxious, smug, criminal who has a perpetual smirk on his face throughout his conversation with Jack and continuously taunts Jack with the fact that he cannot kill him. Jack’s dismissal of his boss’ outrage at his actions only reinforces the necessary evil that Jack needs to go through in order to achieve security for the country. Indeed, his methods are not upright; the show is clear about that, but since they produce results, since Jack is always right, then they are necessary. Further, Jack’s questionable methods are a form of self-sacrifice. His deeds come at great injury to himself and his family. He loses his wife because of his job. He continues to have a rocky relationship with his daughter following the murder of his wife since she blames him for her death. He loses his sanity, falling into heroin addiction in season three in order to cope with the stress of his work. And at the end of it all, he loses even his country. Jack Bauer ends the show with his own government out to get him for all the crimes he has committed throughout the years just to protect his country. The effect of the deliberate decision to make Jack a morally questionable character cannot be overstated. The show gives off the very clear message that these are extreme circumstances that require extreme action no matter how reprehensible we find those actions. If we want to be kept safe, then we need people like Jack Bauer. One of the
producers said as much in an interview with the New Yorker, “the series […] is ripped out of Zeitgeist of what people’s fears are – their paranoia that we’re going to be attacked […] it makes people look at what we are dealing with […] there are not a lot of measures short of extreme measure that will not get it done […] America wants the war on terror fought by Jack Bauer. He’s a patriot” (Steuter and Martin 130).

Carrie’s neurotic paranoia is used for similar purposes as Jack’s paranoia. Except in her case, as Bhattacharyya argues in an essay about Homeland’s depiction of femininities, what is employed is the old trope of the feminine hysteric (378). As mentioned above, Carrie is far from a stable character, and the narrative makes the viewer acutely aware of that throughout the first season. While Brody is placed under suspicion, Carrie’s speculations are not at all treated as given truth. The audience fluctuates between believing her, then believing Brody and back to believing her for the majority of the first season. Her conclusions, while eventually vindicated, are arrived at through details that seem insignificant. The movement of Brody’s fingers, for example, when he’s on screen in front of the press can easily be missed by anyone without Carrie’s hyper-fixation on details (1x01 50:00-50:55). Up until the point when Brody’s guilt is revealed to the audience, much of Carrie’s evidence is purely speculative, as if she is hanging on to details just to prove her point. Her bosses’ dismissals of her, whether it be Saul or the head of the CIA in the show’s canon, also place the audience in the position of skepticism. However, eventually, Carrie’s speculations are all proven to be true, to the audience but not the rest of the characters. Her unconventional method of stringing evidence together is given full justification. If she had listened to her boss in the very first scene and extracted herself from Iraq before listening to the prisoner, then she would not have been able to know that “an American soldier had been turned” (1x01, 00:00-02:30). If it were not for her placing illegal cameras throughout
Brody’s house, then she would not have known that he has converted (1x01). If she had not seduced him, she would not have been able to know that he can easily pass a lie detection test (1x06, 45:00-47:17), nor would she be able to find out his connection to ‘Essa, ‘Abu Nazir’s son if she hadn’t slept with him and woke up to his screaming ‘Essa’s name in the middle of the night (1x07 35:42-36:48). And, perhaps most importantly, if it weren’t for the instability of her mental state, then she would not have been able to string together the timeline of ‘Abu Nazir’s activities and correctly estimate the time of his upcoming attack (1x11 34:29-36:02). As Bhattacharyya points out, Carrie embodies “the physical unease of attempting to achieve security” (377). Much like the results that Jack’s amoral methods produce, Carrie’s manic insight justifies the methods of securing national security.

The choices of Jack Bauer and Carrie Mathison as the protagonists heightens the paranoia and urgency of both narratives. The suggestion is that no matter how begrudgingly we accept their actions, the fact of the matter is that without Carrie or Jack, we would not be safe. The audience would have a completely different narrative were upright, orthodox agents the main protagonists. But both TV shows make the audience complicit with the process of securitization of the state. They force the vision of their rogue agents onto the narratives and vindicate their unorthodox actions that propel the plot from one point to the other. And eventually they come out triumphant, announcing that the gritty, rough-around-the-edges, dirty-handed torturer and the hysteric feminine are the only ones who seem to truly understand the world around them, who clearly see the threat and are willing to go beyond the rigid orthodoxies of their governments to protect the country. Indeed, as we mourn the loss of Carrie’s memories in the last few seconds of the first season, as we find ourselves longing for her to be saved, as we mourn Jack’s downfall and his eventual disappearance to avoid captivity, we are, in effect,
rooting for their grim vision of the world, for the violence of their methods, for their unorthodoxies, despite all their horrors (Bhattacharyya, 382). After all, in those moments, the narratives manage to convince us that we, as Western nations, cannot survive without the repulsive actions of Jack Bauer and Carrie Mathison.

The issues brought up here regarding *Homeland* and *24* are not new. In 2005, the Council on American-Islamic Relations expressed concern over the show’s depiction of Muslims, fearing that it inspired inflammatory rhetoric and biased stereotypes against Muslims. Members of the council met with network executives and the show’s producers (“24’s Culture Clash” tvguide.com). The concern prompted the show to issue a disclaimer before one of its episodes, read by Kiefer Sutherland, the actor who portrays Jack Bauer, that “while terrorism is obviously one of the most critical challenges facing our nation and the world, it is important to recognize that the American Muslim community stands firmly beside their fellow Americans in denouncing and resisting all forms of terrorism” (“Fox Airs ‘24’ Disclaimer” CAIR.com). The disclaimer encourages viewers to keep this in mind while watching *24*. The fact that the show yielded to the demands of CAIR indicates its awareness that its depiction of Arabs and Muslims is less than innocuous.

*Homeland* has its own share of critics as well. In a now-famous case, during the show’s time filming in Berlin, “Arabian” graffiti artists were hired to decorate the set with spray paint to replicate a Syrian refugee camp. The artists, vehemently opposed to the show’s depictions of Muslims and Arabs, sprayed phrases like “*Homeland* is racist,” and “*Homeland* is a watermelon”6 (Cameron, *the Daily Dot*). The phrases passed through the filming process

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6 This phrase confused some non-Arabic speaking commentators, like Stephen Colbert. It’s an Arabic catchphrase that means to say “*Homeland* is a joke”.

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without anyone paying much attention to them, and the episode actually aired with Carrie Mathison walking past phrases like the examples given. The graffiti artists even commented on the fact that no one paid them much attention. The set was supposed to be finished in two days and the content of the phrases was of no importance to set designers. “In their eyes, Arabic script is merely a supplementary visual that completes the horror-fantasy of the Middle East,” the artists stated “a poster image dehumanizing an entire region to human-less figures in black burkas”. The artists stated that while at first skeptical when contacted for the job, they soon found it an opportunity to make their point by “subverting the message using the show itself” (Cameron, *The Daily Dot*). Perhaps the most telling part about this incident on the set is the fact that shooting resumed without anyone catching on to the content of the Arabic phrases.

However, in spite of both shows’ problematic histories, or perhaps because of them, they both achieved popular success and critical acclaim. As of this writing, 24’s average score on rotten tomatoes is 88% (“24”, Rotten Tomatoes) and Homeland’s is 87% (“Homeland”, Rotten Tomatoes). Throughout its run on TV, 24 has won 70 awards, including two Golden Globes and several Emmys for performance, writing and directing, and it has received over 205 nominations (“24”, IMDB). Homeland, thus far, has won 54 awards, including five Golden Globes and numerous Emmys, while achieving 164 nominations (“Homeland”, IMDB). Much could be said about politics behind awards and their ability, or lack thereof, to determine what is truly worth watching. But one thing remains true, winning awards, especially the like of Golden Globes and Emmys, is still a major source of prestige. It can help a show receive more budget from a network and gives it the proper publicity and exposure to gain traction among audiences.

It might seem unfair to zero in on 24 and Homeland when they are “just” works of fiction. But the two shows are not isolated instances of problematic depiction. They are
emblematic of numerous depictions in Hollywood, whether in TV shows or in movies, as will be examined shortly, of irresponsible depictions of Muslims, Islam and Arabs, creating a narrative that Others and reduces numerous peoples, cultures and nationalities to hollow stereotypes of the terrorist, the threat and the dead. At the heart of it, shows like *Homeland* and *24* dehumanize Arabs and Muslims, making their torture and murder commonplace. The narratives enable and perpetuate bigotry through their one-dimensional depictions. Howard Gordon, one of *24’s* creators, said in a panel in 2010 that he regrets the depictions of Muslims he presented in the show, that he hid behind the fact that it’s just fiction. “Clearly,” he says “what I was doing was having an impact beyond my own parochial interest in telling the most exciting story” (“Who Speaks for Islam”). In 2011, *Homeland* premiered, and Howard Gordon is one of its creators. It is unclear how he learned from the mistakes he made in *24*.

This is not to say that there are not more responsible, albeit definitely not perfect, approaches to the issue of terrorism on television. A prime example of that is *Quantico*, a somewhat gimmicky and clichéd show about the training and making of FBI agents. In an interview, its producer blatantly stated that there will be no Muslim terrorists on the show, simply because there have been too many depictions of that on television (Delbyck, *Huffington Post*). Instead, *Quantico* presents a hijabi twin as one of the new trainees.

The underrated procedural thriller *Person of Interest* takes a more moderate approach. Its premise centers entirely around the 9/11 attack, and yet the equation of Islam with terrorism does not seem to occur to the writers. True, over the course of its five seasons *Person of Interest* indeed deals with examples of Arab Muslim terrorists. But they are a staggering minority, especially in comparison to *24* and *Homeland*. There are exactly two examples of Muslim terrorists in the entire show. The first, and perhaps most problematic, is a cell planning on
detonating a bomb in Berlin in the second season of the show, the members of which are killed within the first few minutes by the stone-faced Sameen Shaw (2x16 01:16-3:00). The second is a young, petty terrorist who is terrified throughout his interrogation by the CIA. He breaks down, admits to his crimes only for the CIA agent to turn around, kill the translator and force the young man to detonate the bomb as initially planned to help the government rid itself of a few unwanted persons (2x22 21:35-22:28, 30:44-31:52). The suspect trope is used twice as well. One of them leads to the team collaborating with the Egyptian man being blackmailed to save his son (4x01). The other leads to the elimination of an innocent young man from Dearborn at the hands of a government official (4x12). None of these depictions is perfect. In fact, they are hardly memorable, which in itself can be reproachful. With the exception of the murdered college student, none of the rest of those characters even occupy the space of a full episode focus. However, the petty crimes of those people get lost amongst the show’s struggle against faulty government, drug lords, corrupt cops, mafia and its own philosophical questions. And the Arab that ends up being truly memorable is the Iraqi refugee that the team of protagonists help through the process of gaining asylum (3x18). The episode has several memorable moments. Omar is constantly spoken about in a positive light as his brother and his girlfriend collaborate with the protagonists to help him out. He works as a translator, a job wholly unrelated to national security. In one passing moment, Shaw and Reese, two of the main protagonists, have a short squabble over which city has better food, Baghdad or Beirut (3x18 05:45-06:05). The scene, while short, is endearing, referencing specific dishes in both cuisines without bothering to give explanation for whoever is not as well versed in the culture. It also frames two well-known cities in the area as a part of a normal conversation about food instead of terrorism or war or destruction. But perhaps the most memorable moment is when main character Harold Finch,
disguised as Omar’s lawyer, snickers at the halting of the asylum-seeking process because a suspect managed to slip through the system. “But surely an isolated case shouldn’t affect the plight of thousands,” he says (3x18 13:31-15:08). This, of course, is exactly the case. And the government is all-too-willing to deport Omar even though he has received threatening letters. His deportation is essentially sending him back to die. All is well for Omar eventually, however. He’s saved by the protagonists and reunites with his girlfriend. Once again, the representation is not perfect. Some hasty generalizations are made. The protagonists are careful at first, thinking that Omar might be involved in terrorism. But, overall, the episode gives a positive example where human parts of Omar are shown, and the plight of refugees is hinted at. Person of Interest might not be actively contributing to a counter narrative in a significant way, except perhaps in the character of Sameen Shaw, a complicated case that will be examined later, but at the very least its presentation of terrorism does not delude itself into thinking that most terrorist activities come from Muslim countries.


Considering the fact that the major wars the U.S. has been involved in over the last two decades are all located in the Middle East, it is no surprise that images of Arabs and/or Muslims are commonplace in this genre of Hollywood movies. Over the past few years, the most influential of those movies was American Sniper. The release of American Sniper on December 25, 2014, was not uncontroversial. Early on, when promotional material for the film began to trickle onto the internet, the movie’s conception was met with hostility, whether from parts of the general audience, or some celebrities, like Seth Rogen and Michael Moore, both of whom tweeted against it. By all means, the movie’s controversy is not unwarranted. One need only to
look at the source material to question the wisdom of the making of the movie. Chris Kyle’s autobiography, also titled *American Sniper*, is problematic at best. While Chris Kyle is hailed as an all-American hero, what with his being the deadliest American sniper ever with about 160 recorded kills, the autobiography, in tone as well as content, displays prejudiced and downright racist thinking on the part of its author. Considering the source-material, it is difficult to find a reasonable justification to Clint Eastwood’s assertion that the movie sends an anti-war message (“Clint Eastwood Says,” *Time*). The book refers to Iraqis as savages throughout, something that the movie is not at all shy to adopt, and makes light of Chris Kyle possibly committing kills simply for the sake of keeping a higher score than his fellow snipers. The timing of its release is also cause of concern. Towards the end of 2014, the Syrian refugee crisis occupied a large portion of the news, and one can argue that the release of a war movie where the killing of Arabs and Muslims is commonplace might further ignite prejudices.

Nonetheless, *American Sniper* opened with a bang. On its opening weekend, *American Sniper* garnered $90.2 million, setting a record for January releases, and moving towards becoming the highest grossing war movie in Hollywood’s history (Stern, *The Daily Beast*). Prominent actor, activist and pacifist Jane Fonda called the movie “powerful” in a tweet. And Seth Rogers and Michael Moore had to reckon with severe backlash in the wake of expressing their opinions from general audience as well as some celebrities. The movie went on to be nominated for six Academy Awards, including Best Actor and Best Motion Picture, two of the most anticipated awards, even amidst mixed reviews from mainstream media outlets. And it is exactly because of this success, with prominent Clint Eastwood and Hollywood’s lovable Bradley Cooper at the helm of the ship, which makes experiencing *American Sniper* perplexing.
The above-mentioned opening scene with the menacing sound of the ‘adhan and the immediate placement of an Iraqi woman and boy as threatening figures sets the tone for the entire movie. It is nothing but a start for what will be largely a movie that places American lives at the highest value while making Iraqis, with their brown and often covered faces, as inhuman, shot and killed within moments of their appearance without a single positive representation to even attempt a balance. Indeed, American Sniper, in its own unique way, with its lack of self-awareness and authoritative, unquestioning view of the world, is far worse than either Homeland or 24. While the latter two might harbor some shy, self-conscious embarrassment about the images of Muslims and Arabs they’re putting forth that pushes them to drop a line here or present a character there to vaguely hint at a different perspective, American Sniper does not at all concern itself with such niceties. Not a single Iraqi is not a terrorist, or an opportunist, or both. And at the end of the day, they are all killed within moments of their appearance. Indeed, their presence is so Othered, so distant and removed, that even though more than half of the movie’s run time is set in Iraq, Iraqis have very little screen time and even less lines of dialogue.

The opening sequence of the movie builds tension as the distant sound of the call to prayer merges with the image of a hijabi woman stepping out of the house along with her son. The woman pulls out a grenade from her ‘abiyyah, a traditional loose, often black, robe, and gives it to her son. The child cannot be older than ten. Up on a roof, with his rifle propped up and ready to fire, Bradley Cooper’s character, Chris, is perplexed at the prospect of having to shoot the child, as he watches the movement of the mother and her son. The scene masterfully pulls in the audience, using tense silence against the backdrop of the call to prayer, and Chris’s pronounced breathing and his distressed expression as it cuts between him and the child who is slowly advancing towards the American convoy (02:07-04:33). The tension is eventually broken
by a gunshot that transports us back to Chris’s childhood, hunting deer with his father and brother. The parallel drawn between Chris’s conflict whether to kill the child or not and the subsequent scene of hunting the deer is made all the more explicit as the movie introduces the philosophy that Chris’s father lives by and passes on to his son. “There are people in this world,” his father says, “who think there’s no evil. They wouldn’t be able to protect themselves if there was anyone at their door. These are the sheep […]. Then there are those blessed with the gift of aggression and the overwhelming need of protecting their flock […]. We protect our own” (05:00-06:03). This sentiment of protecting one’s own ricochets throughout the movie, as Chris Kyle unapologetically and uncritically adopts it. A few minutes after the scene with the father’s speech, Chris echoes the statement as he watches news reports of the death of eight Americans in a terrorist attack. “Look what they did to us,” he says to his brother, eyes fixated on the screen with an angry expression on his face (10:00). They, of course, need to be stopped from hurting us. It is this impulse to protect his own that eventually drives Chris to join the Navy SEALs. This sense of protection is only heightened after 9/11, making Chris anxious for the war in Iraq. The movie suggests that the invasion of Iraq was motivated by 9/11, ignoring the over-a-year lapse of time between the two events, Bush’s speeches about Weapons of Mass Destruction, or the supposed goal of liberating the Iraqi people. Instead, the movie implies that the United States invaded Iraq to defend itself after the 9/11 attacks and to fight terrorism in the country, in spite of the fact that terrorism was a non-issue in Iraq until after the 2003 invasion. Yet, this explicit association between the 9/11 attacks and the war on Iraq is essential to the movie’s premise of good and evil, of black and white. The political debate, the protests, the government’s lies, and even the so-called heroic quest of bringing democracy to Iraq, all bring up the messiness of the Iraq war and the uncertainty behind it. Instead, the movie chooses to sidestep this problem in
favor of giving a more direct message about justice, morality and patriotism by more or less erasing the political debate altogether. Creating an explicit connection between 9/11 and the Iraq war, while not necessarily untrue, puts the war in the realm of aggressor, evil Iraqis, out to kill us, those who are like sheep of us, against Chris Kyle who is a protector of his own. Adding in the politics of it all might have undercut Chris Kyle’s heroism, and brought into question the clear morality that Kyle espoused early on in the movie. Only two quick scenes are inserted between the attack and Chris’s subsequent deployment to Iraq. It is at this point, at minute 25:00, that the movie goes back to its first scene, as we await Chris’s reaction to the threat of the boy. Eventually, he kills the boy then his mother when she picks up the grenade after her son’s death and attempts to detonate it herself.

The choice to begin the story non-linearly is interesting. True, the movie follows the outline of the book that starts with a less dramatic version of this incident, but it does not leave the reader hanging in suspense, choosing to immediately fully report on the incident. The movie, however, chooses to interject the incident with the backstory of Chris Kyle, his philosophy, and his motivation. Perhaps the movie worries that the sympathy offered by Bradley Cooper’s expressive face is not enough for the killing of the child. Or perhaps it means to underscore the importance of Chris’s mission and its stakes. Therefore, it plunges us into the world of Chris’s perceptions and subjectivity. Do not judge, it tells us, until you fully comprehend his situation. And the technique largely works. There is a sense of building up patriotism that eventually makes the death of the child and the mother acceptable, especially with our newfound knowledge that these were his first kills and the obvious effect they had on him. When his comrade congratulates him, slapping his shoulder playfully, Chris snaps at him not to touch him as he continues to stare at the carnage through his rifle with tears in his eyes (26:00-28:30). The
feeling that resonates in this scene is that war requires making tough decisions if one is to protect one’s own.

It should be noted that while this incident is in the prologue of Chris Kyle’s autobiography, the killing of the boy is a fictitious addition from the movie’s creators. Chris Kyle reports that he killed a woman, the only non-male combatant he killed, because she was about to launch a grenade at the American soldiers, while kids were close by. But at no point does he imply that the kids were involved in the women’s schemes. In fact, he is disgusted by her unrelenting want to kill Americans even in such close proximity to children. He says that she didn’t care who she might kill as long as she killed Americans. The choice to add in the death of the child, then, was a questionable creative choice. Perhaps it was done for dramatic effect. But one must wonder why the drama could not be inserted by Chris’s distress that the child, too, will be killed, or removed the child from the scene altogether so as not to appeal to our protective sensibilities of children that might make us immediately on-board with Chris’s killing of the woman. But the murder of the child heightens the tension and drama, it heightens the protagonist’s dilemma, and therefore his heroism, by putting forth the idea that all Iraqi bodies are a threat. It matters not whether they are children or women, let alone men. They are the evil that Chris is up against and needs to reckon with in order to protect his own, regardless of how difficult some of the killings he has to make are.

The addition of the threat of a child is not the only questionable creative choice that American Sniper makes. The main villain it chooses to depict is a sniper named Mustafa who is only briefly mentioned in the book. The movie’s rival sniper is a Syrian Olympic gold medalist who is a looming threat throughout the movie, while the book’s rival sniper is an Iraqi sniper who is mentioned in one paragraph with no real emphasis. It is understandable that the movie
needed a tangible villain that it can kill off and cleanly lead into its triumphant, Disney-like ending, but the choices that the script makes in regards to the villain, whether by the depiction of his non-existent characteristics or by the specificity of his nationality, are interesting.

It would not be a stretch to say that Mustafa might be one of the most boring villains in the history of cinema. Throughout the movie’s runtime, he has a grand total of zero lines. It is no surprise, then, that he has no personality or motivation or anything resembling humanity. He’s nothing but a walking vessel for the movie’s straightforward philosophy of black and white, good and evil—Mustafa, of course, being entirely evil. Depictions of him are often laughably cartoonish. He is only shown behind his rifle, whether in close-ups as he prepares to shoot, or from a distance after the effect of his bullet is felt. He wears exclusively dark colors, head adorned with the signature kufiyah that most faceless Iraqi men wear before being shot. Even in the moment where we find out that Mustafa has a wife and an infant, he is given none of Chris’s human, heartwarming instances with his family. Instead, his wife, wearing all black and her hijab inside the house for some reason, stands in a corner with the infant child in her arms, while Mustafa menacingly toys with a bullet, his rifle propped up next to him. This moment of Mustafa in his house is concluded with him receiving word of Chris’s whereabouts and leaving to chase his rival. The camera pans to a wanted poster with a prize on Chris Kyle’s head, affirming that Mustafa, unlike Chris, is not really fighting for any principle but is purely an opportunist. The camera then moves to a picture of Mustafa winning the gold medal during the Olympics for shooting, reminding us of his legacy, his societal position and nationality (1:20:00).

Mustafa’s utter silence is especially noteworthy in juxtaposition to the white terrorists featured in Homeland and 24. It operates within the larger theme of the inability to imagine non-white terrorists as anything but subhuman killing machines with no real backgrounds or stories.
In fact, American Sniper takes this theme a step further, opting to silence Mustafa altogether. At least in Homeland and 24, ‘Ali and ‘Abu Nazir offer moments of interesting insights and are allowed to show human emotions. Mustafa, on the other hand, is so fully Othered that he comes off as a machine rather than a human person. His silence, coupled with the stoic, unchanging expression on his face, distance him from the possibility of having any kind of inner world. This extreme dehumanization of Mustafa is especially detrimental when the movie does not showcase a single somewhat complex example of an Iraqi person. In this opposition that the movie sets up of good American soldiers and bad terrorist Iraqis (and Arabs at large since Mustafa is Syrian), no one of the opposite group is allowed even an ounce of humanity or a small inkling of relatability, not even the main villain whose existence makes the climax of the third act of the movie possible. But it isn’t so much that we are incapable of imagining a complex terrorist as much as it is impossible for us to imagine a nuanced evil if it does not wear a white face. As Mills suggests, the normative experience of the world is essentially seen as a white experience, so that human has become synonymous with whiteness. Everything else is a deviant experience that is somehow less human. Therefore, it is no surprise that even villainy would need a white face to be complex. After all, the barbaric opportunism of Mustafa is presupposed by his being from a certain culture, where the people of those culture are clearly racialized. The actions of white terrorists on the other hand need explanation, for their decisions are not presupposed by any belonging to a racial or ethnic group. They are simply the default human, and therefore need reason and justification for their actions. They need complexity and nuance in a way that Mustafa is presumed not to.

Another looming question in Mustafa’s personality is his nationality. If the Mustafa that Chris Kyle briefly mentions is Iraqi, why does the movie choose to make him a Syrian Olympic
gold medalist, especially when Syria’s sole Olympic gold medal was won by a woman and not for shooting? (“Syrian Arab Republic,” Olympic.org). The screenwriter had no reason to depict Mustafa as Syrian or as an athlete, except for dramatic effect. This effect, however, furthers the association of all Arabs and Muslims with terrorism. Even Olympic athletes can’t seem to escape Hollywood’s tyrannical view of the region and its people. It does not matter what facet of society the individual belongs to, athlete, family man, child, woman or whoever else they might be. They are all somehow involved in terrorism. They are all somehow a threat. As Said suggests, this gives a singular reference frame of what it means to be Arab or Muslim. In this case, what it means to be from the East is to always be somehow involved in terrorism. This is the image that fits the West’s view. Further, choosing to give Mustafa a Syrian nationality seems purposeful, especially considering the movie’s release date. As mentioned above, the movie was released around the time when the refugee crisis was becoming a pressing concern. It was written, shot and filmed, then, around the time of deterioration of Syria’s political sphere and as refugees were fleeing their homes. To unnecessarily associate the villain of the movie with Syria cannot be a mere coincidence. After all, Mustafa could have remained as he is in the movie but as an Iraqi. It would have been less convoluted and more consistent. Nor does this change make the story more riveting. Mustafa is nothing but a target for Chris to hyper-fixate on and gain victory over. His nationality, then, is entirely irrelevant. To make it explicit, in fact, to make it the only thing explicit about Mustafa, then, is problematic. Given the context of the movie, it seems as if filmmakers wanted to emphasize his Syrian-ness to nod towards not just an Iraqi threat, but also a Syrian one. And the Syrian one might come to our door, since refugees are waiting in masses to be taken in. Another way to understand this decision is that the screenwriter merely wanted to exploit a kind of simmering fear against refugees. Even if the screenwriter did not intentionally
go through either thinking processes while writing the script, the end result is at the very least short-sighted.

Other than Mustafa and the countless faceless, quickly-killed Iraqis, the movie presents us with three other Iraqi characters: the Butcher, Sheikh Al-Obodi, and Terrorist Man. The first two names are actually mentioned in the movie, but Terrorist Man has no name and is credited simply as Terp #2. The Butcher, like Mustafa, is nothing but a walking embodiment of the “savages,” to use Chris’s word, of which Chris and his companions speak. He is a looming threat, the prime target of their terrorist hunting efforts, who kills people using a drill. This grotesque method of killing is only ever shown when The Butcher kills Sheikh Al-Obodi’s son who also cannot be older than ten years old (55:00-56:00). The question of grotesque violence, whom it is enacted upon and whom it might humanize will be explored further down. For now, it would suffice to note that this incident marks the second graphic killing of an Iraqi child in the movie. The movie almost goes for a third brutal killing when Chris nearly has to kill another child who unknowingly picks up a weapon and almost uses it, but Chris is relieved from the burden of this brutality when the kid is distracted by something else, and Chris can heave a sigh of relief after an intense moment of whispering “don’t do it” to the child (1:35:00-1:36:00). The Butcher is killed after this incident and is not memorable.

Sheikh Al-Obodi, played by Homeland’s Abu Nazir, perhaps has the most lines in the movie. He, along with his family, are introduced under the threat of weapons, during a raid on their house by the American soldiers as they look for the Butcher. After the family assures the soldiers that they mean them no harm, Chris and his fellows attempt to negotiate for the Man’s cooperation. At first he’s reluctant to give any information, fearing for his and his family’s life from the Butcher’s violence. Eventually, he asks for a hundred thousand dollars in exchange for
the information he has to provide, to which the commanding officer responds with a sarcastic “figures” (41:00-43:59). The man is later killed by the Butcher and his cooperators. But instead of this moment being used to point to the very real threat that those terrorists represent to locals, the scene is capped with a “they’re fucking savages” from Chris (56:40). It is difficult to sympathize with Sheikh Al-Obodi. His death and that of his family hardly strikes one as tragedy. For the movie over-emphasizes the Sheikh’s want for money, the American soldier’s annoyance, and gives no memorable, normal moment of the family. They are either relegated to the background as burqa-clad women who wail at the death of the Sheikh and his son, or, as in the case of the son, are there to be brutally killed. Further, the Sheikh’s initial reluctance implies that he’s a terrorist sympathizer, his decision to cooperate is entirely related to a personal interest as opposed to a principled act, and his eventual death is nothing but another moment that showcases the savagery of Iraqis. Or, at least, this is how the protagonist and his fellow soldiers see the Sheikh. And the movie does little to undercut this vision or hint at a complicated dynamic within Iraq. At the end of the day, the motivation and death of this man does not strike the viewer as particularly important, as the movie’s vision remains zeroed in on its protagonist’s perspective.

A more damaging depiction than Sheikh Al-Obodi is Terrorist Man. He, too, is introduced when soldiers storm into his house for an operation. He has little say as they camp in his house to scout the area for Mustafa. At first he, his wife, and his child, appear to be no more than a scared family of three whose life was disrupted by the war and the subsequent arrival of the soldiers to their house. Silent and passive, true, but not harmful. For a split moment, the movie seems to show another side of Iraq when the man invites the soldiers to his table on the eve of ‘Eid al-Adhha. They all sit around the same table, eating the same food together, and relaxing together (1:06:00). For a moment, the movie almost suggests a possibility for
understanding, for cooperation, for a less cut-and-dry image of its dichotomous good American and bad Iraqi. But the ever careful Chris shatters all such possibilities when he notices a patch of blood on the man’s elbow. This discovery leads to an action sequence as Chris discovers a hiding spot of weapons in the man’s bedroom then forces him to confess all the information he has. He leads the soldiers to what looks like a restaurant’s pantry or fridge, where the camera shows hanging bodies and decapitated limbs throughout, associating the man’s actions, and those of whoever else might be working with him, with cannibalism. In a shoot-out following this discovery, the man is killed (1:08:00-1:09:00). Afterwards, the man’s wife calls Mustafa, suggesting her involvement in the operation as well (1:10:35).

It is unclear what purpose the introduction of this man and his family serves. The soldiers could have just as easily discovered the terrorist cell through their raiding. Yet, while his existence is unimportant to the plot, his existence to the narrative is. This scene reinforces the idea that good American soldiers face the evil "savage" Iraqis, who are all terrorists, even the ones who generously invite you to their table and look like a normal family. The resonating lesson becomes: they cannot be trusted; do not let your guard down.

The movie is certainly violent, but its grotesque violence is disproportionately employed against the masses of Iraqis being shot and killed. The Butcher does not kill anyone on-screen except for the Sheikh and his child. This applies to general forms of physical violence as well, so much so that the murder of another Iraqi is hardly noticeable after the first few ones. Further, violence against Iraqis propels the plot forward and escalates the situation. The killings of the only two speaking Iraqis in the movie serves as a launching pad for a quick action sequence as the soldiers engage with terrorists in highly tense and dangerous situations. In contrast, any violence enacted against an American soldier slows down the action as the focus shifts from the
exciting fight scene to this person’s injury as Chris and the rest of the soldiers scramble to get the injured American soldier to safety and provide him with necessary care. The movie, then, makes a spectacle out of the killings of Iraqis while showcasing the tragedy of hurt American soldiers.

The function of violence and injury during fighting is just another technique the movie employs in its presentation of who has or, indeed, deserves personhood. Mass killings of faceless brown Iraqis, Mustafa’s complete silence throughout the movie, the death of its only two speaking Iraqis whose depiction is even more disparaging and Othering than if the movie had forgone their existence, are all coupled with the movie’s reference to Iraqis as savages throughout to completely alienate the audience from Iraqis. All hints of self-reflection and doubt are quickly undermined by the seeming need to reinforce the overarching message of good and evil. The anti-war message Eastwood wants to claim is embedded solely in the hints of PTSD that Chris has and the few deaths or decapitations of other American soldiers. Never once does the movie consider including the deaths of many Iraqis into its supposed pacifist message. Even towards the end, in Chris’s therapy session, the idea that ending those people’s lives might be regrettable is immediately dismissed. Instead, Chris says that the “thing that haunts [him] most are all the guys [he] couldn’t save” (1:57:00). His regret, his PTSD, his pain, and his ghosts are wholly related to American lives. Iraqis, until the very last minute of the movie, are seen as nothing but savage terrorists who live in a country where the “dust tastes like fucking horse-shit” (02:07).

The movie’s philosophy is not surprising when considering its uncritical espousal of Chris Kyle’s perspective. Its eyes see only through the lens of Kyle’s vision, even camera movement is often meant to reflect his vision. Never once does it widen its scope to deconstruct or bring to question the protagonist’s view of the world, of the war, or of Iraqis. American lives
are held at high value because of Kyle’s stringent patriotism and his drive to protect his own against the enemy. The movie’s view of the world, of the conflict is black and white because Kyle saw it as such. Very early on in the first chapter of his book, Kyle admits to this vision of black and white. He sees very little shades of grey, he says, and he’s adopted this philosophy from his father and never once questioned it, believing that the world operates on clearly delineated lines of black and white (Kyle 00:12:16-00:25:00). The movie does not at all divert from this perception, in spite of its medium making subtext possible, and in spite of its capability to fictionalize and therefore criticize this narrow-minded view. Instead, all its fictionalization, its re-writing of history, are squarely directed towards pronouncing and furthering Kyle’s view. The end result, then, is that the movie allows itself to see Iraqis as nothing but killable livestock, as caricatures of terrorism, and as savages throughout its run time while still finding a way to easily evade accusations of prejudice or racism. After all, this movie is simply told from Kyle’s perspective, regardless of the wisdom of this decision. One can simply say that the movie is a truthful depiction of the protagonist’s view and does not necessarily reflect prejudices of the filmmakers, who only wanted to tell a story reflective of Kyle’s life.

The view of the movie as sending an anti-war message requires further examination. The idea here is that the movie is not a political commentary on the war, but rather a character study of a solider and his plight of having to choose between his family and his job. The anti-war-ness of it is therefore not related to an explicitly pacifist message. Instead, this message comes from the depiction of soldiers’ suffering and the need to better protect them and provide for them. Essentially, by claiming that the movie is a human story about Chris Kyle’s plight, the movie claims to be apolitical while at the same time claiming a political stance as an antiwar movie.
This attempt at de-politicizing *American Sniper* is echoed in interviews held with Bradley Cooper and Jason Hall as well. Jason Hall tells *Time Magazine* that the story he wrote is about the soldiers’ suffering as they are forced to make difficult choices that affect their lives. His argument came in response to the backlash the movie received, calling it propagandistic and glorifying of war. “Chris and those other guys,” Jason Hall says, “they didn’t pick the war. If they did, they would have picked somewhere else because Iraq is a shithole—it’s 140 degrees and just dirt” (“*American Sniper* Screenwriter,” *Time*). Comment about Iraq aside (although, this comment sheds some light on some of the lines used in the movie and the general depiction of Iraq), this provides some insight to the vision of the movie as an anti-war movie. It’s a simple equation, really: soldiers suffering = war is bad = anti-war movie. The war is bad because it’s bad for *our* soldiers, regardless of its effect on the opposite side. This is a running problem in most American movies dealing with war, even the ones that criticize it. *The Hurt Locker*, which also deals with the Iraq war, is another example of this phenomenon. *Sand Castle* somewhat reckons with this problem as well but with far more grace and nuance (as will be discussed further on). When Jason Hall, then, says that *American Sniper* is “about how war is human,” what he really means, what he really sees is a disproportionate humanity, in which the personhood of the other side is completely erased in favor of propping up the humanity of our side. In light of this, Bradley Cooper’s hope that people would find a “universal” story of soldiers suffering in *American Sniper* (Suebsaeng, *The Daily Beast*), what he suggests is that he hoped Americans would find the story relatable. The fact that he would think of this story as universal only speaks to American self-centeredness which imagines its experiences as the norm and its stories as the most generalizable.
Further, the very attempt at de-politicizing this movie is directly related to Mills’s ideas of the normalized white experience. Here we have a movie entrenched with political implication defending against the prospect of its politicization simply because the story is told from the dominant white perspective. The movie’s effects are felt entirely in politics, with both its supporters and detractors bringing politics into the conversation. And, yet, the movie rejects the conversation, while Forbes Magazine publishes an article defending such view and insisting that the movie is just that, a movie (Mandelson, Forbes). It is just a movie in a way that is impossible to imagine for a movie, say, from Mustafa’s perspective, which would dare not make a claim to be apolitical, let alone hope to be perceived as such. But the story, told from the dominant, normalized white male perspective, about a white male, written, directed and acted by white males, about a war fought against villainized, faceless brown people, finds it acceptable to insist on its being a merely apolitical, human story. After all, it showcases the suffering of the least politicized existence in our imagination, and the most default of human suffering.

One last noteworthy point needs to be made about American Sniper. In most mainstream media outlets, the movie received unfavorable reviews. However, the problems cited in those reviews rarely touched on the problem of its depictions of Iraq or Iraqis, and if such mention is made, it is only done briefly. Rolling Stone’s Matt Taibbi probably wrote the most scathing review against the movie. He criticizes the politics of it, the insistence on the claim of its being a human story, deals with the question of Chris Kyle the fictional character vs. Chris Kyle the real person, and talks about the historical inaccuracies. But he only has a passing line that acknowledges the commonplace bloodshed of Iraqis without much else to say about it (Taibbi, Rolling Stone). In a far more removed and frank review, the New York Times, hints at the problems of Eastwood’s simplistic moral scheme and the issue of historical accuracy, but is
completely silent on the depictions of Iraqis (Scott, *The New York Times*). *Vox* as well as several reviews by *The Guardian*, reckon with the issues of historical inaccuracies, the simplistic worldview, and the problematic source material, but do so with no comment on the spiteful tone against Iraqis in the movie (Bradshaw, *The Guardian*. Brooks, *The Guardian*. West, *The Guardian*. Taub, *Vox*). Perhaps the only review from a well-known source that explicitly deals with the depictions of Iraqis in the movie was published by *Huffington Post*, and the review acknowledged the fact that conversations about the movie’s issues when it comes to depictions of Iraqis, has not yet entered the mainstream media (Green, *Huffington Post*). The question, then, becomes: why is there a reluctance to explicitly acknowledge the blatant problem of Iraqis’ depiction in the movie? Most reviews avoid the issue, only making a statement by implication or through the veil of criticizing the singular world view. There seems to be either refusal, or at least reluctance, to reckon with the movie’s racism, whether in its plentiful bloodshed, the silence of the other side, or at least the very obvious problem of referring to Iraqis as savages throughout. This very silence might be indicative of the kinds of conversations we are willing to have, and the ones that might not even occur to us. After all, perhaps the silence is, in large part, a fear at having to criticize Chris Kyle himself and his world view.

That being said, *American Sniper* is not a bad movie. On the contrary, cinematically, *American Sniper* makes for a thrilling, entrancing watch. The movie’s use of lighting techniques, of sound effects, of music, even of storytelling techniques and dialogue, make for a riveting unfolding narrative. Its ability to build tension is nothing short of masterful, with its short cuts, subtle zooms, solid acting, and silence against steady, heavy breathing. Its nomination for Best Picture, then, is not entirely unwarranted. And, perhaps, it is because of its aesthetic value that reckoning with *American Sniper* becomes even more important. For it is difficult to dismiss
when it is a good, captivating cinematic experience. Indeed, this cinematic experience is what is most missing in *Sand Castle*, a Netflix produced movie about the war in Iraq which, while problematizing much of what *American Sniper* has to say, lacks the capability to offer as much of a captivating spectacle.

*Sand Castle* opens with shots of dust and sun. It immediately places us in the scorching heat of the desert. Slowly, the camera abandons its pursuit of still shots to follow its protagonist as his voice trickles in. “I was lucky to get a war,” he starts,

That’s how the old guys saw it. I’d have the rest of my life to make history. Well, I signed up July 11th, 2001, two months before that really meant something. Oh, I’d love to say, “I’m here to fight for freedom.” But honestly, I joined the Reserves for the college money. I don’t belong here. And I’m ashamed of that. A war story can’t be true unless it’s got shame attached to it. (1:18-1:42)

Matt, the protagonist, narrates this as he purposely walks towards a car, opens its door, and smashes it against his knuckles repeatedly. In the subsequent scene, we learn that this was Matt’s attempt to avoid being sent off to Iraq with the next convoy from the staging area in Kuwait.

Much like *American Sniper*, the opening sets up the philosophy of the movie and its main protagonist. And, indeed, in both cases, the primary focus is on its protagonist soldiers. But where *American Sniper* chooses to integrate the ominous Muslim-ness of its place into its very first moments, *Sand Castle* chooses the arid scenery of its place;⁷ where *American Sniper* chooses a cold palette, with greys dominating its color scheme, blues and warm browns are abound in *Sand Castle*; where *American Sniper* immediately emphasizes the difficult choices facing its protagonist, between protecting his own and staying with his family, *Sand Castle*

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⁷ According to the movie’s IMDB page, it was exclusively shot in Jordan. There is a proximity in the nature of the scenery.
distances its hero from any pretense to heroism. This soldier, Sand Castle tells us, is doing this for purely practical reasons. Everyone thinks this soldier is a hero who is about to make history, but he is filled with shame. He is so removed from this noble quest that he tries to escape serving his country, without success of course. And while the narration might suggest that it is Matt who is not there to fight for the right reasons, that he “doesn’t belong here,” the movie goes on for almost two hours to prove that “here” is exactly where he belongs. No one, after all, is there to fight for freedom or democracy, no one is there to do what they said they would.

The movie’s depiction of the American military is unkind. The protagonist’s proclamation at the beginning is only the start of what will be in large part a picture of vulgarity, violence, and borderline childish play. Within the first twenty minutes, soldiers loot one of Saddam Hussein’s palaces and take up residence there. Soldiers slide on staircase railings, raid a porn stack, jump on beds or in-between bed sheets, and generally revel in the luxurious mansion (16:08-17:44). There is nothing dignified or heroic in this depiction. The soldiers come off as starved, mischievous boys at best. The following scene, however, is even more disturbing. Matt, along with a group of fellow soldiers pose with the corpse of an Iraqi man, cracking insinuating jokes about Matt keeping his activities with “Hajji Peepee” from the waist up, that is keeping any kind of sexual activities with the corpse to a minimum, when he is relegated to the back of the car next to the body (19:09-20:21). The main point of this scene seems to emphasize a kind of everyday reality of the American soldiers. The reality, the movie says, is that those soldiers didn’t really know what they were doing. They either were not there to help or they did not know how to help, and they engaged in shameful behavior. Nonetheless, the vulgarity of the scene comes once again at the expense of the Iraqi people. Once again, Iraqis are relegated to dead bodies; only now they are dead bodies that are the butt of the joke. The question becomes: is this
undignified treatment of the body necessary? The same idea can be communicated without the addition of this scene, perhaps. And there is something to be said about the director and screenwriter’s choice to include such a scene specifically to communicate this vision of the soldiers’ reality. However, perhaps the shock of it is, in fact, necessary. Considering the movie’s primary target audience, some of whom might need such vulgar and disturbing depiction. Certainly, whether this scene is or is not necessary gets at a larger question in narrative: at which point does abrasiveness in story elements risk dissociation from audience? And when is such risk acceptable? It is difficult to say in this particular instance. For while Sand Castle’s choice of this scene is problematic, it might also be effective in a way that more timid scenes might not be.

The bulk of the movie’s plot revolves around Matt’s platoon as they are sent to a remote town to fix its water system, which has been damaged by an American airstrike. The platoon’s quest is far more complicated than they initially anticipated, and the movie has a few moments of sober insights. The first speaking Iraqi in the movie is Mahmoud, a translator, played by American Sniper’s Mustafa and Homeland’s anonymous ‘Imam. Mahmoud asks the commander for money after a game of cards, to which the captain responds jokingly, “how about I pay you in freedom and Democracy?” Mahmoud laughs and gives him the middle finger (30:33). This moment is a part of a running joke in the movie about the intentions or wisdom of invading Iraq. Mahmoud, however, has no character development outside his role as a translator and his trifling with the American soldiers.

One of the most memorable scenes in the movie features an Iraqi father driving his daughter to the doctor. During one of the American soldiers’ trips to the water supply to bring the town water as the system is being fixed, they stop the man’s car, thinking that he’s a threat. The car, they think, is following them. They force him out of the car at gun point. The man is
frightened, but his daughter, about seven or eight years old, is even more terrified. Throughout the scene he chants “don’t be afraid” in Arabic to his daughter, more concerned with comforting her as they detain him and point a gun to his head, than with Mahmoud asking him questions in a loud, intrusive voice. Eventually, the man says that he’s taking his daughter to a relative who happens to be a doctor. But even at this admission, one of the soldiers says they should detain the father, claiming that those people (i.e. terrorists) always hide behind children. The commanding officer ignores those worries, however, and tries to pay the man money for his trouble. The man refuses to take the money, answering with “I don’t want your money. [I hope] God take them.” Mahmoud only translates the first part of the response (36:51-40:16). Interestingly enough, most of the Arabic spoken is not translated, not fully. Mahmoud never translates the man’s “don’t be afraid” or his subsequent curse when he refuses the money. In fact the movie rarely uses subtitles for the Arabic, opting for Mahmoud’s translation within the fictional narrative to clarify for viewers as well as characters. This technique heightens the tension since the audience, typically non-Arab speaking Americans, would not be able to understand the man from anything except his physical cues, much like the soldiers. Yet, the terror on his daughter’s face is unmistakable and the man’s distress is so evident that a sense of injustice done towards this man is obvious. It is a moment that highlights the dilemma of both sides. The American soldiers are acting against this man out of self-preservation, and the man sees nothing in those men but a foreign invasion that disrupted his life and made even a visit to the doctor a risk.

Another poignant and somewhat lengthy scene that highlights the tension between the locals and the soldiers is when the sergeant and the captain meet with the town’s sheikh to talk to him about using local labor to fix the town’s water system. They announce the need for workers

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8 This a rough translation of الله يأخذهم. In the dialect, it is used as an expression of anger and resentment. It is a form of damnation and is not used lightly.
the day before, making it clear that the soldiers will pay the workers. But no one showed up for fear of retribution from other powers in the area. The sheikh, the sergeant hopes, will help persuade some of the townspeople to help out. But he is not interested. In a back and forth, he makes it clear that helping the Americans is out of question. “Those you say are bad,” Mahmoud translates, “will only hurt us if we help you out.” When the sergeant pleads with him that the system cannot be fixed without local help, the sheikh flat-out tells them that it is their problem, since they broke it, they have to figure out a way to fix it. Throughout the scene in which the sergeant genuinely tries to persuade the sheikh, Mahmoud acts as a mediator, while the sheikh himself and the captain are unwilling to communicate together, representing the two tugging poles of the conflict. The sheikh eventually kicks them out. And the captain responds with a saccharine smile that he “hope[s] [the sheikh] gets shot in the head and die[s]”. Mahmoud stammers to fix this, claiming that the captain said “thank you for your hospitality” (45:42-5:07).

The sheikh is not painted in a sympathetic light. He comes off as uncooperative and rigid. This is contrasted with the school director, Kadeer, played by American Sniper’s Sheikh Al-Obodi and Homeland’s Abu Nazir, who approaches the soldiers asking them to fill the school tanks for him. He speaks perfect English, is dressed in a suit and is clean-shaven. The interaction with the sheikh cuts back and forth to Kadeer’s interaction with Matt. That we should compare them is obvious. One is a sheikh, the other is a teacher and school director. One needs a translator, the other speaks perfect English. One is condescending and unkind, the other is increasingly cooperative. The dichotomy set up in this interaction is clear, and very much operates within the basic notion that those who help us, those who are good, are secularized, speak perfect English, and follow the civilized Western dress code. The obvious set up here all nods in the direction that Kadeer is good because he looks like us with his manner of speaking
and dress. The sheikh, however, belongs to a fanatical religious group that does not accept us and is therefore incomprehensible to us. Once again the measurement unit of what is good, what is civilized, is the West. Of course Kadeer would eventually be the one to help out and not the backwards religious figures, the like of this sheikh.

The connection between Kadeer’s secularism and his goodness is made even more explicit when he confronts Matt about the lack of water the school received. The delivery of water was stalled by a shoot-out with a pocket of resistance. And Matt, bereaved by the loss of a friend, snaps at Kadeer that if they want water then “stop shooting us.” Kadeer’s answer to this is that “we don’t shoot. Not the people at this school. We want the same thing as you do […] clean water, and for you to go home.” When Matt says that no one would help, Kadeer just replies “maybe you’re asking the wrong people” (1:00:11-1:01:23). Kadeer’s assessment turns out to be accurate when he manages to round up help for the soldiers including his brother, an engineer. Matt is amazed at Kadeer’s brother’s, ‘Ali, knowledge and asks him where he learned that. ‘Ali answers “here, in university of Mosul,” confused by the question. He asks Matt if he’s ever been to university and is baffled when Matt says it is too expensive. Matt, for his part, is astonished at the prospect of a free university (1:07:00-1:08:14). The interactions between the workers and the soldiers are littered with small moments of cautious connection. ‘Ali offers some of his food to the sergeant, which he accepts in spite of his fellows telling him not to. Several shots showcase both local Iraqis and Americans working together and making progress on fixing the damage to the water system (1:09:50-1:11:30). The idea here is simple: a lot of those Iraqis are good people. But they are also the people with suits and ties who speak English and have gone to universities. As Samira Haj points out, the standard by which the East is evaluated is still the Western standard, one that follows a secularized notion of what is civilized, who is good, and what is
right. Some of those Iraqis, then, are truly worthy of our help. It is just the likes of the sheikh who are rigid and uncooperative that we are fighting. Those other good, highly secularized Iraqis are not to blame, especially since they are willing to cooperate. The movie’s message is not all that radical. That is, until one looks at the much more common likes of *American Sniper* and then *Sand Castle* seems revolutionary.

Kadeer’s help comes at a high cost, however. When his cooperation is discovered, he is burned alive and his scorched body is hung in the school’s yard to send a message. Grotesque depiction of violence aside, this is another moment *Sand Castle* succeeds where *American Sniper* fails. While in *American Sniper* the death of the Sheikh and his child are used to further emphasize the so-called savagery of Iraqis instead of legitimizing the man’s earlier anxiety at cooperation, this moment in *Sand Castle* is used to emphasize the very real danger of cooperating even when it seems to be the right thing to do and even when locals want to. The sheikh’s refusal to help wasn’t for naught. The question of loyalty, of allegiance, of right and wrong is a lot more conspicuous when the consequences can be so dire. It highlights the perception of the American soldiers as foreign invaders who are not seen as heroes by the locals or by the narrative itself. And just like those locals do not want to associate with the soldiers, the soldiers do not necessarily want to associate with the locals either. It’s only in dire circumstance that they are brought together. This circumstance muddies the water, and hurts the locals more so than it hurts the soldiers. One of the things that the sheikh asks when the sergeant promises him protection is what will happen after they leave. After all, the soldiers who are highly trained and have sufficient weaponry and technology, will eventually leave, while the locals are left behind scrambling for survival.
This point is hammered home in one of the last few scenes of the movie. Having failed at restoring the water system, the platoon is sent back to the green zone, where Matt is informed that his services are no longer needed and he can go home. Matt is incredulous. In spite of his initial reluctance to being sent to Iraq, when informed that his war is over, that his fight is over, that his job is done, the resonating question he’s left with is “how?” (1:38:25-1:40:25). It doesn’t seem to him that his job is over. Nothing is solved. Nothing is fixed. People never got their water back and they somehow left the situation even worse than how they found it, with Kadeer dead, his family traumatized, and his school, therefore, in jeopardy. But Matt is asked not to question it and just go home.

_Sand Castle_ is by no means perfect. At the end of the day, it understands itself as an American war movie and is therefore primarily fixated on the suffering of soldiers and lays the moral reprehensibility in the higher ranks of politicians who put the soldiers in this situation. Its displays of violence towards Iraqis is once again disproportionately graphic in comparison to violence towards American soldiers. It draws very clear lines between religious figures and secularized, westernized citizens and aligns itself closely with the latter. While the actors playing Iraqis are Arabs, with the exception of Kadeer whose actor is Iranian, it is clear they are not Iraqis since the dialect is inexact. But, if for nothing else, _Sand Castle_ deserves praise for at least attempting a more nuanced, more sympathetic, and more balanced view. It doesn’t shy away from its politics. Nor does it attempt to make clear cut moral assertions. For, at the end of the day, the soldiers are not heroes, and the Iraqis are not terrorists, and the sheikh might not be all that reprehensible after all. There is a sense that this is simply a bad situation, that those people are stuck in this bad situation and need to deal with it. And, at bare minimum, _Sand Castle_
doesn’t call Iraqis savages and emphasizes the country’s beauty and sunshine on multiple occasions (21:42, 1:36:48, and 1:46:000).

*American Sniper* and *Sand Castle* are opposites in a larger genre of war movies. They are by no means the only war movies produced in the last few years that deal with wars in the Middle East either. But *American Sniper* is worth pointing out because of the controversy that surrounded it and the huge success it achieved. *Sand Castle* is significant in that, as of this writing, it is the most recent war movie about the Middle East, and in that in so many ways it is antithetical to *American Sniper*. For the differing philosophies, certainly, but also in terms of its scale and the attention it received. While *American Sniper* had a bloated budget and a big production company behind it, *Sand Castle* is a Netflix production, a company that to this day is known for taking more risks and creating content for a more niche audience, with limited theatrical releases for its movies. *American Sniper* has big star names backing it up with Clint Eastwood at the helm of the ship and Bradley Cooper as the main protagonist, while *Sand Castle* has a largely unknown director and nothing but Henry Cavil’s budding fame, in a secondary role, behind it. Whereas *American Sniper* garnered attention from audience, reviewers and celebrities alike, *Sand Castle* was largely ignored. Indeed, at the end of the day, *American Sniper* will most likely go down in history as some kind of classic, a point of reference for movies about the Iraq war. *Sand Castle* will probably receive no such attention.

Over the past decade, movies dealing with wars in the Middle East have been amply produced. *The Hurt Locker* is another war movie on the Iraq war that uses Iraqis as silent bodies, there to be killed or terrorize. It won Best Picture the year of its release. *Zero Dark Thirty* is similar to *The Hurt Locker*. The movie about the tracking down and execution of Osama bin Laden received a limited release but was nominated for Best Picture that year. *Lone Survivor,* 13
*Hours: The Secret Soldiers of Benghazi* and their likes, quickly blur together as movies about wars in dusty places featuring heroic American soldiers and loud helpless if not terrorist Arabs and/or Muslims. The newly released *12 Strong* seems to operate within the same lines as well. *Patriots Day*, which deals with the Boston bombings, and *the 15:17 to Paris*, which tells the story of the two American soldiers who managed to preemptively stop a terrorist attack on a train, also directed by Clint Eastwood, can be more or less seen in relation to the above war movies. They place a disproportionate, obsessive emphasis on the Muslim threat. Together, those movies make it commonplace to see an Arab and/or a Muslim as a threatening Other, terrifying and distant and utterly alien. Arabs and Muslims are always placed in situations of violence, always seen as a threat.

In many ways, the representation of Arabs and Muslims in war movies cannot be seen separately from their representation in hyper-paranoid TV shows dealing with the issue of national security. In large part, this relationship is due to the simple fact that these are the most commonplace representations of Arabs and/or Muslims. But also, this is because of the interplaying dynamic between the two genres. War movies serve to highlight the heroic struggle that our veterans have to go through in order to protect us from the barbaric, irrational violence of Muslims and/or Arabs. Those struggles are clear in their morality, and are seen as unquestionable. There is the right side, the American soldiers, and a wrong side, Muslim terrorists. But such heroic ventures do not always manage to keep the evilness of the other side away. And for those who slip through the cracks in the system, we have the narratives of rogue agents bending rules and sacrificing their sanity for the greater good, for the sake of their country. Here, with the threat in our backyards and more ambiguous than ever, we need a more
flexible and grey morality. But never too complex. It’s still the case that we are right and they are wrong. It’s just a matter of our having to do some wrong to achieve what is right.

III. The Good Arab

In episode 2x14 of *Lost*, titled “One of Them”, the newly introduced Benjamin Linus, the villain of the show from that point on, asks Sayid Jarrah a simple question: Who are you? To that Sayid answers:

I was twenty three years old when the Americans came to my country. I was a good man, I was a soldier. And when they left, I was something different. For the next six years, I did things I wish I could erase from my memory, things I never thought myself capable of. But I did come to learn this: there is a part of me that was always capable of doing these things […] My name is Sayid Jarrah. And I am a torturer.

(29:50-30:35)

The words are delivered through a chilling performance from Naveen Andrews, as his face is bathed half in light and half in darkness. His expression is stony, and the music has an ominous quality about it with a string of sadness that is just barely there. After he delivers his monologue, the scene cuts off to a black screen. The word “torturer” hangs, a sense of horror and tragedy lingering in it. One is left wondering: How could a person identify as a torturer? What kind of a life did they lead to find such a label appropriate? And, indeed, it is an appropriate label for Sayid. At this point, audience members have had a season and a half that prove exactly what Sayid has said. And the label is disturbing, to say the least. It seems as if Sayid is just another example of the disturbing representation of Muslims and Arabs in popular narratives. But this is not the whole story. *Lost*, a story that is primarily about finding sympathy for the monstrous, loving people in spite of their repulsive flaws, or perhaps because of those flaws, offers up Sayid,
an Iraqi Muslim, as one of its large main ensemble. Much like everyone else, Sayid is given depth, flaws, and a deeply disturbing inner world. Indeed, in so many ways, *Lost* is disruptive to the narrative of the one-dimensional Muslim Arab terrorist because it examines a more complicated morality, a more nuanced history through an interesting character. Nonetheless, *Lost*’s project is more difficult than one might at first assume. In spite of its attempt to deconstruct the harmful depictions of Arabs and Muslims we see in other movies and TV shows, it still manages to fall into the same pitfalls it tries to avoid. The failure becomes a case-in-point for the enduring system of Orientalism. After all, even the most well-meaning attempts perpetuate the same statements they mean to counter.

The quote above is a part of perhaps *Lost*’s most sober presentation of Sayid’s standing as a foreigner or outsider. Certainly, the show concerns itself with questions of belonging, of societal formations and understandings of other people throughout, but episode 2x14 “One of Them,” is the only episode that draws a direct parallel between Sayid’s foreignness, to the American audience at large and the characters within the TV show, and the protagonists’ slowly escalating interactions with a group on the island they’ve dubbed as the Others. Benjamin Linus, the captured man who Sayid introduces himself to in this menacing tone, is suspected to be one of those Others. And Sayid, as the resident interrogator in the camp, questions him to infer his intentions. Suffice it to say, Sayid’s interrogation methods are not all that morally sound. He fluctuates between coercion, threats of violence, and actual physical manifestations of violence. Jack, the doctor in the camp and their self-appointed leader, is shaken by Sayid’s approach. He expresses this distress to John Locke, Jack’s opposite in almost all respects, asking him if the French Woman, who is a nomad on the Island who lives on her own, said that Benjamin Linus is one of "them," the Others. The ever-clever Locke simply answers Jack that to The French
Woman “we’re all one of ‘them.’ I guess it’s all relative, huh?” (2x14, 38:00-39:50). “It’s all relative” becomes the statement of this particular episode.

Lost’s narrative structure is non-linear. The plot revolves mainly around a group of passengers whose plane crashes on a mysterious island. Each episode places one character as its central figure and, through flashbacks, introduces the audience to their backstory. 2x14 is appropriately a Sayid-centric episode. The flashbacks of Sayid’s introduction to torture is paralleled with the introduction of the new foreign figure of Benjamin Linus, and Sayid’s first reaction is to interrogate him. The main timeline draws a contrast between the Sayid we currently know and the Sayid he used to be. The audience, though this is not their first glimpse of Sayid’s history as a “communications officer,” is finally given insight into his initial introduction to torture. In a surprising turn of events, Sayid is manipulated into torturing his commanding officer by the American army in the Gulf War. In an attempt to find a missing pilot, and after finding out that Sayid can speak English, an American sergeant coerces Sayid into finding out the necessary information, going as far as giving him the necessary equipment for the interrogation (14:15-16:53). Sayid, young and trapped, follows the sergeant’s orders. In a particularly poignant moment, he gives the sergeant the box of tools for torture back with bloodied hands. The camera lingers for a moment or two on that shot, ironically contrasting the apparent bloodiness of Sayid’s hands and the cleanliness of the sergeant’s (26:06-26:16). But there is hardly any question about who is morally reprehensible here and who is deserving of the audience’s sympathy. Sayid, a young, trapped soldier captured by the American army by no means provokes more revulsion in the audience as the older, more powerful, sergeant, who used Sayid for his own means. The sergeant’s tactics are clearly manipulative; his face is stony and his attitude is condescending and mocking of Sayid. While Sayid’s face displays his guilt, confusion, and sense
of humiliation. The discomfort caused by the sergeant is further capitalized on towards the end of the episode. The sergeant mocks Sayid, telling him that they’re leaving and Saddam will still be in power, meaning Sayid can keep his job. “Guess you’re lucky you have a new skill set you can use” (41:10), the sergeant says. “What you made me do no human being should ever have to do to another” (41:19), answers Sayid. The look on his face is between revulsion and despair, while the sergeant looks on with a glint of amusement in his eyes. The scene closes with the sergeant giving Sayid money then driving off, leaving Sayid staring blankly at the road ahead of him (41:50). The turning point referenced in this scene for Sayid was the gulf war. It turned his life upside down. The show subverts the assumption of the inherently violent Middle East, specifically Iraq in this case, by making the explicit connection between the Gulf War and Sayid’s newfound monstrous skill. Not only does this moment historicize Iraq, and therefore Sayid’s character as a part of a society that is bound by wars and extenuating circumstances, but also it implies that apparent civility does not mean actual civility. At the end of the day, despite our understanding of ourselves as superior morally, we are actually not all that different from the monsters we claim to fight, and, in fact, we also create them.

In Sayid’s monologue to Benjamin Linus, he says that he came to learn that “a part of [him] was always capable of doing those things” that the sergeant made him to do. This line is disturbing out of context, since it might imply that there is something inherently violent about Sayid, a part of his DNA. And had it been the case that only Sayid, the Arab Muslim, made such a claim about himself, the line would have been far more problematic. However, this possible innate instinct to kill is a running motif throughout the show that most its characters express. Kate, the most central female figure, killed her abusive biological father, and in a conversation with her stepfather where she asks him why he didn’t kill the man himself, he says “because I
don’t have murder in my heart” (3x09 31:21-33:25), the implication being that Kate does, because she did end up killing him. And Kate is only one of several examples in which this questioning of people’s violent nature comes into focus. Further, in spite of Sayid’s deadened eyes in the particular moment where he delivers his monologue, there is no sense that he revels in the pain that he causes, unlike the terrorists in 24 for example who seem to take sadistic pleasure in torture. And he is every bit as haunted by his kills as Kate is by her own.

The subversion of expectations does not solely hinge on Sayid’s introduction to torture. Another intriguing episode, in its flashbacks, puts Sayid face-to-face with coercive CIA agents. They demand he infiltrate a terrorist cell that his old college roommate is involved in, and lead them back to the C-4 the terrorist cell has managed to steal, and it is only through blackmail that the CIA manages to get Sayid on-board (1x21 3:00-4:50). Throughout the flashbacks, Lost does not seem all that interested in showcasing the typical terrorist story. It neither concerns itself with a conception of Sayid’s heroism for deciding to help a just cause, nor with the CIA’s rightness, for they blackmail him throughout the episode, nor with depicting ‘Essam, Sayid’s old roommate, as a villain. During the audience’s first interaction with ‘Essam, we are introduced to a major conflict that seems to have deeply affected him: the death of his wife, Zahraa. Zahraa, he tells Sayid when asked about her, was killed by a stray bomb (1x21 11:00-14:00). The implication is that this happened during or shortly after the 2003 Iraq war. Immediately, the narrative gives ‘Essam a tragic backstory for the audience to latch onto. From ‘Essam’s distressed facial expressions and his trembling voice, the audience can deduce that ‘Essam is neither cold-hearted nor cruel. There is, in fact, very little that is menacing about his introduction.
‘Essam’s narrative does not veer into the cruel, sadistic terrorist trope either. ‘Essam tells Sayid that he is not sure he can go through with it (1x21 21:10). The CIA agent’s response to Sayid’s subsequent request that they help out ‘Essam is “he’s useless.” Sayid counters “he’s in over his head.” The agent, however, does not seem to care, for the goal is to find the stolen C-4, and ‘Essam does not have access to it. She tells Sayid he must convince ‘Essam to go through with the attack so they can bust the operation, and if he refuses, she will arrest the love of his life (1x21 22:00-23:25). There is nothing in this particular instant that would make the viewer sympathize with the CIA agent. ‘Essam wants to be helped and yet this organization wants to push towards this evil act. And now Sayid, one of our main protagonists whom we have come to root for, is forced to do something terrible. And Sayid’s method of convincing ‘Essam is particularly interesting. “What if I’m doing this out of anger?” asks ‘Essam, “because they killed her? The imam preaches peace, Sayid. Every life is sacred.” Sayid’s response is not an appeal to religion at all. Instead, he capitalizes on ‘Essam’s anger and grief. He tells him to do it, not to realize heaven or be a martyr, but to avenge his dead wife (1x21 27:00-29:43). Unlike the depictions of terrorists discussed above, *Lost* does not choose to appeal to religiosity in its explanation of terrorism. Nor does it forego any kind of context so that ‘Essam is seen as another member of a sick culture that is prone to violence and terrorism. Instead, it treats ‘Essam as 24 and *Homeland* treat their white terrorists, giving him a backstory, a motivation. There is grief and anger and a want for revenge there, something that has nothing to with Islam. The religion is not the problem here, nor the culture. The problem is a set of circumstances and real human emotions that were capitalized upon, first by the leader of the terrorist cell and second by Sayid and the CIA. *Lost* gives a subtle historical context, suggesting that the United States might have unintentionally facilitated an atmosphere for terrorist activity.
This depiction is not without its own set of problems. To make ‘Essam more human, the leader of the terrorist cell is fully villainized, with menacing tone and cryptic talk of fate and cool smirks. And ‘Essam, upon finding out that Sayid has betrayed him, shoots himself, before having a real chance for redemption. Yet, Lost’s context, its premier in 2004 when its main point of reference would have been 24, manages to subvert much of the latter’s basic assumptions. Lost slips in subtle commentary on morality, a question that the show has concerned itself with extensively. The episode, aptly titled “The Greater Good,” leaves one questioning the morality of collateral damage. After all, the CIA did manage to find the C-4 through Sayid’s ploy, but there is no sense of triumph for Sayid in that moment. He does not feel as if he had just done something good, as if he had just prevented a disaster. Instead, he is torn by guilt. His face, his refusal to leave Sydney before giving ‘Essam a proper burial, indicate as much (1x21 40:44-41:38). Unlike 24, which espouses that the torture and the deaths of a few innocents are all necessary in the grand scheme of things, Lost is hesitant in taking such a utilitarian stance on morality. In its depiction of an alternative, more complex narrative of the terrorist storyline, Lost shows a degree of awareness that attempts to breakdown boundaries.

Yet, even Lost’s project of subversion is problematic, and somewhat stilted. Sayid’s journey throughout the show ultimately suggests that he seems incapable of escaping the same narrative that is represented in other examples presented here. In the grand scheme of things, Sayid’s journey is defined by violence. At every corner of his life, he is typecast into an inflictor of torture or death. This is evident in his journey post-plane crash, certainly, but is especially true in his flashbacks where his background as an Iraqi is most evident.

Sayid’s flashbacks always center on his violent history in Iraq. Oftentimes, unlike the two episodes mentioned above, consistent correlation of Sayid with his military life does not seem to
subvert notions about Iraqis as much as it creates an atmosphere in which Iraq and Iraqis are not seen outside of a military context. In all the flashbacks involving Iraq, Sayid is seen as a soldier, never as a normal citizen. There is no depiction of his life as a citizen, what his family life might be like, who his family and friends are. None of that is given. Instead, Iraq is presented in a perpetual state of violence. Its setting is of tortures, executions, and political prisoners against the vague backdrop of a dusty desert. *Lost* even chooses to present Sayid’s love life in this military context. Nadia, the epic love of his life, is a Shi’ite rebel who falls into the regime’s hands. Sayid knew her when they were children, and they have harbored affections towards each other. Over the course of her imprisonment, Nadia and Sayid revisit their initial liking of each other. He develops feelings for her, and she for him. Sayid cannot bring himself to hurt her. He smuggles food to her instead, and reasons with her that her only way out of this is to tell him the names of her co-conspirators. Nadia refuses, telling Sayid that he needs to stop “pretending to be something [she] know[s he isn’t]” (1x09 26:20-27:30). Eventually, Sayid helps Nadia to escape right before they execute her.

His love story with Nadia is the first piece of background information that the show presents us with through flashbacks. And it continues to be a running narrative throughout the entirety of Sayid’s journey. The story certainly has the dramatic flair of epic love stories, but one must wonder why the creators went down that route of reconnecting the two instead of coming up with any other scenario. Certainly, this love story could have been a good opportunity to widen Sayid’s life beyond his job as a torturer. Instead, this very human, very relatable story of two people falling in love becomes political and shrouded with strangeness. Between the implications of the religious divide, the inevitable mention of the tyrannical government, and the
political imprisonment and almost execution, the show alienates Sayid’s experience of love, making it removed and distant from the show’s primarily American and Western audience.

The sense that creators can’t seem to envision Sayid’s background without the involvement of his violence is furthered in 3x11 “Enter 77”. In this episode, the flashbacks involve Sayid, now not in Iraq but in Paris, as one of his previous victims tracks him down for retaliation. The entire episode regurgitates information that the audience has already been introduced to: Sayid is a torturer, he hurt people who now want to make him pay for his actions. There is nothing new that the flashbacks offer. It only presents Sayid in a gruesome light once more as he spends this episode not hurting people, but being hurt. The commentary on human nature at this point in the show has been made several times already, and the same goes for the subject of retaliation. The episode in this instance seems to suggest a lack of ability to envision anything else for Sayid. The show does not give us his journey out of Iraq. It does not present us with his troubles as an immigrant. It does not give us his relationship with his family. In comparison with other main characters, this is a slight to Sayid’s character. The show treats its other mains as layered people whose episodes slowly introduce us to new dimensions of their lives. While most of those flashbacks end up coming full circle to a main thesis about the character, their setting, their journeys, the people they interact with are varied in ways that Sayid’s are not.

Nor is the confounding image of Sayid’s character restricted to his background. His time on the Island with the rest of the cast is tumultuous. In a particularly unnerving situation, Sayid tortures Sawyer, a conman whose interactions with Sayid have mostly included slurs and accusations on Sawyer’s part, with Jack’s approval. The cast, under duress, escalate a minor situation into a full-blown fight that finds Sawyer as its primary perpetrator. Jack begins the
spark of violence by starting a fist-fight with Sawyer, but it is Sayid who suggests the escalation of violence. “I thought you were a communications officer,” Jack says to Sayid, puzzled and slightly weary. Sayid answers that a part of his job was to make the enemy effectively communicate information (1x08 20:00-21:00). Jack agrees to Sayid’s suggestion but only reluctantly. Jack is rather distressed for the majority of the debacle with Sawyer while Sayid enters a zone of ruthless focus (22:15-25:36). Eventually Sawyer breaks down when Sayid threatens to gouge out his eye.

During this scene, the audience watches as an Arab man tortures a white man while another white man stands to the side questioning the morality of it all, his kind heart barely able to withstand the sight as he turns his face away continuously. Instead of having Jack beat it out of him, it is Sayid who is cruel enough to go through with it. Jack, after delivering only a couple of punches earlier in the episode, stops himself, deciding that they’re “not savages” yet (9:20). Sayid is not referred to as a savage, but isn’t his ability to go on with that violence an indication of his monstrosity? A “genuine Iraqi,” as Sawyer puts it (28:01), with his southern drawl that puts too much emphasis on the I so that the word is pronounced like I-raq, almost sounding like a sarcastic slur, has no real qualms over torture. But the narrative of Sayid as the uncivilized torturer is disrupted later on when, at the end of the episode Sayid decides to leave the camp. He tells Kate “what I did today I swore to do never again. If I can’t keep that promise, I don’t deserve to stay” (39:50-41:00). Sayid goes into self-inflicted exile for a while after to pay for his sins. This once again underscores Lost’s approach to Sayid. He does not feel pleasure at the concept of violence. But he perpetrates this violence all the same.

Yet perhaps the most disturbing aspect of Sayid’s involvement with violence is his journey after leaving the island. After the situation with Sawyer, Sayid becomes the camp’s
interrogator, but his violence becomes far more contained. His journey as a character, however, takes a turn for the worse following his rescue from the Island, as he becomes a hired assassin. Indeed, after season four, Sayid’s character is reduced to nothing but a killing machine, culminating in the literal possession of a dark force over his body (6x06). His redemption from this dark force is realized when he saves his fellow plane crash survivors from a ticking bomb by taking the bomb far away from his friends and meeting his own death (6x13). Sayid’s continuous definition as a killer, the centering of his character arc around his infliction of violence, indicates the creators’ inability to envision any other potential for him. Other main characters, even the killers among them, go through far more varied journeys, with ebbs and flows of goodness and redemption. Kate, for example, finds her redemption in becoming a mother. Her capability of murder becoming a protective instinct for her son. At the end of the day, the murder becomes a mistake, one step that does not define her, while Sayid’s kills, whether remorseful or not, do define him.

Sayid’s character comes with its own healthy dose of research deficiencies. It should be noted that Naveen Andrews is not Iraqi or even Arab. He is Indian. Certainly, he is talented, and gives a solid performance throughout the show, even earning an Emmy nomination for the first season for his depiction of Sayid. Phenotypically, he can pass for an Arab. However, his nationality particularly becomes a problem during the flashbacks, for he cannot speak Arabic, let alone the Iraqi dialect. In one flashback scene, the dialogue is supposed to be Iraqi in the first few seconds, but it is spoken with such heavy accent, and the words are so inaccurate to the dialect, that I, a native Iraqi, had to read the English subtitles to understand what is being said then piece together what the actors are supposed to be saying in Arabic. Further, the show gives up altogether on speaking Arabic for the rest of Sayid’s flashbacks, and the characters instead
speak accented English. This is only true in the case of Sayid’s flashbacks. A part of the ensemble is a Korean couple, both of whom are played by Korean actors, and who speak Korean in their flashbacks and to each other, as they should. This privilege is not given to Sayid.

This trend of having non-Arab actors play Arab people who may pass as Arab is interesting, since it is not only Lost that perpetuates it. Problematic, as well as other “good” examples, employ the same cast tactic. As long as the actor can phenotypically pass for an Arab, then they are good for the role. Another example of a “good” Arab whose casting is also questionable is in the movie Cairo Time. In the movie, Tariq is an Egyptian gentleman who takes care of an American woman throughout her journey in Cairo during her husband’s absence. Tariq is played by Alexander Siddig, a half-Sudanese, half-English actor, and while his Arabic is slightly better than Naveen Andrews’s, owing to the fact that he is half Sudanese, it is still quite flawed, since the spoken dialect is awkward and not really Egyptian. This casting trend indicates a kind of general understanding of the region. Anyone from anywhere in that region will do. There need not be much attention to nuanced differences between cultures, languages and dialects. This is especially noteworthy in the case of Naveen Andrews. India is oftentimes not even considered a part of the Middle East, let alone a part of the Arab world. Yet, following his role in Lost, Andrews became typecast as an Arab, scoring the role of Jafar in Once Upon a Time, a TV show that re-imagines Disney fairytales, even though he is not, in fact, Arab. This is not to disregard people from India or Sudan, rather it is to point out a general attitude from Americans about the Middle East where the Middle East becomes a blanket statement about peoples whose diverse cultures, languages and practices become collapsible into a vaguely

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9 This choice is note-worthy. Egypt is considered the Hollywood of the Middle East. It is full of actors of all ages who are perfectly capable of speaking fluent Arabic and English. It could not have been impossible to enlist one of them to play Tariq, especially since the movie was actually shot in Cairo.
Middle-Eastern culture. Another approach could have been to integrate either actor's background into their characters or at the very least to teach them the dialect well-enough to deliver their few lines of Arabic believably, if the concept of casting someone from the appropriate background is that challenging.¹⁰

The setting suffers as well. Once again, the language presents the biggest challenge to the set designers. There are spelling errors in signs put on buildings as props. The word نِيَة (bunyah), which means body-build is plastered onto a sign on a building that’s supposed to indicate its number, instead of the correct word: بناية (binayah) (1x09 30:10). In another flashback episode, the signs are written with Arabic letters separated from each other making them incomprehensible (2x14 02:27).

Turning to Lyotard’s ideas to understand Lost’s slippage into the narrative that it attempts to deconstruct can be helpful. Lyotard writes that moves by a system

necessarily provoke ‘countermoves’ – and everyone knows that a countermove that is merely reactional is not a “good” move. Reactional counter-movements are no more than programmed effects in the opponent’s strategy; they play into his hands and thus have no effect on the balance of power. That is why it is important to increase displacement in the games, and even to disorient it, in such a way as to make an unexpected ‘move’ (a new statement). (16)

The idea here is that countermoves, because reactionary, serve only to legitimate the dominant system. The system has already predicted and programmed the countermove, and therefore a

¹⁰ Sand Castle, a far more recent movie than either narratives at hand, seemed better able to reckon with this problem. While its actors slipped into the Shami (Syrian, Palestinian, Lebanese, or Jordanian) dialect every once in a while, there was still an effort to maintain the Iraqi dialect. Recently, the limited series The Looming Tower, has recruited several Arab actors, including big names in the Middle East, to play Arab characters. This might be an indication that the passage of time is helping with this matter.
reaction does not really manage to disrupt the powerful system. In other words, a countermove holds that it needs to respond to the system at hand. The reaction legitimates the system because it sets it up as significant enough to respond to. Further, the reaction does not start a new statement to displace the conversation at hand, instead it plays into the current statements trying to divert them without truly managing to disrupt the system or its power. *Lost’s* attempt to respond to depictions of Arabs and Muslims by its contemporaries, then, becomes a mere reaction that plays into the already established conversation, and ends up merely reinforcing. Its initial introduction of Sayid, for example, is through a fight between him and Sawyer when the latter accuses him of crashing their plane (1x02 8:00-10:00). Sayid, then, is introduced as the Muslim threat, at least in the eyes of some the characters. The narrative does not use that moment for suspenseful action, choosing it to highlight the difficulty those people will have in cooperating together, instead. And the diversion of the conversation from Sawyer’s ludicrous accusations might be a response to the absurdity of the threatening Muslim trope. Nonetheless, the show by responding to this trope, it introduced and maintained Sayid as a threat. By not envisioning his introduction differently, by not giving his presence with the other passengers normalcy, it re-establishes the validity of the system. Similarly, its attempt to dismantle the trope of the terrorist as cruel and sadistic and its approach to Sayid’s history of torture, operate within an attempt to negate and work against narratives like that of *24*. However, all of those depictions reaffirm the thesis put forth by the system at hand. The show communicates that Sayid was not born violent, that nothing about him makes him more prone to violence than anyone else, that his introduction to torture was brought on by a foreign invasion, our invasion, but it maintains that Sayid is a violent person, a torturer, and a criminal, instead of a high school teacher, for example. And it might dismantle the myth of the terrorist as a sadistic, sick mind that is hardwired to
destroy Western culture and give him a backstory that humanizes him, but it still depicts a Muslim and an Arab as a terrorist, and it still puts Sayid, its main Arab Muslim character, in contact with that violent world, maintaining a perception that all Arabs and Muslims are somehow, in one way or another, connected to terrorism. *Lost*, then, in its attempt to nuance some of the images perpetuated by the media, becomes a reaction that upholds those images and maintains them as the norm.

Yet the question of displacing the system by making an unexpected move, as Lyotard puts it, is not as simple as one might think. It is unclear what might count as a non-reactionary movement or what might be considered a “new” statement in this instance. *Cairo Time*, for example, showcases Tariq as a normal Egyptian man. He owns a coffee shop, has a family, wears suits, speaks English, and is extremely polite. One can make the argument that much of Tariq’s gentility is related to his Westernized secular behavior. Yet, the movie treats the fact of his Arab-ness frankly, shows his more cosmopolitan side in his interactions with the American woman, and his more conservative tendency in an episode involving a young couple. Overall, the movie does not feel the need to either punish his Arab or Muslim identity, nor does it relate it to violence, like Sayid’s.

*Person of Interest* chooses a different approach in its depiction of Sameen Shaw’s character. Its main strategy is silence on the subject. Shaw’s background is never truly capitalized upon. She is a part of the protagonists’ vigilante group who happens to be Iranian, her background drawn from the actress’s own background. It is unclear whether she identifies as Muslim or not, and, in fact, it is unclear for most of her run on the show what exactly her background is. In keeping with the show’s subtlety when it comes to its characters, Shaw’s background comes to the forefront in small lines only twice. First, in the episode mentioned
towards the end of the “Muslim Arabs in the Context of War and Homeland Security” section dealing with Omar, the asylum-seeking Iraqi. In passing, she talks to Omar’s girlfriend about her mother’s escape from Iran. Later on, Fusco, one of her teammates, buys her a glass of champagne to celebrate the Persian New Year (3x18 36:18-37:26). The other instance is when during a bout of hallucination, she speaks Persian (5x04 8:50-9:10). Other than that, her background is not at all emphasized, such that even her placement in this list might be awkward. However, the casualness with which her ethnicity is treated might be exactly the kind of unexpected movement that is needed.

*The Bold Type*, a recent TV show concerned primarily with depictions of femininity and embracing women protagonists, presents Adena, a lesbian, hijabi Muslim woman as a recurring guest star who gets entangled in a romantic story with one of the three main protagonists. Adena is a particularly interesting case. She is unapologetically Muslim, asserting that her wearing of the hijab is a part of her identity. We see her praying. And, much like Shaw, the actress’s Iranian background is worked into the character, even though her country of origin is never explicitly mentioned, possibly to avoid offense since Adena comments several times about the repression of women in her country. Adena is the most recent example dealt with here, since the show premiered in June of 2017. And while Adena is not a main character unlike above examples, her depiction could indicate a shift in perception. We might, indeed, be on the horizon for new trends. Examples like Adena can possibly be the displacing, new statement that Lyotard speaks of. After all, her lesbianism, her Muslims-ness, as well as the showcasing of how the recent political situation has affected her livelihood in the United States (the extension of her work visa was rejected and she was ordered to leave the country towards the end of the season) all bring...
new contributions to the table, ones where there is not over-emphasis on her Otherness, but no
dismissal of her difference, either.

That being said, out of the mentioned examples, *Lost* is still the most significant one. Its
popularity is the only one comparable to examples where depictions of terrorist and violent
Muslims abound. It premiered to high ratings in 2004, continued to hold a cult audience until its
conclusion six years later, and garnered 106 wins and 376 award nominations, including a
Golden Globe for Best Drama Series, a Screen Actors Guild Award for Performance by an
Ensemble in a Drama Series, and multiple Emmys for performances, technical categories,
writing and directing (“Lost,” IMDB). *Lost*, while it is one of the strangest and most
controversial TV shows, was by all accounts a smashing success. *Cairo Time* is a small budget
independent movie. It received limited release and garnered only a little shy of 2 million dollars
in Box Office sales (“Cairo Time,” IMDB). *Person of Interest*, in spite of its solid writing,
performances, and premise, remains an underrated show. And *The Bold Type*, while managing to
garner its audience’s attention, is distanced from the prestige afforded *Lost* due to its status as a
“chick-flick.” Not to mention, Adena is not a part of the core cast. *Lost*’s popularity, then, makes
it the only truly influential piece of media where a Muslim Arab character is one of its main
protagonists thus far.

**IV. The Orient’s Reactions to Images of Orientalism**

Thus far, this project primarily focused on depicted images of the East by the West.
Certainly, this examination is important because, as Edward Said suggests, Orientalism tells us
more about the West than it does about the East. Yet, those images are not projected onto a
passive culture or its people. Orientalism, by virtue of its intellectual, cultural, and political
fallout, did directly affect, in one way or another, the Middle East and how it perceives itself. The ways that such perceptions were received and engaged with become an important part of this discussion, as they helped facilitate the East’s understanding of itself and its position in the world.

With the rise of Colonialism and the expansion of Western power in the 1800s and early 1900s, the question of the East’s position in this new world order became a hot topic amongst prominent thinkers. Arabs and Muslims alike concerned themselves with how to deal with Western colonization, how to consolidate Western power with the perceived fall of the Orient, and how to understand Islam in the modern world. Approaches to the issue at hand varied, speaking to the challenge it represented. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, for example, called for pan-Islamism, though this label is rather problematic. The way that he perceived Islam, however, was not merely as a religious text. Influenced by trends in philosophy at the time, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani saw Islam as its own culture and civilization, one that has had an important history but has now declined. He understood this decline as a result of the fragmentation in the Islamic community, whether by the ruling dynasties that strayed away from a singular Muslim unit, or by the differing sects, like Sunnis and Shi’is, within theological thought. He called for the use of human reason which would always bring a person to Islam and show one the soundness of its ways. This method would supposedly once again bring Muslims back to the rightful Islam, and by uniting, Muslims would be able to fight Western Colonial power. Al-Afghani, then, even with his revolutionary tendencies, had to reckon with narratives of the decline of Islamic civilizations, and approached the issue through a Western perspective that emphasized human reason as a tool for reaching the community’s goal.
Muhammad ‘Abduh, a student of al-Afghani, shares much of al-Afghani’s ideas, but without much of a revolutionary flare. Instead, he emphasized the importance of education, both in religious sciences and in modern sciences. He, too, emphasized human reason, asserting that the Qur’an not only encouraged the use of human intellect, but also demanded its use. ‘Abduh, in this case, called for change as well. And much like al-Afghani, he located the solution, more or less, within an Islamic context. The formulations of those arguments, however, diverted from traditional approaches to theological thoughts. Therefore, the two men became known as the pioneers of what is problematically called Islamic modernism.

While ‘Abduh and al-Afghani remained firmly within Islamic thought in their response to the new world order, other thinkers approached the issue differently. Qasim ‘Amin, an upper class Egyptian intellectual who was a contemporary of ‘Abduh, wrote in 1899 his infamous book *The Liberation of Woman*. In this book, he called for women’s education, locating the perceived sickness of the Arab Muslim culture in the culture’s treatment of women. Women are responsible for the home life. Educating them would make them better mothers and therefore they would be able to produce better members of society. The argument was revolutionary enough at the time. But it is not his call for women’s education that is most noteworthy, since ‘Abduh had done so before. Along with his call for education, Qasim ‘Amin called for women’s unveiling. This call for women to shed their hijab caused an uproar within the community, and several responses were produced against ‘Amin’s argument. What is curious about the call for women’s unveiling is that colonial power leveled women’s veils as an argument against Islam’s unfair treatment of women. Leila Ahmed, in her book *Women and Gender in Islam*, draws an explicit connection between the way in which Colonial power presented ideas of the veil and how Arab and/or Muslim men educated in and influenced by Western men perpetuated those
ideas (Ahmed 149-155). Indeed, as Ahmed points out, the veil was seen thus far as a cultural
dress code that did not particularly denote anything. It’s not until Colonial power made the veil a
marker of cultural deficiency that it became as such; and she locates ‘Amin’s work as the first
instance in which this issue was brought up in Arab discourse (144-145). Residuals of this
discourse are still evident to this day, where the issue of women in Islam cannot be brought up
without the mention of the veil. Further, ‘Amin’s adoption of Orientalist thinking, his want to
embrace a Western mode of dress and thinking, is a part of an ongoing mode of thinking about
the Orient by people from the region. It is the case that many thinkers adopted much of the
writings by Orientalists and their framework in understanding the region and its people.

While Qasim ‘Amin and similar intellectuals seemed all too willing to embrace Western
culture, there were intellectuals who strongly rejected it. One of the main scholars who
articulated his rejection of the culture in several instances is Sayyid Qutb. Sayyid Qutb, an
Egyptian scholar writing in the first half of the 20th century, perceived Western culture as
possessing a material grandeur that hid a decadent, valueless culture. The “correct” culture, he
says, that is meant to lead the world is Islamic culture. Islam possesses the values that the West
lacks. And for Islam to be able to lead, it needed to be embodied in a nation, a nation that did not
exist yet but needed to, according to him. He saw Islam as a complete sociopolitical system that
needed to be enforced.

Sayyid Qutb, along with Muhammad Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhab and other scholars who
continued on the same path, are often categorized as “fundamental” thinkers, who then became
the launching pad for recent terrorist jihadist movements. This assertion must be scrutinized.
Suggesting that the root of terrorism can be easily traced to thinkers who had extreme thoughts
with violent undertones to them, asserting that one branch of interpretation allowed for the
creation of those violent organizations, is to suggest that the rise of violent terrorism is ahistorical. The existence of violent tendencies in some Islamic thought does not preclude or necessitate the rise of violent organizations. Mahmood Mamdani, in his book *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, refers to this argument as Culture Talk. Culture Talk assumes that the actions of the terrorist groups are embedded within their premodern culture and religion. It assumes an unchangeable “essence” that defines and explains the political actions of the group (17). This kind of assumption severs all chances of historicizing and politicizing the actions those groups partake in, whilst painting everyone within that region as a possible threat, a bomb ready to go off at any given moment. Indeed, we have seen the implications of this Culture Talk in dealing with depictions of Muslim terrorists as opposed to white terrorists, where the latter needed an external reason for their actions and the former did not. Tracing terrorism solely to ideological understandings of Islam is a form of this Culture Talk and is, in fact, a form of Orientalism. After all, it asserts that this region exists ahistorically and apolitically, its actions comprehensible only to its deficient culture, which operates independently of circumstantial factors.

Instead, the rise of so-called Islamic terrorism is directly related to and resultant from global political conditions. The latter half of the 20th century is often seen as defined by the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. Al-Qaeda emerged exactly from that context. When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, the United States’ response was to start a proxy war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. During the 1980s, the CIA worked with Pakistan’s Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) to train and recruit men for guerrilla wars against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Those recruits were referred to as mujahedeen, or jihadists (Mamdani 126). In their ardent attempt to ward off the Soviet Union, the CIA and ISI resorted to increasingly militarizing the jihadists and to focusing their attention on the more extreme groups
since those were more likely to throw themselves in the line of danger (Mamdani 119). During the 1980s, the mujahedeen split into several groups with varying radical thoughts, some of whom believed in a more traditional approach to an Islamic state, one that sought to build states confined to the existing borders with reforms to the system, and some of whom belonged to the more radical school of thought that sought to remove borders and completely overthrow the system. The latter received more financial support, and it is from them that al-Qaeda, led by Osama Bin Ladin, emerged over the course of the next decade or so (Mamdani 153-163). Al-Qaeda as an organization was made possible by political circumstance. Later political actions and reactions managed to exasperate the situation and created a chain reaction that resulted in ISIS. Those organizations found justification for their actions in some questionable writings within the Islamic tradition, but the mere existence of such tradition is simply not enough for the emergence of this group.

Terrorism is one way in which reactions manifested themselves. But, as mentioned above, the intellectual history of scholars like Qasim ‘Amin is also enduring, especially as groups of notables managed to benefit from the Colonial system, initially, or weeded their way into global capitalist Western hegemony, and accumulated wealth that gave them special privileges. Access to higher education in Westernized schools and colleges, entrance into multi-national corporations, and other aspects of the increasingly globalized world, created a class, often defined by socioeconomics, that seems to emulate much of the Western values as a mark of civility, and as a way to integrate into the modern world. Indeed, this social class has become common enough for frank depictions in mainstream media of it to abound, with little to no attempts at moralizing.
Yet, this division is not clean, clear, or without its own set of challenges. A recent Egyptian TV show toys with the idea of the possible identity crisis experienced in such contexts. *Haza al-Masaa*, or “This Evening”, juxtaposes the lives of lower-middle to working-class Egyptians with the lives of upper-class Egyptians. There is little connection to their styles of living; the characters, their problems, their social interactions are all different. The show even chooses a vibrant color scheme for scenes involving the lower-classes and a more muted, blue, and cold one for the upper classes, reflecting the general sense of detachment those people feel towards their surroundings.

But perhaps the most interesting aspect of *Haza al-Masaa*, is in its representation of the character of ‘Akram. ‘Akram is a wealthy young man, the CEO of a company, who was well-off as a young man but comes from a more conservative family, but who married into a wealthy, liberal, “Westernized” one. His wife, Nayleh, has lived half her life in London. She attended Oxford. Her father has permanently relocated there. Drinking, extravagant birthday parties for their ten-year-old daughter, expensive clothing, vacationing in London, are all a normal part of their life as the narrative constructs it. When the couple decide to take a break, to get a sense of where their relationship is headed, ‘Akram falls in love with his driver’s sister, ‘Ablah. Falling in love, though, might not be the right way to frame it. ‘Ablah is a working class woman, who has none of Nayleh’s soft edges, and none of her polite reservation. There is a sense in which ‘Akram did not fall in love with ‘Ablah as much as he craved the kind of rawness that she could offer, the rough, unchastised, unrefined edges of a “simple” woman. This longing that ‘Akram experiences is highlighted in a telling scene with Nayleh. After spending a day with ‘Ablah, at the end of which he gives her a ring as a gift that she is offended by, he decides to spend the following day with Nayleh. When they sit down to eat, he proposes a rather strange choice, from
Nayleh’s perspective, for their meal. “Why don’t we eat peasants’ food?” He suggests, to which Nayleh gives an amused laugh but agrees to humor him (Ep. 11 21:09-21:13). Before their meal arrives, ‘Akram suggests to Nayleh, who is in the business of making perfumes, to make something more “oriental,” and gives her a sample of cheap misk he bought from an old market. As soon as she smells it, her face scrunches up, disgusted, overwhelmed and uncomfortable (Ep. 11 21:38). “It’s so overpowering,” she says, and while she seems to find fault in the strength of the scent, ‘Akram’s hum of agreement through a half smile tells a different story (Ep. 11 21:40). Nayleh dismisses the possibility of her working on something similar in the future, citing the difficulty of extracting it as a reason. But one gets the general sense that she is not interested in trying, either (Ep. 11 21:43-21:56). The conversation is interrupted as their meal arrives, which takes the scene into an even more curious direction. ‘Akram’s first instinct when the food arrives is to use his hands. After all, they’re eating peasant food. Nayleh glances at him for a split second (Ep. 11 22:25) before reaching for her silverware. Laughing, ‘Akram stops her, “this isn’t how you eat this,” he says, proceeding to use his hands to give her a bite (Ep. 11 22:27-22:40). Neylah, now a little put-off, accepts his offer to humor him once again, but takes a second before tasting the food, questioning its cleanliness. When she finally bites into it, ‘Akram asks “good, huh?” to which she hums in agreement, even though her face does not quite agree (Ep. 11 22:41-22:53). When he tries to repeat his earlier actions, however, he senses her discomfort. As she grabs for napkins to wipe at her hands and mouth, his face slowly falls. It turns from mirthful amusement, to disheartened, to realization, to reluctant acceptance: what he is looking for is not

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11 My translations: “ما تيجي ناكل أكل فلاحي؟” “ما تيجي ناكل أكل فلاحي؟”
12 “دي قوية قوي.”
13 “ده ما بيتاكلش كدم.”
14 “حلو، هام.”
to be found in Neylah (Ep. 11 23:06-23:41). At the end of that episode, he goes to ‘Ablah again, this time to propose frankly to her (Ep. 11 29:07-30:15).

‘Akram’s conflict, of course, is not merely about identity. For even though he does end up marrying ‘Ablah, there was never a question, from either party, of him leaving his first wife. That, in itself, is telling. ‘Akram tries not just to “reconnect” with roots but also to maintain his current status as an upper class man. There is a sense in which his relationship with Neylah, which ironically significantly improves after he marries ‘Ablah in secret, supplements one part of his being, while his relationship with ‘Ablah supplements another. Neylah, by virtue of her societal position, becomes all about wealth and material gain, ‘Akram’s marriage to her giving him a prestigious status within society, while ‘Ablah becomes associated with a more sensual, to a disturbing fetishizing degree, approach to life. There are also indications of crisis of masculinity, too. The narrative is extremely critical of ‘Akram’s position of power, in a system that grants him even more power, and therefore allows him to exploit both women. At the end of the day, ‘Akram’s outward refinedness becomes nothing but an illusion. The distinctions between him and ‘Ablah’s ex-husband for example, quickly crumble, and his tailored suits and clean cars become nothing but a façade. In this collapse of ‘Akram’s personhood as a gentleman there is an underlying cynical criticism of the narrative’s set-up dichotomy. When it is all said and done, these people do not seem all that different. The outward appearance of civility, whether to be read as partial, or wholesale uncritical, or superficial adoption of Western values, is empty. Certainly, none of this is to say that this TV show is factually accurate or fully representative of the issue at hand. Rather, it is indicative of a developing dynamic in the region, or at the very least, a certain understanding of this dynamic by the creators, which definitely did
not come about from a vacuum. Qualitative and quantitative research on the subject in the future will help shed some much needed light on the issue.

**Conclusion**

Hollywood’s depictions of the so-called Orient, of its Arab-ness and Muslim-ness, echoes the Orientalist system of knowledge that Said, Lyotard and Mills speak of. While the focus has shifted from the morally decadent, sexually promiscuous Muslim and/or Arab to the threatening terrorists whose lives are entrenched with and centered on violence, the paradigm of such perceptions remains the same. The Orient is an Other, one that cannot belong to the civilized West, whose existence, in fact, threatens the very being of this civilized West. Its religious fundamentalism, its lack of tolerance, its hatred of us, which really just means its hatred of everything that is good, must be fought, regardless of the sacrifices that it might require. And, strangely enough, this threatening vision of the Orient and its peoples does not negate its sexualization or exoticization.

The situation of Arab and Muslim depictions in Hollywood is, in fact, so dire that actors are continuously typecast into terrorist roles. As shown above, the chances of an actor re-appearing to reprise another role of a terrorist are fairly high. Other than *Homeland*’s anonymous ‘Imam who is also *American Sniper*’s villain who was eventually promoted to a translator in *Sand Castle*, *24*’s Yusuf Auda is also *Lost*’s ‘Essam. The typecasting is so common that actors have a running joke about it. Recently, comedian Bassem Youssef spoke with Maz Jobrani, a Persian actor who wrote a book titled *I’m Not a Terrorist, But I’ve Played One on TV*, about owning up to his Arab-ness, even though he is Persian. The two men poke fun at Hollywood’s depictions of Arabs and Muslims, with Maz Jobrani giving ridiculous advice about how to land
the role of a terrorist, like frowning and using the word “kill” even if it’s not in the script and screaming all of his lines (Youssef). A similar sentiment is expressed in Michael Moore’s documentary Fahrenheit 9/11, where an Arab actor reported that, having played too many terrorist roles, he asked his agent not to call him about another terrorist role, and that’s when his phone stopped ringing.

Nonetheless, it seems that the singularity of the terrorist Muslims and Arab narrative is slowly being challenged. More recent depictions, especially in TV shows, seem to head more and more towards more nuanced representations where Muslims and Islam are allowed to exist without being threats. This trend is slow in coming and will most likely prove to be imperfect, but depictions like The Bold Type’s Adena might gesture towards change. Further, Homeland’s past two years have re-oriented themselves towards domestic threats that are not necessarily related to Islam. Its most recent season, currently airing as of this writing, aims to tackle the tension of the current political moment in the United States. A female president won in the last election in the show’s universe, and now has to deal with attempts of assassination. Regardless of what one might think of the story premise and its execution, Homeland’s attempt to rebrand and reinvent its threat shows an effort to minimize its damaging images of Muslims, especially after the backlash it received on several fronts. The Looming Tower, a recent limited TV series with Jeff Daniels’s major star power and a large budget, portrays a revisionist history of the 9/11 attacks. It focuses on a fallout and lack of coordination between the CIA and the FBI that might have prevented the attack and its predecessors. It is also careful to place character ‘Ali Soufan, a Lebanese Muslim, as a central figure working with the FBI, with its first episodes hinting at a more personal struggle that ‘Ali has to go through. This might indicate a willingness to perceive
recent history through a different lens and with more nuance. Time will tell whether, or rather when, blockbuster movies will be able to re-orient themselves.

The fact remains, however, that to truly revolutionize the current depictions, Muslim Americans would need to take charge. As Reza Aslan points out, it is futile to attempt to battle FOX news, for example. Their reach is too limited. It is far more influential to assert a Muslim presence within Hollywood to shift perception. A beginning of this presence can already be felt, such as comedian Kumail Nanjiani’s recent movie *The Big Sick*, co-written and acted by him. His film offers a fresh view on Muslims in America in a humorous, fictionalized retelling of his story meeting his white American wife. And, perhaps, it is new generations, who live in an increasingly globalized world, and whose lives are defined by a dual identity, who can become the counter, balance power, and who can eventually re-imagine damaging images and constraining systems.
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