

The making of the 'TV Arab'

While stereotypes of many groups have been dismissed by society, Arabs are still caricatured as oil sheiks or terrorists

On Jan. 6, the *Citizen* published a caricature of an Arab man holding two barrels of oil to his chest with a caption reading "Oil Gone Wild" on top and on the bottom the word "Obscene." Clearly the cartoon and the captions are playing on more than words; it is playing on racial stereotyping and prejudices. It is the choice of caricature and words that require serious attention.

It is the job of a caricaturist to push the envelop. Cartoonists typically challenge the reader's sensitivities and boundaries. However, their powerful medium can also fuel and add to misconceptions and biases. The statement plays on racial and cultural stereotyping that can lead to further misunderstanding and ignorance. The image the *Citizen* published raises two fundamental questions: Why did the cartoonist choose the Arabs for his outrage over the price of oil and not other nationalities since there are so many other countries including Canada that benefit from the oil boom? Secondly, why publish the image of the stereotypical "made-for TV Arab"?

I am neither outraged nor do I subscribe to stifling political correctness; the cartoonist allowed us an opportunity to dialogue on this issue, as a result of a possible ignorance of the significance of this image. As a society, while many Canadians believe that we are more enlightened than others, we continue to hold many troubling views about "the other," which requires serious, deliberate and honest discussion. Those who cannot debate and discuss in order to alleviate ignorance and educate in the process should step away.

The generalization of a culture is common. Many of us continue to do it, maybe unconsciously. However we also recognize its fallibility. We all would agree that it is not right. Many advances made by the Jewish, black and Asian communities have not shielded them from that. We keep hearing of many old prejudices expressed publicly. However, they do get noticed and corrections are always made either through admission of wrongdoing or through the legal channels that exist to eliminate hate and racism. Unfortunately this is not the case where the Arab and Muslim cultures are concerned.

No matter how integrated and influential in their fields or how long they have been living in Canada, Arabs are generally viewed in either of two lenses: oil or terrorism. The construction of the stereotypical Arab has been fabricated over a long period of time. There are sociological and political reasons for building a negative image of a people. Clearly, ignorance perpetuates these images. Unfortunately, over the centuries many populations paid dearly for it.

The stereotyping of Arabs has come in stages. At first the Arab man was seen as savage, barbaric, and menacing. Jack Shaheen, author of *The TV Arab* and the recently published *Reel Bad Arab* explains, "... from 1896 until today, filmmakers have collectively indicted all Arabs as Public Enemy No. 1 -- brutal, heartless, uncivilized religious fanatics and money-mad cultural 'others' bent on

terrorizing civilized Westerners, especially Christians and Jews."

Underpinning this image of the undeserving Arab is another deep-rooted dislike and distrust of the Arab and Muslim person. Thus, the Arab and Muslim is the object of ridicule and amusement, and Canadians are consumers of this message. I remember in many movies, the supposed Arab (who incidentally often spoke some unintelligible tongue rather than Arabic) was all-too-often a terrorist, making me wonder why? Where are the Arab heroes? Why are the music, the poetry, the arts and the human story never told?

Writing in the *Nation*, world-renowned Arab-American intellectual Edward Said wrote that "so far as the United States seems to be concerned, it is only a slight overstatement to say that Muslims and Arabs are essentially seen as either oil suppliers or potential terrorists. Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arab-Muslim life has entered the awareness of even those people whose profession it is to report the Arab world."

The Arabs, while they are not being exterminated for who they are, or how they look, will forever be guaranteed their enemy status, as "different than us" and threatening if this image is not rectified. Again Edward Said explains that "what we have instead [of a positive image] is a series of crude, essentialized caricatures of the Islamic world presented in such a way as to make that world vulnerable to military aggression."

Does our system of multicultural integration pass the test as a result? We are certainly not immune to the subtle projections of biases, prejudice and stereotyping that perpetuate racism. Most of the prejudice Arabs and Muslims suffer is not consciously inflicted. And I would argue that Canadians, for the most part, are not consciously anti-Arab. But how does a cartoon cause a distortion, or lead to an anti-Arab policy?

Once again Mr. Shaheen describes it eloquently: "The Present-day Arab stereotype parallels the image of Jews in Nazi Germany, where Jews were painted as dark, shifty-eyed, venal and threateningly different people. After the Holocaust, the characterization of Jews as murderous anarchists or greedy financiers was no longer tolerable. Many cartoonists, however, reincarnated this caricature and transferred it to another group of Semites, the Arabs. Only now it wears a robe and a headdress instead of a yarmulke and a Star of David."

Again, Edward Said articulates participation of policy makers in the construction of the bad Arab, "the views of the experts and of the media are nearly identical on this. Far from attempting to refine, or even dissent from, the gross image of Islam as a threat, the intellectual and policy community in the United States has considerably enforced and concentrated the image."

But what are Arabs doing to improve their image? And maybe a follow-up question to ask is related to the role of Arabs in the construction of this image.

If we consider Osama bin Laden and the other terrorists who came from the Arab region it is easy to point the finger.

And in many cases it is fair to say that Arabs have not helped themselves. Suicide bombings,

hijacking of planes, dictatorships, and many other ills that afflict that society are all true and require an internal diagnosis and internal solutions. It definitely falls on the Arabs to fix their problems and ills.

However, along the road to the creation of the "TV Arab" it is important to remember that the Arabs did not invade North America or Europe, it was the other way around. The Arabs did not occupy and recreate and redraw the map of Europe, the opposite is true.

Clearly, responsibility falls both ways, but it is imperative that we look, in Canada in particular, at our prejudices and biases to consider whether we are unnecessarily stereotyping a whole people because we either don't understand them or just for the sins of a few.

We have changed our views of others. Has the time not come for us to re-examine our views of the Arab?

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Source: By Mazen Chouaib, The Ottawa Citizen, Monday, January 14, 2008

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