

Teaching about Tragedy

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At Risk of Prejudice The Arab American Community

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“IF THEY FIND OUT that the attackers were Arab, will they put us in internment camps like the Japanese in World War II?” An Arab American boy posed this question to his parents in the wake of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. His fears were not laid to rest in the week after the tragedy, when hundreds of hate crimes were perpetrated against Arab Americans, both Muslim and Christian. These included verbal and physical attacks, shootings, bomb and death threats, and vandalism against homes, businesses, and places of worship. A general mood of hostility toward Arabs and Muslims was evident among the American public. The communities found themselves bearing the blame for the tragedies that had unfolded at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Media commentators, community leaders, politicians, and President Bush spoke out against the scapegoating and ill treatment of Arabs and Muslims. Likewise, school administrators and educators scrambled to find ways to stave off the discrimination and stereotyping that would eventually find their way to their students. After teaching tolerance and an appreciation for diversity for many years, teachers, multicultural coordinators, and guidance counselors now wondered how to stop a tide of prejudice from seeping into their classrooms. How can we teach about the Arab world in an objective way?, they wondered. Where can we obtain appropriate resources about the Arab world and Islam? What can be done to allay the fears of Arab and Muslim students and provide them with a safe and nurturing environment?

The Arab World as the “Other”

Teachers often say that before starting a unit on the Middle East, they have to spend time guiding students to “unlearn” the stereotypes that the media and popular culture have propagated for decades. The terrorist, the harem girl, the wealthy oil shaikh, and the “mysterious East” are but a few of the impressions that many Americans have about the Arab world—from cartoons and comic books to TV shows and feature-length movies. Such images serve to exoticize that area of the world and make it strange and unfamiliar and different. We know that lumping any ethnic or racial group—in this case, 250 million Arabs—into categories, especially hostile ones, provides fertile ground for discrimination and “othering.” Arabs become the “other,” a people and a culture that exist outside Americans’ concepts of what is “good” and “civilized.” Essentially, a person

begins to feel that she or he has nothing to do with “that group.”

The textbooks available to teachers deal more seriously with the Arab world but still have some common defects. First of all, they often present Arabs as a homogeneous people (in fact, there is much diversity in the Arab world) and use photographs that reinforce stereotypes, such as camels in a desert and nomadic peoples.¹ Although these do exist, such glimpses only show one aspect of life in Arab countries. Images of urbanization, industry, farming, the arts, strong family ties, education, and sea coasts and mountains all would add important breadth and understanding to our knowledge of Arab society.

Second, textbooks often focus on the Arab world as a “region of conflict” without properly exploring Arab culture, civilization, and history. The result of this treatment is to reinforce stereotypes of Arabs as a violent people. Of course, there is conflict in the Arab world, but the last hundred years have also witnessed conflicts of extraordinary magnitude in the world as a whole. When we teach about our own historical conflicts or those of other western countries, we give those conflicts a context by showing how they fitted into and affected our views of ourselves as a people, with our distinctive aspirations, values, and way of life. Teaching about conflicts involving Arabs without teaching about Arab culture and civilization can lead to a distorted, one-dimensional image of Arabs. Offering a fuller view of Arab history and culture would go a long way toward fostering a deeper appreciation of the Arab world, and it would encourage students to see that in many ways “Arabs are just like us.” It is important that educators provide context to discussions that deal with the Arab world; for example, subjects like political Islam, Arab women’s rights, sanctions against Iraq, or oil and economics must be studied and analyzed in the light of their full social, political, and historical background.

The starting point for all this is perhaps an improved understanding of history. In one view of history commonly held in the West, respect is given to the achievements of the ancient Greeks and Romans, but a dark period is then considered to have elapsed until the European Renaissance, which is treated as the start of modern history. In this view, ideas and scientific advances born in the Renaissance have traveled eastward and awakened other peoples, including the Arabs. Historians of the medieval era know otherwise. Arab/Islamic civilization flourished in the era preceding the Renaissance; it was Arabs who translated ancient Greek works, and then expanded and elaborated on them, thus helping to lay the groundwork for the Renaissance. Arabic-language treatises on such subjects as

Resources on Arabs and Arab Americans

Books

- ▶ Ashabranner, Brent. *An Ancient Heritage: The Arab American Minority*. New York: HarperCollins, 1991.
- ▶ Bushnaq, Inea. *Arab Folktales*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1986.
- ▶ Hayes, John R., ed. *The Genius of Arab Civilization: Source of Renaissance*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1983, 2nd edition.
- ▶ Hourani, Albert. *A History of the Arab Peoples*. New York: Warner Books, 1991, and Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991.
- ▶ Naff, Alixa. *The Arab Americans*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988.
- ▶ Nye, Naomi Shihab. *The Space Between Our Footsteps: Poems and Paintings from the Middle East*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998.
- ▶ Pearson, Robert P. *Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (accompanied by a Teaching Strategies booklet). New York: A CITE Book, 1993.
- ▶ Samhan, Helen. "Arab Americans." *Grolier's Multimedia Encyclopedia*; www.grolier.com.
- ▶ Shabbas, Audrey, ed. *The Arab World Studies Notebook*. Berkeley, Calif.: AWAIR (Arab World and Islamic Resources) and Washington D.C.: Middle East Policy Council, 1998.
- ▶ Shaheen, Jack G. *Arab and Muslim Stereotyping in American Popular Culture*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Georgetown University, 1997.
- ▶ Tamari, Steve. *Who Are the Arabs?* Washington, D.C.: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1999.
- ▶ Zogby, John. *Arab America Today: A Demographic Profile of Arab Americans*. Washington, D.C.: Arab American Institute, 1990.

Videos

- ▶ Hart, Robbie and Luc Cote. *Turning 16: Part 4: The Story of Eman*. Oley, PA: Bullfrog Films, 1994. 30 minutes. A documentary detailing the life of a sixteen-year-old Egyptian girl; her dreams, expectations, and responsibilities are explored within an Arab-Muslim cultural context. Part of a larger series detailing teenagers of different cultures.
- ▶ Mandell, Joan. *Tales from Arab Detroit*. Detroit, MI: Olive Branch Productions, 1995. 45 minutes. A documentary following the visit of traditional Egyptian musicians to an Arab American community in Michigan. Explores the identity issues arising from mixed cultural backgrounds, and portrays the Arab American community through the lenses of several generations. Offers an overview of the diversity found within an Arab American community. Appropriate for grades 6-12.
- ▶ *Young Voices from the Arab World: The Lives and Times of Five Teenagers*. Washington, D.C.: Amideast, 1998. 30 minutes. A collage-style documentary of the lives of five young Arabs living in Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Kuwait, and Morocco. Narrated by Casey Kasem. Appropriate for grades 4-9.

Internet Resources

- ▶ American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee: www.adc.org
- ▶ Amideast: www.amideast.org
- ▶ Arab American Institute: www.aaiusa.org
- ▶ Arab World and Islamic Resources (AWAIR): www.telegraphave.com/gui/awairproductinfo.html
- ▶ Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University: www.ccasonline.org
- ▶ Council on Islamic Education: www.cie.org
- ▶ Middle East and Islamic World Film Collections: www.lib.unc.edu/cdd/crs/foreign/meiw/films.html
- ▶ Middle East Network Information Center: link.lanic.utexas.edu/menic
- ▶ National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations/High School Model Arab League: www.ncusar.org/modelarableague/aboutmal.html
- ▶ Network of Educators on the Americas/Teaching for Social and Economic Justice: www.teachingforchange.org

astronomy, mathematics, optics, chemistry, philosophy, and religion abounded and helped bridge the gap between the wisdom of the ancient world and that of the modern one.

Partly because of the emphasis on conflict in the region, the Arab-Israeli conflict often is the focus of a unit of study on the Middle East. This seemingly intractable dilemma poses difficult challenges for teachers, and some have told me that they opt not to teach it at all. "American policy as it relates to the Middle East is not usually covered in the classroom," one teacher notes, adding, "That's a hornet's nest that most teachers prefer not to tackle." To be sure, many common myths are associated with this conflict as well, the prevalent one being that the Palestinians are terrorists bent on destroying Israel. When teaching about this conflict, it is important to humanize the Palestinian people and include the study of their history, culture, life under occupation, and national aspirations. A lasting peace can only result from a just settlement that recognizes the rights of both Israelis and Palestinians.

Who Are the Arab Americans?

There are approximately three million Americans of Arab descent, the majority of whom trace their roots to five national groups: Lebanese, Syrians, Palestinians, Egyptians, and Iraqis. The early Arab immigrants started to travel to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most of them from the area that is present-day Lebanon and Syria. The population of Arab Americans spans all fifty states, with large concentrations in three major metropolitan areas: Los Angeles and southern California, Detroit and Dearborn in southeastern Michigan, and the New York/New Jersey area.

A sizeable percentage of the community is Christian (all denominations, including Maronite, Melkite, Chaldean, Eastern Orthodox, and Coptic), owing to the high numbers of Christian immigrants from Greater Syria (an area ruled by the Ottoman Empire) prior to World War I. The number of Arab Muslims—both Sunni and Shi'a—increased as immigrants from all Arab countries settled in the United States, largely in the second half of the twentieth century. They, along with South Asian, East Asian, African, African American, and American Muslims, bring the number of Muslims in the United States to approximately seven million.

Arab Americans have played an important role in American society in all areas—the arts and literature, government and politics, business, medicine, sports, and the entertainment industry. Notable examples are poet and writer Kahlil Gibran, consumer advocate and presidential candidate Ralph Nader, heart surgeon Michael DeBakey, actor Danny Thomas, former Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala, former Senator James Abourezk, U.S. Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham, football star Doug Flutie, children's author and poet Naomi Shihab Nye, and disk jockey Casey Kasem. Like other naturalized ethnic groups, Arab Americans have served in the U.S. military in World Wars I and II and the Korean and Viet Nam Wars, and continue to serve their country today.

Arab Americans have organized in political, civic, social, and religious organizations, though they are generally not an insular



community and participate actively in American life. More than 80 percent of the community's members are U.S. citizens and identify themselves as Democrats, Republicans, or independents.

As a result of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the United States' strong support of Israel, a politically charged atmosphere surrounds Arab

Americans. Within the Arab American community, a strong perception exists that there is a bias toward Israel in American foreign policy and that the United States is not an impartial mediator in the conflict. Arab Americans also face the ramifications of political Islam as it plays out on the world scene, and the negative public opinions that it generates in the United States. One of the community's concerns is the current application of anti-terrorism laws, which some believe unfairly target Arab Americans and sanction the use of secret evidence against them, thereby jeopardizing their right to due process under the law. The U.S. Attorney General's office would like to expand its powers to use phone and computer tapping and other methods of intelligence collection. These moves concern many legal professionals in that they might erode Arab Americans' civil liberties and constitutional rights.

Arab American Students

The horrific events of September 11 catapulted the "Arab terrorist" stereotype to the forefront of America's consciousness. Because many of the terrorists were found to be Arab, all Arabs became suspect, and Arab Americans were on the receiving end of the American public's anger. To be sure, many religious and civic organizations offered support and solidarity to the community; such sentiments were evident at numerous interfaith services and speeches of political leaders.

Arab American students, however, have been feeling afraid, unsafe, and insecure. Their peers have taunted them about their nationality or blamed them indirectly for the terrorist acts. "My father says you are bad people," one child told an Arab American peer, according to an elementary school guidance counselor. The parents are experiencing worse, threats such as phone calls or letters saying, "Go home. We don't want you in our country."

Arab American and Muslim students need to feel protected and safe in school. Guidance counselors must be alerted when such incidents occur, and teachers need to show support and understanding. It is not helpful to act in a dismissive manner and to say that the problem will go away. Teenagers, in particular, can experience great anxiety if rejected by their class-

mates, and feelings of abandonment and depression may set in. Some students might begin to question their self-worth, and their self-esteem may diminish. Still others might feel angry and act out, and they will need counseling.

Teachers and school administrators have a responsibility to protect these students and assure them that they are safe from verbal, physical, and psychological harm. Educators need to help all students understand that the actions of a few do not reflect on an entire population, just as the actions of Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber, do not mirror all Americans. Most Arabs and Muslims, like most Americans, are law-abiding citizens who work and have families and want nothing more than to live peaceful and fulfilling lives.

Students might want to know that many Muslims and Arab Americans died in the World Trade Center tragedy, and that their families are grieving for them and searching for answers as well. Arab Americans—both Muslim and Christian—are actively involved in the rescue operations, donating blood, organizing fund drives for the victims, and holding special religious services and vigils. 📖

Note

1. One common public misconception of Arabs that textbooks should always correct is that all Arabs are Muslim. The Arab world contains significant Christian minorities in such countries as Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinian territories.

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Arab American students must feel secure, safe, and supported in our classrooms and schools.