



The Reception of American Culture in the Middle East after “The Arab Spring”

RECEPTION DE LA CULTURE AMERICAINE AU MOYEN-ORIENT APRES “LE PRINTEMPS ARABES”

Nazmi Al-Shalabi^{1,*}; Marwan Obeidat²; Shadi Neimneh³

¹PH.D, Department of English, The Hashemite University, Zarqa, Jordan

²Department of English, The Hashemite University, Zarqa, Jordan
Professors of American Literature.

Email: marwanobeidat@hotmail.com

³PH.D, Department of English, The Hashemite University, Zarqa, Jordan

Email: snaamneh@excite.com

*Corresponding author.

Address: Department of English, The Hashemite University, Zarqa
13115, Jordan

Email: nazmi_shalabi@yahoo.com

Received 22 August 2011; accepted 29 September 2011

Abstract

Despite its being old, the relationship between the Middle East and the West (America included) has been marked by confrontation, intervention, and stereotyping. The West, driven by its interests and blinded by bias and hostility, has been keen on colonizing the Middle East, empowering Israel, and foolishly disregarding the aspirations of Arabs and Muslims, which tremendously contributes to generating anti-American sentiments and bitterness. These feelings, fed further by the pro-Israeli tilt American policy, do hinder the advancement of the US national interests which have been subordinated to those of Israel that has been receiving direct and unconditional support from the West. Such a type of support for Israel that occupies Palestine demonstrates folly, disregard of laws, and blindness to reality. This blindness itself underlies America's reluctance to adopt a proactive role in the “Arab Spring”, the political movements sweeping the Middle East for the first time in decades. This reluctance has impacted the image of the US that has, unfortunately, been negative due to America's taking sides with Israel at the expense of Arabs' natural needs and inalienable rights in Palestine. This American stance has been responsible for the Israelis' perpetrating atrocities, turning a deaf ear to the Security Council resolutions, and usurping Palestine in defiance of all international laws. By supporting Israel that acts this way, the US has sacrificed its interests, has

lost its credibility, has isolated itself, and has failed to be a leading power. To regain its status, the US should reexamine its policy, stop its unconditional support for Israel, and align itself with peoples' aspirations.

Key words: Stereotyping; Double standards; Anti-American sentiments; Unconditional support; Regain

Résumé

En dépit de son être vieux, la relation entre le Moyen-Orient et l'Occident (Amérique est incluse) a été marquée par la confrontation, l'intervention, et les stéréotypes. L'Occident, conduit par ses intérêts et aveuglé par les préjugés et l'hostilité, a été vif sur la colonisation du Moyen-Orient, l'autonomisation Israël, et sottement sans tenir compte des aspirations des Arabes et des musulmans, ce qui contribue énormément à générer sentiments anti-américains et d'amertume. Ces sentiments, alimenté encore par la politique d'inclinaison pro-israélien américain, ne entravent l'avancement des intérêts nationaux américains qui ont été subordonnés à ceux d'Israël qui a reçu un soutien direct et inconditionnel de l'Occident. Un tel type de soutien à Israël qui occupe la Palestine démontre la folie, le mépris des lois, et la cécité à la réalité. Cet aveuglement se sous-tend réticence des Américains à adopter un rôle proactif dans le «printemps arabe», les mouvements politiques balayant le Moyen-Orient pour la première fois depuis des décennies. Cette réticence a influencé l'image de l'américain qui a malheureusement été négative en raison de prendre parti de l'Amérique avec Israël aux dépens des Arabes "besoins naturels et les droits inaliénables en Palestine. Cette position américaine a été responsable pour les Israéliens "atrocités perpétrer, faisant la sourde oreille aux résolutions du Conseil de sécurité, et d'usurper la Palestine au mépris de toutes les lois internationales. En soutenant Israël, qui agit de cette façon, les Etats-Unis a sacrifié ses intérêts, a perdu sa crédibilité, s'est isolé et n'a pas réussi à être une puissance

de premier plan. Pour retrouver son statut, les Etats-Unis devraient réexaminer sa politique, cesser son soutien inconditionnel à Israël, et de s'aligner avec les aspirations des peuples.

Mots clés: Stéréotypes; Doubles standards; Sentiments anti-américains; Soutien Inconditionnel; Retrouver

Nazmi Al-Shalabi, Marwan Obeidat, Shadi Neimneh (2011). The Reception of American Culture in the Middle East after "The Arab Spring". *Canadian Social Science*, 7(5), 156-161. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/j.css.1923669720110705.337> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.css.1923669720110705.337>.

We have argued elsewhere that the relationship between the Near (or Middle, as some prefer to say) East and the West (America included) is over one thousand and four hundred years old. In spite of this long period of time, this relationship has unfortunately been marked by confrontation, intervention and stereotyping. After the end of World War I, Europeans, driven by their interests that are, Alkadry (2004) claims in "Colonialism in a Postmodern Age," at odds with the national and public interests of the Arab people, changed the geography of what is now called the Middle East, by deciding, at the San Remo Conference held in 1920, that "the whole of Arab Rectangle lying between the Mediterranean and the Persian Frontier [be] placed under mandatory rule" (305-306). While Europeans first arranged for colonizing the Middle East, they empowered and helped the Jews with establishing a state in Palestine. This choice made by Europeans is informed by their own interests as well as their misunderstanding of Arabs and Muslims who have the right to enjoy their rights as humans in much the same way others do. Weak and divided, Arabs and Muslims have been politically ruled by the West. They have also been subordinated to Israel whose alliance with the US has been stifling the development of any constructive peace talks, and shielding it against criticism. Arguing in support of this view, Zunes (2010) claims, in "Ten Things to Know about US Policy in the Middle East," that "[o]ver the past thirty years, the US has used its veto power to protect its ally Israel from censure more than all other members of the Security Council have used their veto power on all other issues combined" (p.5). America's use of its veto power represents not only a direct and unconditional support for Israel, but it also places, Zunes (2010) adds, "the United States in direct violation of UN Security Council resolution 465, which calls upon all states not to provide Israel with any assistance to be used specifically in connection with settlements in the occupied territories" (p.6). This attitude of America obviously reflects its double standards despite its claims that it adopts an even-handed policy. Clarifying this situation, Eric Watkins (1997) holds, in "The Unfolding US Policy in the Middle East," that "[a]lthough US policymakers

claim to adopt an even-handed approach in dealing with the Arabs and the Israelis, their practice traditionally favors Israel" (p.1).

This bias has been igniting a lot of anti-Americanism in the Middle East, which not only springs from, Obeidat (2010) argues in "Beyond American Borders: The Middle East and the Enigma of anti-American Sentiments in the Aftermath of 9/11," "a prejudiced hatred of and a blind bias against the United States or American culture and citizens for that matter, but from a profound feeling about America's role as a leading power at the international level" (p.15). Like Obeidat, Sumra Salem (2008) argues, in "Anti-Americanism in the Middle East," that the "Israeli- Palestinian conflict, also referred to as the Arab-Israeli conflict, contributes tremendously and is the foremost explanation of the high levels of anti-Americanism in the Middle East. These anti-American sentiments are created by Washington's stance within the conflict and are best exemplified by its substantial support for Israel politically, economically and militarily" (p.4). Reiterating the same view, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak states that "because of the war in Iraq and Washington's continued support of Israel, hatred of Americans in the Arab world had reached new heights." Following Mubarak's steps, Shehab (2003) and Sid-Ahmed (1980) view Washington's unconditional and "eternal support of the ruling right-wing in Tel Aviv," and alliance with Israel whose stance on the core issue of Palestine is uncompromising "as the foremost reasons for the rancor" (p.7). This American collaboration with Israel manifested in the alliance is, Sumra (2008) argues, "a legitimate source of grievances in the Middle East and prime generator of anti-Americanism" (p.5). The alliance with Israel intensifies the anti-American anger that also stems from Arabs' feeling let down due to the United States' refusal to pressurize Israel to withdraw from the occupied territories, the United States' consistent policy of supporting Israel at all costs, the United States' condoning the Israelis' developing as many nuclear weapons as they please, and the United States' treating Israel as a country above the law. This stance of America brings about dissatisfaction, anger, and anti-American sentiments. These sentiments are further created by America's failure to help Palestinians enjoy their rights in a state of their own. They are also directly associated with, Sumra Salem (2008) adds, "the effects felt across the region as a result of American policies" (p.4).

Lacking even-handedness, these American policies have been generating bitterness amongst Arabs for a number of reasons. Firstly, the US has been so far helpless to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict giving birth to instability, insecurity, despair, and acts of violence. This situation has been also contributing to America's losing its credibility. Secondly, the United States' ongoing support for Israel has been enabling it to defeat Arabs and, thus, maintain its occupation of Arab territories. Thirdly, the US has been

maintaining a military presence in the region, especially in Iraq and the Arabian Gulf countries. Such an ongoing presence is certainly conducive to creating an increasing resentment. Fourthly, the US has been opposing efforts by Arab states to produce, Stephen Zunes (2010) claims in "Ten Things to Know about US Policy in the Middle East," "weapons of mass destruction while tolerating Israel's sizable nuclear arsenal and bringing US nuclear weapons into Middle Eastern waters as well as rejecting calls for the creation of a nuclear-free zone in the region" (p.2). Fifthly, the United States' applying grievous double standards in connection with implementing UN resolutions has certainly a bearing upon its interests in the region. This American behavior makes Arabs and Muslims all over the world critical of America in particular and the West in general for failing, Andrew Young (2004) holds in "The 'Clash of Civilizations' and American Intervention in the Middle East," "to punish Israel for violating U.N. resolutions" (p.2). Young adds that it is not surprising that the West (America included) "[has] utilized force against Iraq but fails to force its kin countries to behave" (p.2).

This imbalanced, pro-Israeli tilt policy has been hindering the advancement of America's national interests. A careful scrutiny of American foreign policy in the Middle East since the Cold War demonstrates that the US government has been serving its selfish interests, and, thus, it has promulgated, Isra Jensia (2008) maintains in "US Middle East Policy," "an outpouring of hatred and animosity toward the United States" (p.1). Isra (2008) adds that unless the US government changes its policy toward the Middle East "the best interests of the American people will never be served" (p.1). The United States has been subordinating its interests to those of Israel whose diplomats care only for their own interests. To advance its interests, the United States should suspend its aid to Israel whose compliance with the UN resolutions would liberate, Paul Findley (2002) maintains in "Reflecting on Our Relationship with Israel," "all Americans from long years of bondage to Israel's misdeeds" (p.3). The suspension of this aid is a necessity and a prerequisite for the protection of the interests of the American people. While the United States provides this type of support for Israel, it doesn't do Arabs and Muslims in the region any justice. It keeps imposing restrictions on them and disempowering them, which does not help them with wresting their inalienable rights as humans. It also arranges for keeping them subordinate to Israelis by holding onto and disseminating their negative images, which makes people unsympathetic to them.

As far as support for Israel is concerned, this support has been both direct and unconditional. Since the 1990s, the US has been using its Veto right in the Security Council to obliterate any resolution against Israel, and prevent international observers from protecting Palestinian human rights. The US has been also keen on supplying Israel with weapons, justifying its wars on the Arab World

and taking sides with it despite its flagrant violation of the UN resolutions. Blinded by political prejudice, the US demands that the Arab countries, especially Syria and Libya, comply with these resolutions, which are unjust and unjustified. At present, the US claims that it is supporting efforts toward peace in the Middle East and toward establishing a viable Palestinian state. Taking advantage of its status as an influential international go-between, it is offering Israel great help by turning a blind eye and deaf ear to settlement building, which undermines the peace process in its entirety, rendering peace talks futile.

As regards the rationale for this biased support, the US believes that Israel has the right to exist, and that it is a duty to help the Israelis enjoy this right. Another reason for this support is probably Americans' subscribing uncritically to the notion that Islam is a religion of tyranny, and that it fosters oppression, terrorism and hatred of others. It is interesting to note that Americans' engagement with the Arabs and Muslims dates back, as Obeidat (1996) argues in "On Non-Native Grounds: The Place of American Literature in the English Curriculum of Arab World Universities," "to the Barbary Wars (1785-1815), which were actually the first immediate encounter between the region and the emerging American republic, and the "Barbary Pirates" affair virtually sums up what the Arabs knew most about the United States of America, and, in turn, what America knew about the Arab East until the 1970s, the Arab-Israeli Wars, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, and the Gulf War". (8). Drawing upon stereotypes, Americans inherited, Robert Allison (2000) argues in *The Crescent Obscured*, this image of Islam as a religion of tyranny from Christian Europe. (9). Commenting on these negative images of Islam and the Arabs, Edward Said (1980) suggests, in *The Question of Palestine*, that the Zionists have taken it upon themselves to explain the Oriental Arab to the West, to assume responsibility for expressing what the Arabs and Palestinians were like. (10). Unaware whether this image is accurate or not, Americans have been limiting themselves to employing it as it is. (for more information on the negative images of Arabs and Muslims, see M.Obeidat's *American literature and Orientalism*, Shaheen's *Reel Bad Arabs*, and Said's *Covering Islam*).

In this paper, our argument is completely different. We contend that the US, blind to reality and uncertain of what turmoil in the Middle East will bring, has been reluctant to adopt a proactive role in the political movements sweeping the region for the first time in decades. These movements have so far forced Zain El-Abideen Bin Ali of Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt to step down. Others such as Ali Saleh of Yemen, Muammar AL-Qadhafi of Libya, and Bashshar Al-Asad of Syria are still rejecting the idea of listening to citizens asking them to resign and depart. The result is that there has been much bloodshed, flagrant violation of human rights,

biting criticism from the international community, and depletion of resources, which are all acts indicative of the lack of wisdom, meanness, avarice, and ruthlessness. These acts, being uncommon, have also bedeviled the US which has failed to pursue a reasonable policy. Arguing in favor of this view, Tayekh claims that "current changes in the Middle East present uncertainty for American relationships" (Gaier, 2011, p.1). Underlining this confusion, R.K. Ramazani (2011) claims in "American Independence Inspires the Arab Spring," that Washington finds it difficult "to pursue a coherent policy in response to the Arab democratic aspirations and expectations of support" (1).

Surprisingly, the pro-democracy movements in the Middle East haven't impacted the US positively. According to Pew Research Center (2011), views of the US "remain negative, as they have been for nearly a decade" (1). The reason for these negative views is that the US has been taking sides with Israel, which is to be solely blamed for the duration of occupation in Palestine, the deprivation of Palestinians of their inalienable rights, violence and instability in the Middle East, the violation of the UNO resolutions, and countless grievances in the region. This bias has been giving birth to anti-American sentiments which also stem from America's failure to meet the expectations of Arabs as outlined in President Obama's speech delivered in Cairo in 2009. Emphasizing these expectations that center on settling the Palestine question, James Zogby (2003) holds, in "The Passive Voices," that there are "two key elements that may help change the Arab peoples' attitude toward the US: solving the Arab-Israeli conflict and providing economic assistance via US foreign direct investment to help create jobs in post revolution Arab countries" (1). Laying the blame on Arabs for pinning their hopes on the US, Patrick Seale (2011) maintains, in "Challenges Facing the Arabs," that it is "sheer folly for the Arabs to depend on the US to solve the Palestine problem" (1). Justifying his contention, Seale claims that pro-Israeli activists have taken control of America's Middle East policy.

Unfortunately, this American policy has been consistent. While this policy has been demonstrating America's blindness to the natural needs of Palestinians in the occupied territories, it clearly shows the high value it attaches to the Israelis' needs. It follows that Israel has taken advantage of this policy in a way that has stifled the establishment of a viable Palestinian state. Even though Israel blames Palestinians for the failure of peace process, Israel itself, via building and expanding settlements as well as maintaining its blockade of Gaza Strip and divesting thousands of prisoners of life necessities, is to be blame for the death of peace and the endurance of grievances and unprecedented countless cruelties perpetrated in the daylight in cold blood simply because the US never condemns any Israeli action in the occupied territories, and is always keen on vetoing any

resolution against Israel in the Security Council or the United Nations Organization. Taking advantage of this opportunity, the Israelis act they please, knowing that, John Gunther (2006) maintains in "American Policy," "they have virtually a blank check to do as they wish" (2). This stand of America has been impacting the Arab World's responses to the US policy. Whereas some Arab governments hold America to be too weak to pressure Israel to make peace with Arabs, other governments realize that the US has been indifferent and unwilling to make peace because its protected interests in the Middle East outweigh the gains earned from settling the conflict. This apathy of the USA has been understood by Arabs who have decided not to listen because they don't think, Freeman claims, Americans "know what they are doing or that they are capable of anything at all, given our dysfunctional politics and knee-jerk genuflection to the Israeli government's views," quoted by Robert Dreyfuss (2011) in "Washington's Weak Response" published in The Nation.

Such an imbalanced policy cannot escape the attention of Arabs who have begun distancing themselves from the US. In "Saudi Arabia and the USA: The Paradoxical Beneficiaries of the Arab Spring," Sotiris Roussos (2011) claims that "the new regime in Cairo is wishing for a bold regional role, more autonomous from the US and Israeli choices" (1). This argument reveals that Arabs know all about the US policy that will certainly backfire with many challenges unless it is changed. In an article titled "US Middle East Policy Ignores Realities in the Region," James Zogby (2003) argues that "the US role in the region is heading toward disaster" (1) as Americans "have not engaged in dialogue or listened to determine the true feelings of the Arab people". He adds that Americans haven't either paid any "attention to history, even recent history, in an effort to understand how Arabs view their circumstances or see[American] role in contributing to their current problems" (1). The significance of this contention is that it makes it clear that America's not listening to Arabs to know about their problems is the source of all troubles. By not listening, Americans won't be able to address Arab concerns and realities. They won't be able either to solve serious problems, which clarifies the reason underlying their failure to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict. Contrary to their expectations, Americans, by not listening to Arabs, create problems for themselves. They isolate themselves from others, and create anti-American sentiments by not supporting victims shouting that they be given their human rights. This argument is true of Palestinians who have been suffering for decades, but, unfortunately, their shouts for human rights have been disregarded by the US that deems itself to be the sole defender of human rights on this planet.

As far as the defense of human rights is concerned, the stance of the US toward human rights in the Middle East is confusing. While the US has been trying all

ways to stop Palestinians from going to the UNO to demand their legitimate right to be a state, its stance wavers between support and neutrality as to unrest in the region. In order not to taint the US as an unbending ally of oppressive regimes, President Obama sometimes argues in favor of peoples’ calls for freedom, justice, self-expression, transparency, etc. This argument is true of Obama and Hillary Clinton’s asking Bashar Al-Asad to step down under the pre text that he has lost his legitimacy as a president. It is also true of their asking Al-Gadafi of Libya to step down for the same reason. At other times, Americans maintain neutrality because they cannot, Chester A. Crocker (2011) maintains in “The Arab Spring,” “assume that “the street” is a voice of democracy, cannot afford further damage to [their] reputation as a reliable friend of strategically important governments,” and “do not want to “own” these diverse transitions or to acquire responsibility for making fundamental choices of political succession” (1). This neutrality does not solve America’s problems; it isn’t either the role expected of America to play as a great power.

I have demonstrated that the American policy in the Middle East has been dictating the relationship between the US and this part of the world. Being imbalanced, this policy has been the cause of bitterness and anti-American sentiments reflective of displeasure, anger, frustration, and disappointment at the role America has been playing. This role doesn’t meet the expectations of Arabs who have been pinning their hopes on the US to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict. Taking sides with Israel, the US has been isolating itself, sacrificing its interests, undermining the peace process, losing its credibility, and damaging its reputation as a leading power. To regain this status, the US should set a good example for others. It should play its cards well, and argue in support of peoples’, including Palestinians, demanding freedom and human rights. In this way, it should align itself with peoples’ uprisings spreading from one Arab country to another asking for more rights, and craft a wise policy congruent with its principles and interests, demonstrative of its keenness on maintaining the necessary balance between claims and actions, and indicative of its far-sightedness. In so doing, the US can easily improve its image, meet peoples’ expectations, restore its credibility, and protect its interests.

REFERENCES

Alkadry, Mohammad (2004). Colonialism in a Postmodern Age: The West, Arabs and the Battle of Baghdad. *Public Administration and Management: An Interactive Journal* 9(1), 35-45.

Allison, Robert (2000). *The Crescent Obscured: The United States and the Muslim World, 1776-1815*. London: University of Chicago Press.

Crocker, C. A. (2011). *The Arab Spring*. United States Institute

of Peace. Washington, D. C. Available at: www.usip.org/publications/the-arab-spring

Dreyfuss, R. (2011). Washington’s Weak Response to Arab Awakening. *The Nation*.

Findley, Paul (2002). Reflecting on Our Relationship with Israel http://www.ifamericansknew.org/us_ints/p_findley.html (Accessed on 11.3.2010).

Gaier (2011). Will the Arab Spring Lead to a Post –American Era? *Arab American Institute*. Available at: www.aaiusa.org/blog/entry/will-the-arab-spring-lead-to-a-post-american-era/

Gunther, J. (2006). A Problem in American Foreign Policy: Palestine. *Scoop*. www.scoop.co.nz/stories/HL0604/500105.htm

Jensia, Isra (2008). U s - Middle East Policy. http://associatedcontent.com/article/1126807/US_middle-east-policy.html?cat=9

Obeidat, Marwan (1996). On Nonnative Grounds: The Place of American Literature in the English Curriculum of Arab World Universities. *American Studies International*, 34(1), 18-30.

...(2010). Beyond American Borders: The Middle East and the Enigma of Anti-American Sentiments in the Aftermath of 9/11”. *American Studies Today Online*, 17.

Pew Research Center(2011). *Arab Spring Fails to Improve Us Image*. Available at: www.pewtrusts.org/our_work_report_detail.aspx?id=85899359930

Ramazani, R. K. (2011). American Independence Inspires *The Arab Spring*. *The Daily Progress*. Available at: www2.dailyprogress.com/news/2011/jul/03/American-independence-inspires-arab-spring-ar-1149923

Roussos, S. (2011). *Saudi Arabia and USA: The Paradoxical Beneficiaries of the Arab Spring*. CEMMIS (Center for Mediterranean, Middle East and Islamic Studies). Available at: www.cemmis.edu.gr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=265%3Asaudi-arabia-and-usa-the-paradoxical-beneficiaries-of-the-arab-spring&catid=43%3A-middle-east-flashpoints&Itemid=66&lang=E

Said, Edward. (1981). *Covering Islam*. New York: Pantheon.

...(1994). *Culture and imperialism*. London: Vintage.

...(1980). *The Question of Palestine*. London: Rutledge & Kegan Paul.

Salem, Samra (2008). *Anti-Americanism in the Middle East*. *Global Affairs*, Issue 8. <http://www.Globalaffairs.es/en/anti-americanism-in-the-middle-east/>(Accessed on 24.3.2010).

Seale, P. (2011). Challenges Facing the Arabs. *The Nation*. Available at: www.agenceglobal.com/Article.asp?Id=2595

Shehab, S. (2003). The Intention is Clear. *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 23-29.

Sid –Ahmed M. (1980). Shifting Sands of Peace in the Middle east. *International Security*, 5(1), 53-79.

Watkins, Eric (1997). The Unfolding us Policy in the Middle East. *International Affairs*, 73(1), 1-14.

Young, Andrew (2004). *The Clash of Civilizations and American Intervention in the Middle East*. <http://www.lewrockwell.com/orig5/young-andrew.html> (Accessed on 20.3.2011).

Zogby, J. (2003). Us Middle East Policy Ignores Realities in the Region. Arab News.

Zunes, Stephen. *Ten Things to Know About Us Policy in the Middle East*. http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/middle_east/ten_things_mepolicy_zunes.html (accessed on 14.3.2010).