

Authentic Narratives: Building Connections between America and the Middle East through Film and Television

Cynthia P. Schneider, PhD

Distinguished Professor in the Practice of Diplomacy, Georgetown University

Senior Non-resident Fellow and Coordinator, Arts and Culture Dialogue Initiative, Brookings Institution

cpschneider@restructassoc.com

Despite the plethora of post 9/11 bridge building efforts, recent polls indicate the persistence of negative stereotypes between America and the Arab world.¹ Popular culture significantly shapes perceptions on both sides, yet policymakers rarely take it into account. As report after report is written on how to improve America's image in the Middle East, programs such as "Friends" and "24" are influencing that very image, for better or worse. For American audiences, generally ignorant about the Middle East, impressions also are significantly shaped by popular culture, where Arabs and Muslims invariably play the "bad guy du jour".

This paper will discuss two approaches to increasing understanding and respect between America and the Middle East, using film and television. One is to improve the authenticity and accuracy of portrayals of Arabs, Muslims, and the Middle East in American entertainment, and the other is to increase the availability of films made or co-produced in the Middle East in the U.S. The recession offers a blessing in disguise for opening the American markets to talent from the Middle East because it has obliterated traditional models for financing and making films. This situation, combined with new forms of creation and distribution through digital products, offers an opening for film makers from the Muslim world. To increase the accuracy of portrayals of the Middle East in American entertainment products, a new organization, MOST (*Muslims on Screen and Television: a Resource Center for the Creative Community*, www.mostresource.org), seeks to bridge the worlds of policy, academia and entertainment by providing information on all things Middle Eastern and Muslim for the creative community.² MOST's goal is to facilitate for Arabs and Muslims the kind of normalization that has occurred in American entertainment with African Americans or gays and lesbians.

An analysis of the disjunction between foreign policy and the creative sector in America will frame the analysis of these two approaches to realizing the potential of film and television to increase understanding and respect between America and the Middle East.

¹ Jon Cohen and Jennifer Agiesta, "Most in Poll Back Outreach to Muslims", *Washington Post*, April 6, 2009, A10; John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam?* Gallup Press, 2008.

² I am a co-founder of MOST, which developed out of the Arts and Culture Dialogue Initiative at the Brookings Institution, in partnership with Unity Productions Foundation and Gallup.