

Islamophobia and Arab Spring Products
Interview with Dr. Waleed Mahdi

Interview by Salah Shuaib

This interview was originally conducted and published in Arabic at Al-Awan website on February 25, 2016. To access the original Arabic version, [click here](#) or [here](#)

Recently, we have witnessed the rise of negative portrayals of Arabs and Muslims in large parts of the West, spearheaded by many media outlets. This phenomenon has accompanied a series of bloody incidents committed in the name of Islam. This has prompted the emergence of, what many Muslim intellectuals call, "Islamophobia," which could be defined as attitudes breeding hatred and prejudice against Islam and Muslims. Although Islamophobia dates back to the 1970s in the United States, the tragic attacks of September 11, 2001 have offered a fertile ground for the rise of anti-Muslim sentiment in the political, cultural, academic, and social circles. The events taking place in the Middle East for the last four decades, particularly the violent attacks carried out by radical groups and individuals, have contributed to the rise of Islamophobia.

The purpose of this interview is to examine this phenomenon while shedding lights on the post-Arab Spring political transformations that serve a general context for the contemporary articulations of violence, often conflated with Islam in the United States. To do so, I reached out to Dr. Waleed Mahdi, a Yemeni American faculty at George Mason University (Virginia) with expertise in U.S.-Arab/Muslim cultural politics. We had the following conversation:

Salah: How did you develop academic interest in the relationship between the West and Islam?

Waleed: My interest in the tension between the West and the Muslim world goes back to the 1990s in Yemen. I came across Samuel Huntington's book *Clash of Civilizations* (1996) in which he theorized for a post-Cold War world order marked by a civilizational conflict between the "Christian West" and the "Muslim East." I was in high school when I developed a critique against the proposition that my world was doomed to geopolitical conflicts informed by religious-mapped civilizations. This position instilled in me the passion to learn English at Taiz University to understand the depth of culture, history, religion, and politics in the United States. Traveling to the U.S. to pursue my master's degree in cultural studies and comparative literature (university of New Mexico) provided me with the opportunity to learn more about the American society away from the media's stereotypical and reductive imagery. The experience motivated me to pursue my doctoral degree in American studies (University of Minnesota). Since then, I have developed interests in learning the complexity of the American culture, especially in respect of its encounters with the Arab and Muslim worlds.

S: What are your research findings regarding American and Arab/Muslim cultural productions?

W: There are two dimensions to my current research project. The first dimension pays close attention to the Arab/Muslim American image in U.S. cultural production, particularly in Hollywood's films. My analysis concludes that the projection of Arab/Muslim Americans in media draws from the U.S. orientalist and racialized discourses, which constitute the parameters of current Islamophobia narrative. The second dimension criticizes the portrayals of Arab/Muslim Americans in Arab cultural production (Egyptian cinema as a case study), which limits its stereotypes of the Arab/Muslim diaspora within a sensational postcolonial critique of the United States. Both U.S.-Arab cultural producers, I argue, fail to unveil the role of Arab/Muslim Americans in enriching the East-West civilizational dialogue. They have rather relied on polarizations that reproduce Huntingtonian images of the United States and Arab/Muslim worlds. In my research, I emphasize the role of Arab/Muslim American cultural producers in reclaiming their own narratives and presenting their cross-cultural experience, which stands as a testimony against the "clash of civilizations" rhetoric.

S: What are the main grounds for the growth of Islamophobia in the United States?

W: The U.S. Orientalist heritage plays an important role in distorting the images of Muslims and depicting them as a permanent source of threat to the country's security and stability. This heritage is rooted in the eighteenth century, when stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims crystallized in response to several factors, including the acts of piracy against American ships in the Barbary Coast (a European term for today's North Africa), and the rhetoric surrounding what was once called "Ottoman despotism." Travelogues in the post-civil war era, particularly to Egypt and the Holy Land, perpetuated reductive images of the region's populations in ways that did not reflect their ethnic, linguistic, or religious diversity. The specificity of the U.S. experience with "racism" has also directly affected the structure of imbalance between the majority and the disenfranchised minorities, which represents until this very moment a key factor in the marginalization of the American Muslim community. However, the rising sense of resistance among Arabs and Muslims against the U.S. political, military, economic, and cultural influence during the Cold War and War on Terror eras constitutes the major factor in reproducing hatred against Islam and Muslims. In my interrogation of Hollywood's films, I emphasize the relevance of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Iranian Islamic Revolution, and the spread of violent organizations to the intensity of Islamophobia, and the projection of Islam through terrorism in American culture.

S: What is the extent of 9/11 impact in supporting Islamophobia?

W: 9/11 helped produce a right wing polarizing discourse that recycled Huntington's theory, which already received intense criticism throughout the 1990s. It enabled neoconservatives to simplify their response to Americans' most asked question following the attacks, "why do they hate us?" Their Islamophobic response portrayed Muslims as the civilizational enemy of the

United States in a way that legitimized for the White House the right to declare its war on terror against the enemies of “freedom,” “democracy,” “justice,” “human values.” In short, 9/11 provided neoconservatives with the impetus to employ the state of fear among Americans in the service of their agendas in solidifying their political status, recycling their explosive discourse, and glorifying their role in protecting the “American civilization.” It created a momentum that forced Democrats to vote in favor of many of the post-9/11 negative resolutions that Arab and Muslim populations, including their diaspora in the United States, are still paying their price.

S: How do you view the recent Islamophobic rhetoric accompanying the U.S. presidential campaigns, especially the Republican candidate Donald Trump's comments, in light of the death of 14 Americans in the San Bernardino attack in California - carried out by Muslim extremists?

W: The recent attacks by ISIS affiliates, known in the Arab world as Daesh, in Paris (November 2015) has raised a campaign in U.S. and European media that antagonized the Arab and Muslim communities in the West. The San Bernardino incident in the United States has enhanced feelings of fear and anxiety around anything Islamic. The coincidence of this media campaign with the U.S. presidential election season has provided the republican presidential runners with the opportunity for public incitement. Republican candidate, Donald Trump, capitalized on this moment through his sensational proposal to deny Muslims the right to migrate to or visit the United States. In the midst of this pandemonium, other reasonable voices demanded proper deliberation with the public in the aftermath of tragedy. Many U.S. civil society organizations protested Trump's proposed plan in addition to the congressional attempts to restrict freedoms and crack down on Muslims, which they consider as unconstitutional. The U.S. Department of Defense also considered such attempts to bear a direct threat to the country's national security. Furthermore, President Obama's famous speech on terrorism (December 6, 2015) was the most rational in addressing the problem and proposing appropriate solutions (even though, it called for the continuation of U.S. interventionist policies in the Middle East.) He demanded congressional members to address the security situation by enacting laws regulating possession of firearms; a problem that has claimed the lives of many victims of mass-shooting violence in the United States, regardless of the identity of offender. He called on Americans to wrap around a national project uniting Americans in fighting terrorism. He also considered the American Muslim community as a key partner in encountering extremism. I personally bet on the ability of the American people to embrace this approach, as long as it is congruent with the recommendations of the U.S. administration, including its military and security apparatus.

S: How do you view the anti-Islamophobia current within the American academic field, led by the two prominent thinkers Noam Chomsky and Cornell West and some liberal groups, and to what extent they can offer a different image of Muslims?

W: Islamophobia is a complicated concept and is not limited in its definition to hatred against the Muslims as directed by the religious right stream in the United States. Liberals like the

satirist Bill Maher have also fueled the rhetoric and served as a manifestation of enmity against Islam. In this regard, Islamophobia could be read as a product of both conservatives and liberals. Having said that, there is another phenomenon, which American scholar Andrew Hammond refers to as, “Islamophilia” (2010). The concept refers to a growing phenomenon among U.S. liberals set to dissipate the negative images of Muslims and present Islam as a victim of extremist Islamist organizations. Although these efforts are helpful in dealing with the Islamophobia momentum, they cannot withstand in-depth and familiarity of the complexity of the contemporary Muslim scene. There is no doubt that the contributions of intellectuals like Noam Chomsky and Cornell West are very important in their support of the anti-Islamophobia stream. However, I do not think that western liberalism is capable of adopting Muslims issues with all their intricacies. The American Muslim community bears the ultimate responsibility in delivering self-representations, producing their own concepts, and coming to terms with the nuance of their identity on their own. American Muslims carry the obligation of self-organizing and contributing to civil life through civil society organizations, media outlets, political venues, etc. I can see a glimpse of the American Muslim attempt in reclaiming their voice and sharing their perspectives, and therein lies the hope in their ability to engage with oversimplifications produced by Islamophobia and Islamophilia.

S: Are there any positive impacts or a glimmer of hope in the American research centers in criticizing Islamophobia?

W: Research centers do certainly offer the vessel through which knowledge can offer in-depth analyses of the society and interact constantly with its issues. Many academic works dissect Islamophobia and propose constructive engagement with American Muslims. Unfortunately, the academic influence on the public seems less than that of the politicians and the media practitioners. There are still examples of academics attempting to engage directly with the public, e.g. the Arab Studies Institute publications (<http://www.arabstudiesinstitute.org/>), (Aslan media (<http://www.aslanmedia.com/>) and the Bridge Initiative at Georgetown University (<http://bridge.georgetown.edu/>). A new media outlet like Aljazeera America has provided a space for academics to contribute a critique of dominant narratives. Alternative media creates indefinite possibilities to deal with information beyond the restrictions of mainstream media. Organizations like Council on American–Islamic Relations, American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), and Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) are examples of many proactive organizations that accommodate intellectual contributions to spreading awareness about the rights of the Arab/Muslim communities in America.

S: How do you see the Obama Doctrine in dealing with the Middle East issues? Do you consider his policy embraces a new approach different from his predecessors'?

W: For many Muslims, the American President Barak Obama represents the incomplete dream. His foreign policy is characterized by restraint and disinterest in direct military intervention, especially during the various stages of Arab political transformations since 2001. His approach is marked by a determination to create a complex web of regional and international alliances. His foreign policy might seem different from his predecessors. At the onset of his presidency, he delivered a speech to the Muslim world in which he envisioned hopes for complete change in the relationship between the United States and Islam as well as Muslims. His administration, however, revealed a lack of serious commitment to address Muslim grievances, ranging from closing Guantanamo to resolving the Palestinian issue. Although his administration prohibited use of torture, exposed during the Bush administration in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, it endorsed the drone program in fighting terrorism, which resulted in human tragedies in Yemen, Pakistan, and other places. Some scholars describe this transition as the Obama Doctrine, i.e., “kill, don’t torture.” His administration would invite American Muslims to the annual iftar dinner at the White House but he would express, in the same dinner, his utmost support to Israel without addressing the attendee’s concerns. Obama issues well-articulated speeches about Islam and Muslims, but seems extremely cautious in engaging with their demands. He, no doubt, presents a different model for the U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, especially in his engagement with the Iranian file. His administration, however, does not hesitate in continuing its support of many regimes that care less about their peoples’ aspiration.

S: How do you read the "New Middle East" term, which dates back to President George W. Bush?

W: Issuing the term “New Middle East” in the post-9/11 context carried a new U.S. vision for the region marked by instituting democracy, dwarfing the impact of armed groups, and resolving the Arabi-Israeli conflict through Arabs “concession” to the principle of co-existence. The circulation of the term in light of the U.S. invasion in Iraq (2003) and the U.S. lack of intervention during the Israeli bombardment of Lebanon (2006) enhanced concerns in the Arab street of a new U.S.-led imperial investment dedicated to dividing Arab countries into new entities. The European imperial history in the region, particularly through the “divide and rule” policy in the aftermath of the collapse of Islamic caliphate system, along with the unrest projected in the aftermath of the Arab Spring have added more meanings to this term. Some Arabs even consider the Arab Spring as a translation of the ideological project envisioned by the Bush administration. When we use this term, we must pay close attention not to simplify our reading of the contemporary Arab scene as if it is a direct outcome of one uniform American strategy. We need to pay attention to the power players in every Arab country in addition to the viable role of regional powers (Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel), and international forces (Russia and China). We also have to acknowledge the revolutionary spirit that populations carried against authoritarianism. Centralized governance and lack of check and balance have resulted in the disenfranchisement of minorities along ethnic, religious, sectarian, tribal, and

partisan lines. This dynamism pushed many people to demand justice and self-determination. Conspiracy theories usually ignore this complexity in favor of singling the United States as the sole disruptor in the region without recognizing that the contemporary U.S. foreign policy is invested in interacting with stabilizing forces rather than creating new sources of instability. This, of course, does not exempt the United States of any critique for its many serious wrongdoings and for serving its own agenda in the region.

S: What about the future of current political transformation? Do you think there will be a New Middle East?

W: It is very difficult to predict the future of the Middle East. Will the current political conflicts impose de facto realities that require restructuring Arab countries as what happened in Sudan? Will the civil wars in Yemen and Syria (with the continuing split of regional and international positions and supports) lead to sectarian-based entities? What is the future of Iraq in light of the sharp division among Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish communities so long as the regime is incapable of enforcing security and equitable distribution of wealth? What is the outcome of the conflict in Libya? To what extent will Gulf Cooperation Council states pursue policies of exclusion, repression, and lack of fair representation? What is the reaction of the opposition to the military rule in Egypt and its systemic prosecution of its opponents? These are questions, which I cannot claim the ability to answer. One common denominator among such countries, however, has been the absence of decentralization in governance. Arab nation-states are a product of arbitrary colonial mapping (though still within the systematic framework of Sykes-Picot Agreement). The military regimes inheriting those states in the post-colonial era faced a serious challenge in dealing with the complexity of the new states. Centralized governance emerged as a common strategy in managing the populations in every state. This forged a space for disempowered groups to rally behind other forces in order to secure, if not control, public trust, leading to an era of instability. Subsequently, the only possible resolution in the Arab world is to adopt pluralist constitutions and governance structures. Another means to enforcing stability and security is to produce conditions for governments to maintain a sense of sovereignty in managing their local affairs. Although continuing Saudi-led interventions and confrontations may seem to be the only way to preserve a country like Yemen, for instance, de facto outcomes could result in disrupting it. If it is necessary to use the term "New Middle East", then let us hope that the region's decision-makers and their power sources in the East and the West recognize the importance of sovereignty and decentralization in governance, rather than continuing to boost current existential war projects.

S: Has the extremist religious discourse contributed to division in the Arab world?

W: Since the 1950s, we have witnessed the emergence of an Islamist extremist discourse disconnected from early calls for reforms from Muslim thinkers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This discourse was not limited to criticizing the Arab military regimes

and their compliance with either capitalism or socialism during the Cold War, but called upon Islamists to inherit power through “jihad” revolutionary means. Such a change in rhetoric was a direct reaction to the systematic violence and policies of repression and persecution directed against Islamists aspiring for Islamic-based governmentality. This climate made “risk and opportunity” politics the norm in Arab socio-politics, which continues to breed extremism and violence. There is no doubt that the Islamist extremist discourse presents a serious problem in its all complexities. Its dogma is rather a product of intolerance and inability to understand each other. This is why we experience little dialogue at this critical time, when the sounds of guns are loud and blood is everywhere in the region.

S: In light of what you mentioned, is it expected that the radical groups are going to inherit the political situation?

W: It is hard to imagine that those groups will be the only ones to dominate the political spectrum. Military confrontations are still there. There is also the vital role of regional and international forces in the region blessed by a complete international rejection. It may seem that the current Islamic discourse is unable to deal with such groups, but I bet on future generations to employ the rising rejection of public rejection of the philosophy of takfir (apostasy charging) and death. One cannot predict the outcomes of the dynamics of the current conflict though. To what extent could Iran continue its support for the Bashar regime? To what extent can Saudi Arabia continue its war in Yemen? To what extent will Turkey stand on the side of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt? To what extent would Israel intervene in the conflicts? A number of miscalculated decisions may lead to exploding the entire region, making it easier for those groups to speed up organization and control. I believe we are in a very complicated stage that may take enough time for such groups to continue their violence. This stage is bound to lead to another one that enables future generations to reject all kinds of tragedies and sufferings committed in the name of religion. This reality will be possible once the public becomes capable of transcending current polarizations, based on “my way or the highway” philosophy.

S: You are, of course, aware that the Arab Spring moment signaled some hope regarding resistance against authoritarian regimes and aspirations to building states of institutions in the Arab world, but the Arab Spring turned into a threat to the national entity of each state. Will it be possible for the Arab Spring promise to repeat itself even in different ways?

W: Reproducing that peaceful Arab Spring moment as a headline for another stage of political change is very difficult. We are now in a different phase. The title of this phase is "No Return" because the ultimate say is for weaponry and conflicting local, regional, and international power players. Hope, however, remains that it will be possible to re-live those moments when people once demanded a better life rather peacefully. It is possible to log into a phase of peace but in other circumstances because we must first log out of this bitter era. In the past fifty years, we have struggled with the heavy legacy of colonialism, i.e., authoritarianism. The Arab Spring

moment presented the opportunity to engage with the consequences of this struggle. The current violence ravaging the region is a token of an era in which we are forced to deal with the consequences of the consequences. I hope the next era will allow future generations the opportunity to comprehend the high price paid by the region's populations to these armed conflicts.

S: What about the new media? Does it carry some hope in terms of spreading awareness and providing room for freedom of expression? Is it a critical factor in the public struggle against their governments?

W: Alternative media is no more than a tool that could be utilized for positive and negative ends. A lot of rumors, superstitious observations, fabricated news, and gossip are transmitted through social media applications. But, such applications have become in some way a liberator for individuals. Now, no one can control the flow of information. This, in turns, empowers the recipients to interact with news whether it confirms or contradicts their perspectives. Media consumption is, therefore, no longer an act of reception, as is the case in the past, when people relied on state-sponsored radio, news channels, and newspapers to get both information and its interpretation. In fact, dealing with the new media grants the consumer the opportunity to engage with information more critically. Alternative media has also provided a communication mechanism with the various communities within every Arab state, including Arab diaspora worldwide. This transformation in media may play an important role in pressuring participating power players in the political spectrum of every country, and creating a space for dialogues informed by openness to information and news. The real role for activists in this new media space is to participate in spreading an awareness of diversity in all its forms.

S: Finally, how do you see to the Yemeni case with all its complexities and the interference of regional and international powers as a crucial factor in the Yemeni society's internal conflicts?

W: The failure of the Yemeni experiment in peaceful transition of power embodies the afflicting crisis of the region. The misdirection of the "Quranic march," Ansarullah's (aka, Houthis') revolutionary philosophy, from calls to create a governance system capable of providing social justice for all segments of society to violations of national dialogue and seizure of power in a manner that resulted in the exclusion of other power players is a token of "risk and opportunity" politics in the region. One of the factors behind this dynamism is mistrust among political parties in the country. The Interference of the coalition in Yemen aggravated the conflict and ascribed to it a sectarian sense. The alliance between the Houthis with the ex-president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, added another a local regional layer to the tension. The country is, thus, wrapped in a war within a war with tribal, sectarian, partisan, and regional aspects. The emergence of armed groups in various parts of the country presents a challenge to the solidification of the state in any post-war settlement. Many cities have been ravaged, the number of casualties is on the rise, the infrastructure is almost completely ruined, and polarization threatens social cohesion. Will the

conflict lead to the fragmentation of the country into north and south? Will Yemen disintegrate into more than one region? Will the national dialogue recommendations to decentralize governing through the establishment of six semi-sovereign areas be implemented? It is hard to predict with certainty the country's next phase, but dialogue remains the best solutions to peace. The real losers of this violence cycle, at the end of the day, are Yemenis.