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Arab Muslims in TV screens: The reproduction of reality by the American Entertainment Industry in the age of contemporary radical armed groups

العرب المسلمون على شاشات التلفاز: إعادة إنتاج الواقع من طرف هيئة صناعة الترفيه الأمريكية في عصر الجماعات المتطرفة المعاصرة

Benziane Mohammed Nabil¹, Abdelhay Bakhta¹

¹Laboratory of Gender Studies, Languages and Sociolinguistic Diversities. University of Mostaganem – Algeria,
benzianenabil@gmail.com, bakhta.abdelhay@gmail.com

Abstract

The Arab Muslim character has always represented a problematic issue in the outputs of the American Entertainment Industry. From violence and backwardness, through fanaticism and exoticism to recently terrorism, the image of Arab Muslims has been ideologically structured to reinforce these already settled presumptions. This representation, as the paper at hand is concerned, attempts to reproduce ‘reality out there’ from a biased perspective that aims, in turn, to promote the image of ‘villain Arabs’. In the process of examining this vilified depiction of Arab Muslims, semiotic analysis stands out to be one prominent approach to decipher and reveal the unsaid about this ideological discourse which is inherent in cinematic products and, yet, to inspect the way in which reality is reproduced so that to manifest as ‘social consciousness’ about Arabs and Muslims. The contemporary radical armed groups, however, extensively contributed to uphold the image of ‘fanatic

Muslims' in TV screens as they show adherence to certain extremist ideologies, therefore, they present an erroneous image of Islam and Muslims. Ultimately, this picture is considered by the American Entertainment Industry as 'reality out there' about Arab Muslims.

Keywords: Arab Muslims, American Entertainment Industry, Reality, TV Screens, Ideology, Semiotic Analysis, Contemporary Radical Armed Groups

Corresponding author: Benziane Mohammed Nabil, e-mail: benzianenabil@gmail.com.

المخلص

مثلت شخصية العربي المسلم دائما قضية إشكالية في منتجات هيئة صناعة الترفيه الأمريكية بدءا من العنف والتخلف مروراً بالتعصب والغرائبية، ووصولاً إلى الإرهاب، بنية تشويه صورة العرب المسلم بطريقة أيديولوجية لتعزز كل هذه الافتراضات المجسدة فعلياً. مثل هكذا تصوير، كما هو الاهتمام الفعلي لهذا المقال، الذي يهدف إلى إعادة إنتاج 'الواقع المتواجد فعلاً' من وجهة نظر متحيزة، والتي تهدف بدورها إلى الترويج لصورة 'العربي الشرير'.

في سبيل دراسة الصورة المشوهة للعرب المسلمين يتجلى التحليل السيميائي منهاجاً مهماً لتفكيك الغطاء ونزعه عن هذا الخطاب الأيديولوجي المتجذر في المنتجات السينمائية، و أيضاً لفحص الكيفية التي تمت بها عملية إنتاج الواقع لكي تمثل 'وعياً اجتماعياً' للعرب والمسلمين. مع ذلك، أسهمت الجماعات المتطرفة المعاصرة بشكل كبير في ترسيخ صورة 'المسلم المتعصب' على شاشات التلفاز

بإظهارها علنا ولائها لبعض الأيديولوجيات المتطرفة وبالتالي مثلوا صورة خاطئة عن الإسلام والمسلمين مما أدى في الأخير بهيئة صناعة الترفيه الأمريكية إلى اعتبار صورتهم كحقيقة مجسدة فعليا عن العرب المسلمين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العرب المسلمون, هيئة صناعة الترفيه الأمريكية, الواقع, شاشات التلفاز, أيديولوجيا, التحليل السيميائي, الجماعات المتطرفة المعاصرة

1. INTRODUCTION

The composition of cinematic discourse makes the perception of 'reality out there' a complicated task to accomplish. Movies, drama series and even animated sitcoms, for instance, are structured using not merely images but, also, sounds, graphics, print, speeches and visual effects. Indeed, what is referred to as 'real' can be 'unreal' or 'partially real' based on estimated opinions and misleading facts.

However, cinematic products tend to communicate meaning through different complex channels often associated with denotative and connotative meanings of discourse. Here, producers of content implicate and direct audiences' reception of 'reality' to an already intended meaning. This process of implicating ideology in cinematic discourse and therefore manifests it as 'reality out there', is adopted by the American Entertainment Industry to portray Arab Muslims in contemporary productions. In almost all outputs that include Middle East issues, the audience experience Arabs and Muslims mentally more than what they really are. Furthermore, this mental experience is substantially reinforced by certain optical ideologies that serve the representation of false reality about

them. Different linguistic approaches can be used to decipher the inherent ideology in cinematic images.

Because of its depth analysis of signifier/signified ultimate meanings, semiotic analysis stands out to be a key approach in reading cinematic images, as well as, understanding their implications and their depiction of 'reality out there'. This approach shall be used in the present paper, also, to see how different images when associated with sounds and visual effects, for instance, brings forward secondary connotative meanings that affect the perception and understanding of the optical moving image.

2. Optical and Mental perception of cinematic discourse

Since we recognise the world through our senses, the image can represent either something correct or incorrect inside the mind. In that, the similitude of what we see to what is already settled in mind, an idea or a presumption, can lead to an uncertain result that is often concluded with a judgement. In this respect, the field of semiotics is often referred to as what establishes a link between one object that identifies another through a third object (Morris, 1974, p.15).

Semiotics is, also, the field that has concerns with anything that can be regarded as a sign (Eco, 1976, p.7). So, to build a comprehensive meaning out of the image requires the analysis of the variety of components that make the entire image. Furthermore, the golden rule to read an image is to accept and receive it without prejudgement and without any religious, historical, cultural, ideological and aesthetical backgrounds (Rouillé, 2005, p.22).

When exposed to cinematic discourse, however, the human consciousness reacts and constructs meaning over what the eyes see and the ears hear. The first and most valuable aspect in this process is the image; which introduces the meaning and indicates the direction of understanding and attention as well. The word 'image', indeed, has two conjoined meanings: an image is an optical pattern; it is also a mental experience, which is probably why we use the word "imagine" to describe the mental creation of pictures (Monaco, 2000, p.155). Thus, the experience of images happens through two distinct operations that decide the final significance of visual products. Semioticians often refer to these operations as signifier and signified, in other words, the acoustic image and the mental image. Indeed, each sign has signifier and signified, the signifier is any material form used to convey meaning, mail message, email, sound and so on. The signified, on the other hand, is the concept that is indicated by messages and sounds (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009, p32).

Likewise, the image, might serve different meanings that point towards further implications and revoke its primary purposes. Every picture has three messages: Linguistic, denotative and rhetoric messages (Barthes, 1982, p.25). As a result of single images realisation, the moving image came to conceive the load of the variety of messages in single images and achieve excellence as it has the ability to create reality for movement inside the conceived picture and contest the human imagination (Metz, 1968, p.23).

Interestingly enough, the American Entertainment Industry structures its visual products based on the balance between optical and mental perception of images to deliver a deceptive image of Arab Muslims. This balance aims at limiting the scope of interpretation for the audience as to serve particular

intentions. Yet, the observer of such discourse will be restricted within a circle of interpretation. His/her reading of moving images points merely towards the intention of the producer of content. The process of positioning the viewer or reader of a media text is an ideological process, where the viewer or reader is called to take a position that fit with him or her (Bignell, 2002, p.212). As a matter of fact, cinematic discourse creators, exceedingly, take it upon themselves to position their audience and direct their understanding, as well as their interpretation of what they observe on television; therefore, they define to them what is 'reality out there' and what is not.

3. 'Reality out there' as broadcasted by the American Entertainment Industry

A good deal of attention has been given to how cinema uses semiotic signs to deliver and implement ideology within its discourse. Arguably, ideology is a set of ideas that serve an individual or a group of people's interests over others. Furthermore, an ideology is a way of perceiving reality and society and which assumes, also, that some ideas are self-evidently true, while others are self-evidently biased or untrue (Bignell, 2002, p.37). Yet, cinema uses merely parts of reality to form its images (Metz, 1974, p.23).

The implementation of ideology in cinematic discourse has recently become a central focus for researchers in media texts' analysis who attempt to examine the use of ideological deceptive reality which, in turn, is reproduced from 'reality out there'. Ideology, in its essence, attempts to convince us through different manners that it's us who generate meaning (Bignell, 2002, p.237) i.e. the producer of content in cinematic discourse adjusts his message to serve a particular intention, then, broadcast it in a complex manner picturing it to the audience as

his/her own interpretation. In fact, the audience contributes, also, in the structure of final judgments through establishing references between he/she sees and what is already known to him/her. In this sense, cultural and religious presumptions and beliefs affect his/her interpretation. Again, much of this knowledge is currently delivered by media's different outlets; therefore, the process of interpretation is substantially connected with previous visuals.

Interestingly enough, the media represents world that is more real than reality that we can experience. People lose the ability to distinguish between reality and fantasy. They also begin to engage with the fantasy without realising what it really is (Baudrillard, 1994, p.76). Furthermore, civilised people are now living inside cultures that media has determined much of their appearances. Media formulates, to some extent, societies positively or negatively; its visual, printed or auditory manners are permeated with optical images, variety of goals and intended effects (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009, p.9).

The cinematic discourse, as well, alters people's perception of 'reality out there'. This is mainly carried out through the implementation of ideology within images. The image, in cinematic discourse, is a subject that has been worked on; it has been chosen, edited, synthesised, and processed based on allocation rules which are either aesthetic or ideological and that contain a lot of suggestive factors (Barthes, 1977, p.19). Such images are ideologically structured to serve single circled meanings, and which pretend the depiction of reality as it is. The interpretation of these images, as intended by their producers, must be limited to certain already settled spaces. Mostly, they are generated to trigger ideological ideas, therefore, create references with previous knowledge. Actually there are no

neutral images that are identical to reality, though they appear to be identical to things they display. Images sincerely record only what is happening in front of cameras, without interference of language and culture...images automatically reproduce things happening in front of the camera and then pretend identity with reality (Bignell, 2002, pp.132-133). Hence, the depiction of reality in cinematic discourse becomes a selective process, where the reference to 'real' might not necessary be real; or might be aesthetically or ideologically real.

Over and above, cinematic pictures focus on Time-Movement factor to structure their meanings and represent a bias reality. The Time-Movement factor suggests that cinematic products are manipulated and edited to fit the final meaning intended by the creator of content. For instance, it is not quite right to say that the cinematographic image is in the present. What is in the present is what the image 'represents', but not the image itself, which, in cinema as in painting, is never to be confused with what it represents (Deleuze, 1989, pp. 8-9). Therefore, cinematic images generate imaginary perceptions, then, depict them to the audience as 'reality'.

Accordingly, in order to make the cinematic discourse more realistic, producers of content implicate further variables and codes that impact the perception, as well as, the interpretation of messages depicted on TV screens. Remarkably, cinema differs from other arts as it employs together the image, the sound, the movement, and the consistency; therefore, presents a recognition of things which are all absent and not present (Metz, 1975, pp.14-76).

Interestingly enough, the producer of content's offer of pleasure to the audience relies on the ideological

manipulation of codes of the cinematic film (Mulvey, 1975, pp.6-18). Here, the cinematic discourse is structured in a way that triggers further senses among the audience, and that, also, leads into references to personal experiences and background knowledge that finally affect the way of approaching the image as it is represented. Most of movies, for instance, that are constructed using these variables are ideologically manipulated to serve the already settled meanings and intentions of content producers. Overall, cinema is a cultural and economic institution; movies are made and watched in a commercial context. Most contemporary produced movies are narrative fictional (Bignell, 2002, p.229). Substantially, such movies are produced by the American Entertainment Industry to target Arab Muslims as ‘Villains’, especially in the age on contemporary radical armed groups.

4. The deceptive reality about Arab Muslims on American TV screens

Since its early days, the American Entertainment Industry adopted a policy of picturing the Arab Muslim character as a ‘Villain’. In almost of its products about the Middle East and extremism, Arabs and Muslims appeared to be the ‘archenemy’ of the Western civilisation and to modernity. Hundreds of Hollywood movies, drama series and even animated sitcoms represented Arab Muslims in a negative way, therefore, contributed to alter the perception of actual reality about them. The present paper shall examine several scenes taken from two selected case studies where Arab Muslims are represented as ‘villain holy warriors’. These selected case studies are *Rules of Engagement* (2000), and *Homeland* (2011-present).

Rules of Engagement is a Hollywood movie released in 2000 that recounts the American Marines’ code and rules of

engagement during battles. The story is about Colonel Childers, the best friend of Colonel Hodges, who is charged with murder by a Marshall court for executing 83 Yemeni protestors, including women and children, who were protesting near the American embassy in Sana'a, Yemen, against the American presence in their country (Fig.1). As a lawyer, Colonel Hodges attempts to defend his best friend from the charges of murder; claiming that the crowd carried weapons and they opened fire on the Marines first. At the end of the movie, Colonel Childers was found not guilty by the Marshall court for executing 83 civilians.



Fig.1. A scene showing the demise of 83 Yemeni protestors by the American Marines, *Rules of Engagement*, 2000

Considering the context of the movie and the sequence of its scenes, the audience would sympathise with Colonel Childers for the execution of 83 Yemeni civilians. Indeed, the movie starts with a scene from Vietnam 1968, where a group of Marines led by both Marines' Leaders, were ambushed by the Vietnamese in a place known as Ca-Lu. Several Marines were dead in this short battle, which represented a nightmare for Colonel Hodges (Fig.2). This opening scene is regarded inappropriate, taking into account that the movie is not about the war in Vietnam but in Yemen. In fact, it has been chosen to trigger the sympathy of the audience with the American Marines, claiming that every incident outside the American

territories is regarded as a national duty. It also triggers the sense of revenge and patriotism among the audience as the movie shifts directly after this scene to the Yemeni context.



Fig.2. The opening scene of the movie showing the death of American Marines in Vietnam, *Rules of Engagement*, 2000

Here, the creator of the content established a direct link between the death of American Marines in Vietnam and the events in Yemen. The audience is called to consider the actions of the Marines in Yemen as a national duty, furthermore, as an act of revenge to the death of American soldiers. Moreover, the sequence of these events reflects the intention that civilians could be victims in time of deadly conflicts.

On the level of Semiotics, both images transfer two contradictory meanings to the audience; yet, inferring the sympathy with the American Marines over the Yemeni civilians. As the camera moves closely to the bright faces of the dead American soldiers; with an emotional music in the background, the audience, here, is called to contemplate the humanistic factor and sympathises with the families, and probably children of these soldiers. Also, the position of soldiers in the scene infers peace and convenience to the audience, who is exposed to a purely emotional scene from the Vietnamese context. Paradoxically, the Yemeni civilians, including women and

children, are represented dead in an accumulated manner without any sound in the background, thus, the audience is the unsympathetic with those who manifested against the American embassy.

In a previous scene (Fig.3.), the creator of the content showed a group of armed individuals shooting towards the embassy, and a group of women and children were pictured standing next to them. This scene attempts to convey the message that the armed individuals used women and children as human shields, therefore, the Marines were compelled to open fire, yet, women and children are victims of a deadly engagement. Later in the movie, Colonel Childers would confirm that 'civilians could be victims of engagement'. Still, the movie attempts to convey that their death is to be afforded to the armed individuals and not the American Marines.

One prominent aspect that shifted the perception of reality in these scenes is the manipulation of the position of camera. In the scene of the dead American Marines in Vietnam, the camera moves closely to the soldiers adopting a first person omniscient and keeps moving down, showing clearly their faces. The audience is positioned directly inside the scene as an actual Marine member. This position, certainly, triggers the sympathy of the audience with the American Marines over their enemies in the coming scenes of the movie. On the contrary, the Yemeni civilians are represented using a third person omniscient from a far top place. This infers that they are actual enemies that must not be sympathetic with. Furthermore, the image of the dead American Marines (Fig.2.), shows clearly that the camera focuses on the soldier more than the background, unlike the civilians in (Fig.1.), where the focus of the camera is on the

standing American Marine, who is looking into the accumulated dead men, women and children.



Fig.3. A group of armed individuals shooting towards the American embassy with women and children in the background. *Rules of Engagement*, 2000

As a matter of fact, the Hollywood movie *Rules of Engagement*, has endorsed particular ideologies in the depiction of Islam and Arab Muslims. At the time when Colonel Hodges arrived to Yemen in his way to find evidence to discharge his best friend Colonel Childers, he discovered audio tapes near the embassy and in police stations (Fig.4.).

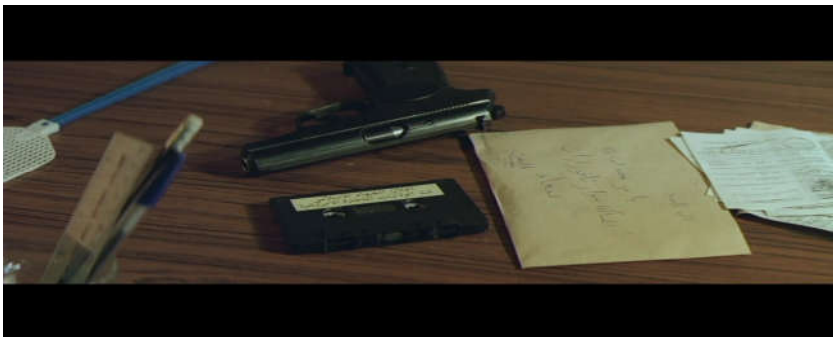


Fig.4. An audio tape found by Colonel Hodges inside the demolished American embassy in Yemen. *Rules of Engagement*, 2000

The label on these audio tapes is written in Arabic language, later will be translated into English in the court, and

clearly states 'The declaration of Islamic Jihad on the United States'. The use of the term 'Islamic' infers that Muslims are in a religious fight with the United States; and that they should be labelled, and seen by the Americans as 'holy warriors' that challenge their existence. The revolver next to the audio tape indicates that the fight is on-going and Americans are in serious threat, therefore, the mass execution of 83 civilians is justified as pre-emptive strikes. Furthermore, the crowd that manifested against the American presence in Yemen claimed no affiliation to any radical armed group, as the movie showed. Thus, the use of religion in this context is distinctly ideological.

As an attempt to prove its ideological, as well as, deceptive representation of Arab Muslims as 'holy warriors', the movie presented an outlook of the future challenges for the Americans with Arab Muslims (Fig.5.). Indeed, this outlook is based on the presumption of 'conventional Muslim terrorism', which, in turn, is considered to be a serious threat to any peaceful coexistence unless the false accusations are to be stopped by the decision makers.



Fig.5. An outlook presented by the movie to the future coexistence between the United States and Arab Muslim. *Rules of Engagement*, 2000

In these two separate scenes, the movie attempt to deliver the message that the American presence in the MENA region is at a serious threat. Civil Americans are claimed to be targets of Arab Muslims. The involvement of a young kid, who was pointing out with his hand towards Colonel Hodges, indicates to the audience that the struggle with Arab Muslims is on-going. The young kid is shown wearing a traditional cloth and living in miserable conditions, without education and health care. The movie, here, attempts to evoke the idea of ‘clash of civilisations’ and total war between the ‘civilised west’ and the ‘intolerance’ among Arab Muslims. Therefore, the reality about Islam and Arab Muslims has been distinctly altered in this movie which, indeed, infers purely ideological perceptions to the audience.

Similarly, *Homeland* (2011-present) is another product of the American Entertainment Industry that presented a distorted image of Arab Muslims. It is a drama series that tells the story of an American Marine Sergeant Brody who was turned into a terrorist after eight years of captivity and torture by Al-Qaeda radical organisation. The drama series focuses mainly on the CIA’s special unit of counter-terrorism which attempts to detect sleeper cells and revoke terrorist attacks against the United States. One of the major features that the drama series attempts to focus on is the shift that occurred in the life of Sergeant Brody after he converted to Islam, and later turned into a terrorist. Indeed, the distorted image of Arab Muslims and of Islam as well, is conveyed to the audience mainly by the character Sergeant Nicholas Brody.

In the first episodes of the drama series, Sergeant Brody initiated the idea of the diversity between both civilisations (Fig.6.). While proclaiming to the plans of radical armed groups against his country, Sergeant Brody referred to the United States as ‘the western civilisation’. This, indeed, indicates that the western civilisation is represented by the United States; and any terrorist plans against it, is regarded as an aggression against the whole western civilisation. Besides, the usage of the term ‘Islamist’, in this context, infers to the audience that the terrorist attacks are always linked to individuals who claim adherence to Islam. On Semiotics level, while he was announcing his claim, Sergeant Brody and the assistant agents of CIA appeared with serious gestures as to transfer to the audience that the speech is official. Without any further voices in the background, the focus of the audience is attracted to the speech of Sergeant Brody.



Fig.6. The proclaim of Sergeant Nicholas Brody about the plans of radical armed groups against the United States. *Homeland, 2011-present*

In addition to the speech of Sergeant Brody, the deceptive reality that Arab Muslims are in a ‘total war’ with the United States was distinctly insisted in the early episodes of the drama series. CIA’s special agent Saul Berenson established another binary system and introduced it to the audience (Fig.7.).

Here, the audience is exposed to an Orientalist idea that insists the segregation between Arab Muslims and the West. This speech is expressed by a character who was introduced in the early episodes as a wise man. Therefore, his claim is to be considered by the audience as thoroughly valid.

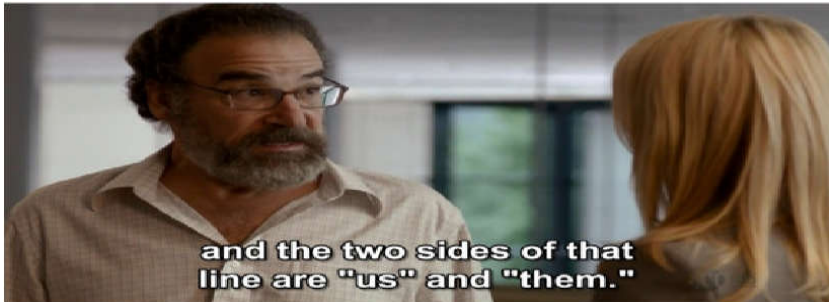


Fig.7. CIA's special agent Saul Berenson announcing the Orientalist binary system. *Homeland*, 2011-present

Interestingly enough, the claimed clash between Arab Muslims and the United States is conveyed in the drama series as it is religiously motivated on the part of Arab Muslims. CIA's special agent Peter Quinn is called by the US assembly of National Security as an expert to debrief them about the actual motivations of Muslims in planning for attacks against their country. The agent starts his testimonial declaring 'It's all in the book. The only book they ever read...And usher in a world without infidels. And it's been that way since the seventh century'.

Previously to this scene, the audience is exposed to an extreme view from Iraq and Syria where a number of American Marines were deceased. Peter Quinn's scene came to explain the reasons behind their death; therefore, the audience's attention has been successfully attracted to the speech of the CIA's special agent. His speech, in fact, is regarded as an expertise,

considering he is claimed in the drama series to be in continuous ties with Arab Muslims. Furthermore, before he started speaking, the drama series showed the entire assembly ardent to hear his testimonial; thus, his speech is pictured as the central focus to the entire members of the assembly; indirectly, the central focus of the audience.

Peter Quinn's discourse attempt to convince the audience that Arab Muslims should be regarded as 'holy warriors' as they are religiously motivated; thus, their fight with the United States is part of their faith, as claimed in the drama series. The reference to history in his discourse attempts to trigger the recall of previous attacks against the United States, mainly the events of 9/11. While speaking, the special agent is represented as exhausted, and with several scars on his face. Later in the upcoming episodes, Peter Quinn is merely the character that suffers from the terrorist actions of radical individuals. Indeed, he will be shown tortured and affronted in the name of religion, again, by extremist members. Subsequently, the audience is called to recall his testimonial in order to prove its validity.

Indeed, the entire of these scenes came to confirm the opening scene of the drama series, where the creator of this content insists that the conflict with Muslims is also ideologically motivated. It is clearly stated that 'Wahhabism' is an 'anti-western' ideology that tend to incite Muslims to refuse all types of contact with the West. The scene shows the early assemblies and celebrations of Saudis after the foundation of Saudi Arabia in the early 1930s. It confirms the claim of clash that even Islam is threatened by the West. At that time the narrator stated 'they want to go back in time', an image of a prostrate old man was accompanied. This indicates a direct link

to the audience between regression and Islam. Ultimately, the alternation of reality about Arab Muslims has been set in the early scenes of this drama series, which is exceedingly motivated by the ideas of Orientalism.

Interestingly enough, *Homeland* represented certain speeches of radical individuals to transmit its ideological outlook of the future coexistence between Arab Muslims and the United States (Fig.10.). The drama series attempts to use such viewpoints to convey the idea that their struggle with Muslims is on-going because it is part of their faith. Pictured in complete darkness, the leader of the radical organisation is expressing his attitudes and plans against the United States. The scene of darkness infers to the audience that expectations and presumptions of future terrorist aggressions seldom found, unless revealed by the CIA; therefore, the image and the discourse of CIA agents, in the drama series, should be regarded true and valid.



Fig.8. A leader of a radical organisation expressing his attitudes to a CIA special agent. *Homeland*, 2011-present

Distinctly, both selected case studies have extensively contributed to alter the reality about Arab Muslims in American TV screens. *Homeland* and *Rules of Engagement* are merely samples of several other outputs that tend to represent the Arab Muslim character as a 'villain' who is willing to carry out a 'holy preordained war'. The discourse that it used to convey this

deliberate, as well as, distorted image has been ideologically motivated. Its main objective is to serve certain false beliefs and presumptions about Islam and Arab Muslims. On the other hand, the products of the American Entertainment Industry are regarded to be one prominent source of knowledge, where the audience tend to incarnate these television beliefs into actions in real life.

5. CONCLUSION

The central aim of this paper was to detect the reproduction of reality about Arab Muslims in the outputs of the American Entertainment Industry. For the purpose of examining this deliberate alternation of actual facts, a number of scenes have been selected from two main case studies namely, *Rules of Engagement* and *Homeland*. Indeed, both case studies have confirmed the racial presumptions and the stereotypical profiling; therefore, distinctly contributed in the alternation of the actual reality of Islam and Arab Muslims. It goes without saying that the invalid usage of terminologies and falsified images of Arab Muslims that have been spotlighted in both case studies attempt to label Muslims as either terrorists or sympathetic with terrorism. This, in turn, flourishes the notion of Islamaphobia in both, the United States and the Western countries.

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