

The Face of Danger

Beards in the U.S. Media's Representations of Arabs, Muslims, and Middle Easterners

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ABSTRACT

To many Americans, geographical imaginings of Middle Easterners, Arabs, and Muslims are frequently derogatory. Though such imaginings have different meanings, origins, and ramifications, they have nevertheless reproduced essentialized perceptions of these diverse groups of people as the backward or dangerous “other.” Images such as the oppressed woman draped in a burka or the angry man with a long beard touting a gun are prevalent in everyday discourses, popular media, and political rhetoric in the U.S. Particularly since 9/11 and the escalation of the “war on terror,” these sorts of representations have not only become common, but have also had widespread ramifications in both domestic and international politics. Focusing on the scale of the body, our paper examines representations of the male body as a site and symbol of difference and “otherness.” Specifically, we examine beards, whether worn by al-Qaeda fighters or Afghan citizens, as key symbols in the manufacturing of Middle Eastern, Arab, and Muslim men as “the dangerous other.” By focusing on media representations of bearded men in our post 9/11 world, we show how certain men’s beards have been embedded in a discourse of fear, danger, and terror; and how the removal of the beard symbolizes modernization, westernization, and liberation. We argue that this othering of Middle Eastern, Arab, and Muslim men as “dangerous” not only creates a homogenized and distorted image of these diverse groups of people, but has also been used to justify social discrimination and U.S. hegemony.

...religious nuts with beards are trouble. I'm not out to dis all of you bearded readers, but my experience is that regardless of your faith, the ones with beards are the scariest.

Nadz Online, blog¹

ON JULY 9, 2007 IN AN AIRPORT TERMINAL IN LONDON, Metallica's lead singer James Hetfield was delayed and questioned by British airport officials whom assessed the beard on his face to be "Taliban-like" (AOL News 2007). Though the airport officials soon determined that the American rock-star was not a member of the Taliban and posed no inherent threat to UK national security (this incident occurred just days after a terrorist plot in Scotland was discovered), instances of bearded men being profiled as suspected terrorists are not uncommon. In 2006, Oscar Brufani, a fifty-two year old Argentinean man, was banned from distributing his potato chips to the Wal-Mart in Buenos Aires simply because employees of the store believed his bearded face looked too much like Osama bin Laden's (Naundorf 2006). Back in London, Mohsin Mohamed, a Muslim male, is suing his former employer Virgin Trains for discrimination. Mohamed claims—and Virgin denies—that he was fired after he refused an order to shave off his beard (Sturcke 2004). As these three brief examples demonstrate, whether kept by an American rock-star, an Argentinean potato chip distributor, or a Virgin Trains employee, beards have become potent symbols of danger and terrorism.²

Conventionally understood as political violence committed by non-state actors, terrorist acts have been committed by various people and groups – such as Timothy McVeigh, the Irish Republican Army, and al-Qaeda. However, it is often Muslims, Arabs, and/or Middle Easterners that are accused of, and associated with, these horrific acts (Shaheen 2001; Said 1997; Watts 2007).³ A telling example occurred in the midst of the tragedy in Oklahoma City in 1995. In the chaos that ensued immediately after the bombing, the media reported that officials were in pursuit of "Middle Eastern looking men." Apparently such a large and destructive attack was not only considered a uniquely "Middle Eastern trait," but finding the "Middle Eastern looking men" supposedly responsible for the attack was presumably a realistic goal (Woods 1996, 48; Sparke 1998). Though Middle Easterners have been the unfortunate targets of a grossly distorted bias, for many Americans it is often Muslims and Islam that invoke social anxiety or fear. Since the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, a perceived "Islamic threat" (Halliday 1999a, 107) has facilitated a false connection between Muslims and danger. Labeled "Islamophobia," (Gottschalk and Greenberg 2008), the fear of Muslims is not just a reductionist discourse, but it has also become an increasingly pervasive one. Within its reductions this discourse has had a tendency to confuse, conflate, or "lump" Muslims with Arabs and Middle Easterners (see discussion immediately following). Indeed, since 9/11, a "culture of fear" (Glassner 1999) has formed around Muslims, Middle Easterners, and Arabs alike;⁴ and is readily noticeable in the escalation of reported incidents of profiling and hate crimes in the U.S. (Elias 2006; Cole 2007).⁵

Numerous scholars have discussed a tendency of many Americans to confuse or equate Muslims with Middle Easterners and/ or Arabs (i.e. Gottschalk and Greenberg 2008, 3-4; Merskin 2004, 157-8; Woods 1996, 48-51). In a chapter sub-section titled "Arab=Muslim," media scholar Jack Shaheen (2008, xiii-xiv) discusses how Hollywood has for decades "lumped together Muslims and Arab as one homogenous blob." Likewise, Michael Suleiman (1988, ix) explains in his book *The Arabs in the Mind of America* that "most Americans cannot distinguish between Arabs, Turks, and Iranians, lumping them all together as Muslims." As common as this "lumping" of diverse peoples is today, it is not new. Indeed, it is an enduring legacy of European Orientalist discourses (see following section), which equated much of the "East" or the "Orient" with the Arab Islamic conquests of the 7th century (Lewis and Wigen 1997, 54). The "Muslim East," as it became known through Orientalist discourses, was essentialized as diametrically different from the "Christian West;" and the diversity of the "East" was largely ignored or generalized. Though Orientalist discourses have changed to some degree over time, the propensity to essentialize and generalize about the peoples of the "East" or the "Orient" remains – though today we are more likely to use the terms "Middle East," "Arab World," or "Muslim World."

Even though Islam originated in the Arabian Peninsula, and the Arabian Peninsula is generally considered part of the Middle East, it is a gratuitous error to conflate Arabs, Middle Easterners, and Muslims. First, people who self-identify as Arabs do not live only in the Middle East, nor are they all Muslims. Second, there is incredible diversity between Muslims. Not only do Muslims practice many different forms of Islam, but they also reside in all corners of the globe (there are more Muslims in Indonesia than in any country in the Middle East). Third, if it is even acceptable to label the people that live in the ambiguously defined Middle East as Middle Easterners, then it is crucial to note that these people have diverse religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds (from Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews to Christian Lebanese, from Sunni Kurds to Zoroastrian Iranians, or from Indian and Philippino migrant laborers to Coptic Christians). Regardless of these differences, there is still a tendency not only to homogenize many of these peoples, but also to do so through a multitude of negative cultural images and stereotypes – one of which is that of the backward and dangerous other (Merskin 2004, 158; Manners and Parmenter 2004, 5; Held 2005, 4).

By focusing on media representations of bearded men in our post 9/11 world, in this paper we highlight the central position the media has in creating and perpetuating views that link certain groups of people to danger. We argue that the conflation of Muslims, Arabs, and Middle Easterners with danger not only creates distorted images of these diverse peoples, but also perpetuates a culture of fear that has helped to justify social discrimination and hegemonic actions. Danger or fear, as recently discussed in a special forum of the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* (Sparke 2007; Lawson 2007), are powerful emotions that not only shape our imaginings of people and

places, but also affect and justify political, economic, and environmental policies (see also Gregory and Pred 2007; Gregory 2004; Said 1993; Falah, Flint, and Mamadouh 2006). As the brief introductory examples above illustrate, the perceived connection of terrorism to a particular bodily image has become so profound that just a beard can invoke active profiling and discrimination.

Scholarly literature and media coverage on bodily practices and representations of Muslims, Arabs, and/or Middle Easterners has largely focused on women (Rohde 2001b, 2001a; Scott 2001; Waldman 2001; Dwyer 1999; vom Bruck 2008). Focusing on the veil, hijab, and burka as politically charged symbols, these studies show that women have not only been gendered, but their bodies have become sites and symbols of identity and difference.⁶ Following common Orientalist discourses, a covered woman has become a symbol of subjugation and backwardness (Moghadam 1993, 26), and the removal of her coverings is associated with liberation and westernization (Moghadam 1993, 70; Shaarawi 1986). Similar to a woman's body, we argue that a man's body (and his facial hair in particular) is a powerful site for the construction of identity and otherness.

In the remainder of this paper, we first detail the enduring role that Orientalist discourses have had on our geographical imagination, and then we provide a brief discussion on the meanings of beards over the last several centuries. After these two contextual sections, we discuss the U.S. media's representations of beards since 9/11, focusing on coverage of Osama bin Laden, the "liberation" of Afghanistan, and the war in Iraq.

AMERICAN ORIENTALISM AND PRACTICAL ORIENTALISM

Since the early European colonial era, Orientalist discourses have been created and used to signify and represent the East and the Orient as something inherently different from the West or Occident. Though the boundaries of East/ West or Orient/ Occident have never been definitive (Lewis and Wigen 1997, 49-62), these imagined spaces have had the long-term effect of folding distance into difference and, thus, have helped to both historically and geographically construct the other. As Edward Said elucidated in his influential book *Orientalism* (1978), numerous images and symbols facilitated the construction of the backward other. Whether they are veils on subjugated women, angry bearded men with swords, or sultry women in exotic clothing, such images have worked not only to essentialize the people of the Orient as primitive, timeless, exotic, and violent, but also to help justify European domination of these supposedly backward people.

In the U.S. today, Orientalist geographical imaginings are clearly evident in representations of the Arab World, the Islamic World, and the Middle East. The manner in which these places are depicted in the U.S. can (in part) be understood within a framework of "American Orientalism" (Little 2002). American Orientalism is distinguished from the older European form primarily in its scope of experiencing the Orient. Western European geographical imaginings of the Orient were formed through

rather direct experiences with the region (i.e. personal travels, travelogues, colonialism, or military endeavors). Whereas American geographical imaginings of the Orient have been, in great part, based on abstractions and impressions (i.e. the media or political rhetoric) (Said 1997; Little 2002). Like the European-style, American Orientalism has essentialized diverse groups of people and produced popular imaginings that dramatize differences between “us” and “them.” Since September 11 and the escalation of the “war on terror,” American Orientalist discourses have had an increased tendency to conflate terrorism with Muslims, Arabs, and Middle Easterners (Watts 2007, 176). Consequently, the words “Islam,” “Muslim,” or “Middle East” don’t merely denote a religion, its believers, or a region, but they also invoke wider imaginings of violence and danger. Though many players have been involved, the media has been central in constructing, representing, and perpetuating geographical imaginings of these people and places (Suleiman 1988; Kellner 1992; Woods 1996; Said 1997; Halliday 1999b; Steet 2000; McAlister 2001; Little 2002; Kull 2003-4; Merskin 2004; Culcasi 2006; Shaheen 2001, 2008).

Negative and oversimplified American Orientalist imaginings have not only helped to shape general perceptions of Muslims, Arabs, and Middle Easterners, but they have also been “practiced.” Outlined by Haldrup, Koefoed, and Simonsen (2006), “practical Orientalism” refers to the ways in which imaginings of the other are folded into everyday discourses and experiences. As demonstrated through incidents of profiling, discrimination, and hate crimes, Orientalist imaginings do not just remain in one’s mind, but are performed and practiced. Further, such imaginings have also been actively used in order to generate moral justifications for U.S. hegemonic endeavors abroad (Sparke 2007, 1390; Flint and Ghazi 2004; Gregory 2004).

BEARDS AND BACKWARDNESS

Within Orientalist discourses, a beard is a powerful symbol that frequently invokes fear; but beards have meant different things to different people over time and space. From Abe Lincoln to the Ayatollah Khomeini, and from hockey players to hippies, beards can symbolize manliness and high class status; or conversely, eccentricity, filthiness, and backwardness. Anthropological and psychological studies on beards have shown that they are kept for numerous reasons, ranging from religious or cultural significance to a simple disdain for shaving (Peterkin 2001; Delaney 1994; Bunkin 2000; Berg 1951; Reynolds 1949; Leach 1957). Though beards are worn for varied and even ambiguous reasons, keeping a beard is a bodily practice that is embedded in particular discourses that help to give it meaning (Gole 2003).

In the case of religion—be it Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, or Christianity—beards have had great significance, though this significance is fluid and contextual.⁷ Within Islam, the Qur’an does contain general guidelines for the modest dress of both sexes (Al-Makki 1978), however it does not provide any provisions on facial hair. Yet growing a beard is a well-established tradition in many Muslim societies. This common practice

can be traced back to the Prophet Muhammad. The Prophet did not completely shave his beard, and therefore some Muslims keep their facial hair out of respect for the Prophet. However, since it is not compulsory to keep a beard, many Muslims are clean-shaven.⁸

Though beards are kept for numerous reasons and are not necessarily a marker of one's class or culture, they have nevertheless been equated with backward or non-western peoples for centuries. Indeed, beards became such a potent symbol of backwardness that their removal was required as part of westernizing and secularizing reforms that were instituted in both Russia and Turkey.

In the late 17th and early 18th centuries, Peter the Great instituted numerous policies that were intended to westernize Russia. For example, he sent Russians to Europe to be educated in western forms of government and business (Riasanovsky 2000, 285-7). He also moved the country's capital from Moscow to Saint Petersburg to be geographically closer to Western Europe. Physical appearance was central to Peter the Great's reforms. Not only did he encourage western-style dress, but he also taxed Russians who refused to shave their beards (Peterkin 2001, 33). Since most Europeans were clean shaven at this time, a beardless male face became a symbol of westernization.

After World War I, Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern-day Turkey, instituted numerous reforms that sought to westernize and secularize the burgeoning state.⁹ For example, he abolished the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Pious Foundations, he adopted the western calendar, and he changed the Turkish language from being based in the Arabic alphabet to the Latin alphabet (Kadioglu 1996, 186; Unsal 1979, 32). In November 1925, Ataturk's westernization policies began to include the more symbolic element of dress. He announced in a speech that "civilized and universal habiliment is the best proper appearance for our nation and we will dress accordingly" (Ataturk 1925). Accordingly, he abolished the fez (a traditional religious hat), he encouraged his male citizens to wear western-style suits and hats, and he limited the wearing of turbans and clokes to certified men of religion (Unsal 1979, 28). While the State prohibited men holding official state jobs to keep facial hair, all male citizens were discouraged from keeping beards. Ataturk did, of course, alter his own appearance with his reforms. He went from wearing a fez and a moustache, to western suits, European-styled hats, and a clean shaven face (figure 1). While the reforms Ataturk instituted were a move towards western politics and culture and away from religion in general, according to Turkish historian Artun Unsal (1979, 56), Ataturk's reforms were a move specifically away from Islam, which for centuries had been considered a non western religion.¹⁰

Russian and Turkish experiences exemplify a history of associating beards with backwardness and a clean shaven face with westernization. Even though men of all walks of life wear beards, the association between beards and backwardness is still common today; and as we focus on in this paper, beards are frequently central to discourses of danger and terrorism. From the Ayatollah Khomeini's long flowing beard to Osama

bin Laden's similarly iconic facial feature, beards have been emphasized in the media as a defining symbol of the dangerous other, and even more specifically as a symbol of Islamic extremism.

INTRODUCTION TO MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF BEARDS

Scholars, politicians, travelers, the mass media, and the general public have all played interconnected roles in constructing and perpetuating Orientalist discourses in general, as well as ones that specifically link beards to the dangerous other. In the remainder of this paper, we focus on the print media because of its central role in constructing and perpetuating geographical imaginings about Muslims, Arabs, and Middle Easterners; and because many Americans rely on the media as their dominant resource for acquiring information about distant places. Though it is unlikely that the print media have an explicit agenda to insult and incriminate specific groups of people, its representations of Muslims, Arabs, and Middle Easterners are often oversimplified and negative. Thus media representations warrant critical attention, if for no other reason than to explore and contextualize our geographical imagination. Our critique of how the media has used beards to symbolize the dangerous other begins with a review what is perhaps one of the most (in)famous, formative, and cited media articles that has perpetuated the idea that Islam is a religion to be feared. Second, we provide a brief review of post 9/11 representations of Muslims, Arabs, and the Middle East in *National Geographic Magazine*. After this general introduction to media representations of beards, we then delve into three specific case studies.¹¹

Bernard Lewis' (1990) *Atlantic Monthly* article "The Roots of Muslim Rage" has received widespread praise and criticism. In this article, Lewis proposes the thesis of "the clash of civilizations," which Samuel Huntington (1993) later elaborated on. Using broad and generalized categories, this thesis argues that the "Islamic civilization" is not only fundamentally different from "Western civilization," but that it is also on a pathway to "clash" with the "West." The discourse of difference and violence that forms the foundation of the "clash of civilizations" is evident in both the title of Lewis' article and the pictorial image that accompanies it. The title, "The Roots of Muslim Rage," not only directly links Muslims to "rage" or danger, but it also refers to Muslim rage as "rooted," implying that Muslim rage is a natural or unchanging aspect of the "Islamic civilization." The image (figure 2) of a dangerous Muslim man, who is wearing both a turban and a beard, is featured prominently on the cover of the magazine. His seething eyes which gaze upon (and reflect) the stars and stripes of the American flag facilitate a message that the innate rage that Muslims have is specifically directed towards America.

Lewis' *Atlantic Monthly* article is by no means unique in its portrayal of Muslims, Middle Easterners, and Arabs as dangerous or threatening. Mahmut Gokmen and Tyler Hass (2007) found that *National Geographic Magazine* has repeatedly represented the "Arab World" as a place of danger and violence. Moreover, since 9/11, there have been

numerous *National Geographic Magazine* articles that contain images that link beard wearing Muslim, Arab, and/ or Middle Eastern men with danger. For example, the image (figure 3) on the cover page of *National Geographic's* October 2003 issue juxtaposes various American-style Orientalist stereotypes about Saudi Arabia (Viviano 2003). In this photograph, Prince Mishaal bin Abdul Aziz is wearing a traditional flowing robe, a red checkered keffiyeh (men's headscarf) as well as full, dark beard. He holds a large sword high in the air, which is seemingly a commonplace practice because the dozens of men surrounding him appear rather disinterested. His dress and facial hair, along with the large, drawn-sword creates an impression of a violent and uncivilized Prince. Since he is the leader of Saudi Arabia, by association the country as a whole is likely perceived as a place of violence and backwardness. Another 2003 *National Geographic Magazine* article frames danger and fear in a specifically religious context. Photographer Alexandra Boulat (September 2003b) captures an image of three Iraqi men whom formed a loose neighborhood organization in an effort to keep their homes safe from potential looters. In the photograph, "Not in My Backyard", the middle-aged man in the background defiantly wields a gun and wears a beard. The young man in the front of the photo has a mustache, holds a stick, and wears a misbaha (prayer beads) around his neck. Another photograph taken by Boulat, which was part of a pictorial article that focused on Baghdad just before it was bombed by U.S. forces (June 2003a), shows a crowd of foreign Arab soldiers at an Iraqi training camp. They all seem to be shouting, most have a beard, and their arms all seem to be reaching for the Qur'an, which is held in the middle of this angry-looking crowd. Coupled with the title of the image, "Iraqi Jihad," this photograph creates a direct and powerful link between these bearded Arab soldiers and Islamic violence or terrorism.

In order to more fully examine the representations of the Middle East, Arabs, Islam, danger, terrorism, and beards in the media, we now delve into three case studies. First, we discuss a small sample of the post 9/11 reporting on Osama bin Laden and the Taliban; second we examine the connection between shaving and the "liberation" of Afghanistan; and lastly we consider how the U.S. media has portrayed beards and shaving in post Saddam Iraq.

REPRESENTATIONS OF OSAMA BIN LADEN AND THE TALIBAN

Many people consider Osama bin Laden to be the most evil and anti-American man alive. Unsurprisingly, this iconic dangerous other has received wide-spread media attention; and often central to both textual and visual representation of bin Laden is his long beard. A January 22, 2002 article (Harper 2002) in the *Washington Times* discusses a marketing campaign in New Zealand in which bin Laden's status as a fugitive is used to sell a quiet and secluded vacation spot. As the *Washington Times'* journalist reports, on several "giant billboards along the scenic highways of New Zealand" the image of bin Laden is used to tout that there is "no better place to escape" than the advertised

vacation spot. The article then elaborates that on these billboards “the terrorist is appearing stretched upon a cozy recliner at the beach, complete with a little radio and a sand pail. Save for a telltale black beard, the terrorist’s face is hidden behind a *Time Magazine* and his feet are propped upon a beach ball.” This rather mundane and even comical newspaper article about a New Zealand advertising campaign illustrates the strong connection between a beard and the most notorious of terrorists. Indeed, the beard is so symbolic or “telltale” of bin Laden that even with his face covered, the identity of this terrorist is still obvious. The visual representation of Osama bin Laden in a 2004 *National Geographic Magazine* article also draws a direct link between this dangerous man and his symbolic beard. The cover-page for an article titled “World of Terror” powerfully represents the global extent of bin Laden’s influence (Laquer 2004). This image (figure 4) depicts the despised terrorist lurking over the entire globe, and his “telltale” beard overlaps and permeates into a map of the world.

Another example of how facial hair and danger have been linked in the media was published in a December 2001 *Time Magazine* article titled “The Taliban Next Door” (Tyranigel et al. 2001). This story focuses on how a once quite boy in California shocked the entire community when he joined the Taliban. The article describes his transformation from a “smooth-cheeked American teenager to a devout, bearded Muslim.” This article provides a clear example not only of how convoluted the imagined relationships between Islam and danger have become, but also of how symbolic facial hair is in that relationship.

“LIBERATION” OF AFGHANISTAN

The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001 was originally justified as retaliation for the atrocities of 9/11. The goal was to capture Osama bin Laden and destroy al-Qaeda. But as the likelihood of locating and killing the 9/11 leader lessened, the media’s attention shifted to a more successful narrative of the “liberation” of Afghanistan from the Islamic Taliban government. The “liberation” (the terms “modernization” and “westernization” are also used in similar ways as “liberation”) of countries has often been gendered through women’s bodies (McClintock 1995; Yuval-Davis 1997; Mayer 2000); and in some instances has been symbolized specifically through the lifting of the veil (Moghadam 1993; Kahf 1999; Sharoni 1997; Shaarawi 1986). Indeed, after the fall of the Taliban the media focused on the powerful symbolic gesture of women revealing their faces and removing their head-to-toe burkas. Though the media spotlighted women, men’s bodies too proved to be discursive and symbolic sites of “liberation.”¹²

During the U.S. led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the *New York Times* published continuing coverage titled “A Nation Challenged.” In this series, women removing their coverings and men shaving their beards became a central narrative that symbolized liberation (access to education and the purchasing of electronic goods were also common narratives). In a November 13th article titled “In a Fallen City, a Busy, Busy

Barber" (Filkins 2001), it is specifically men's bodies that are located as a site of change in Afghanistan. No longer under the harsh laws of the Taliban, men were free to shave their long beards, and as this article attests, barber shops were incredibly busy. Similarly, a November 18th article (Staff 2001) reports how "last week men in the liberated cities had their beards trimmed." On that same date, but in a different article, the *New York Times* again connects beard removal and liberation. In this article titled "Hair as a Battlefield for the Soul" (Sciolino 2001), both sexes are referred to as liberated: men "shaved off their beards, while women unveiled their faces and revealed bits of hair." In this last article, the body is not only the site of liberation, but it is also a "battlefield" where one's struggle with "traditional interpretations of Islam, and modernity" is played out.

Representations of beard removal as a symbol of modernization or liberation were also evident in the *National Geographic Magazine's* textual discourses. A December 2002 article titled "A New Day in Kabul" reports that it is evident that the city has been liberated because "many men have shaved their beards or keep them fashionably trimmed, while office workers increasingly wear suits and ties, expressing a form of modernity not seen in decades" (Girardet 2002, 95). The reports about the liberation of Afghanistan in both *The New York Times* and *National Geographic Magazine* not only highlight the connection between shaving and liberation, but also sustain more antiquated Orientalist discourses of the beard as a symbol of the backward other.

BEARDS AND SHAVING IN POST SADDAM IRAQ

Unlike post Taliban Afghanistan, in post Saddam Iraq the shaving of facial hair was not a celebratory sign of liberation – in part because Iraqis under Saddam had the freedom to grow or cut their facial hair. On the contrary, the U.S. media's representation of beards in post Saddam Iraq focused on the violent and dangerous other, or more specifically on the Islamic militant who was out to destroy all western things. According Robert Worth's (2005) *New York Times* article "A Haircut in Iraq Can Be the Death of the Barber," militant Islamist men were "warning barbers that it is haram— forbidden—to shave men's beards or do Western-style haircuts." Worth reported that as many as twelve barbers were killed by militant Islamists in Iraq since the country's liberation. In a *Time Magazine* article from August 19, 2005, Tim McGirk (2005) reported from Washash, Iraq that a militant Islamist threatened barber Mohammad al-Obaidi to "change your profession," otherwise, "you'll lose your head." McGirk summarized that "barbers are being singled out by Sunni extremists who say that cutting a man's beard violates Islam." As mentioned above, even though there are no laws or prescriptions in Islam that explicitly condemn shaving or western-style haircuts, both militant Islamists and the U.S. media used beards and shaving in post Saddam Iraq as symbols of Islam. The militants likely understood beards as symbolic of their unique Islamic identity, and thus essential to preserve as the threat of Western occupation grew. Whereas the U.S. media used the violence against barbers as a way to perpetuate deeply embedded stereotypes

that (some) Muslims were ruthless and violent. Thus, the two diametrically opposed groups have actually worked in tandem to construct two interconnected identities. The militant Islamists who threatened or harmed Iraqi barbers are protecting beards as an important symbol of their unique Islamic identity; while the exact same symbol has been co-constituted in the U.S. media to construct and emphasize the dangerous and violent tendencies of the other.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Like the bodily practice of a woman covering herself, male bodies are sites where identities are created, symbolized, performed, and even contested. Though there is no singular interpretation of the meaning of beards, for centuries beards have symbolized backwardness in Orientalist discourses, and the removal of the beard, like the veil, symbolizes modernization and liberation.

In the post 9/11 world, there has been a profound trend to associate some men's beards with fear, danger, and terror – whether they are Muslim, Middle Easterner, Arab, or not. As illustrated in this paper, beards have been associated with backwardness, Islam, and terrorism. The print media has had a powerful role in the creation and perpetuation of this stereotype, but of course, media representations do not exist in a vacuum, and beards gain meaning through other normative cultural values and preconceptions (Gole 2003, 810). Nevertheless, our geographical imaginations are, in part, informed by the media; and the media's conflation of beards, Islam, Arabs, Middle Easterners, and danger are plentiful.

The tendency that exists in the U.S. to blur the multiple and diverse identities of Arabs, Middle Easterners, and Muslims with danger or terrorism has had precarious implications on foreign policy as well as domestic profiling.¹³ Though the connection between Muslims, Middle Easterners, Arabs and danger is superficial and divisive, it is also powerful and convincing. Discourses of the dangerous other have been perpetuated not only in and through the media, but have also been actively played out in everyday lives across the globe. Since 9/11, discrimination and profiling of people who are perceived to be Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim has been on the rise in the U.S. (Elias 2006). During this time of heightened profiling, the beard has been invoked not only to symbolize the backward other, but it has also taken the powerful symbolic role of marking the potential terrorist. Indeed, the connection between beards and terrorism has become so strong and widespread that some men have shaven off their beards out of concern that they will be falsely mistaken as a terrorist (Hopkins 2007, 196).

ENDNOTES

¹ This blog is titled "An Arab-American woman's take on politics, the Middle East, feminism, religion, and anything else of interest."

² For additional examples of men with beards being profiled and discriminated against, see Rajesh Thind's (2006) account of the treatment of men with beards (and his particularly) in London after the July 7 attacks. A January 2009 incident on AirTran also exemplifies such

- discrimination. As the *Washington Post* reported in an article titled “9 Muslim Passengers Removed from Jet,” several men with beards and women in headscarves, all of South Asian descent, were profiled and removed from the plane because of their appearance (Gardner 2009).
- ³ The Middle East is an ambiguous term, and its geographical extent does not have definitive boundaries. We use the term in this paper to refer to the countries stretching from Morocco to Pakistan.
- ⁴ Broadly speaking, “culture of fear” refers to the intentional creation and perpetuation of fear throughout a society in order to assert some form of social and political control. See Barry Glassner’s (1999) book *Culture of Fear* for elaboration on this concept. See also Zbigniew Brzezinski’s (2007) *Washington Post* article on how the “War on Terror” has helped create a culture of fear. See Joanne Sharp’s (1996) discussion of *Reader’s Digest’s* reporting on the Soviet Union during the Cold War.
- ⁵ One recent incident of racial profiling, described by Middle East historian Juan Cole (2007), illustrates the perceived connection of Arabs and danger. According to Cole, a man flying on Jet Blue Airlines out of JFK in August 2006 was forced to change his tee-shirt before boarding the plane. His tee-shirt had Arabic script on it, which was frightening people – the tee-shirt said “We will not be silent,” a reference to the Iraq war. Jet Blue supplied him with a less conspicuous tee-shirt to cover up the threatening Arabic script, and he was allowed to board the plane. Also, see footnote 2 and the introductory paragraph for examples of profiling related to beards.
- ⁶ The scale of the body recognizes a shift from the traditional geopolitical scale of the state, to the smaller scales of the body as a site of social and individual reproductions (Hyndman 2004; Dodds 2001; Taylor 2000; Thrift 2000; Marston 2000; Smith 1992).
- ⁷ For example, in the Old Testament, the book of Leviticus is often referenced as a guide to how Jewish men should wear their beard. It states that states “you shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard” (19:27). Yet in Jewish reform congregations, most men are clean-shaven (Bunkin 2000, 11).
- ⁸ Many Muslim men, and famous leaders, do not grow beards (i.e. Muammar Qaddafi, Saddam Hussein, Anwar Sadat, Gamal Nasser, Husni Mubarak). Those that do, are not confined to one particular style (Sunnis often grow long beards; Shi’a shorter). Islamists in Egypt, namely the Muslim Brotherhood, are generally clean shaven and wear business suits (Farmanfarmaian 1995, 50). The struggle over the meaning of beards and shaving– and even more notably veils – has been a point of heated debate (see for example Dickey and Issa 1987; Delaney 1994, 168).
- ⁹ The Tanzimat reforms, announced by Sultan Abdulmecid in 1839, began the process of modernization.
- ¹⁰ Tensions between secularism and religion are often manifested in struggles over bodily symbols, and such tensions became evident once again in Turkey in 1997. In that year, the University of Istanbul banned all male students with beards or long hair, as well as females with headscarves, from entering the University. University and state officials proclaimed beards and headscarves to be Islamic symbols and therefore a violation of the secular principles of Turkey that are enshrined in the constitution (Morris 2000). Though the ban on beards was lifted after students protested, the ban on headscarves remains and has been the subject of intense debate throughout the country, as well as across the globe (vom Bruck 2008). In the summer of 2008, the Turkish parliament ruled to lift the ban on headscarves, but their amendments were overturned by the Constitutional Court as a violation of the principles of secularism.
- ¹¹ Using Lexis-Nexis and the Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature we looked for any article published in major U.S. and U.K. print media since 9/11 that contained the following search terms: “beards” along with “Muslim, Islam, Taliban, Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden, Pakistan, Hamas, Hezbollah, terrorist, al-Qaeda, Middle East, or Saddam Hussein.” We also conducted searches in *Time Magazine* and *National Geographic Magazine*. In our paper we highlight

images and messages that exemplify the general trend of representations to link beards to the “dangerous other.”

- ¹² The following data comes from a comprehensive examination of the *New York Times*' coverage of the invasion of Afghanistan in the fall of 2001. Using LexisNexis, we examined articles from 2001 that had key words: Afghanistan or Taliban and beard. The majority of the articles we found are from a series titled “A Nation Challenged.” Only articles that specifically mentioned a beard are discussed here, even if the images appended to the article were of men with beards.
- ¹³ Middle East historian Juan Cole (2007, 3) has argued, since 9/11 the association of terrorism and Muslims is often perceived as “natural.”

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