Islam Versus United States: Anti-Americanism

The United States' engagement with Islam is rather different from that of Europe, more specifically that of Britain and France. Unlike the United States, Britain and France actually had colonized parts of the East / the Islamic world. The U.S. however had more of a broken relationship with the East rather than direct contact. Since there is a lack of direct contact and experiences between the U.S. and the East, they were solely relying on abstractions and falsifications of what the Orient was. For the most part though, both the U.S. and Europe were basing their views of the Orient off of what a select few have said, written, or portrayed about those people. Historian Edward Said argues that the presentation of non-western cultures has the purpose of communicating the idea that Western society and ways of life is superior to that of the East. Therefore the portrayals of the Eastern world should not be viewed as accurate, but rather cultural representations. The view of the Eastern world has been distorted through political and colonial domination of the Eastern world. These false portrayals are attempts of making the East appear far more dominant than the Orient. The images are being translated in a false manner and being shared with different cultures. This becomes a problem because the West's only exposure to the East is through these false portrayals which then create untrue ideas and beliefs.

American perceptions of Islam between the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries were generally negative. A great amount of these negative views stemmed from the Barbary wars and the "myriad captivity narratives that emerged from them." Often times Americans perceived the Muslim and Ottoman world to be despotic. In other words, they were seen as tyrants, where those in power would use their status and influence over other people in an unfair and/or cruel manner. In the nineteenth century, these portrayals were even more so emphasised when Americans traveled to the Eastern world, more specifically Palestine, and compiled a variety of discourses of the Orient. Those who journeyed to the East were travelers, writers, and artists, who then brought their observations and perceptions of the Orient back to the United States. They created this negative portrayal by "animating accounts of the Holy Land as Levantine dragomans, dirty natives, impious Mohammedans, or 'nominal' Christians." Mark Twain had a great influence on the American people of how they came to view the Orient. It was through him and other writers that added to the increased fascination with the American genre of orientalism. Their works "exoticized the East as premodern, conceived of it as dreamy yet often experienced it as squalid, separated the sacred landscape of the Holy Land from its native Arab inhabitants." These portrayals of the Orient were presented through "promotions, advertisements, trinkets, novels, photographic exhibits, postcards, and ultimately films." Hollywood also played a major role in how America perceived Muslims. There are numerous films that depict Arabs and Muslims as barbaric, evil, and tyrannical. Even children's films such as Disney's Aladdin illustrate them in this violent manner. All of these false representations of the Orient are deeply rooted within the American people which creates a widely believed stereotype about this massive group of people. The attacks on September 11, 2001, also added to these beliefs that those from the East are barbaric. This was really the start of terrorism in the United States and even today, the term "terrorist" is mostly associated with Arabs and Muslims. This event is also essentially the beginning of Islamophobia, which is the dislike or prejudice against Islam/Muslims. After the attacks on September 11, President George W. Bush "a self-professed evangelical" shared his thoughts as to why he thought the terrorists hated

Americans, “They hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.” At this point in time, many evangelical and fundamentalist leaders within the United States used these negative viewpoints and the attacks on America to make assertions that Christianity is superior to Islam. This essentially directly ties in with the term “orientalism” which places an emphasis on presenting Western society to be superior than the East. Throughout the past four centuries, Americans have had a generally negative view of Islam and these beliefs are mostly based on false pretenses.

In the twentieth century, the United States began to realize the rising value of oil as a major long-term energy source. At this point in time the United States became interested in importing resources, more specifically oil, from overseas. This is when the exploitation of Middle Eastern oil started. In return for military protection, Saudi Arabia agreed to grant the U.S. with oil concessions. Along with this they also strengthen their relationship and increased the military and financial aid that they provided to Iran. This then leads into the Arab-Israeli conflict and the United States involvement within it. The U.S. was in support of the Zionist cause, which is the Jewish support and desire to have a Jewish national state in Palestine. Now that the U.S. became involved with the Middle East, they started to also show support of a Jewish state in Palestine. By siding with the Jews, the U.S. greatly strained their relationship with the Arab world. In 1967 the Arab-Israeli war began and was fought between Israel and some of the Arab states. Since Israel was receiving financial support from the U.S., they were able to win the war and occupy even more Arab land. This once again damaged the relationship between the U.S. and Arabs.

One of the reasons there is anti-Americanism within the Muslim world is because of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Palestinians really did not have much of an issue with the United States since they were receiving not only financial support but also military support from them. On the other hand, the Arab states were not obtaining aid from anyone, they only had themselves and their resources to rely on, which was not enough to go up against them. The Arab world began to view America as repressive, in the sense that America was holding them back from liberation. Nasser, former President of Egypt, expressed this thought while giving a speech in 1958: “America refuses to see the reality of the situation in the Middle East and forgets also its own history and its own revolution … How do they deny us our right to improve our conditions just as they did theirs? … We call for positive neutrality. … Why should these peoples not have their way?”. This reasoning for anti-Americanism is based on the belief that this dislike of American values and ways is not based off of a long history of hatred. Rather this is more recent anger and disgust at American policies that have entered the region, more specifically Israel. This reasoning is justifiable, and Nasser put it into great terms. The people of the Arab states are just trying to defend and stand up for themselves but it became practically impossible to do so once the U.S. stepped in and provides Israel with aid and leaving them with nothing. Nasser is correct, this is essentially a similar situation that America has been through before in the past with. It is completely understandable as to why they would be furious with the U.S. and thus creating anti-Americanism beliefs.

An opposing belief as to why there is anti-Americanism is presented by writer Barry Rubin who states that it is “the product of self-interested manipulation by various groups within Arab society, groups that use anti-Americanism as a foil to distract public attention from other, far more serious problems within those societies.” He is essentially saying that it Arab leaders are blaming all of their issues on the United States thus distracting the people's attention from the

real problem, the internal weakness that is causing their political and social oppression as well as their economic stagnation. This poses a reasonable explanation to be upset with the U.S. and that is of course if the blame is actually on them. However, Barry is saying that the U.S. is not actually the cause of the Arab's problems yet they are still being falsely held accountable for them. If the Arab's believe that the U.S. is the root cause of their issues, then that will directly create their dislike for America.

Political scientist Samuel Huntington argues that future wars would be fought between cultures, not countries in a hypothesis he calls the "clash of civilizations." The issue with Huntington is that he makes huge generalizations of large groups of people. For example he wrote that "Islam has bloody borders." Huntington is essentially labeling all of Islam to be be violent people. America has its issues and disagreements with other cultures and countries, however, it is not on a direct course for collision with Muslims. As a whole, the U.S. has no issues with Muslims or those practicing Islam. If anything, the American people and government are concerned about extremists groups such as ISIS. This does not confirm Huntington's theory as it does not mean there is a clash of civilizations. All that it means is that as a whole, America is concerned about these groups (not Muslims) and wants to put an end to their violence not only because they pose a threat to the American people, but to people across the world.