Conflict haunts Arab students

By Ruth Hanley
Dispatch OSU Reporter

Arabs who left their homelands for an education at Ohio State University try to be normal students, but they cannot escape reminders of the conflict in the Middle East, two of them say.

Haisam Ido and Omar Al Omari said they are frustrated by unbalanced reporting by the American media and stereotypical portrayals of Arabs as crafty desert wanderers.

"The Americans are blind when it comes to the Middle East," said Ido, 22, a senior math major who was born in Kuwait and lived in Syria before coming to the United States 11 years ago.

Omari, 30, a graduate student in Middle Eastern studies, complained that most news reports give only one side — Israel's — when describing events in the Middle East. He said reporters apply the label "terrorism" to events but fail to put the events in historical perspective.

IDO ADDED, "Each government uses the name 'terrorism' for its benefit. We must look beyond that and see who's doing the acts."

As members of OSU's American and Arab Friendship Society, Ido and Omari attempt to cut through the misconceptions to promote understanding between the United States and Arab nations.

"We try to provide the other side of the issue" through educational and cultural campus programs, said Omari, who was born in Jerusalem to Palestinian and Jordanian parents. He now is an American citizen.

OSU has more than 300 students from the 22 Arab nations, and most "mind their business," he said. "They're normal students. I don't think any one of us would pretend to be a diplomat or politician. There are no militants here.

"I think they leave behind the conflicts. We leave that to the politicians. We cannot divorce ourselves from what's happening, but I do not take any stand on any Arab government."

NEITHER OMARI nor Ido has had problems with anti-Arab sentiments. Elsewhere in the country, there have been reports of "Arab bashing" in the wake of recent terrorist attacks in Europe.

That's not to say they haven't been bothered. Omari recalled incidents when spectators at OSU have thrown things at commemoration of the Nov. 29, 1947, partitioning of Palestine. And both he and Ido have been frustrated by anti-Palestinian orators on the OSU Oval, he said.

As president of the friendship society, Ido said, he has had calls asking why certain speakers have been selected for society meetings. He also has had political discussions with other students, "but it's all just verbal now," Ido said. "If you don't talk about politics, they don't care."

The stereotypes and lack of understanding remain. Ido mentioned a professor who, upon encountering a malfunction in classroom equipment, jokingly suggested that the Libyan student in the class may have been the saboteur.

A local television station interviewed students after "Death to America" was painted on walls at OSU's French Field House. Among them was an Iranian, whose face was shielded from viewers but who was identified as an "Arab student." Iran is not an Arab nation, Omari said.

AMERICAN REPORTERS have made little effort to learn Arabic and understand Arab history and culture, he said, but slowly, that is changing.

Movies tend to portray Arabs as wandering in deserts and "running after blond women," Ido said. "That has a bigger impact than an article in the newspaper" in maintaining stereotypes.

Both men condemn terrorism against civilians but support the right of Palestinians to regain their homeland. They see the conflict as a struggle between Israeli and the united Arab nations, not individual Arab countries.

"We ask (Americans) to be just, to look at the issue to see why these people are doing these things," Omari said.

The issue has united the Arab nations into a quest for a "durable, just peace" for Palestinians and their fellow Arabs, they said.

IDO ADDED, "Peace is only done through justice. Without justice, there will be no peace.

"The Arabs love peace but they love freedom more."
Image distorts truth

Ads portraying Arabs in ‘dangerous, warped’ light

By Jeff Grabmeier

A newspaper ad several years ago urged readers to “Burn Sheeks” (sic), a new commercial brand of charcoal briquette. The ad showed an Arab man, dressed in a turban, above a fire.

An advertisement for a wood stove depicted a sinister-looking Arab man holding a gas pump. The headline read, “Don’t get burned. Declare your freedom (from high gas prices) today.”

Advertisements like these don’t just sell products, according to Marsha Hamilton, assistant professor of University Libraries. They sell a dangerous, stereotypical view of Arabs.

“The advertising message in all of these is very clear: They are ugly Arabs. They are different from us and they have too much money. It’s a very dangerous and warped view,” she says.

For several years, Hamilton has studied the image of Arabs in popular culture, especially advertisements. She collected and classified hundreds of images from the 1880s to the early 1980s. Her findings were presented at the annual conference of the Middle East Studies Association.

Hamilton says advertising using Middle Eastern imagery can generally be divided into five categories. Commercials describe the Middle East and its residents as magical, sensual, full of ancient wisdom, greedy and barbaric, or describe them in neutrally informative terms.

For many years, most ads fell into the magical, sensual or ancient wisdom categories, Hamilton says.

These include those that used images of genies to show the supposed “magical properties” of a product, or ones that depict the sensuous life of a harem in order to sell beauty aids.

Observers can see through advertisements how much politics, and our views of the Middle East, have changed even in the last 20 years, Hamilton says. For instance, a brand of whiskey used to boast that it was “preferred by the Shah of Iran.”

Beginning with the Arab oil embargo in 1971, these sensual and magical images were virtually replaced with ones depicting Arabs as greedy and barbaric.

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“More than half of the ads I have collected since the 1970s play on the fear and hatred of Arabs,” she says. “They are shown in ads as terrorists, or as getting rich off the suffering of Americans.

“These ads are frightening because they can influence people to believe that Arabs are nothing but terrorists, that they are robbing Americans of their money or livelihood,” she says.

For example, one bank ran a newspaper ad with the headline: “At some banks, locally owned and operated is often worse from the truth.” It pictured a smiling Arab, dressed in a kaffiyeh (an Arab headdress) and military fatigues.

“The implication is that if we do business with any bank which has Arab investors, we may actually be supporting Middle Eastern terrorism, or at the very least, oil-rich foreigners who don’t need the money,” Hamilton says.

Negative stereotypes of Arabs have become so common in American culture that they are accepted without thought, Hamilton says. The result is that highly offensive, racist ads about Arabs don’t cause the outrage that would occur over racist ads about other ethnic groups.

The advertiser who created the “Burn Sheeks” campaign wouldn’t have dared to create a campaign titled “Burn Jews,” Hamilton says.

“Luckily, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee managed to get the ‘Burn Sheeks’ ad removed from distribution,” she says. “The product producer had felt it was humorous and didn’t imply real people should actually be incinerated as the ad depicts.”

Hamilton believes that the negative stereotypes of Arabs found in advertisements and elsewhere influence both our foreign policy and how we treat Arab-Americans.

“Politicians, journalists and opinion leaders are going to make decisions based on the stereotypes and images they hold,” she says. “If you think everyone in a particular country is a nomad, or a cowboy, or fits one particular stereotype, that’s obviously going to affect how you treat that country.”

Here in the United States, many people assume that Arab-Americans hold the same views as the leaders of their ancestral countries, Hamilton says.

“That’s distressing to Lebanese-Americans, who would love to see the hostages in Lebanon released. Too many Americans want to take out their frustrations about international politics on individuals whose ancestry is from the Middle East.

“And that’s really sad.”
Workshops to give insight to life in the Middle East

By David Tull

Even as the United States becomes increasingly embroiled in the Middle East, the people and cultures of that vital region remain a mystery to most Americans.

Two summer workshops, meeting daily from July 29-Aug. 14, will attempt to confront this problem. One workshop, "The Culture of the Contemporary Arab World," will meet from 1-4 p.m. The other, "The Culture of Modern Israel," will meet from 9 a.m.-noon.

"The goal of both workshops is the same, to gain insights into the cultures of the Middle East through lectures, discussions, films and other presentations, as well as through luncheons featuring Middle Eastern cuisine," says Frederic Cadara, chairperson of the Department of Judaic and Near Eastern Languages and Literatures.

"Three of the teachers who participated last summer are returning to make a half-day presentation. They will review their experiences in teaching units on the Middle East culture in their respective schools."

The workshops are sponsored jointly by the department, the College of Humanities, the Office of Continuing Education, the Melton Center for Jewish Studies, the Middle Eastern Studies Center, and the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations.

Adults may participate in one or both of the workshops and may register for graduate or undergraduate credit, or take the workshops on a non-credit basis.

Some scholarships are available, Cadara says. The deadline to apply for scholarships is July 9.

Additional information on the workshops or scholarships may be obtained from the Department of Judaic and Near Eastern Languages and Literatures, 292-9255, or from the Office of Continuing Education, 292-8860.
Campus Jews, Arabs negotiate club talks

By Rebecca Mugler
Lahent staff writer

Two historically-opposed student organizations met for the first time Monday night in the Ohio Union to discuss possible negotiations.

The Jewish Student Activities Board and the OSU chapter of the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee met in the hopes of launching a Palestinian-Jewish dialogue on campus.

“We hope to give the OSU community a greater understanding of both the stumbling blocks and possibilities for peace at the same time,” said David Bernstein, a member of the Jewish Student Activities Board.

Suhail Zidan, spokesman for OSU chapter of the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, said their organization is currently trying to continue the momentum of negotiations emerging in the Middle East.

“Our long-term goal is to promote and achieve Palestinian sovereignty,” Zidan said. “The American people have the right to know the whole truth, not just one side. Concern has been focused on Israeli human rights, but the Palestinians have basic human rights also.”

About 400 people met in the West Ballroom of the Ohio Union Monday night to hear the debate between John Quigley, an OSU professor of political science and law, and Don Schueftan, a researcher from Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Quigley said the United Nations’ Security Council has been attempting to initiate an international conference to ease tensions in the Middle East for the past six years. Israel and the United States are the only two countries that remain opposed to negotiations with the Arab countries, specifically Palestine.

Schueftan, who spoke for the Jewish Student Activities Board, said, “The recent element in the Palestinian world, namely the PLO, has not reconciled itself with Israel, although some of its leaders profess they have.”

Schueftan said the Arab world has come a long way in the past 20 years.

“More Arab countries realize today that their attempts to undermine the state of Israel will produce things that are counter-productive to their own well-being.”

He said until a few months ago, all Palestinians had stated in very clear language that they wanted total destruction of the state of Israel. Now, some Palestinians are willing to consider the possibility of a peaceful co-existence with Israel, he said.

“If you’ve had a long experience that has threatened your very existence, you also need some securities before you’re willing to make concessions,” Schueftan said.

Schueftan said he and at least half of the Israeli population have no problem with withdrawing from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. But certain conditions must be met first, he said.

“Israel will not be party to any settlement unless the PLO accepts that Israel is there, period,” he said. “The question is: Will we have something on the other side that is willing to co-exist with Israel?”

Quigley, who spoke for the OSU chapter of the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee said, “I don’t think the public is aware of the extent of the tragedy that befall the people of Palestine as a result of the establishment of Israel.”

Quigley said if people realized the tragedy of the situation, more support would come from Americans to allow for a sovereign Palestinian state.

“Palestinians have requested the area along the West Bank of the Jordan River and the Gaza Strip, but the Israelis have refused to comply,” he said.

Schueftan said the main problem lies in whether the PLO will use the West Bank and Gaza Strip as a springboard for a “right to return” which would allow the Palestinian refugees to the eastern sections of Palestine.

“The position of the Palestinians now is that there should be a Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip that would co-exist alongside Israel,” Quigley said.

He added that the PLO would not use this area for military purposes against Israel simply because the west side is too small to pose a viable threat.
Arabs receive violent threats in wake of war

By Shannon Jackson
Lantern staff writer

With the war in the Middle East, many Arabs are feeling the backlash of anti-Arab sentiment. Across the nation, Arabs are reporting death and bomb threats, verbal harassment, and, in some cases, physical assault:

• "Go Home Arab!" and other anti-Arab sentiments were graffitied on a store owned by an Arab in Cleveland.

• A Dairy Queen restaurant owned by a Palestinian immigrant was bombed in Blissfield, according to the Associated Press.

• In San Diego an unactivated bomb was placed in a mosque, said Marvin Wingfield, director of outreach for the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee.

• At Ohio State, one Arab student reported that he had received "a few crank phone calls," said John Greisberger, director of the Office of International Students and Scholars.

However, police departments in Columbus and Detroit said there were no reports of racially-motivated incidents.

As reports of harassment continue in the United States, Arabs are becoming fearful that they could be the victims of ethno-violence, said Sam Thomas, executive director of Cleveland's Community Relations Bureau.

Since the start of the war in the Middle East, there has been a definite upsurge in reports of racially motivated incidents, Wingfield said. "At the same time, there has been definite support for the Arab community," he said.

In order to alleviate the fear, many community leaders have condemned racist acts and instituted proactive measures to ensure the safety of Arabs in their community. Cleveland has a hotline number that Arabs can call to report any racial incidents, as well as to suggest ways to improve multi-cultural understanding, Thomas said.

The administration at Ohio State is communicating with the Muslim Students Association and the Egyptian Students Association and is making students aware that they are available to help, Greisberger said.

Greisberger plans to hold more programs like the open forum on the Middle East held last Thursday because he thinks it is important for the university to help educate people.

"Arabs are concerned that the backlash of racial incidents is being fed by government agencies," said Biakara Constanti of the Arab Community Center in Cleveland.
Arab-Americans deal with U.S. stereotypes

By H.J. Chiu
Lantern staff writer

When he told his friend he came from an Arab country, the friend asked, "Do you have a university there? Where did you park your camel?"

"Oh, yeah, we have special parking lots for them," Bassem Hassan answered in his humorous Arabic style.

Life in the United States isn't easy for Arabs or Arab-Americans.

Hassan, a doctoral student in molecular, cellular and developmental biology, said many misconceptions and stereotypes of Arabs exist in American society.

"These stereotypes must come from somewhere," he said. He thinks most people don't have personal contact with Arabs, and stereotypes become ingrained in the minds of many people.

He said Arabs in films are usually portrayed as terrorists, sexually forward or rich.

Asif Arrabi, a filmmaker and a doctoral student in art education, said these stereotypes do not reflect reality.

He said, as a filmmaker, he understands some films poke fun or attack a certain groups to increasing ticket sales.

"When you are the target, that isn't that fun at all," he said.

With political conflict between some Arab countries and the United States, the stereotyping of Arabs is more difficult to break, Arrabi said.

But he thinks conflicts between governments should not extend to the people. He said often these conflicts manifest themselves in stereotypes in the mass media.

He wonders where objectivity and ethics are in the mass media.

The misconceptions cause him and his wife, Huda Arrabi, a white Muslim-American, much distress.

For example, she said two weeks ago she was driving in downtown Columbus wearing a hijab, the Muslim religious head covering. Without provocation, someone yelled, "F*ck you, Arab!"

She was mistaken for a foreigner because she was wearing the hijab.

"Being a Muslim is one thing, and (to) marry an Arab is a different issue," she said. Some people gave their sympathy—"they think women in Muslim society are suppressed. She wonders where people get these ideas.

Because she was born in the United States, she thinks people shouldn't use their personal values to judge others.

"There is an eastern philosophy that women are equal to men," she said. "But they don't have to be like men, because they have different roles in life."

"I love to be at home with my baby," she said. "There is nothing more important and more satisfying than raising my child.

"Arabs are just like any other people," she said. "There are good people and there are bad people in the world."

Another popular misconception is that all Arabs are followers of Islam.

Although Islam plays a significant role in Arab culture, not all Arabs are Muslims and not all Muslims are Arabs.

Arabs have migrated to this country since the early 19th century, and today about 7 million Arab-Americans live in the United States, Arrabi said. He said it seems Arabs are the forgotten minority in this multicultural society. He said many Arabs are light-skinned and considered part of the white majority.

Cultural differences propagate these misconceptions, especially when there is mixing of cultures, as in the United States.

Arrabi said the Arab culture emphasizes interpersonal relationships more than Americans. Words can be binding contracts. This is also practiced in business.

Business in Arab culture stresses long-term relationships.

If someone breaks his or her words, the person's credibility becomes hard to regain, Hassan explained.