

## The Aftermath of 9/11: The Shift of Islam Representation in American TV Series *FBI*

Ratu Nadhirah El Sarah<sup>1</sup>, Ida Rochani Adi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Bandung, Indonesia, <sup>2</sup>Universitas Gadjah  
Mada, Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta, Indonesia

✉ : [ratu.nad1995@mail.ugm.ac.id](mailto:ratu.nad1995@mail.ugm.ac.id)

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### ABSTRACT

The conflict surrounding Islam has been going on for many years, even before the September 11th, 2001 (henceforth, 9/11) incident occurred. However, the fact that the post-incident living circumstances for Muslim people especially in America has been undeniably rough, raises a new trend where Islam is being represented poorly and almost always talked about in negative ways. There are certain characteristics which are attributed especially to identify Muslims, and also certain role that they play in media. Using the Representation theory proposed by Stuart Hall, this research aims to uncover how Islam is represented in American TV series, *FBI*, which might be seen as a reflection of how Muslims are living in the United States post-9/11 incident. The result found that in the *FBI* series, Islam is still mainly represented as Arab people, though in reality not every Arabs are Muslims, but the point of view has been slightly shifted for the better. The findings highlight the changing dynamics of Muslim representation, driven by the evolving Muslim community and market demands, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of cultural shifts in the representation of Islam.

Keywords: *american television series; identity; muslim; representation; terrorist*

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## INTRODUCTION

Islam is one of the most prominent religious beliefs in America, yet they are still categorized as minority. The talk surrounding Muslim rose up almost immediately after the incident of September 11th, 2001, when the World Trade Centre twin tower buildings were crashed by what known as the terrorist attack. Since the attack on the WTC, Muslims residing in the United States have experienced violations of economic and political liberties, as well as ongoing social discrimination (Moore, p. 91). Since then, the term "Islamophobia" becomes the most common perception in media coverage which claims to show how America feels towards Muslims. There are a number of certain images that tail Muslims following the attack: "irrational terrorists, airplane hijackers, and suicide bombers who wage war against "civilization" and "democracy" in the name of jihad (holy war) to establish the Islamic way of life against the kafirun, who are unbelievers to be either converted or killed" (Yenigun, 2002).

Despite the circumstance, however, according to an analysis of Pew Research Center Surveys and U.S. Census

data, the U.S. Muslim population has grown in the two decades since the 9/11 attack (Lipka, 2017). Yet ironically, as their numbers have increased, Muslims have also reported to experience more discrimination. After the 9/11 incident, many other attacks or bombing in America especially, almost always seen as having connection to or even directly blame on Islam, or certain Islamic groups. For female Muslims, wearing hijab might be a burden because it is being attributed to "Muslim identity", and for male Muslims, something as simple as having a beard might give them a sense of insecurity because they might be labeled as an Arab or Muslim. Those who have a kind of Arabic names such as Mosa, Amina and so on, might also feel uneasy in the public space due to some people look at them as "Muslim", and every time the word "Muslim" is brought up in a conversation, it somehow has a not so invisible tie to "terrorist attack". In a March of 2021 survey, Americans were more likely to say they believe Muslims face "a lot" of discrimination than to say the same about the other religious groups included in the survey, including Jews and evangelical Christians (Mohamed, 2021).

This stereotype of American society towards Muslims is often reflected through literary works such as novels, poems, and movies. After the 9/11 attack and the negative image of Muslims blown up following the incident, American media has portrayed Arabs and Muslims as a group of people who are, yet again, barbaric, violent, unforgiving, and horrid (Gandhi, 2022). This ongoing negative portrayal of Muslims is becoming generalized by people who see them in the media such as the news or even films. A 2007 Pew Research Center survey of Americans found that people's negative opinions on Muslims were mostly influenced by what they heard and read in the media (AP, 2022).

The images of how society sees Muslims, even before the 9/11 incident, but especially after the 9/11 incidents has affected various areas including how the film industry represents Islam or Muslim characters in the majority of American movies. According to a new study conducted by USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative released in 2021, nearly a quarter of the world's population is Muslim, but only 1,1% of the characters portrayed in the 1-top-grossing U.S films from

2017-2019 were Muslim (Khan, et al., 2021). According to the study, "Among the countries that were examined, the US's film industry had the worst representation rates alongside the UK at 1.1 percent" (World, 2021). If we take into account all those negative stereotypes which mostly appear as an impact of many terrorist attacks that have been attributed towards Islam, it becomes no wonder how the media and people in general may perceive Islam in such a negative view.

However, one American television series in particular, entitled *FBI*, can be seen as a tribute to representing the living situation of how Islam and Muslim people in current America. The series brings attention upon actually addressing a number of Islamic issue regarding the stereotype about Islam being the face of terrorism, particularly. *FBI*, short for Federal Bureau of Investigation, is the name of American TV Series directed by Dick Wolf which centers on inner workings of the New York office criminal division of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The series becomes heavily related to the reflection of living condition of Muslims in America after the 9/11 incidents, because

the theme of terrorism and Muslims appears in several episode of the series. This issue arises because security concerns since September 11, 2001 have raised new issues concerning relations between religious communities and government (Barkun, 2006).

Therefore, it is interesting to see that after going through so many discriminations, religious conflicts, and negative stereotypes and so on, Muslim is being put on the spotlight through the *FBI* series by having one Muslim main character. This research seeks whether there is still consistent images of Islam being portrayed, or there has been any change or shift in the representation, and what might have caused them. Whether or not they will still continue to follow the long trend and put such a negative image of Muslim in the media. Also, it is important to dive deep into the behind the scene aspects on why this series was created and published in the first place.

#### **METHODOLOGY**

This research uses the constructionist approach of the three broad approaches offered by the Representation theory. According to this approach, things do not

possess meaning, we construct meaning using representational systems - concepts and signs (Hall, 1997, p. 25). This concept is in accordance with Roland Barthes' concept of Myth or secondary signification discussed by Hall in his book. Barthes argues that:

...Representation takes place through two separate but linked processes. In the first, the signifiers and the signifieds unite to form a sign with a simple denoted message. At the second stage, this completed message or sign is linked to a second set of signifieds—more elaborate and ideologically framed message or meaning... (Hall, 1997, p. 39)

The above statement indicates that through the first and second level of signification, it is possible to analyze, to see and inspect a bigger meaning that is being represented through those signs. The signifiers in this concept are not limited to spoken or written language only. It is more to stand for or to represent something as long as it gives meaning to something else. For example, a musician uses music to represent his feeling and music uses notes and sounds as its sign or symbols. Spoken language uses sounds to

construct meaning, while written language uses letters and words. Body language uses gestures, and traffic light systems use colors to deliver messages of traffic rules.

This research is conducted under a qualitative research method, and since the object and topic of this research concerns with Islam as one of the minority group in the United States of America, it in fact in accordance to a type of problem which belongs to a qualitative research as suggested by Creswell. Moreover, the theory of representation by Stuart Hall might provide the pathway to fully observe how Islam and how Muslims are living in America after the 9/11 incident is being represented through the media, in this case is seen from a TV series called *FBI*. As Hall stated that Representation means "using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people" (Hall, 1997, p. 15). Through the *FBI* television series, various scenes can be found where Islam is put to the spotlight of crime related to bombing or terrorist attack. It becomes interesting then to observe the reaction of people involving in the scene, the dialog as how the issue is

being portrayed and how Muslims as a big part of it is being represented. By observing the representation of Islam reflected through the series, we could actually see the ambiance of how Muslims people are currently, in the modern era, live and being treated by other people in America.

## **DISCUSSION**

The American film industry has long portrayed Arabs as Muslims, which overlook the number of Christian Arabs in the United States and the Middle East (Nittle, 2021). In accordance to the statement claiming that Arabs are collectively perceived as Muslims, especially in the United States (Labidi, 2019) which has also oftentimes, comes with a set of outdated and negative depiction towards Arab and Islam as one entity in general, through Hollywood films. According to the data, Hollywood has made hundreds of movies in which Arabs or Muslims are portrayed as terrorists or dishonest subhuman (Akram, 2002, p. 66). The negative view surrounding Islam usually comes in a common stereotyping which attributed specifically towards Islam and Muslim in general. These stereotype are usually related to appearance which labels people's identity

as Muslim, such as the way they dress, the way they eat, even their names.

The above explanation is in accordance with Yu's statement saying that "airport security officers or the FBI will suspect Arab Americans of being terrorists because of the way they spell their names, the clothes they wear, or the color of their skin" (Yu, 2000, p. 231). Meaning that a person's name, the clothing they choose to wear and their overall physical appearance play a very essential and urgent marking for other people recognize their identity. Also stated in chapter two, that a 2007 Pew Research Center survey of Americans found that people's negative opinions on Muslims were mostly influenced by what they heard and read in the media. Therefore, the discussion below covers how Islam stereotyping is being represented through the media, specifically the chosen five American superhero series being released throughout 2022, 22 years since the atrocious tragedy of September 11th of 2001 happened in the United States of America.

As mentioned briefly in the introduction above, a new USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative study (Khan, et al., 2021) released in 2021, nearly a

quarter of the world's population is Muslim, but only 1,1% of the characters portrayed in the 1-top-grossing U.S films from 2017-2019 were Muslim. Moreover, in 2021, a British-Pakistani actor Riz Ahmad had spoken up about misleading portrayal of Muslim in the movies, especially Hollywood movies. The claim said that Muslim is very rarely being included in any movie, let alone represented, yet once they do most of the times the representation is highly problematic. According to the study mentioned earlier, "Among the countries that were examined, the US's film industry had the worst representation rates alongside the UK at 1.1 percent" (World, 2021).

In contrast to that data however, the FBI television series in considerably a big part, offer the audience glimpses of Islam in the story they show. There are a number of aspects being showcased to represent how America sees Islam through the series, especially related to the aftermath of the 9/11 incident, such as through the characters and the theme of the story for certain episodes.

### **Islam Representation through Muslim Characters**

It might not be particularly common to see Muslim person assigned as the main character in American movies and television series. As the data in a 2021 study mentioned earlier reveals that, both Islam and Muslim are very rarely being included in the American film industry. While television series *FBI* (2022) which according to IMDb is a procedural drama about the inner workings of the New York office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, appointed one of its main character to be played by Zeeko Zaki, an Egyptian-born American actor who portrays Special Agent Omar Adom Zidan in the *FBI* series. Zaki is indeed a Muslim who also speaks Egyptian Arabic despite having emigrated to the United States at a very young age with his family. Having a Muslim cast in the series, "television's portrayal of the *FBI* has fortunately come a long way since the old procedural starring Efrem Zimbalist that aired on ABC in the mid-1960s" (Rorke, 2018).

In an interview with New York Post, Zaki expresses his own experience in being casted to portray only as the "terrorist or ex-military" figure in his previous work before appearing in *FBI* as special agent OA as a Muslim

FBI agent. Being conscious with Zaki's personal background, the director also stated in an interview that,

"Zeeko's Egyptian/Muslim background both grounds and adds depth to the character. He speaks fluent Arabic and that character has not been on a series before. I think he is representative of the type of people that are the boots on the ground in the *FBI*" (Rorke, 2018).

Just as the producer claims that, the character like the one Zaki got to portray has never been found in any American series before. Zaki's visible characteristics are usually found playing a terrorist role in mainstream American movies, which in line with the statement claiming that "the villains must all have beards" (Lalami, 1997), which is the common claim and stereotype of antagonist characters in American film industry. Arab people have always been casted as villain or the bad people, and they "must all have beards" align with other claim on old stereotype of Muslims that they are all "dark-skinned with thick beards and moustache" (Bekheet, 2019).

First, the physical features of Zaki particularly fit the description of those people who would be attributed

to Islam. He has a Middle-Eastern look, also a little bit of beard that everyone who looks at him will definitely be able to guess that he is indeed, a Muslim. Second, he speaks Arabic by nature, thus it comes very natural to the character he plays whenever he has to converse with another Muslim character in the story using Arabic language. In short, being casted as special agent in the FBI puts Zaki pretty much in the spotlight, which also turns the audience's attention into what kind of person and background he is representing. Below is the picture of Zeeko Zaki as Special Agent Omar Adom Zidan in the FBI television series.

Image 1. Actor Zeeko Zaki who played as Special Agent Omar Adom Zidan in the *FBI* series



Source:

[https://www.imdb.com/name/nm4976368/mediaviewer/rm479212033/?ref\\_=nm\\_ov\\_ph](https://www.imdb.com/name/nm4976368/mediaviewer/rm479212033/?ref_=nm_ov_ph)

Upon being casted as a Muslim FBI agent in the series, Zaki also shares that

"... he sees FBI as a chance to change the narrative for Arab-Americans and help create a platform and a voice... I have a lot of Arab-American actor friends and everyone is sick and tired of playing terrorists and crying mothers" (Rorke, 2018), which more or less confirm that the series is indeed trying to show the Audience, especially American Audience post 9/11 incident a brighter and more positive representation of Muslim People through the character of special agent Omar Adom Zidan played by Zeeko Zaki.

While Zaki is the the only Muslim main character in the series, there are also a number of other characters who play the Muslim characters portraying the role of Imam, college students who came from Middle-Eastern countries, as well as Halal restaurant owner. The role these actors played contributes significantly to contrast the character played by Zeeko Zaki which makes him stand out even more. While other Muslim characters in the series portray how they live in the United States post 9/11 with fear of being haunted by terrorists image, Zaki's character as a confident Muslim FBI agent who tries to live past the incident, rehabilitates the image of his



People on American TV since he is all too aware that Muslims have been the go-to enemy on network series for years (Rorke, 2018).

That being said, if we go back to put the representation of Islam in this TV series analyzed through Arab-looking actors, like Zaki, it should be fair to say that the visual representation of Islam in movies still follow the old stereotype. However, the old stereotype saying that these characters played by actors who possess a physical appearances which represent Arab people, must embodies one or more amongst these Arab role type: villains, sheikhs, maidens, Egyptian and Palestinian (Akram, 2002, p. 66). In the series, Zaki's characters do not belong to the villain category, none of his characteristics portrayed as an evil character who would look like they promote violence as the study conducted by the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative Study, Missing & Maligned demonstrate that,

Among other things, that study found that less than two per cent of speaking characters in major films released between 2017 and 2019 were Muslim. It also found that more than one-third of those characters were depicted as

"perpetrators of violence," while more than half were shown to be victims of it (Weaver, 2021).

The above statement is the result of a study on Islam Representation in Hollywood movies released between 2017 and 2019. The result shows that the majority of Muslim character involved in the movies were either the perpetrator of violence, or the victim of a violence which mostly also perpetuated by other Muslim character in the movie. Therefore, this can be seen as considerably a huge shift in casting Muslim character, from always being casted as no other than terrorists, to becoming the main character, let alone an FBI agent like Zaki, who played Special Agent OA in the *FBI* series.

#### **Terrorism Topic (Post 9/11 Incident)**

Although anti-Muslim discrimination in the United States has roots that long predate the 9/11 incident (Al-Arian, 2021), the post incident America "witnessed the establish merit of the Department of Homeland Security, the Patriot Acts, and the merging of agencies of domestic and foreign intelligence" (Bilici, 2012,

p. 5). According to the statement above, it can be said that the 9/11 incident has risen the suspicion nature from the public towards Islam as a whole, being held responsible for the atrocious disaster. The data from Human Rights Watch in 2002 suggests that following 9/11, the FBI requested over 8000 interviews with men of Arab or Muslim descent and mandated fingerprinting of visitors from specific Middle Eastern countries (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2019, p. 876). This phenomenon demonstrates how Muslims living in the United States are very fragile on becoming a suspect of terrorism, considering the fact that they are the ones who share the same faith with the terrorist that the public acknowledge.

Until the year of 2022, the FBI series has been releasing 4 seasons which in total consists of 78 episodes with a variety of crime investigation topics in each one. After watching every season and gathering all necessary data related to Islam in the story, there are a total of 10 episodes which plot specifically dealt with Islam, and doubt not, they all have something to do with the act of terrorism. Some of these Episodes are: season 1 episode 2 "Green Birds" talks about

food poisoning happening in a restaurant, which later leads to finding that the person who did it was a woman who has been attracted to a radical form of Islam and duped into undertaking the terrorist attack. This episode explicitly portrays ISIS as the mastermind behind the attack, which if we remember the 9/11 incident, it is believed that the People who were in charge with the bombing was also related to, if not a part of, none other than ISIS.

Another striking one is season 2 episode 1 "Little Egypt" talks about the investigation of a bomb that detonates at a restaurant not far from where special agent Omar Zidan had lived during his childhood which is a notable Muslim area in Queens, New York City. This episode highlights the act of terrorism in recruiting young vulnerable Muslim teenagers living in fear in America because people oftentimes see them as "the other" particularly after Islam took the blame for what happened during the 9/11 incident. However, this paper focuses only on FBI season 4 as it is the most recent one being released this year. There are 3 episodes in this season that talk about Islam, which are

episode 13 "Pride and Prejudice", episode 18 "Fear Nothing", and episode 20 "Ghost from the Past".

The above mentioned 3 episodes in *FBI* series season 4, circle around bombing and terrorism attacks which points to Islam being the source and also center of it. The *FBI* series repeatedly portrays that the *FBI* in the United State is in fact monitoring a number of mosques and their imams for suspicious activity regarding terrorism planning and so on, which makes the Muslim community furious and often does not want to cooperate with the *FBI* investigation. It is interesting to see how the path has to cross between the *imam* of the Muslim community who is accused of terrorism activity, with special agent Omar Zidan who acts as an *FBI* agent whose work is to investigate all possible suspects. Along the story, it is apparent that the producers of the *FBI* series still represents Islam in general, not necessarily as a religion, very closely related to all terrorism activity happening in the United States. This big picture might have originated from the 9/11 attack as we have been talking about throughout this paper.

What is being showed through those particular scene above, resonates so much with what has been discussed earlier about how the *FBI* takes extra caution towards the Muslim community. It was reported that following the 9/11 incident, the United States law enforcement agencies "quickly set about to uncover "sleeper cells" hiding within the community's mosques and Islamic centers" (Al-Arian, 2021) which is supported by the state by granting itself "authority to surveil Muslims through the revisions of the *FBI* Domestic Investigation and Operations Guidelines" (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2019, p. 877). This information nonetheless, grants the audience with assurance that it does happen in real life that the *FBI*, according to several reports, does suspect and actually surveil on the Muslim community, especially their leader which is the sheikh or the imam of the mosque.

In one particular episode, there was a scene where a bomb had exploded in New York City, and in an interview, Zaki expressed that,

"There was enough pandemonium on location to bring back memories of 9/11 for members of the crew..." and that "there's fire and

everything. And at the moment as an actor, I have no precedent for that. It got a little deep. Our director came out, tearing up. It was a very heavy moment. It kind of showed us how important it is to represent FBI agents." (Rorke, 2018)

From Zaki's statement above, one can learn that the 9/11 incident did in fact leave a very vivid and terrible impression on American people in particular, towards Islam. The "terrorist" image that Islam carries since then is very thickly glued to the public's eye, thus the character that Zaki plays in the *FBI* series kind of steers off the common image of Muslim people, like trying to convey a statement that a Muslim too, is capable of being an FBI agent and fight for justice in the United States of America.

By addressing such issue, it may be safe to conclude that *FBI* series is trying to portray what living as Muslims in the United States looks like. As these things happens also in reality, it could be said that the data gather from the series represent pretty much an accurate reflection of what is happening in the society, that "Islam was portrayed as lurking behind every corner and posing a growing threat to the American

way of life, if left unchecked" (Al-Arian, 2021). Therefore, by presenting characters like Special Agent Omar Adom Zidan, the imam at the mosque, and a few other minor characters who are proud to be Muslim, the series is actually giving Islam a chance to defend itself, to see the reality of Islamic life from the inside point of view. Regardless of does it happen in reality or not, there are certain scenes in the series, showing the audience that not all Muslims are bad, and not all imam at the mosque should be put under suspicion that he is secretly conducting a terrorism plan, and a Muslim too, is eligible and most certainly capable of becoming an FBI agent, not just the target of it.

## CONCLUSION

The current growth of Islam and Muslim communities Ignites demand from the Muslim people to see themselves being represented correctly in the film industry. By taking into consideration the number of Muslims all over the world, filmmaker may recognize the potential of creating a huge hit series by making the story that resonates to those demographic. The *FBI* series came like a breath of fresh air by showing a Muslim main character playing as a special

agent of the FBI. By showcasing a main character portrayed as Muslim FBI special agent in the series, it is fair to say that the representation of Muslim in the American film industry, particularly in the crime investigation genre has shifted for the better. At last, regardless of the reason being economically driven, or genuinely pursue a better representation of Islam, this research shows that both sides each achieved something good. For the Muslim community, the good thing is the fact that they are finally being represented in positive ways, whereas for the production teams, they did a great job in building emotional connection with the intended audience, resulting in a rising hope and building expectation that in the future, there would be more movies like this, which means... more marketing opportunity.

#### **COMPETING INTEREST STATEMENT**

Herewith the author declares that this article is totally free from any conflict of interest regarding the assessment, review and revision, and publication process in general.

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