

ABSTRACT

From Extremism to Extravagance:
The Impact of U.S. Television on Iranians and Persians

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Middle Easterners are often negatively stereotyped in television, including the shows examined in this study: Showtime's *Homeland*, and Bravo's *Shahs of Sunset*. Both represent Middle Easterners poorly; in *Homeland*, they are largely depicted as terrorists, while in *Shahs of Sunset*, Persians are portrayed as vapid and lazy. This study looked for trends between viewing these shows and harboring negative bias towards Middle Easterners, particularly Iranians/Persians. A two-pronged approach was used: first, a brief content analysis of the shows was performed; next, a survey was administered, gauging respondents' familiarity with the shows and perceptions of Middle Easterners. Findings indicate *Homeland* viewers trended toward perceiving Middle Easterners more negatively than non-viewers. Viewers of *Shahs of Sunset* did not perceive Persians significantly worse. Findings suggest that shows portraying Middle Easterners as violent are tied more closely to viewers' negative perceptions than are shows casting Middle Easterners in nonviolent, albeit unpleasant, roles.

From Extremism to Extravagance: The Impact of U.S. Television on Iranians and Persians

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Middle-Eastern Americans living in the United States are often subjected to discrimination, much of which is due to negative stereotypes circulating in society (Alsultany, 2013; Bender, 2015). Stemming from tragedies such as the 1989 Iranian Hostage Crisis, or the September 11 attacks in 2001, public sentiment towards Middle Easterners has remained highly derogatory. Individuals who fit the mold of an Iranian or Arabic ethnicity have repeatedly experienced verbal and physical attacks, as well as subtler prejudice such as barriers to entry in the workplace or hiring bias (e.g. Bakalian & Bozorgmehr, 2009; Bender, 2015; Dean, 2011; Filipowicz, 2015; Ingraham, 2015; Smith, 2016; Stonebanks, 2010; Sullivan, 2015; Haines, 1996; Annear & Bosco, 2015; Widner & Chicoine, 2011). These reoccurring stereotypes are often most prevalent in media; this includes not only news sources, but also popular movies, television shows, and advertisements (e.g. Sides & Gross, 2013; Shaheen, 2001, 2000, 1984; Morey & Yaqin, 2011; Bender, 2015; Fayyaz & Shirazi, 2013).

In this study, a survey was used to gauge audience reaction to two particular television shows—Showtime’s drama *Homeland*, and Bravo’s reality TV show *Shahs of Sunset*—and to seek out shared characteristics in viewers of these shows regarding attitude towards Middle Easterners. The survey also sought to uncover mental preconceptions respondents had in relation to Middle Eastern television characters. Prior to discussing the results of the survey, an extensive literature review is included in order to provide

background on Middle Eastern ethnicities, including Persian and Arabic, as well as an overview of existing studies on television and race. Before delving into survey methodology and findings, the literature review will conclude with a brief analysis of *Homeland* and *Shahs of Sunset*, the shows focused on in this study.

Research on these television programs and their viewers is important, as both of these programs depict Middle Eastern individuals in a negative light. *Homeland* depicts multiple Middle Eastern ethnicities throughout its five existing seasons, while *Shahs of Sunset* focuses solely on Persian-Americans. In *Homeland*, the overwhelming majority of Middle Easterners are depicted as terrorists, criminals, or savages (Durkay, 2014). While some have defended this portrayal, prominent magazine *Salon* called the show “TV’s most Islamophobic show,” and an article in *The Guardian* noted the portrayal of Middle Easterners as “violent fanatics” (Rosenberg, 2012; Al-Arian, 2012; Beaumont, 2012). *Shahs of Sunset*, while it at least refrains from portraying Middle Easterners as terrorists, depicts its Persian-American characters as vapid, lazy, overly promiscuous, and vain (Groves, 2012). The show’s negative portrayal was enough to garner a petition from Iranian Americans boycotting the show and requesting it be taken off the air. A protestor of the show stated, “It is racist and only encourages others who do not know Persians in our American society to feed into the worst kind of stereotype” (Ritz, 2012). In examining both of these shows, it is important to recognize the negative implications such portrayals may have for the thousands of Middle Easterners living in the United States who do not fit the portrayals dominating this popular fare.

The impact of TV on minority ethnicities is made credible by numerous studies that have been carried out on the subject (e.g. Bender, 2003; Deo, 2008; Dixon, 2011; Entman

& Andrew, 2001). Specific studies focusing on Middle Easterners have shown that repeated negative portrayals of Middle Easterners in television shows may have a negative effect on the ways in which the group is viewed by society in general (e.g. Alsultany, 2012, 2013, 2014; Bender, 2015; Morey & Yaqin, 2011; Halse, 2011). In the survey used for this study, individuals are asked whether they have seen or are familiar with these shows. They are also asked about their personal perceptions of Middle Easterners. By comparing the answers of viewers with non-viewers, this survey will assist in determining whether viewers of these shows trend towards holding a greater negative bias towards Middle Easterners than do non-viewers. While this does not confirm that holding negative views of Middle Easterners is a direct result of watching these shows, it does help to bring attention to the fact that these programs may reaffirm already established harmful beliefs.

In addition to looking at more general bias against Middle Easterners, this study also narrows its scope by examining Iranians and Persians specifically. It has been uncovered in previous studies that Iranians will actively choose to call themselves Persian, a label close in meaning, in order to escape the negative connotations that are associated with the word Iranian (Mostofi, 2003; Ansari, 2006). Since “Persian” provides a safe haven from the unfortunate associations of “Iranian,” it is of interest to discover if shows depicting Persians negatively might reduce the safety of the Persian label, and cause individuals to view Persians just as negatively as Iranians. As the only nationally viewed show centered on Persians, *Shahs of Sunset* is in a unique position to potentially impact this phenomenon of connotations. Unfortunately, rather than capitalizing on an opportunity to televise the traditional Persian associations of history, high class, art, and culture, *Shahs of Sunset* presents a sharp break with these connotations and depicts Persians as spoiled,

ungrateful, reckless, and overly extravagant (Yarshater, 1989; Minazad, 2012). This has caused many in the Persian American community to worry that this depiction will reflect on all Persians (Sarraf-Yazdi, 2012). The online survey allows for a chance to determine if viewers of *Shahs of Sunset* respond more negatively to Persians than non-viewers, thus assessing if audience reaction validates this fear.

Ultimately, this study attempts to bring attention to a potential correlation between audiences of television shows with negative stereotypes, such as *Homeland* and *Shahs of Sunset*, and negative views of Iranians and other Middle Easterners. It is possible that if Iranian Americans choose to go by “Iranian,” they may be seen as similar to the vilified Middle Eastern extremists depicted in *Homeland*; if they choose to go by Persian, they may be associated with the vapid, grotesquely extravagant Persians seen in *Shahs of Sunset*. Ideally, this study may help to showcase the need for media casting Middle Easterners in a positive, or even neutral, light.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

For this study, there are multiple threads within existing literature that must be explored. One such thread is literature that discusses the treatment of Middle Easterners living in the United States. Though Iranians are the main ethnic group focused on in this paper, it is crucial to also bring up literature centering on Arabs, since Iranians are often mistaken for Arabs and vice-versa. Focusing on the discrimination that these Middle Eastern groups have faced will help to highlight the potential impact that media has in this area. In addition, it is important to look at literature discussing how and why self-describing Iranians may be treated differently from self-describing Persians, in order to understand why a show negatively depicting Persians specifically may be harmful to these groups. Another thread crucial to this study is literature discussing the impact of television on societal views, particularly television casting minority ethnicities in a negative manner.

Literature Focusing on Treatment of Middle Easterners

While there exists a great multitude of Middle Eastern ethnicities in the United States, this study will primarily limit its focus to two groups: Iranians/Persians, and Arabs. The reason behind focusing on Iranians and Persians is because one of the shows to which audience reaction is being analyzed, *Shahs of Sunset*, is solely about Persian-Americans. It would be difficult to elucidate why audience reaction to *Shahs of Sunset* is of particular concern for this group without first providing enough background information specific to Persians and Iranians. The reason Arabs are being included within this study is because

they are the largest and most well-known Middle Eastern ethnicity within the United States, and are potentially more likely than other Middle Eastern ethnicities to be affected by shows such as *Homeland*, 24, or other programming depicting Middle Easterners in a negative light (Kaleem, 2013).

Iranian Americans

Though Iranians have lived in the United States for hundreds of years, their presence first became noticeable in the 1960s (Ansari, 1977). During this decade, the first wave of Iranian immigration picked up enough speed for other United States citizens to recognize the increasing number of Iranians in the country. This wave, which technically began in 1950 and ended in 1977, largely consisted of young, male college students seeking expanded opportunities for education in the West. This group of Iranian students was enormous enough to be noted by the Institute of International Education as the largest body of international students within the United States (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2015). By the end of this wave, approximately 34,855 Iranians were living in the United States – though this number presents a low estimate when considering the fact that many Iranians were hesitant to report their heritage to the census-takers for fear of discrimination (Bozorgmehr, 1998). While Middle Eastern individuals were not as closely associated with terrorism during this time, Iranians were still victims of the surrounding geopolitical context. Iranians in this period were associated with communism due to Iran's involvement with the Soviet Union during World War II (Burgener, 1997). Since fear of and hatred towards communism was extremely powerful during the decades comprising this first wave, Iranians in the United States were placed in a precarious position. Many were able to avoid association with communism due to the fact that Iranians often appear similar to

the Western conception of “white,” and could avoid being identified as Iranian (Marvasti, 2005). On the other hand, Iranians could also closely resemble Arabs, and were able to capitalize on inclusion in a generic “Middle Eastern” category rather than being singled out as Iranian (Marvasti, 2005). Another way of escaping this association was to go by “Persian” instead of “Iranian” – this essential strategy will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

The second wave of Iranians came during and immediately after the 1979 Iranian Revolution (Bozorgmehr, 1988). In order to understand the demographic of this group, as well as the situation they faced upon arrival in the United States, historical context is necessary. From 1953 to 1979, Shah Reza Pahlavi had ruled the Iranian people; he was best known for his excessive force and long list of human rights abuses carried out by his SAVAK, or secret police. Pahlavi had not been elected by Iranian citizens; the British M16 and United States CIA had placed him in power, allegedly to prevent the spread of communism (Kinzer, 2003). Momentum had been growing to depose and imprison Pahlavi, due to his continuous abuses and seemingly illegitimate power. Although the revolutionary forces, acting with the long-revered Ayatollah Khomeini as their leader, were able to overthrow the government, they were unsuccessful in capturing Pahlavi. After facing his abuses for nearly three decades, the incentive for the Shah to stand trial was high. After escaping Iran, Pahlavi was eventually allowed into the United States for medical treatment (Kinzer, 2003). The new Iranian government requested that Pahlavi be returned to stand trial, but had their request denied by President Jimmy Carter. In retaliation, over 60 Americans were taken hostage at the United States Embassy in Iran, effectively sparking a political crisis and increasing resentment against Iranian persons (Kinzer, 2003).

United States citizens were not alone in experiencing the effects of the revolution; though initially appearing as a better alternative to Pahlavi's regime, the new Islamic government proved to be increasingly persecutory of its own citizens. As a result, many Iranian families became refugees with no choice but to flee. A large number of fortunate Iranians were allowed asylum in the United States, despite President Carter's hard stance against Iranian immigration (Emami, 2014; Bozorgmehr, 1998). This wave, unlike its predecessor, was mainly composed of entire families with varying degrees of gender, age, education, and socioeconomic status (Bozorgmehr, 1988). Many fleeing Iran were apprehensive of being linked to the Shah through their former status in Iranian government or society. Leaving alongside families were "political dissidents...writers, journalists, artists, and musicians" that would undoubtedly be ostracized by the new theocracy (Emami, 2014). This group faced an even harsher atmosphere due to the hostage crisis; although most came to the United States to find safety, this hope was not realized in the face of the escalating discrimination they were presented with. The immigrants in this era harbored hopes that the revolutionary government would soon be replaced by one more hospitable to their return, as a large majority were planning to go back to Iran. Unfortunately for the displaced, an invitation back home was never extended, and they were forced to remain in the United States and begin to acclimate themselves to an unfamiliar culture (Shavarini, 2004, 2012).

The third, and current, wave of Iranian immigration into the United States has been occurring since the early 2000s, and is colloquially known as the "brain drain" (Torbat, 2002). This newer demographic of Iranian immigrants is mainly composed of adult professionals in highly skilled professions such as engineering or medicine. Rather than

leaving Iran by force, these immigrants chose to seek the unrestricted opportunities for career advancement that is offered much more extensively by the United States than it is by Iran. Mainly arriving after the September 11 attacks, these immigrants have been subject to prejudice due to their similarity in appearance to Arabs (Torbat, 2002). More recently, focus has been narrowed back in on Iranians specifically, as occurrences such as the Iranian Nuclear Deal are being placed in the spotlight by the news media. The Iranians that continue to arrive are increasingly subject to scrutiny from this as well; nevertheless, the allure of a career unfettered by theocracy continues to entice Iranian immigrants.

This background on Iranian Americans is important to this study because, as a relatively new immigrant population, individuals in the United States have not had a great deal of personal contact with Iranians. Due to this, depiction of Iranians in media may be the only exposure American-born citizens have to this group (Kamalipour, 1998). This makes negative portrayals in media more powerful, especially when they are not counteracted with a comparable number of positive portrayals (Bender, 2015).

Difference between Iranians and Persians

Before beginning to understand why it is of such magnitude that *Shahs of Sunset* focuses solely on Persian Americans and does not often refer to the characters as “Iranian,” it is first necessary to expand on the actual, denotative differences between Iranians and Persians, as well as give a synopsis of their connotative associations.

The country of Iran is located in a region of the Middle East known as the Caucasus, also termed the “Aryan region” (Akbarzadeh, 2003). The word “Aryan” is essentially a variation of the word “Iran,” making all those who live within that region technically “Iranian,” regardless of their actual ethnicity. Within this Iranian section of the Middle East

is a large region named “Pars” that is almost entirely homogenous in regards to the ethnicity of its inhabitants. Historically, the ethnic group in Pars spoke Parsi (later known as Farsi, due to the lack of the letter ‘P’ in the influencing Arabic language), practiced similar customs, and were fairly uniform in their Zoroastrian religion. It is this region from which the label “Persian” comes from: individuals whose ancestors are from the Pars region are Persian. The Pars region makes up an enormous portion of the Iranian region – so much so that the country was originally named “Persia.” Though a mix of ethnicities have historically resided in Persia – including Kurd, Lur, Azeri, Turkmen, and Arab – the largest ethnic group to live here were Persians, due to the enormity of the Pars region as well as Persians’ migration to other parts of the country (Akbarzadeh, 2003). Since the Pars region is within Iran, anyone who is Persian is also technically Iranian. However, there may be individuals who lack ancestry within the Pars region, but have ancestors in the Aryan region, making them Iranian but not Persian. This latter group is significantly smaller in number, but does still exist. In summation, all Persians are automatically Iranian, but not all Iranians are necessarily Persian.

In the past century, this distinction between Iranian and Persian has become gradually muddled to outside observers, in part due to Persia’s name change in 1935. The leader of Persia at that time, Reza Shah, was faced with what he believed to be a troubling international situation. As countries in Europe grew in status and innovation, Persia seemed to be connected more to its ancient past than to a technologically significant future. Reza Shah desired the nation to be regarded as a modernized country, and to provide it with a stronger chance of becoming a key player in international affairs (Kinzer, 2003). A number of scholars argue that Reza Shah was aware of and catered to Hitler’s affinity to Aryans; it

is believed that he wished to appear more favorable to Germany and its increasing band of allies in Europe and beyond (Yarshater, 1989). Changing the country's name to Iran would directly link to an Aryan background, and thus help the country to become more closely linked to Germany. It would also help rid it of the "Oriental Other" that was largely associated with the name "Persia," and the region in general (Said, 1978). In contrast, some scholars believe that the name was changed in order to encompass all ethnicities within Iran, rather than solely recognizing the Persian majority (Akbarzadeh, 2003). Due to one of, or a combination of, these factors, in 1935 Reza Shah made a proclamation in which he requested that the name "Persia" be abandoned in favor of the nation's new name, Iran.

Though this request was eventually honored by the international community, many citizens within Iran mourned the loss of the former name – a name which was prized for its ability to evoke images of ancient history, conquerors, architectural marvels, poetry, and art. One Persian scholar, Ehsan Yarshater (1989), spent much of his career arguing for the continued use of Persia, saying "one speaks of Persian art, Persian literature, Persian carpets, Persian miniatures, Persian mosques, and Persian gardens all of which attest to a general refinement of taste and culture" (p. 63). A similar sentiment comes from the Iranian newspaper *Payvand*, which stated, "The change in the international name of our country, from Persia to Iran, has created a detrimental gap between Persia and its historical and cultural past in the mind of the people of the world" (Akbarzadeh, 2003). Feeling this same nostalgia, a large number of Iranians continue to use the name "Persia" for the country, despite over 80 years passing since the official change. It is still very common for Iranians of all ages and locales to call themselves "Persian," and disregard the Iranian label that they feel has been forced upon them (Mostofi, 2003).

While the Iranians who choose to go by Persian offer up many different explanations for their choice of descriptor, the particular line of reasoning that is the most applicable for the purposes of this study is that Iranians choose to call themselves Persian in order to escape prejudice. The word “Iranian” has many negative connotations, for a plethora of reasons which include political, historical, and religious associations.

Politically, the word “Iran” was not recognized on a worldwide scale until after 1935, when Reza Shah changed the country’s name from Persia to Iran. Prior to 1935, “Persia” was an embodiment of glorified ancient history, and exuded a sense of class, beauty, and art to which younger nations could only aspire. “Iran” was at first unknown on a global scale – when it was finally recognized, it was amidst the backdrop of communism and war. In the mid-20th century eyes of the west, Iran came to be associated with oil production and exportation, rather than culture (Kinzer, 2003). This impression endured until the hostage crisis and revolution in 1979, when Iran then became known as a nation composed mainly of an Islamic, West-hating population (Khakpour, 2012). Children of Iranian immigrants in this period learned from their parents the necessity of using “Persian” – Porochista Khakpour (2012) recalls “I said [Persian] because my parents said it. At first I suspected empire-state-of-mind pride, though I slowly began to sense bony shame in an era when Iran equaled ‘hostage crisis’ and ‘revolution.’”

After this period, Iran’s reputation only worsened. September 11 and the ensuing war and turmoil in the Middle East left a stain on Iran that has endured to this day – even though much of this turmoil has not actually taken place inside Iran. Surveys from the past decade have shown that many Americans are unaware of the difference between Iran and Iraq (Rood, 2008; Sawyer, 2006). These two very dissimilar countries are separated in

Western perspectives by only one letter; some Americans even struggle to remember whether it is Iran or Iraq that United States troops have been sent to (Moore, 2014). Within the past few years, as the topic of nuclear threat pushed its way to the forefront of the United States news media, Iran has garnered its own, distinct reputation as a war mongering country with highly destructive potential. Iran's political and historical timeline has only been building for less than a century, yet has proved to be immensely destructive to the connotative associations attached to Iran's citizens. The Iranian government's actions have been, in many cases, seen to be directly representative of its citizens' character (Marvasti, 2005). Persia, on the other hand, is technically no longer a country and is unable to reflect poorly on Persian people; as there are no longer destructive acts being carried out in the name of Persia, this word becomes something of a safe haven for Persian/Iranian individuals living abroad.

On this phenomenon, Mostofi (2003) writes, "'Persia' means beautiful and has a positive connotation, while 'Iranian' qualities are construed, no doubt by virtue of Islamic influence, as ugly with negative implications." The events of the past eighty years have caused many negative traits to attach themselves to the term "Iranian;" according to Mostofi (2003), these traits include "narcissism, highly competitive spirit, self-aggrandizement, [and] intense emotional reactions" (p. 688). Though a desire to refrain from association with such poor generalizations is by itself enough for Iranians to choose to label themselves as "Persian," they are further encouraged to avoid "Iranian" by the repeated discriminatory acts that have been directed towards them since 1979; these acts will be discussed at length later in this chapter.

While the label of “Persian” allows for an escape from many of the aforementioned political and historical connotations, it also goes a step further by allowing Iranians to sidestep the automatic religious association that comes with “Iranian.” Since Iran’s full name is “The Islamic Republic of Iran,” from the name alone, it is clear that Islam—specifically Shiite Islam—is a central aspect of the nation’s identity. Unfortunately, due to the actions of a comparatively small group of Muslim extremists, Islam receives a great deal of negative attention in Western nations, including the United States (Morey & Yaqin, 2011; Alsultany, 2012; Bender, 2015; Disha et. al., 2011; Sides & Gross, 2013; Stonebanks, 2010). Studies have shown that even those Muslims in the United States who are not Middle Eastern face increased scrutiny in comparison to other religions (Bender, 2015; Lipka, 2015). After seeing Muslims primarily depicted as terrorists in movies or TV shows such as *24* or *Homeland*, Iranian Muslims may not wish to be automatically associated with such a negative portrayal (Morey & Yaqin, 2011). It is also important to take into consideration that many Iranians are not Muslim – though to a lesser extent, it is also common for Iranians to be Jewish, Baha’i, Christian, and Zoroastrian (Shavarini, 2004). One example of this is seen in *Shahs of Sunset*: though the majority of the cast is Muslim, several of the main cast members are Persian Jews. The descriptor of Persian provides a mental break between the individual and their religion, thus allowing Iranians to escape any negative, religion-based assumption that they may face if presenting themselves as Iranian.

In sum, choosing to go by Persian rather than Iranian allows for Iranian individuals to avoid automatic assumptions based on nationality, politics, and religion (Mostofi, 2003). This opportunity to present themselves as an independent individual, rather than a living

representation of the Iranian government, is of enormous importance for these individuals and may aid them in avoiding prejudice or discrimination. To understand the great importance that avoidance of potential discrimination carries, it is necessary to examine past and ongoing examples of discrimination against Iranian Americans and Arab Americans.

Discrimination against Iranian Americans

While there may have been cases of discrimination against Iranian Americans in earlier years, the societal discontentment surrounding Iranians did not become highly prominent until the 1979 Iranian Hostage Crisis (Haines, 1996). Almost as soon as the Americans at the Iranian embassy were taken hostage, Iranian Americans felt the backlash in their Western home (Shavarini, 2004). While many discriminatory acts were directed against individual Iranians in singular cases, several prejudicial acts took place on a wide-ranging level.

One such comprehensive act occurred in Mississippi in 1980, when all of the colleges in the state chose to double tuition prices for Iranian students, while keeping the tuition prices for all other students constant (“Iran Students in Tuition Fight,” 1980). The governor at the time, William Winter, signed a bill into law making this selective increase legal – and exemplifying the discrimination toward Iranians that had permeated the state government. The tuition hike presented a signal to Iranian students that they were unwelcome – one such student, Ali Rayei, stated in a newspaper interview, “there would be no way for me to stay in this country with this tuition hike. Nobody can afford it. They want to make pressure on the Iranian students to leave the U.S. because of the existing situation between Iran and the U.S.” (“Iran Students in Tuition Fight,” 1980, p. 6).

The tuition increase, though very clear in its intended meaning, was kinder retaliation than many Iranian Americans at the time would endure. Some Iranians would suffer not a financial assault on their wallets, but direct verbal and physical assaults. One Iranian American author recalls, “Iranians endured slurs, lost or found it hard to find jobs, and became the victims of hate crime” (Shavarini, 2004, p. 2). The Public Affairs Alliance of Iranians Americans (2014) echoed these sentiments, stating “Iranian-Americans were the recipients of a backlash of prejudice, discrimination, and sometimes violence from individuals displacing their anger at the actions of the Iranian government. Verbal and physical attacks on Iranian-American students on college campuses, boycotts of Iranian businesses, and even incidents of arson occurred” (Emami, p. 13). Protests were held across the country urging for Iranians to return home; the more extreme protestors called for the United States government to take Iranian Americans hostage, in order to compensate for the Americans being held hostage in Iran (Emami, 2014). In order to protect themselves during this difficult time, “many Iranians shopped at night and otherwise avoided people to reduce the threat of physical attack” (Emami, 2014, p. 13).

Although tensions died down noticeably once former President Carter left office, prompting the new Iranian government to free the American hostages, this trend of discrimination has continued in the years since the 1979 Iranian Revolution (Ansari, 2006). Today, discrimination occurs against Iranian Americans in multiple forms—organizational, violent, and verbal—and for multiple reasons. One major reason is because of Iran’s current government and the international debate over its nuclear program, while another is due to the hostile climate after September 11, 2001. The latter reason is a source of pain for Iranians, Arabs, and any other ethnicity fitting the “Middle Eastern” description, including

Punjabis and even Latinos at times. The former reason, however, is solely directed at Iranians – though other Middle Easterners still bear the brunt of this discrimination, as most United States citizens are unable to distinguish between ethnicities or even nationalities in the Middle East (Rood, 2008; Sawyer, 2006; Walker, 2002; Moore, 2014).

The discrimination against Middle Easterners occurring at organizational and government levels is “often not perceived because it is based on subconscious beliefs, attitudes, and shared cultural values” (“Trading Action for Access,” 2008, p. 2159). These particular beliefs and attitudes cast Iranians in the part of terrorists, radical Muslims, and enemies of the West (Bender, 2015; Alsultany, 2012; Bozorgmehr, 2011). Two prominent organizations that have been known to practice this subtle discrimination are Apple and the University of Massachusetts.

Within an often unnoticed clause on Apple’s website is the provision that Iranian citizens may not purchase Apple products as they may have “intent to go back to Iran” (“Global Trade Compliance,” 2015). Apple’s given reasoning is that they are complying with the United States government’s policy of curtailing the sale of technology to Iranian nationals (York, 2012). However, Iran’s citizenship works differently than United States citizenship; anyone with a parent born in Iran or holding Iranian citizenship is also automatically granted Iranian citizenship even if they have never set foot in the country (“Interview with Shahram Mohammadzadeh about Iran’s Citizenship Laws,” 2002). This policy garnered slight media attention in 2012 when it was practiced by an Apple store in Georgia (Kanalley, 2012). A store employee had discovered that a customer was Iranian after overhearing her speaking Farsi. Upon this revelation, the employee informed the 19-year-old Persian American girl that she would not be allowed to purchase Apple items

since the United States and Iran “have bad relations” (Kanalley, 2012). Despite having been born in the United States, this company policy still applied to her, since she had automatic Iranian citizenship.

A few years later, the University of Massachusetts enacted a policy similar to Apple’s. In February of 2015, UMass announced a policy change that prohibited students with Iranian citizenship from entering into science or engineering graduate programs (Annear & Bosco, 2015). School administration offered the rationale that the policy was meant to comply with United States sanctions – however, the Iranian student body at UMass was not convinced by this reasoning, since the sanctions had existed since 2012 and had never specified any restrictions on course offerings. After sparking media attention and student outrage, the school administration removed restrictions for Iranians, so “long as their planned studies do not run afoul of federal sanctions intended to curb Iran’s nuclear ambitions” (Annear & Bosco, 2015).

Though not due to official administrative policies in this instance, Iranians were also targeted at Stanford University in 2011. A Stanford professor, Jefferey Ullman, publicly made his disdain for Iranians known, even in his professional life. He refused to assist Iranian students who emailed him for help, saying “I will not help Iranian students until Iran recognizes and respects Israel as the land of the Jewish people” (NIAC, 2011, para. 2). Outside of private correspondence, he posted on his Stanford profile a FAQ section titled “Answers to All Questions Iranian.” The question and answer that upset the Iranian community most read, “Can [an Iranian] get into Stanford?” with an answer of “Probably not” (NIAC, 2011, para. 3). Although this was merely one professor whose actions may not have been condoned by school administration, it sends a strong message

to Iranians that Ullman's prejudiced FAQ section had been allowed to be posted on a Stanford-owned and operated website. Additionally, Ullman did not face termination – reinforcing the message that these sentiments against Iranians are acceptable (NIAC, 2011).

Even higher up in prominent organizations, the United States government has also taken part in the structural discrimination against Iranians. An example of this is embodied in the January 2016 passage of a bill designed to restrict travel to Iran, and limit United States visas for “dual Iranian, Iraqi, Sudanese or Syrian citizens” (Smith, 2016, para. 3). The bill denies visa waivers to anyone who has visited Iran within the past five years, making it difficult for Iranian Americans to visit family and be able to return home without hassle. Iranian American Nadereh Chamlou lamented the bill, saying, “we feel we are being singled out...everywhere we have gone as Iranians, we have been exemplary citizens” (Smith, 2016, para. 15). Another Iranian, Kourosh Kolahi, stated,

Because of the little-noticed visa reform language included in the federal omnibus spending bill, I am now treated differently than my wife, daughter and other fellow Americans. I was born in this country and have spent my entire life here. I am a proud American; this is my home. Yet, based on our ancestry, this law discriminates against me and other Americans (Smith, 2016, para. 19).

Various other individual governmental officials have expressed similar prejudicial sentiments as the ones effected by the passage of the bill. Although many of these sentiments have not become law, they nonetheless remain in public discourse and impact the public's view of Iranians. A recent example of this came in early 2016: immediately after a prisoner swap between the United States and Iran, presidential hopeful Sen. Ted Cruz commented on the affair in a manner derogatory to Iranians. The seven Iranian prisoners that the United States returned home were solely “charged with violating

economic sanctions against Iran, not with attempting to kill people or commit acts of violence” (Carter, 2016). Despite this fact, in a public television interview Cruz referred to the prisoners as “terrorists” and condemned the planned swap for releasing these “terrorists” (Carter, 2016). This charged rhetoric serves to associate all Iranians with terrorism, whether or not there is an actual charge.

South Carolina Sen. Lindsay Graham attacked Iranians even more fiercely than Cruz; in 2015, he publicly declared, “The Iranians cheat, and they lie. They are a radical regime. They want a master religion for the world; the Nazis wanted a master race” (Zurcher, 2015). At a later date, he made reference to the “religious Nazis running Iran” (Kopan, 2015). The blatant comparison of Iranians to Nazis creates an image in the public eye that is not easily erasable, further linking all Iranians with extremism and violence.

Such rhetoric has also come from the other side of the aisle, as evidenced in the first democratic primary debate for the 2016 presidential election. During the debate, former secretary of state and presidential candidate Hillary Clinton was asked the question of which enemies she was proudest of having. Mixed in with responses such as “republicans” and “the NRA,” she listed “the Iranians” as an enemy (Filipowicz, 2015). It is almost certain that Clinton was referencing the Iranian government; however, the loose rhetoric of her response is dangerous in that it generalizes all Iranians as terrorists, regardless of whether or not they are also American.

This aforementioned rhetoric and societal stereotyping has impacted Iranians in their daily lives. This stereotyping is only further enforced by the negative television programming discussed in this study, which normalizes such speech and stereotyping. Due in large part to the prejudicial speech of politicians and prominent figures, Iranians have

faced discrimination not only from organizations and institutions, but from strangers in their own neighborhoods. This discrimination may come in the form of hate speech – for example, a poster displayed in restaurant located in Katy, TX depicts “a group of cowboys donning ‘Iranians Suck’ T-shirts while lynching an Iranian,” and featuring the statement, “Let’s Play Cowboys and Iranians” (NIAC, 2011, para. 1). Despite a request for the poster to be removed for its “potential to encourage xenophobia and hatred toward Americans of Iranian descent,” the owner maintained his argument that “this is still America. If they’re not happy here, then they should go back to Iran” (NIAC, 2011; Dean, 2011).

Taking a drastic step further, this daily discrimination also comes in the form of violence, as it did in the case of Shayan Mazroei. This 22-year-old Iranian American college student was murdered in October 2015; he was attacked and killed by a White supremacist outside a bar in California. According to the killer, Craig Tanber, Mazroei was targeted due to a tattoo written in Farsi script on his arm. Tanber cited the Farsi tattoo as evidence that Mazroei was a terrorist, or enjoined with ISIS – witnesses overheard him call Shayan a “terrorist” and a “f----- Iranian” (Williams, 2015). Mazroei’s tattoo was not affiliated with ISIS or terrorism – ironically, in Farsi, it said “love” (Williams, 2015). Tanber was charged with murder, yet despite community efforts, he was not charged with the additional count of a hate crime (Williams, 2015; Hensley, 2015).

Mazroei’s death is one of the most recent prominent examples of an Iranian being singled out for violence, but does not at all represent the only time Iranians have been targeted due to their general Middle Eastern features. Iranians, Arabs, and Middle Easterners of all ethnicities fall victim to post-9/11 stereotyping. Additionally, individuals of Middle Eastern appearance are assumed to be Muslim regardless of their actual religion,

subjecting them to hate crimes directed towards Muslims as well. In early 2015, a study determined that these hate crimes “are still five times more common today than before 9/11” (Ingraham, 2015).

Discrimination against Arab Americans and Muslim Americans

For the purposes of this study, it is also essential to examine instances of discrimination that Arab Americans and Muslim Americans have faced while living in the United States. Due to similar appearances, many Middle Eastern ethnicities are mistaken to be Arab, and vice versa, regardless of what ethnicity the individual actually is. Further, due to media portrayals, most individuals of Middle Eastern ethnicity are assumed to be Muslim, and the words “Arab” and “Muslim” are often used interchangeably (Alsultany, 2012). Negative portrayals of Middle Easterners on shows such as *Homeland* are especially damaging, as they continue to reinforce the unflattering stereotypes and destructive societal view of Arab/Muslim Americans. Such stereotypes are strongly linked with discrimination against Arab/Muslim Americans, ranging from subtle biases in the workplace to outright hate crimes.

An important example of a workplace bias is visible in a study done by Widner and Chicoine (2011), which looked at hiring biases that disadvantage Arab Americans. The researchers in this study created false, identical resumes and cover letters that were unique only in one thing: the applicant’s name. Half of the resumes and cover letters were given American or Anglo sounding names (i.e. John Smith), while the other half were given Arabic, or Middle-Eastern sounding names (i.e. Abdulrahman Karim). The study found that the fake applicants with Anglo names were four times more likely to be contacted by employers than were those with Arabic names, despite all other information being equal

(Widner & Chicoine, 2011). This may have been subconsciously done by the employers, as is suggested by theories of structural discrimination, or it could have been a conscious, post 9/11 choice. Either way, it is a prime display of bias against Middle Easterners.

Although an undeniable display of prejudice, this hiring bias begins to seem slight in comparison to the violent acts carried out against Arab/Muslim Americans over the past decade. According to the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports program, "annual hate crimes against Muslims have consistently hovered in the 100-150 [attacks per year] range, roughly five times higher than the pre-9/11 rate" (Ingraham, 2015). In the first year after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, there was "a 1,600 percent increase" in attacks on Middle Easterners – "from 28 hate incidents in 2000 to 481 in 2001" (Disha et. al., 2011). Many of these hate crimes are intended to target Muslims; however, in the United States, it is often stereotypically assumed that all Middle Easterners are Muslim. Additionally, Muslims and Sikhs wear similar traditional dress, causing discrimination against Muslims to carry over to Sikhs at times (Moftah, 2015). Indians and Hindus, as well, are often confused to be Middle Eastern or Muslim.

This violence towards Middle Eastern Arabs, Muslims, and other groups of similar appearance has taken place nationwide in various forms. In July 2007, an Indian American man who was mistakenly believed to be Middle Eastern "suffered fractures of several facial bones and an orbital fracture in one eye after being kicked and beaten" by two men. The attackers accused the victim of being a terrorist and "relative of Osama Bin Laden" ("Hate Crimes Against Arab Americans, Muslims, and Sikhs," 2009). In January 2009, two Middle Eastern store clerks in Memphis were shot and killed in cold blood. Reports from a civil rights group note that "following the shooting, unknown perpetrators set fire to the

store and an employee's car, and activists called for a boycott of all Arab-own businesses in the neighborhood" ("Hate Crimes Against Arab Americans, Muslims, and Sikhs," 2009). In this incidence, despite Middle Easterners being the victims in the crimes, they were still blamed for violence occurring in the community. Recently, in 2015, three Middle Eastern American college students in North Carolina were murdered by a man who had a history of public anti-Muslim sentiments (Sullivan et. al., 2015).

Despite the ethnically-motivated murder of these individuals and many others, the FBI did not develop and place into effect a category that would track hate crimes against Arabs, Sikhs, or Hindus until 2015. This change was only implemented after "civil rights organizations argued that the nation's law enforcement agencies were not adequately monitoring bias incidents against Sikhs, Hindus and Arabs" (Moftah, 2015). Although the FBI focus on these crimes is a display of progress, many consider it alarming that it was only implemented after numerous White supremacists attacked these ethnic groups (Moftah, 2015). Additionally, since 'hate crime' is defined by the Hate Crime Statistics Act of 1990 as "offenses against a person or property motivated by bias toward race, religion, ethnicity/national origin, disability or sexual orientation," many Middle Easterners are upset that the many attacks that have obviously fallen into that definition were not deemed hate crimes prior to the FBI's official change (Disha et al, 2011).

Impact of Television on Minority Ethnicities

The subject of bias in media has been extensively studied, and as both of the shows examined in this study exhibit bias in their portrayal of Middle Easterners, it is prudent to touch on this literature. Bias in media has been studied in numerous forms: political or partisan bias, gender bias, and racial or ethnic bias make up a large amount of the existing

literature on this subject (Kressel, 1987; Morris, 2007; Moeller, 2006; DellaVigna & Kaplan, 2007). This study focuses on bias in relation to race, ethnicity, and nationality of those being depicted in media. Scholars have noted that the negative or “Othering” depiction of foreign cultures by Western media can be representative of a form of present-day cultural imperialism (Sonwalkar, 2001; Said, 1978).

An example of this is seen in a study by Sonwalkar (2001), which examined the debate over the entry of foreign press in India in the 1990s. At this time, though India had become responsive to international business dealings, the country’s citizens hesitated over whether Western press outlets should be able to invest in Indian print media, or publish news from within India. The *Washington Post* reported of this debate, “no proposal has prompted such a visceral anti-foreign reaction as the one to open India’s print media to international investors” (Sonwalkar, 2001, p. 746). The main fear in this case was that Western coverage of India would depict events and individuals through a Western cultural lens, and diminish the importance of, or even mock, Indian culture. Those vehemently against allowing Western press in India made arguments such as, “allowing them in would amount to legitimizing cultural imperialism,” “it would lead to a Murdoch-ization of the Indian press,” and that a Western press would “strike at our civilization, our culture, our traditions, our politics, [and] our freedom of expression” (Sonwalkar, 2001, p. 746-747). These passionate arguments against depiction of Indians by Western media serve to indicate the perceived reality of cultural imperialism and bias in media for not only a select group of people, but for an entire nation.

Outside of news media, the issue of bias and stereotyping in entertainment television, specifically, has garnered a great deal of attention from researchers. Although

this study's scope is confined to a focus on Middle Easterners, previous landmark studies have examined the impact of television stereotypes on a much wider range of racial and ethnic minorities. It has been asserted by past studies that "racism in the post-civil rights United States is reproduced through subtle and naturalized ideologies" (Deo et. al, 2008; Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Feagin, 2000; Steinberg, 2001). The inclusion of these racist ideologies in media, specifically television, serves to "Other" the ethnicities being portrayed, and effectively demarcate their status from that of dominant Anglos (Ramirez-Berg, 2002; Hall, 1997; Deo et al, 2008; Said, 1978). Deo et al (2008) assert that "images on television do not exist in a vacuum, but rather convey and infuse ideological meanings into the societies in which they are produced" (p. 148). Television executives and producers have argued against these views, maintaining that television is purely meant for entertainment purposes and, as entertainment, does not truly impact those it creatively depicts. However, numerous scholars have argued that television plays a direct role in subjugating racial and ethnic minorities, with the majority of studies in the field focusing on African Americans and Latinas/os (Entman & Andrew, 2001; Foley, 1997; Feagin, 2000; Gray, 2005; Hall, 1997; Steinberg, 2001).

Though negatively impacting each minority race or ethnicity to some extent, stereotyping in television has a particularly heavy impact on children, regardless of their specific ethnicity. Film and minority scholar Steven Bender (2003) writes, "demeaning media portrayals help shape children's opinions about their societal and self-worth, causing humiliation, isolation, and despair as well as cultural and self-hatred" (p. 3). Bender (2003) admits that television shows are intended to present a dramatized fiction, but argues that they nevertheless are a reflection of the accepted norms in society, and implicitly reinforce

to viewers that these norms, even the racially or ethnically marginalizing ones, are an acceptable part of life. In studies, this effect has been seen as detrimental to numerous groups, but historically, it has most prolifically impacted African Americans and Hispanics or Latinas/os. According to Bender (2003), the largest wealth of information on the topic of television and minorities focuses on African American children and how “television in particular fosters and reinforces unflattering beliefs that Black children hold of themselves” (p. 3).

Bender takes this theoretical foundation and builds off of it to examine the effect of television on Latinas/os. He has found that many television shows, including *Cops*, *Miami Vice*, and even *Toy Story 2* present negative portrayals of Latinas/os as criminals. Bender (2003) wrote, “This association of Latinas/os and crime is particularly apparent against the backdrop of a relative absence of Latinas/os in other prominent roles on television” (p. 4). This comment is highly relatable to Middle Easterners – who are associated with terrorism while remaining relatively absent in other prominent roles.

While this depiction of Latinas/os as criminals is harmful in that it reinforces and validates derogatory stereotypes in the public opinion, Bender (2003) argues that this harmful effect is even more serious than apparent. He contends that this impact can go a step further than influencing public opinion, and can influence the way the legal system treats Latinas/os. Bender (2003) cites several pieces of legislation in California as directly stemming from stereotypical representations in media, pointing specifically to the “assaults on affirmative action” (p. 5). He argues that, due largely to television, affirmative action is depicted “as marginalizing the educational experience of students and as treating Anglo applicants unfairly by giving preference in the admissions process to the stereotypical

unintelligent Latina/o and African American” (Bender, 2003, p. 5). Bender (2003) believes that this negative depiction of affirmative action played a prominent role in the legislator’s decision to cut affirmative action programs.

A smaller subset of studies has also focused on the dramatized representation and typecasting of East Asians in television, and the derogatory stereotypes that are reinforced by such production (e.g. Deo et. al., 2008; Taylor & Stern, 1997; Lee, 2001; Lee, 1997). A study by Deo et. al. (2008) examined the framing methods of television in regards to Asian populations. Deo et. al (2008) suggested that contemporary discrimination, which is more subtle and nuanced than the overt discrimination of the 19th and 20th centuries, is the most dangerous form of racism. This is due to the present “comprehensively racialized social structure...that lures us into the false belief that racism has ceased” (Deo et. al., 2008, p. 147). The study suggested that even “positive” generalizations in media – e.g. the ‘smart’ Asian – are damaging to the entire population of individuals who do not fit that mold. In addition, such stereotypes reinforce the dominant belief that these generalizations are an acceptable part of society.

This collection of previous studies on racial and ethnic minorities sets an important precedent and foundation on which studies of Middle Easterners in television can build off of. Though Middle Easterners in general have been depicted in television since a much earlier date, the starting date that this study uses is the coverage of the 1979 Hostage Crisis. Programming covering this historical event was largely the first exposure that United States citizens had to the Iranian people, rather than to a generic view of the “othered” Orient (Kamalipour, 1998). Since the sensationalized news coverage was typically one sided, this

publicity gave an early, lasting, negative impression of Iranians and Middle Easterners in general.

As Yahya Kamalipour (1998, para. 12) reported,

Rather than providing a context and explaining the history of American-Iranian relations, the media focused on sensationalism. Blindfolded hostages were shown on television repeatedly - in fact, this scene was incorporated into the opening collage of many television news programs in the United States. Images were essentially substituted for explanation and reasoning behind the unfolding events in Tehran. In fact, these images have been engraved in the psyche of those Americans who witnessed, mainly through television, that unfortunate event.

This early television featuring Iranians thus set a precedent for how Middle Easterners would come to be depicted in much of media: violent, fanatic extremists bent on destruction of the West.

Television Programming featuring Middle Easterners

There are many TV programs that feature Middle Easterners, but the most notable of these do not contain positive depictions. The earliest TV show to incorporate Middle Eastern terrorism into its plotline was the Fox network drama *24*. Starring Kiefer Sutherland as a Counter Terrorist Unit agent named Jack Bauer, this show began airing in 2001 – only two months after the World Trade Center attacks. While the first season focused on the Balkans rather than the Middle East, the second season was quick to change its focus to Middle Eastern terrorism (Alsultany, 2012). Though the producers of the shows insisted that the show took creative license and was not meant to be a realistic depiction, the Council on American-Islamic Relations “objected to stereotyping Arabs and Muslims as terrorists, [and] the Parents Television Council, Human Rights First, and faculty from West Point Military Academy objected to *24*’s portrayal of torture as an effective method of interrogation” (Alsultany, 2012, p. 19). Many organizations felt that the protagonist’s

use of torture on Middle Easterners was dangerous and could influence impressionable viewers; West Point in particular was “concerned that some of their cadets believed torture was an effective method of interrogation because of 24’s portrayal of it” (Alsultany, 2012). A former army interrogator confirmed the reality of West Point’s fear by saying, “Among the things that I saw people doing [in Iraq] that they got from television was water-boarding, mock execution, using mock torture” (Alsultany, 2012, p. 19).

Outside of portraying blatantly militaristic Middle Easterners, 24 was also the first show to suggest that seemingly innocent Middle Easterners were also concealing extremist tendencies. Alsultany writes, “24 introduced viewers to a Middle Eastern family in a recurring role for the first time on U.S. network television” (2013, p. 87). At first glance, this seems like a positive step for Middle Eastern minorities: for the very first time in United States TV history, a Middle Eastern family has a prominent role in a show. However, it is soon revealed that this “ordinary” family is actually a terrorist sleeper cell with the goal of causing a nuclear power plant meltdown in the United States in order to “kill millions and make regions of the United States uninhabitable for years” (Alsultany, 2013, p. 88). The father of this family is even depicted as “willing to kill his wife and son in order to complete his mission” (Alsultany, 2013, p. 88). By coloring the landmark act of presenting a recurring Middle Eastern family with the specter of terrorism, the show effectively sets Middle Easterners back in society, rather than normalizing their inclusion in television (Halse, 2011).

Other recent television shows – Showtime’s *Sleeper Cell*, NBC’s *Blacklist*, and FX’s *Tyrant*, to name a few – continue the trend initiated by 24 (Bender, 2015; Yahr, 2014). Ibrahim (2014) argues that Middle Easterners are currently “perceived to be part of an

invented, imagined race of brown, swarthy terrorists” due in large part to their consistent portrayal “by television dramas as inherently violent” (p. 168). Even United States President Barack Obama has recently stated, “Our TV shows should have Muslim characters that are unrelated to national security” (Schilling, 2016).

Leading Middle Eastern film scholar Jack Shaheen (2001) has argued that when Arabs are portrayed outside of this mainstream terroristic mold, it is either as “billionaires” or “belly dancers” (p. 4). Even children’s movies are guilty of subscribing to stereotypes of Middle Easterners – for example, Disney’s *Aladdin* depicts caricatures of Arabs. The protagonist of the film is the most westernized of all the characters – he has paler skin, and lacks any Middle Eastern accent. The villain, however, is darker skinned and speaks in a sinister Arabic accent. This demarcation went further than appearance – even the lyrics in the film’s songs referred to the Middle Eastern world as “barbaric” and garnered enough backlash to warrant a change in subsequent releases (“It’s Racist, but Hey, It’s Disney,” 1993). A statement from the New York Times in 1993 continues to ring true for both *Homeland* and *Shahs of Sunset*, the shows focused on in this study:

Most Americans now know better than to use nasty generalizations about ethnic or religious groups. Disparaging stereotypes -- the avaricious Jew, the sneaky Chinese, the dumb Irishman, the lazy black person -- are now so unacceptable that it's a shock even to hear them mentioned. Thanks to current international politics, however, one form of ethnic bigotry retains an aura of respectability in the United States: prejudice against Arabs.

Homeland. First airing on Showtime in 2011, *Homeland* garnered the attention of well over two million viewers – a number that remains consistent even today, as the show approaches its sixth season (Plunkett, 2012). The series’ plot is centered on the female lead, Carrie Mathison, who is a CIA agent with varying background complications and

psychological problems that develop over the course of the show. The main antagonist in *Homeland*, and the greatest threat to the Western world, is Abu Nazir, a fictional character similar in nature to Osama Bin Laden. Throughout the first few seasons, the protagonists in the CIA wage war against Nazir and his Middle Eastern and Muslim allies, who are depicted as deceitful and extreme in their violent beliefs (Durkay, 2014). The show, despite its popularity, has been the subject of criticism for its factual errors and prejudicial representations of Middle Easterners and Muslims – two groups who, in the show, are largely regarded as one and the same.

Writing for the Guardian, Laura Durkay states, “the entire structure of ‘Homeland’ is built on mashing together every manifestation of political Islam, Arabs, Muslims, and the whole Middle East into a Frankenstein-monster global terrorist threat that simply doesn’t exist” (2014). Within the first four seasons, viewers are exposed to an Iranian attempt at bombing the CIA headquarters, a barbaric Arabic POW holding center, and multiple terrorist sleeper cells in the United States. Within these varying plotlines is an enduring theme: Middle Easterners, “be they Arab, Iranian, or Pakistani, are brutal terrorists who can’t be trusted, and they’re all out to get us” (Durkay, 2014). For the *Chicago Monitor*, Noor Salhuddin writes, “Every Muslim character in the show is suspicious at best, a terrorist at worst...instead of dispelling stereotypes, *Homeland* promotes them, actively selling Islamophobia in the name of thrill and action” (2012).

The xenophobia is worsened by the many factual errors within the show. In an interview with *The Daily Beast*, former counterterrorism planner Rick Nelson asserted that most of the actions carried out by the CIA on the show would in reality be done by the FBI, as the CIA “does not conduct domestic spying or collect intelligence on U.S. citizens” as

is often done in the show (Zalaznick, 2012). Factual inaccuracies are also seen in the portrayal of Middle Eastern cities; Beirut is depicted as “a dusty, medieval bazaar, instead of the bustling metropolitan city it is” (Salhuddin, 2012). Islamabad, as well, is shown as a shell-shocked, barren wasteland, instead of what it actually is: “a beautiful, well-planned city...[with] quaint little ice-cream parlors, picturesque parks and hiking trails, and wide avenues lined with meticulously cultivated flower beds” (Shakeel, 2014). Another issue within the show is its consistent casting of Anglo or Israeli actors to play Arab characters – a practice similar in offense to hiring Anglo actors to play African American characters (Salhuddin, 2012). While the latter example is recognized as “deeply offensive to the African American community,” *Homeland* has no such qualms when dismissing the value of authenticity for Arabs – and neither does much of the viewing public. Additionally, the actors that have been cast are unable to speak Middle Eastern languages, such as Urdu, correctly (Shakeel, 2014). Shakeel (2014) writes, “Homeland consistently botches the most fundamental aspects of Urdu conversation, in ways that are both painful and hilarious to anyone who actually speaks it.”

In stark contrast to the seemingly imaginary version of the real world that *Homeland* has created, the show at times strays from fiction and makes references to real-life Middle Eastern individuals. Once such similarity between *Homeland* and real life is the name of a terrorist character within the show: “Haissam Haqqani.” This name is remarkably similar to “Husain Haqqani,” which happens to be the name of the actual Pakistani ambassador to the United States (Aslam & Sheikh, 2015). Taking offense to this insinuation, among *Homeland*’s numerous other offenses, a group of Arabic graffiti artists hired by *Homeland* producers “to lend graffiti authenticity to a film set of a Syrian refugee

camp” chose to retaliate in their own subtle manner (Mackay, 2015). Rather than designing random graffiti on the set, the artists instead wrote “Homeland is Racist” in Arabic, among other similar accusations. This went unnoticed by the producers and aired on television, where viewers literate in Arabic noticed the background writing. This was seen as a strike against *Homeland* for the reason that a show depicting Arabs in an overtly negative, stereotypical manner did not contain anyone in the production team who could actually read Arabic (Mackay, 2015).

Despite these errors and offense within the show, *Homeland* has enjoyed much positive critical response and gained phenomenal accolades. Included in its list of awards are multiple Golden Globes and Emmys, among other prominent honors. Also, as mentioned earlier, millions of viewers continue to watch *Homeland* week after week. The producers of the show—who were also behind *24*—maintain that they do not mean for the show to be racist (Rosenberg, 2012). They back up this claim by including several Middle Eastern characters who end up assisting the CIA in the fight against terrorism, and show in several episodes that the CIA has wrongfully accused an innocent Middle Easterner of terrorism. However, Alsultany (2012) argues that these minor Middle Eastern characters are part of a strategy known as “simplified complex representation,” which is “used by television producers, writers, and directors to give the impression that the representations they are producing are complex” (p. 21). Despite a seeming attempt to create complex Middle Eastern characters, *Homeland* is still fundamentally raced due to its most prominent “logics that legitimize racist policies and practices, such as torturing Arabs and Muslims” (Alsultany, 2012, p. 21).

Through the survey used, this study looks to emphasize the potential harm that stereotypes in *Homeland* may hold for Middle Eastern Americans by gauging both viewers' and non-viewers' reaction to Middle Easterners. As Durkay argued, "Homeland is not just mindless entertainment, but a device that perpetuates racist ideas that have real consequences for ordinary people's lives" (2014).

Shahs of Sunset. After being created by reality TV mogul Ryan Seacrest, *Shahs of Sunset* began airing on the Bravo network in 2012; though the numbers fluctuate, it retains roughly two million viewers (Patten, 2012). The show purports itself to be an unscripted reality TV show, and is centered on the daily life of a group of Persian American friends living in California. The show follows six main Persian American cast members through their relationships, careers (or lack of them), and family life. Los Angeles, where the show is set, is the home of the largest number of Persian Americans in the United States – so much so that the city has been nicknamed "Tehrangelles" in popular culture (Kelley et. al., 1993). The show has garnered criticism from Iranian Americans living in Los Angeles and the rest of the United States for its portrayal of Persian life as shallow, materialistic, pretentious, egotistical, spoiled, and vain (Groves, 2012; Hess, 2012; Hale, 2012; Stasi, 2012; Nahai, 2012). Many of the first-generation Persian Americans in *Shahs of Sunset* brag about how they are financed by their parents, their exploits at parties, and their sexual conquests (Hale, 2012). Within just the first few episodes, the Persian American friends buy a pet tiger to showcase at extravagant parties, criticize their friends for wearing non-designer clothing, and embark on shopping sprees with their parents' credit cards – regardless of the fact that they are adults in their thirties (Minazad, 2012).

Speaking of his motivation for creating the show, Seacrest stated, “I think we expected to raise a few eyebrows. But Persian Americans have such a rich and beautiful culture with a deep history, in the end, we felt it was worthy of showcasing so audiences could be educated as well as entertained” (Hess, 2012). This sentiment appears admirable at first; however, after four seasons of the show with a fifth upcoming, critics have noted that any desire to educate has not actually come to fruition on-screen. Instead, the show is more often compared to Seacrest’s most well-known show, *Keeping up with the Kardashians*. Outlets have commented that the characters in *Shahs of Sunset* are just as vapid, self-centered, and spoiled as the *Kardashian* characters (Hale, 2012).

While this criticism of materialism and selfishness is applied liberally to reality television, and in no way is unique to *Shahs of Sunset*, it is a pressing concern in this instance for multiple reasons. First, *Shahs of Sunset* is the first nationally viewed television show that is focused on Persian Americans. While other programs have included Persians in their cast of characters, they are usually cast within the decades-old stereotypes of “billionaires, bombers, and belly dancers” (Shaheen, 1984, p. 4). Second, when Persians are included in other shows, they are usually not the main characters – and they are not always Persian American. The depiction of Persian Americans as the central cast members is an important step in displaying the reality that Persian Americans are not part of a dangerous heritage that should be shunned, but are instead an ordinary ethnic group within United States society.

Third, when Persians are represented in television, they are usually referred to by others within the show as “Iranian” – all Persians are technically Iranian, and this label is now more widely recognized in international affairs. However, “Iranian” is also more

closely linked with negative associations such as terrorism, nuclear weapons, and religious extremism, while “Persian” brings with it positive connotations of ancient empires, cats, and high culture (Mostofi, 2005). The cast members of *Shahs of Sunset* assign other descriptors to the label: in the first season, one character states, “There are a lot of stereotypes about Persians and most of them are true. We are loud, we are clannish, we wear a lot of gold and we have really nice cars. And we are all in real estate” (Seacrest, 2012). Other than *Shahs of Sunset*, there has not yet been a national show that uses “Persian” as the main descriptor for its Iranian characters. As such, it is of interest to see if this choice might affect the relative safety of the term “Persian” in comparison to “Iranian,” as many Iranians call themselves Persian for the express purpose of avoiding prejudice.

Current conversation about the show is divided on this subject. On one side of the issue are Iranians who are convinced that the show’s negative representation of Persians will harm the reputation of all Persian Americans in the United States. This line of thought has been strong enough to prompt a petition calling for the ban of *Shahs of Sunset*; petition creator Nina Sarraf-Yazdi (2012) argues, “Racial stereotyping is always wrong. We as a country should celebrate our many ethnic minorities, not mock them.” Agreeing with Sarraf-Yazdi is Iranian American author Firoozeh Dumas, who said “I never thought Iranian Americans could get any press worse than what is on the news every night. But now, Americans have a chance to see a slice of materialistic, shallow and downright embarrassing Iranian culture...we are not all like that!” (Groves, 2012).

On the other side of the issue are those who argue that the show is merely entertainment, and may even distract from the harsher accusations Iranians face such as terrorism. The National Iranian American Council, for one, believes that the show’s

portrayal of Persians as materialistic and vain is far preferable to mainstream media's more dominant portrayal of Middle Easterners as terrorists. The NIAC commented that this portrayal, though still unflattering, might show that Middle Easterners are more multifaceted than the terrorist stereotype would have one believe (Perdomo, 2012). The cast members in *Shahs of Sunset* agree with this sentiment. Reza Farahan, a central character, stated "I don't mind being stereotyped as materialistic. Middle Easterners have many stereotypes, and materialistic is one of the better ones. We're usually viewed as evil terrorists, so if you're going to stereotype me, I'd prefer it to be because we love gold and Mercedes instead of Uzis" (*Iran Times*, 2012).

However, as of now there are many more outspoken Iranian Americans siding against *Shahs of Sunset* than there are those who are unconcerned about this novel portrayal. This disagreement is unsurprising, especially when considering how the main Persian American woman on the show is known for lines such as, "There are two things I don't like. I don't like ants, and I don't like ugly people" (Groves, 2012). Even non-Persians were shocked by the show's depiction; one outlet stated, "If the goal of ...*Shahs of Sunset* is to make Persians in LA look like egomaniacal, soulless bores whom you wouldn't want to spend five minutes with, let alone an hour, then they've succeeded" (Stasi, 2012). The immense amount of negativity surrounding the show coupled with its consistently high viewership raises the question of how this will impact audience's views of Persians – and to what extent does this impact differ from that of shows such as *Homeland*? This question leads to the following portion of this study: survey research.

Survey Research on Middle Easterners

A number of studies have lent credence to the importance of surveying individuals on the topic of the Middle East (e.g. Bozorgmehr & Sabagh, 1989; Read & Reynolds, 2012; Wald, 2008; Mutz, 2011; Johns, 1991; Hoffman, 1989; Darvishpour, 2002). These studies range in broad topic, from familial roles among Middle Eastern immigrants, to the incidence of sickness among Middle Eastern immigrants, to the extent which Middle Easterners feel they are acclimating to United States society. Additional survey studies have been carried out with a focus on Muslims, a group that has historically included Middle Eastern subjects (Lipka, 2015). On this topic, the Pew Research Center found that, while United States citizens are heavily divided in their beliefs, roughly half believe that Muslims are more violent than non-Muslims, and that they should be subject to more scrutiny than non-Muslims (Lipka, 2015).

While this Pew Research Center survey is helpful in gauging public opinion, it is not necessarily focused on Middle Easterners: many Muslims are not Middle Eastern, and many Middle Easterners are not Muslim. As such, there is presently a lack of studies that utilize surveys to ascertain United States born citizens' view of Middle Easterners, specifically. The current research focusing on this group is mainly devoted to uncovering information about the Middle Eastern American population itself, but not about outside views of this population. This study differs from the currently dominant approach by using a survey that questioned United States citizens about their views of Middle Easterners, thus helping to fill the gap that presently exists in this area. This survey will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

Methods

Research Questions

Using the literature review and short content analysis of *Homeland* and *Shahs of Sunset* as background information, and a survey as a means of attaining answers, this study asked the following questions:

1. Is there a visible difference in how viewers of shows such as *Homeland* and *Shahs of Sunset* versus non-viewers perceive Middle Easterners?
 - 1a. Are viewers of *Homeland* more likely to ascribe negative connotations to individuals of Middle-Eastern ethnicity than are non-viewers?
2. Is there a visible difference in how viewers of shows such as *Shahs of Sunset* perceive the label “Persian” versus non-viewers?
 - 2a. Are non-viewers more likely to ascribe a positive connotation to “Persian?”

Survey Design and Distribution

The research for this study was carried out through an online survey, which was created specifically for this study using the website Survey Monkey. The survey as it appeared to participants is included in the Appendix of this study. Respondents were selected for participation due to either their inclusion in readily available banks of stored university email addresses, or because they were members of Survey Monkey and had indicated an interest in responding to surveys, since the site donates a small amount of

money to charity for each survey taken. To ensure a large sample, the survey was emailed to over six thousand individuals located throughout the United States. Survey participants included current university students, faculty, and staff in the Midwest, as well as a number of individuals located throughout the country who responded through their Survey Monkey account. The foremost reason for choosing an online survey as the primary research method was respondent anonymity. The anonymity of an online survey allowed participants to speak more candidly about their perception of Middle Easterners without fear of appearing prejudiced. After reviewing the write-in answers provided by participants, it seems highly unlikely that respondents would offer the same answers in a face-to-face interaction, or one in which personally identifiable information was collected.

The decision to use Survey Monkey as the survey host was made due to cost restrictions as well as convenience. Although emailing the survey link out to a certain group of participants, as well as opening it to Survey Monkey users, did not yield a truly blind sample, it was ideal for this study, as a true blind sample would have been too expensive to collect. Ideally, however, a blind sample would have been taken, with a focus on a younger demographic that is more likely to watch television. After all potential participants were contacted, the survey remained open for one month to collect responses. Only the respondents that gave consent to be used in this study were counted; any respondents who answered negatively to consent were removed from the data set. The final number of respondents included in the data set was 394.

The survey itself consisted of fourteen questions: one regarding participation and consent, three regarding demographics, six regarding Middle Easterners and television, and four regarding respondents' views of Iranians and Persians. The questions related to Middle

Easterners and television asked: (1) Have you ever watched the TV show *Homeland*?; (2) Which ethnic group is primarily depicted as the enemy in the TV show *Homeland*?; (3) Have you ever watched the TV show *Shahs of Sunset*?; (4) Which ethnic group does the TV show *Shahs of Sunset* mainly focus on?; (5) What role do you think a Middle Eastern actor is most likely to play on TV?; and (6) What TV shows do you watch that you have noticed Middle Eastern actors in?

The first four of these questions listed possible answers solely in a multiple choice format, while the latter two were write-in answers. The write-in option was done in order to capture the conceivably wide range of individual answers and to avoid prompting respondents or subconsciously swaying their answer, as well as to gauge their automatic responses.

The four questions relating to views of Iranians and Persians were: (1) When you hear the word “Iran,” which of the following immediately come to mind?; (2) When you hear the word “Persia,” which of the following immediately come to mind?; (3) When you meet someone who is Persian, what do you expect them to be like?; and (4) When you meet someone who is Iranian, what do you expect them to be like?

All four of these questions contained multiple choice options, as well as an “other” answer choice that allowed respondents to write in their own answer. The multiple choice answers available to participants were randomized each time the survey was taken, in order to ensure a minimization of ordering bias.

In order to answer the research questions, the data was analyzed in several unique ways. To answer the question of whether there is a visible difference in how viewers of shows such as *Homeland* and *Shahs of Sunset* versus non-viewers perceive Middle

Easterners, the data was split into two sets: respondents who indicated that they had not seen or were not familiar with these shows, and respondents who indicated that they have watched or are familiar with these shows. Once these answers were separated, the study looked to see if there was a significant difference in how viewers of the shows described Middle Easterners compared to non-viewers.

To answer the question of whether there is a visible difference in how viewers of *Shahs of Sunset* versus non-viewers perceive the label “Persian,” the data was again split in a similar manner. The respondents who indicated that they have watched or are familiar with *Shahs of Sunset* had their answers separated from those who indicated that they do not watch or are not familiar with *Shahs of Sunset*. Then, the study looked for differences in answer patterns, specifically within the questions that explicitly asked about Persians.

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

Overall, the findings of the study demonstrated that, among respondents, there is a strong set of expected stereotypes pervading Middle Easterners in television. Those who regularly watch or are familiar with *Homeland* trended towards a more negative view of Middle Easterners than did those who regularly watch or are familiar with *Shahs of Sunset*.

Familiarity with Television Shows

Out of the respondents (394) included in the data, 16.15% regularly watched *Homeland*, 29.43% answered that they were familiar with the show but did not regularly watch it, and 54.43% answered that they were not at all familiar with the show. For *Shahs of Sunset*, 8.31% were regular viewers, 10.39% were familiar with the show but were not regular viewers, and 81.3% were not at all familiar with *Shahs of Sunset*. Although ideally the percentage of respondents familiar with *Shahs of Sunset* would be higher, the responses nonetheless allow for an adequate comparison between viewers' perspectives and non-viewers' perspectives of Persians. The number of respondents familiar with *Homeland* is ideal, as almost half are familiar with the show, allowing for an even comparison.

The next question asked, "Which ethnic group is primarily depicted as the enemy in the TV show *Homeland*?" Out of the answer choices, 21.93% correctly responded "Middle Easterners," less than 1% each answered "Russians," "Japanese," or "Koreans," and 75.98% answered, "I do not know." The percentage of respondents choosing "Middle

Easterners” was almost 6% higher than the percentage of respondents who indicated that they were regular viewers of the show.

The next question in this set asked, “Which ethnic group does the TV show *Shahs of Sunset* mainly focus on?” Out of the possible answers, 15.89% correctly answered “Persians,” 2.08% answered, “Armenians,” 0.52% answered “Italians,” and 81.51% answered “I do not know.” The percentage of respondents answering correctly for “Persian” was almost twice as high as the percentage of respondents who indicated that they were regular viewers. This possibly suggests that the show’s advertising, or conversation sparked by the show, is prominent enough for non-viewers to know the subject of the show.

Overall View of Middle Easterners (write-ins)

Multiple questions in the survey specifically assessed perceptions of Middle Eastern ethnicity in the realm of television. The first question that did so asked, “What role do you think a Middle Eastern actor is likely to play on television?” There were no multiple choice options; all participants were required to write in their answers, and were given no prompting. Many of the 394 respondents wrote in multiple answers, which is why the percentages in Table A.1 do not equal one hundred percent, as they, instead, represent the percentage of a certain answer per total number of respondents.

The top answer to this question was overwhelmingly “terrorist” or “villain” (44.93%). Roughly 19.45% of respondents were “unsure” of what roles they had seen Middle Easterners play on TV, or could not remember seeing any Middle Easterners on the shows they watched. This was followed in incidence by the theme in responses that Middle Easterners usually play TV roles such as a “generic Arab,” “Middle Eastern

manager of a 7/11,” or “immigrant.” This theme of “generic Arabic role” in the answers accounted for 14.5% of responses. Though this category was not as negative as the “villain” category, it is still highly stereotypical and diminishes Middle Eastern television characters down to a set of pre-established roles. The next category included answers such as, “doctor,” “lawyer,” and “businessman.” All of the answers in this category referenced Middle Easterners in television as playing the roles of professionals; these answers accounted for 12.33% of the total. Below this, respondents (10.96%) indicated that Middle Easterners usually played minor characters, “sidekicks,” or “small cameos.” Finally, 6.85% of respondents indicated that they usually saw Middle Easterners playing the role of a government official, military general, or an individual working for the government in another capacity.

Table A.1

Roles of Middle Easterners in Television

Categories	Response %
Villain (i.e. terrorist, enemy)	44.93%
Unsure/unknown	19.45%
Generic Arabic stereotype (i.e. convenience store owner)	14.52%
Professional (i.e. doctor, lawyer)	12.33%
Supplemental/minor character	10.96%
Government associate	6.85%

To help put these answers into context, respondents were asked, “Which TV shows do you watch that you have noticed Middle Eastern actors in?” This question also required a write-in response, and had no prompting from multiple-choice answers. Some respondents listed multiple shows, which is why the number of responses in Table A.2 below appears greater than the total number of survey respondents. Only those shows that were mentioned by more than one respondent were included within the table. Somewhat

alarmingly, the largest number of respondents (194) indicated that they could not remember seeing any shows featuring Middle Eastern actors, suggesting that Middle Eastern ethnicities may be underrepresented in mainstream television. The TV shows that participants most commonly cited as featuring Middle Eastern actors were *Homeland*, *NCIS*, *Shahs of Sunset*, *Blacklist*, and *The Big Bang Theory*. Some answers were interesting in that the respondents cited Hispanic actors in shows such as *That 70's Show*, or Indian actors in *The Big Bang Theory* and *The Mindy Project*, and believed them to be Middle Eastern.

Table A.2

Television Shows featuring Middle Easterners

Television Shows	Incidence
Have not seen any Middle Easterners in TV	194
Homeland	63
NCIS	38
Shahs of Sunset	32
Blacklist	20
The Big Bang Theory	17
Law and Order	12
24	10
Parks and Rec	9
Lost	6
Quantico	6
CSI	5
Tyrant	5
Criminal Minds	4
House	4
Masters of None	4
The Mindy Project	4
The Good Wife	3
Keeping up with the Kardashians	3
Bones	2
Community	2
Game of Thrones	2
New Girl	2
The Office	2
Once Upon a Time	2
The Simpsons	2
That 70's Show	2

Difference between Iranian and Persian

The other questions addressing perceptions of Middle Easterners were specifically focused on Iranians and Persians. For both Iranians and Persians, the participants were asked two identical questions: “When you hear the word (“Iran” or “Persia”) which of the following immediately come to mind?” and “When you meet an (Iranian) or (Persian) person, what traits do you assume they will have?” An identical list of answers, in addition to an optional write-in answer, were provided for both corresponding Iranian and Persian questions. Participants were allowed to choose multiple answers, instead of or in addition to writing in their own. These questions served two purposes: firstly, they help to gauge United States opinion on Iranians and Persians. Secondly, they assist in uncovering the different connotations that are assigned, often arbitrarily, to the near-identical descriptors of Iranian and Persian. Any negative assumptions that surface may help to showcase the need for positive depictions of Middle Easterners in television programming.

For the Iran/Persia association questions, the answers were starkly disparate. The top five answers when asked what comes to mind when the word Persia is heard, were carpets (60.3%), history (53.44%), exotic (46.01%), desert (44.63%), and Arabic (42.7%). The three answers chosen the least for Persia were invention (6.06%), technology (4.41%), and nuclear (4.13%). The write-in answers for Persia ranged widely, but contained several recurring themes. One such theme was popular culture; respondents cited videogames such as “Prince of Persia” and movies such as *Aladdin*. Another popular theme was “ancient civilizations.” In this theme, though many respondents indicated that Persia is the ancient name for Iran, a number of respondents also states that it is the old name for Iraq.

Table B.1

Associations of “Persia”

Answers	Incidence
Carpets	60.33%
History	53.4%
Exotic	46%
Desert	44.63%
Arabic	42.7%
Foreign	41.3%
Religion	31.1%
Farsi	27.8%
Food	22.9%
War	19%
Literature	17.6%
Painting	12.7%
Terrorism	11.8%
Tourism	11%
Fashion	10.5%
Invention	6%
Technology	4.4%
Nuclear	4.1%

In contrast to this “Persia” question, the top five answers when asked what comes to mind when the word Iran is heard were war (71.43%), religion (55.18%), terrorism (54.9%), desert (50.14%), and nuclear (47.9%). The bottom three answers for Iran were invention (3.64%), painting (3.36%), and fashion (2.52%). Of interest here is the fact that “nuclear” was chosen least for Persia, yet most for Iran. Several themes also emerged in the write-in answers for Iran. One theme, relevant to that in the “Persia” question, was that Iran is present-day Persia. Another theme was that Iran is a “hostile” land that oppresses and has “extreme disrespect for women,” and is full of religious extremists. The write-in comments were much more negative here, with some respondents going so far as to refer to Iran as a country full of “filthy murderers.”

Table B.2

Associations of “Iran”

Answers	Incidence
War	71.4%
Religion	55.2%
Terrorism	54.9%
Desert	50.1%
Nuclear	47.9%
Foreign	45.7%
Arabic	45.1%
History	34.7%
Farsi	22.7%
Exotic	14.3%
Carpets	11.2%
Food	9.5%
Technology	7.0%
Literature	6.7%
Tourism	5.3%
Invention	3.6%
Painting	3.4%
Fashion	2.5%

Though to a lesser extent, a similar disparity was seen in the following questions. When asked what traits a Persian would likely have, the top five choices were beautiful/handsome (37.88%), friendly (37.6%), kind (21.73%), helpful (16.71%), and outgoing (15.88%). The bottom three answers were cheap (5.57%), angry (4.74%), and cruel (3.34%). The main theme in the write-in answers was that it should not be assumed that Persians have any innate traits; respondents wrote answers such as “no expectations,” “no preconception,” and “all people are different.” Some respondents characterized Persians positively, writing “smart,” “great cooks,” and “stylish and highly skilled.” Negative write-in responses included answers such as “stinky, loud,” “terrorist” and “foul odor.”

Table B.3

Views of Persians

Answers	Incidence
Beautiful/Handsome	37.9%
Friendly	37.6%
Kind	21.7%
Helpful	16.7%
Outgoing	15.9%
Shy	14.2%
Dishonest	6.1%
Sleazy	5.9%
Cheap	5.6%
Angry	4.7%
Cruel	3.3%

When asked this question in relation to Iranian traits, the top five answers were friendly (29.39%), kind (21.33%), angry (20.75%), beautiful/handsome (18.73%), and dishonest (14.99%). The bottom three answers were cruel (11.24%), sleazy (8.65%), and cheap (7.49%). Again here, an answer (angry) chosen least for “Persian” was chosen most for “Iranian.” As with “Persian,” the main write-in answer was “no expectation.” However, other responses were much harsher – participants wrote traits such as “mean angry killers,” “short and fat and hairy,” “shady,” “murderers,” and “lying if their lips are moving.”

Table B.4

Views of Iranians

Answers	Incidence
Friendly	29.4%
Kind	21.3%
Angry	20.8%
Beautiful/Handsome	18.7
Dishonest	14.9%
Outgoing	14.9%
Shy	14.9%
Helpful	11.5%
Cruel	11.2%
Sleazy	8.7%
Cheap	7.5%

Trends in Responses from Viewers of Homeland

As nearly half of the respondents indicated that they either regularly watched *Homeland* or were familiar with the show, the survey is suitably able to examine trends in viewers' and non-viewers' perceptions of Middle Easterners. The group of respondents who indicated they were familiar with *Homeland* had their answers split from the group who indicated they were not familiar with the show. Two specific questions were then focused on in order to determine the trends in and differences in perception common to viewers and non-viewers of *Homeland*.

The first question that was analyzed asked what role a Middle Easterner is most likely to appear in on television. While some of the responses are roughly the same in incidence between viewers and non-viewers, the disparate ones are particularly interesting. Out of *Homeland* viewers, 52.1% reported a Middle Easterner would likely play a villain or terrorist onscreen, compared to a smaller 37.76% of non-viewers. Viewers of *Homeland* were more likely (14.97%) to answer that Middle Easterners would play a stereotypical role (i.e. cab driver) than non-viewers (10.71%), but slightly less likely (10.78%) to respond that a Middle Easterner would play a professional such as a doctor or lawyer than were non-viewers (11.73%). Viewers of *Homeland* were also more certain in their answers – only 10.18% of viewers answered that they were “unsure” of what role a Middle Easterner would play, while 18.37% of non-viewers answered that they were unsure. It is possible that this last difference is due to *Homeland* viewers seeing Middle Easterners on TV more often than non-viewers; the drawback to this is they appear more likely to see Middle Easterners in negative, stereotypical roles. While it is possible that viewers of

Homeland already held these beliefs prior to viewing the show, the inclusion of such stereotypes in *Homeland* serves to reinforce these beliefs as acceptable and valid.

Table C.1

Roles of Middle Easterners in Television: Homeland Viewers

Categories	Viewers	Non-Viewers
Villain (i.e. terrorist, enemy)	52.1%	37.76%
Generic Arabic stereotype (i.e. convenience store owner)	14.97%	10.71%
Professional (i.e. doctor, lawyer)	10.78%	11.73%
Supplemental/minor character	13.78%	19.2%
Unsure/unknown	10.18%	18.37%
Government associate	7.78%	4.1%

The second question analyzing differences between viewers and non-viewers asked what associations automatically came to mind when one heard the word “Iran.” This question was used as a comparison because Iranian Americans are fearful that *Homeland*’s factual mistakes regarding Iran will reflect negatively upon both them and their heritage. An example of one the numerous factual errors regarding Iran is seen in season three of *Homeland*, when the show depicts the Iranian government and the terrorist organization Al-Qaida working together against the West. In reality, these two entities are bitter enemies, and constantly seek to destroy one another – not work together, as the show suggests (Cohen, 2013). The comparison between viewers and non-viewers showed that, while differences in association are not drastic, they do exist. One notable difference is that *Homeland* viewers were more likely (54.6%) to use the term “desert” for Iran than were non-viewers (46.35%). As discussed earlier, *Homeland* erroneously depicts much of the Middle East as an enormous, war-torn desert. If this desert-locale belief was not in place before viewing *Homeland*, this could account for the difference in percentages. Viewers also used the term “nuclear” more often (53.99%) compared to non-viewers (42.71%).

Some more positive differences between the two groups were that viewers were more likely (26.99%) to select “Farsi” – the actual language of Iranians – than were non-viewers (19.27%), and viewers also selected “history” more often (42.33%) than non-viewers (28.65%). However, the history that is told through the lens of *Homeland* is often distorted, potentially diminishing the positive aspects of this increase in descriptor for viewers.

Table C.2

Associations of “Iran” – Homeland

Answers (alphabetically)	Viewers	Non-viewers
Arabic	45.40	44.79
Carpets	11.66	10.94
Desert	54.60	46.35
Exotic	17.18	11.98
Farsi	26.99	19.27
Fashion	4.29	1.04
Food	11.66	7.81
Foreign	50.31	42.19
History	42.33	28.65
Invention	5.52	2.08
Literature	11.66	2.60
Nuclear	53.99	42.71
Painting	3.68	3.13
Religion	60.74	51.04
Technology	7.98	6.25
Terrorism	55.83	53.65
Tourism	6.13	4.69
War	73.62	69.79

Trends in Responses from Viewers of Shahs of Sunset

One aspect of the study was an attempt to determine if “Persian” is becoming less of a safe descriptor due to its being featured negatively in shows such as *Shahs of Sunset*. In order to determine if audience reception of “Persian” differed from that of non-viewers, the respondents who indicated that they watched or were familiar with the show were analyzed separately from those who were unfamiliar with it. The results for this research question were more surprising than the results concerning *Homeland*. For one, in *Shahs of*

Sunset, the characters are incessantly engaging in petty arguments with one another. However, not a single viewer chose “angry” as a descriptor for Persian, while 5.8% of non-viewers selected it. Also, none of the viewers chose “cruel” as a descriptor, while 4.1% of non-viewers selected cruel. Additional unexpected results were that non-viewers were more likely to choose “dishonest,” while viewers more often chose “friendly,” “helpful,” and “kind.” The results that were more expected included non-viewers choosing “shy” more often (15.7%) than non-viewers (7.69%), and viewers choosing “outgoing” more often (23.08%) than non-viewers (13.99%). The cast in *Shahs of Sunset* is extremely boisterous, thus aligning with this result.

Table D.1

Associations of “Persia” – Shahs of Sunset

Answers (alphabetically)	Viewers	Non-viewers
Angry	0%	5.80%
Beautiful/Handsome	44.62%	36.18%
Cheap	7.69%	5.12%
Cruel	0%	4.10%
Dishonest	4.62%	6.48%
Friendly	46.15%	35.49%
Helpful	16.92%	16.72%
Kind	29.23%	20.14%
Outgoing	23.08%	13.99%
Shy	7.69%	15.70%
Sleazy	7.69%	5.46%

Demographics

The respondents were also asked a number of questions relating to demographics. One such question asked participants which age range they were part of: 14.6% were between 18-24 years old; 17.7% were between 25-40 years old; 32.58% were between 41-60 years old; and 35.11% were over 60 years old. In regards to gender, 53% of respondents were female, and 47% were male. Participants were also asked what region they currently

lived in: 6.11% lived in New England, 44.69% lived in the Midwest, 20.9% lived in the South, 19.61% lived in the Pacific region, and 8.68% lived in the Mountain region. A limitation of this study is that respondents were not asked about their race/ethnicity, which could potentially impact their answers.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

The conclusions of the study suggest that television programming, including the two specific shows examined in-depth here, may be somewhat correlated to the ways in which individuals view those of Middle Eastern ethnicities. This does not necessarily indicate that these shows are directly impacting their viewers; it could be that viewers who already hold these mental frames of Middle Easterners are simply more likely to watch these types of shows. However, regardless of why viewers hold negative mental stereotypes of Middle Easterners, the inclusion of such stereotypes in these shows reinforces and accepts such damaging views.

The correlation between viewing a show and holding negative perspectives of Middle Easterners was strongest for *Homeland*, suggesting that unflattering, violent depictions of Middle Easterners in television may carry over more strongly to those being depicted than would an unflattering, non-violent depiction. Although this does not necessarily imply that *Shahs of Sunset* does not have any effect on how Persian Americans are viewed by society, it does suggest that fears of discrimination stemming from the continued broadcasting of the show are, fortunately, likely not as well-founded as they initially seem. The minimal differences in responses from viewers of *Shahs of Sunset* versus non-viewers, along with the highly dichotomous survey results from the Persian/Iran questions, seem to indicate that Persian continues to be a safer descriptor than does Iranian.

Homeland viewers, on the other hand, were visibly more likely to offer negative views on Middle Easterners. With the reductionist, prejudicial rhetoric being casually offered by today's politicians, shows such as *Homeland* likely indirectly contribute to the context of fear, stereotyping, and discrimination against Middle Easterners. Some of the findings prompt further discussion, as they may have deeper or more puzzling implications. One finding was that, when asked which ethnic group played the enemy in *Homeland*, the percentage of respondents choosing the correct answer was almost 6% higher than the percentage of respondents who regularly watch the show. This could indicate that the other respondents have engaged in conversation with acquaintances who do watch the show, or it also may suggest that they have seen advertising for *Homeland* which features an antagonistic Middle Eastern character. Another alarming possibility is that the correct respondents simply guessed "Middle Easterner" due to the high prominence of villains being played by Middle Easterners.

Another finding of note is that many respondents, when asked what role they believed a Middle Eastern actor would play on TV, answered terrorist first, and "generic Arab character" second. Additionally, 194 respondents out of 394 indicated that they do not remember seeing any Middle Eastern characters in television. These answers point to a lack of substantial roles being played by Middle Eastern actors, and imply that Middle Easterners may be underrepresented as protagonists. Additionally upsetting is that, when a Middle Eastern character is written as a protagonist, the character is often played by an actor who is not Middle Eastern. For example, the protagonist in the FX show, *Tyrant*, is supposed to be one of the "good Arabs," and sole noble member of a royal Middle Eastern family – but he is played by an actor who is Anglo (Yahr, 2014).

Also of interest is that, when asked what shows they recall seeing Middle Eastern actors in, many respondents wrote-in shows that do not actually feature Middle Eastern actors. For example, *The Office*, *The Mindy Project*, *New Girl*, and *That 70's Show* all feature main characters who may be mistaken for Middle Eastern, but in actuality are Indian or Hispanic. This suggests that many United States citizens are unaware of the distinctions between these ethnicities. This suggestion is supported by the answers given when asked what words come to mind for the word Iran or Persia. For Persia and Iran respectively, respondents selected "Arabic" 42.7% and 45.1% of the time, while they selected "Farsi" only 27.8% and 22.7% of the time. Ironically, Iranians are not Arabic, nor do they speak Arabic – they speak Farsi, the option chosen far less often. This further supports the idea that many United States citizens are unaware of the nuances involved in the different Middle Eastern ethnicities. This misunderstanding may be reinforced by TV shows, such as *Homeland* or *24*, that often incorrectly lump all Middle Easterners together into one antagonistic group, despite their use of simplified complex representations.

Limitations

Although assisting in providing a sense of television's impact on the perception of Middle Easterners, this study is not without its drawbacks. One limitation of this study is that it only analyzes reactions to two television shows featuring Middle Easterners, rather than taking a wider approach and featuring other popular shows that portray this group. Limitations were also present in the use of the survey; although the 394 respondents presented an adequate sample size for this study, it is extraordinarily small in relation to the entire United States population. Future studies would ideally survey a larger group of individuals, and use a blind method of surveying. Also, respondents were not asked what

race/ethnicity they were; this characteristic could have an impact on answer choice, and would ideally be included in future studies. The ordering of the survey questions could also influence participants: the questions about *Homeland* and *Shahs of Sunset* are presented prior to the ones inquiring about participants' view of Middle Easterners. For those who watch *Homeland* or *Shahs of Sunset*, referencing the shows could place a mental image in the participants' mind that could carry over to the questions on perception. Another limitation of this study is that it is possible that individuals who already hold negative views of Middle Easterners are more likely to watch *Homeland*, instead of the other way around. It is also possible that individuals' negative views of Middle Easterners are from factors such as where they receive their news, or personal interactions they have had or anecdotes they have heard. While this is impossible to determine in this study, it is certainly of interest for future studies to look into this possibility further.

Implications

This study suggests that there is a dire need for television programming that features Middle Eastern actors in positive, if not at least neutral, roles. Additionally, this study suggests that prominent figures in society may have an impact on the ways in which Middle Eastern Americans are perceived, as their words are broadcast often through the influential medium of television. These prominent figures, namely entertainment producers and politicians, have a responsibility to be cautious in making sweeping generalizations or casual discriminatory comments. Producers of shows such as *Homeland* and *Shahs of Sunset* may be attempting to merely provide entertainment, and may not intend to discriminate against any certain groups or worsen their position in society; however, these

producers have a responsibility to be aware of societal stereotypes and seek to subvert, rather than play into, such nuances.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX

Survey

1. Do you agree to let your anonymous answers be included in data used by Baylor University students? (Your identity will be kept anonymous and confidential, and your answers will not be associated with you). If you select 'b', the survey will exit.
 - a. Yes, Baylor University may use my anonymous answers
 - b. No, I do not give Baylor University the permission to use my answers for any purpose
2. Have you ever watched the TV show 'Homeland'?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No, but I am familiar with it
 - c. No, and I am not familiar with it
3. Which ethnic group is primarily depicted as the antagonist in the TV show 'Homeland'?
 - a. Russians
 - b. Japanese
 - c. Middle Easterners
 - d. Koreans
 - e. I have seen the show and do not know
 - f. I have never seen the show and do not know
4. Have you ever watched the TV show 'Shahs of Sunset'?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No, but I am familiar with it
 - c. No, and I am not familiar with it
5. Which ethnic group does the TV show 'Shahs of Sunset' mainly focus on?
 - a. Italians
 - b. Persians
 - c. Armenians
 - d. I have seen the show and do not know
 - e. I have never seen the show and do not know
6. What role do you think a Middle Eastern actor is most likely to play on TV?
 - a. Write-in answer
7. What TV shows do you watch that you have noticed Middle Eastern actors in?
 - a. Write-in answer

8. When you hear the word "Persia", which of the following immediately come to mind?
(Check all that apply)
- a. Food
 - b. Exotic
 - c. Desert
 - d. Terrorism
 - e. Nuclear
 - f. Fashion
 - g. War
 - h. Foreign
 - i. Carpets
 - j. Literature
 - k. Painting
 - l. Invention
 - m. Technology
 - n. Religion
 - o. History
 - p. Tourism
 - q. Arabic
 - r. Farsi
 - s. Other
9. When you meet someone who is Persian, what do you expect them to be like? (Check all that apply)
- a. Kind
 - b. Cheap
 - c. Angry
 - d. Cruel
 - e. Helpful
 - f. Beautiful/Handsome
 - g. Shy
 - h. Outgoing
 - i. Sleazy
 - j. Friendly
 - k. Dishonest
 - l. Other
10. When you hear the word "Iran," which of the following immediately come to mind?
(Check all that apply)
- a. Food
 - b. Exotic
 - c. Desert
 - d. Terrorism
 - e. Nuclear
 - f. Fashion
 - g. War

- h. Foreign
- i. Carpets
- j. Literature
- k. Painting
- l. Invention
- m. Technology
- n. Religion
- o. History
- p. Tourism
- q. Arabic
- r. Farsi
- s. Other

11. When you meet someone who is Iranian, what do you expect them to be like? (Check all that apply)

- a. Kind
- b. Cheap
- c. Angry
- d. Cruel
- e. Helpful
- f. Beautiful/Handsome
- g. Shy
- h. Outgoing
- i. Sleazy
- j. Friendly
- k. Dishonest
- l. Other

12. Which age group do you belong to?

- a. <18
- b. 18-29
- c. 30-44
- d. 45-59
- e. 60+

13. What is your gender?

- a. Female
- b. Male

14. Which region of the United States do you currently reside in?

- a. Midwest
- b. Mountain
- c. New England
- d. Pacific
- e. South

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