Preface

The American interest in the Arab world is relatively new. It can be roughly traced back to the 1930s when the American multinationals began excavation for oil under the desert sand in Arabia. The quest for oil and the increasing American involvement in the region that went parallel to it amalgamated in the post-Second World War era as the United States assumed the status of a superpower. The majority of scholars agree that American interests in the Arab world center around two issues: ensuring secure and uninterrupted access to the Persian Gulf oil and the security of Israel. Stability in the region, therefore, is a key American priority. During the Cold War, stability was perceived as the deterrence of Soviet penetration of the region and the containment of the pro-Arab nationalist regimes (Little 2002: 311-312).

In the post-Cold War era, these interests remained in place in the American perception, despite the changes that had taken place over the second half of the twentieth century. Although American dependency on the Persian Gulf oil lessened due to the emergence of new suppliers in Central Asia and Africa, Arab oil remained crucial to the United States and its key allies such as Japan and Western Europe. American support for Israel—even against the fulfillment of Palestinian national aspirations and despite the remarkable decline of Israel as a strategic asset to the United States—continued as vigorous as it was in the 1970s. Containment of the ‘Communist threat’ was replaced by containment of the ‘Islamic threat’. Nonetheless, American ‘national interest’ became a much debated issue in the intellectual circles of Middle East experts in the United States.

American policy towards the Arab world has steadily gained in aggressiveness and hegemonic domination over the last six decades. American hegemony reached its apogee in the post-Cold War era. Since 1990 U.S. imperialism in the Arab world has
taken a more aggressive turn. The United States has demonstrated a steadfast determination to change the face of the region, to redraw its map, and to redefine it in a way congenial to the American imperial endeavor. Under the veneer of the international community and in the name of defending peace and stability and promoting freedom and democracy, the United States has waged violent wars, targeted states that challenged its hegemony in one way or another, unconditionally supported autocratic regimes, and even was directly involved in suppressing democracy.

With the collapse of the USSR, Islam has been cast in the role of the new threat by many policy-makers, intellectuals, and the media in the United States and Europe. Rhetoric about the “Islamic threat” became predominant. Many intellectuals devised a new role for the United States in particular and the West in general towards the “Islamic threat”. As the United States assumed global leadership in a unipolar world, some intellectuals declared the “end of history,” and others envisioned a “clash of civilizations,” while still some others spoke of “Jihad vs. McWorld”. In all these theoretical expositions “Islam” was presented as the sole challenger of American dominance and a threat to American supremacy. Projection of Muslims as the threatening other became more intense than ever before; misunderstanding and mistrust of Arabs and Muslims—and indeed of Islam as a faith—reached unprecedented high levels. Anti-Arab and anti-Muslim prejudice and bias, including severe measures against Arabs and Muslims in the United States, curtailment of civil liberties and violations of human rights, also increased remarkably. Among the American public, prejudice against Muslims escalated and continues undiminished in a dismally negative scale that shows almost no prospect for improvement. A Gallup poll shows that almost a quarter of Americans—22%—do not want to have a
Muslim as a neighbor (Saad, 2006). When asked in a 2005 Gallup poll about what they admired most about Islam, the majority of Americans—57%—replied “nothing”, or “I don’t know” (Esposito, 2010: 16). The majority of Americans name “Islamic fundamentalism,” “Islamic militancy” and “Islamic extremism” as the prominent features of their knowledge about Islam (Khan, Esposito & Mogahed, 2008). Similarly, Deane and Fears (2006) in A Washington Post/ABC News poll found that “nearly half of Americans—46%—have a negative view of Islam, seven percentage points higher than a few months after Sept. 11, 2001.” These negative views have remained in place without any improvement. A Gallup poll released on January 21, 2010 shows that almost half of the Americans (43%) admit to feeling prejudice against Muslims; which is more than twice the number of Americans who state the same about followers of other faiths: Christians (18%), Jews (15%) and Buddhists (14%). When the respondents were asked about their overall view of the four religions, Islam emerged as the most negatively viewed: 31% said that their view of Islam was “not favorable,” compared to 9% who say their views of Islam are “very favorable” (Religious Perception in America: 2010).

Such views are surely fed by the actions of a radicalized fringe and minority of Muslims who adopt violence as a means to counter American encroachments on the Arab world and other Muslim countries. The media play a vital role in enforcing and perpetuating the negative image in their biased coverage. Epithets such as “Islamic terrorism” and “Muslim terrorists” have become as American as apple pie. The demonization of Islam and Muslims in general skyrocketed in the course of the last two decades. Anti-Muslim prejudice is by no means a new phenomenon in the United States. On the contrary, it is quite old and dates back to the early days of the pioneer immigrants. It has been fed by the Orientalist tradition and the indigenization of Islam.
as a despicable other in the American culture. The initiation of the field of Middle East studies as a full-fledged discipline in the United States in the post-World War II period enforced the historical legacy and misrepresentation. Since the end of the Cold War the Arab and Muslim worlds have loomed large in the American policy-making community, intellectual circles and the public sphere at large; Islam and Muslims emerged more misunderstood than ever before. The rise of the neoconservatives to power ushered in a new era of imperial expansion and imperial conquest. The United States has aggressively targeted many Arab countries, some by military strikes and economic sanctions, others by arousing internal dissent that seeks to destabilize unfriendly regimes, and others by containment. No sooner the United States assumed the status of the sole superpower than it rallied a global coalition and declared war on Iraq in the name of freedom and restoring justice. The Iraqi people emerged as the primary victims of the first Gulf War and the thirteen-year-long embargo that reduced the Iraqi people to a state of misery and poverty and undermined one of the most powerful economies in the Arab world to a backwater economy. The repercussions of the first Gulf War went well beyond Iraq and destabilized the region as a whole. The second Gulf War and the ultimate invasion and occupation of Iraq wrote the unfinished segments of the chapters in the American imperial designs on Iraq. The Sudan has been molested by the successive American governments and their allies; they encourage secessionist calls in the south and rebellion in the oil-rich Darfur. The corrupt regimes receive American support, and their violations of human rights in their respective countries go unnoticed by the American governments as long as they are amenable satellites in the American orbit. The so-called “war on terror” has gone unabated for a decade and continues in place under the Obama administration despite this administration’s rhetoric of departing from the neoconservative line and turning
over a new page in Muslim-American relations, characterized by building bridges of mutual cooperation, understanding, and coexistence between the Muslim world and the United States.

In such a state of affairs, the Middle East experts in the United States have played a formative role in defining the nature of the relationship between the Arab and Muslim worlds and the United States as well as the role of the United States in a unipolar world. The discourses they proliferate have had a decisive impact on shaping American policy towards Arab and Muslim countries and on channeling American public opinion in a certain direction. These discourses are not marked by conformity, nonetheless. Rather, two competing—sometimes diametrically opposed, at times strikingly convergent—currents contend for influence. While the one adopts a hard-line position, advocating large scale confrontation and wars, the other warns against the course of massive exercise of leverage through wars and recommends a somewhat benign way of practicing American hegemony. Both trends emanate from political obsessions and concerns about power and supremacy. In other words, ideology plays a decisive role in the formation and production of the discourse on the Arab and Muslim worlds. This translates into a certain way of representation of Arabs/Muslims and Islam in American discourse on the Arab and Muslim worlds.

This thesis explores the representations of Arabs, Muslims and Islam in the discourse of leading American experts on Islam and the Arab/Muslim worlds. It attempts to answer the following questions:

How are Arabs, Muslims and Islam represented in the discourse of American specialists on Arab and Muslim affairs?
What are the dominant thematic and topoi that dominate those discourses? And to what extent do they reflect the concern for power?

What are the ideological positions and universes governing the discourses? And how do these determine and shape the discourses?

To what extent do the competing trends diverge on key issues such as democracy, Islamist activism, the “Islamic threat,” American imperialism, and American military intervention in Arab and Muslim countries? And to what extent do they converge?

What methodological approaches and ideological positions inform the discourses and the debates among the experts? And how does that shape the knowledge they produce?

How do scholars respond to various developments and events in the Arab and Muslim worlds? And how do these figure in the discourses they proliferate?

How do scholars deal with the rampant misconceptions of Islam among the American public? How do they structure their discourses in relation to that negative perception? How do they capitalize on it, manipulate it, or attempt to rectify it? How does ideology play a role in this case?

To what extent is the American discourse on Arabs and Muslims genuinely American, reflecting peculiarly American demands and concerns?

What are the meta-representational issues involved in those discourses?

To what extent are those discourses conditioned by political exigency and obsession with American hegemony? In other words, to what extent are they ideologically inspired?
To what extent do those discourses fit into the category of a purely intellectual endeavor?

How do these discourses influence American policy towards Arab and other Muslim countries? What is their practical impact? And what are their real-world consequences?

Is it still valid to speak of an American Orientalism in a world of endisms and post-isms?

The thesis falls into seven chapters. Chapter One, “Historical and Methodological Background to the Study,” provides the rationale for the study and delineates its scope and hypotheses. It provides a literature review of the studies that had been done on Orientalism. It also discusses issues of terminology and concepts used in the study. Moreover, it sheds light on the wider context of the study and introduces the theoretical framework and methodology. It examines the political atmosphere in which the American discourse on Islam and the Arab and Muslim worlds takes place.

Chapter Two, “Orientalism American-style: Middle East Studies in the United States,” further places American discourse on Islam and the Arab and Muslim worlds in its peculiar American setting; thus, departing from the essentialist picture drawn by the critics of Orientalism. It examines the influence of those critiques of Orientalism, especially Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) on the field of Middle East studies in the United States and the chasm it created in the ranks of the field. It also deals with the transformation of the field of Middle East studies in the United States over the last three decades.
Chapter Three “The Orientalist Approach,” deals with the discourse of the Orientalist and neo-Orientalist scholars. It relates their discourse to their ideological position and partisan attitudes, and the way ideology is mediated in discourse through the formulation of an ongoing conflictual encounter between the Muslim world and the West. It examines the functioning of those scholars in the Zionist lobby in the United States and how that affects their views and attitudes. It places their ideological stance within the larger neoconservative agenda. Finally, it discusses the “clash of civilizations” thesis as a central motif in their discourse.

Chapter Four “The Social Science Approach: MESA Experts on the Arab World and Islam,” deals with the second major trend in the field of Middle East studies in the United States. It sheds light on the ideas and arguments of these scholars in regard to various topoi such as the “Islamic threat,” democratization in the Arab world, etc., as well as their approaches to the study of Islam and Arabs and Muslims. It sheds light on the nature of the debate in the field, how that debate is politicized and moves to a battle over the field itself as well as the competing views on what constitutes knowledge. The second section of this chapter deals with the politicization of knowledge and shows how this process proves a stumbling block to many otherwise thoughtful and profound scholars. It also demonstrates how that politicization of knowledge is manipulated by the partisan scholars as a means to push and materialize their political agenda.

Chapter Five, “The American Weltanschauung and Conceptualizations of American Interests,” deals with the treatment of Islam’s encounter with modernity in the American discourse. It examines the scholars’ conceptualizations of modernization and the way they judge the Muslim world in this respect. It also examines the role of American values in the discourse on the Arab and Muslim
worlds. It fathoms the ways the American “national interest” in the Arab world is defined, how those formulations of the “national interest” influence the process of policy-making, and the way they are determined by ideological stances.

Chapter Six, “Ideological Binkers in the American Islamicist Discourse,” provides further analysis of the ideological component in American Islamicist discourse, and the way ideology determines the shape and content of the discourse, resulting in a canonized picture of Islam and a distorted view of Muslims. It examines the ideological positions of the scholars and how these determine their approaches to the study of the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Chapter Seven, “Conclusion,” presents the findings of the study, delineating the shortcomings and providing suggestions to improve the quality of the discourse in a way beneficial to both the Arab/Muslim worlds and the West.