

# AMERICAN ARAB



## A COMING OF ARAB STORY

KARTEMQUIN FILMS PRESENTS A FILM BY USAMA ALSHAIBI EDITED BY MATT LAUTERBACH LESLIE SIMMER USAMA ALSHAIBI  
CINEMATOGRAPHY BY CHRISTOPHER REJANO DINESH DAS SABU AUDIO BY LARRY KAPSON DEREK HANSON ANNE HANSON  
ORIGINAL MUSICAL SCORE WRITTEN AND COMPOSED BY MARWAN KAMEL CO-PRODUCERS TRISTAN HANSON RACHEL PIKELNY  
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS GORDON QUINN JUSTINE NAGAN DIRECTED AND PRODUCED BY USAMA ALSHAIBI

EST. 1966  
KARTEMQUIN  
FILMS

MacArthur  
Foundation

CAAM  
CENTRE FOR THE ARAB AMERICAN MOVIE

Illinois Humanities Council

AMERICANARABMOVIE.COM

# AMERICAN ARAB

*"A Coming of Arab Story"*



**World Premiere** IDFA AMSTERDAM  
**North American Premiere** BIG SKY DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL  
**Official Selection Honorary Mention** CHICAGO UNDERGROUND FILM FESTIVAL  
**Official Selection** GENEVA FILM FESTIVAL  
**Official Selection** SAN FRANCISCO CENTER for ASIAN AMERICAN MEDIA FESTIVAL  
**Official Selection** CLEVELAND INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL  
**Official Selection** STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL  
**Official Selection** MINNEAPOLIS ST. PAUL INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL  
**Official Selection** KANSAS CITY FILM FESTIVAL  
**Official Selection** RIVER BEND FILM FESTIVAL  
**Official Selection** ATHENS INTERNATIONAL FILM AND VIDEO FESTIVAL  
**Official Selection** PERTH REVELATION INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL  
**Official Selection** INDY FILM FESTIVAL  
**Official Selection** MAINE INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL  
**Official Selection** SYDNEY UNDERGROUND FILM FESTIVAL  
**Official Selection** LANDLOCKED FILM FESTIVAL  
**Official Selection** BIG BEAR LAKE INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL  
**Official Selection** SAN FRANCISCO ARAB FILM FESTIVAL  
**Official Selection** ST. LOUIS INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

AMERICAN ARAB is a KARTEMQUIN FILMS Diversity Project

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Directed and Produced by  
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Executive Producers  
GORDON QUINN  
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2013/ 60 MIN/ COLOR/ 16X9/ STEREO/ USA/ ENGLISH



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WORLD PREMIERE - IDFA 2013 - November  
<http://usamaalshaibi.com/americanarab/>



**Cargo Films** - International Distribution



**The Cinema Guild** - Educational Distribution 2014



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## PRESS REVIEWS

*"American Arab does not attempt to provide a definitive statement about the Arab experience in America. That might make a fine documentary some day – and Alshaibi would be excellent at making it – but here he is more of the inquisitive artist, seeking some kind of answer to questions that seem to keep shifting with each major life event, from the death of his brother to a brutal hate crime assault in 2011 to the birth of his beautiful daughter, Muneera.*

*Identity is a funny thing. We like to think of ourselves in concrete, non-shifting terms, but our identity is constantly shifting.*

*Arab. American. Artist. Father. Son. Brother. Alshaibi is all of these things. He is also one of our most important filmmakers, a fact further defined by this engaging and enlightening documentary." - Mike Everleth, [Underground Film Journal](#)*

*"Alshaibi deftly mixes archival footage, interviews, animation, and music to engage the viewer in an open conversation about a provocative topic. While the film gives an important voice to the hopes and frustrations of several generations of Arab Americans, there is also much that is relatable to audiences regardless of creed or culture. Billed as a "Coming of Arab Story," the struggle with acceptance and search for identity is a universal one. There are no easy answers in "American Arab," but it's a conversation well worth having." - Ben Johnson, [The Film Yap](#)*

قوة هذا الفيلم تتركز في طبيعته الحميمية، وعندما رغب بتقديم مُوسع لموضوعة المهاجر العربي المسلم الى الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية فقد جزءاً من خصوصيته، فالفيلم، يكشف ويؤثر أكثر عندما يركز على عائلة المخرج، وحياة المخرج نفسه

**- Mohammad Mousa (محمد موسى), [Al Jazeera Documentary Channel](#)**

*"News footage of anti-Arab demonstrations and clips from such films as Total Recall, Back to the Future, and Delta Force vividly show how public perception can be shaped by news reports, movies, and documentaries. This perceptive video tells a universal story about immigrants' struggles to assimilate and seek the often elusive promise of the American dream. A potent discussion starter." – Donald Liebenson, [Booklist Online](#)*

*"American Arab picks up this thread of personal narrative and explores what it means to be an Arab-American, post-9/11. Further, in the great tradition of*

American personal documentary film, Alshabi also struggles with what it means to be a filmmaker who happens to be Arab-American. Less concerned with aesthetics than ideas, he uses the camera as a tool to dig for answers about identity, art and filmmaking that are often overlooked." – **Michael Galinsky, [Documentary.org](#) / [International Documentary Association](#)**

"It's giving voice to people who have been marginalized—and when they are presented in mainstream American media, it's rarely from their perspective... At the same time, the movie doesn't feel confrontational. It feels like the start of a conversation, rather than a provocation." – **Ben Sachs, [Chicago Reader](#)**

"Probes what you might call the Arab-American dilemma... Alshaibi's family is smart and complicated, and you immediately have an emotional connection to these people." – **Nina Metz, [Chicago Tribune](#)**

"American Arab is a gift, an important document and beacon of hope for a community and people too often misunderstood, with disastrous consequences." – **Ravi Chandra, [CAAMFest](#)**

"Recommend American Arab to birthers who are convinced that Obama is a Muslim."

"American Arab is full of troubling images... anything but an anti-American screed... rather disturbing." – **David D'Arcy, [Artinfo.com](#), [The National](#)**

## **SHORT DESCRIPTION**

Iraqi-American filmmaker Usama Alshaibi (*Nice Bombs*) shares his own story of experiencing racism in post-9/11 America. Showcasing the diversity of Arabs living in the United States, *American Arab* sparks a frank conversation about identity and perception, and argues for giving people "the space to be complicated."

## **SYNOPSIS**

In Kartemquin's *American Arab*, Iraqi-born Director Usama Alshaibi takes a provocative look at the contradictions of Arab identity in post 9/11 America, weaving his own life's journey and "coming-of-Arab" experiences into the life stories of several diverse characters. Exploring the values, passions, and hopes of his fellow Arab-Americans, Usama tries to make peace with his conflicted chosen homeland.

In a cemetery near Chicago, Usama's mother Maha repeats passages from the Qur'an over her son Samer's grave: "God is great," she chants in English and Arabic. "Cleanse his soul, protect him." Samer died of a drug overdose after years of addiction.

Over a montage of happy family photos, Usama Alshaibi talks about Samer, who was born in America, in contrast to the older Alshaibi siblings who were all born in Iraq and would have to wait years to become citizens. Maha ponders if it would have been better if Samer had stayed in Iraq and died fighting in war. She just didn't want her son to suffer so much through his addiction. Back in the cemetery, Usama and his youngest brother Wisam both kiss their deceased brother's tombstone, a dramatic drum beat is heard and we conclude with a studio portrait of the entire family: mom and dad, surrounded by five healthy children.

**"Our parents brought us here to America for a better life," Usama recalls. "I wonder, was it all worth it?"**

Politics changed perceptions. When images of suspected 'terrorists' were displayed in the media in the years after 9/11, Arabs like Alshaibi did not immediately see villains. They saw their uncles, their fathers, their brothers. They saw themselves. It often felt in both cases like the majority of Americans just saw a threat.

During the 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama was regularly cast as 'Arab' or 'Muslim,' in order to intimidate some American citizens into mistrusting him. When a nervous woman during a rally asked about Obama being an Arab, John McCain bluntly replied: "No, ma'am, he's a decent family man, a citizen." Could an Arab no longer be a decent person? A citizen?

**What does it mean to be an Arab living in America today?**



Through the film, we meet American-born Amal Abusumayah, who wears a headscarf and tells us how she was the victim of a hate crime shortly after the 2009 Ft. Hood shootings. We will also meet the Jassar family, Iraqi refugees who have lived on the north side of Chicago for less than a year after escaping violence in Iraq. Finally, Alshaibi introduces us to Marwan Kamel, a punk musician in his 20s who is forming a new, untraditional Arab-American identity without conflict. As Marwan says, "Just allow me to be complicated."

Usama's own personal American story propels the narrative. He recounts how his adult years were shaped by an altered perception of his identity. Suspicion and even violence replaced the fascination over his cultural heritage others had shown him as a child, when relations between the US and Iraq were amicable.

Arab-Americans are not one monolithic group, but rather a diverse and complex array of many voices and cultures. This film weaves sadness and humor, anger and satire, provocation and understanding, embracing the multifaceted Arab American experience of post 9/11 America. By shedding light and giving clarity to a recent and difficult time for Arabs living in the US, *American Arab* shows how the struggles over identity within this documentary are universal.



## **DIRECTORS STATEMENT**

It's hard to be an Arab in America today. You are suspicious by association. "Terrorists" could be anywhere; and "they" could be "you." You're often compelled to defend yourself, your people, or your religion. But why apologize for your identity, and for acts that have nothing to do with you?

I don't want any young immigrant or Arab to feel alone in this world. The fear and paranoia so many of us felt after the attacks on 9/11 is something that we all have in common. *Change your name, shave your beard. Don't tell anyone where you're from.* The fear that so many Arabs felt was incongruous to the America of our parents. As one young Arab said to me, *"America let us down."* This struggle to find out who we are, where we fit and how to navigate this identity was at the heart of my desire to make this documentary film.

I realized that those of us growing up as Arab Americans had a common experience that was funny, sad and most importantly, relatable. None of us had much of a say in choosing where we were born or raised. America and the Arab world shaped who we are.

How are we viewed in this country, and how do these wars against our homelands shape our American experience? The title refers to that tension for the American Arab.

My film starts out with the death of one of my younger brothers, Samer. He was the first one, from my siblings, that was born in the United States. It was what we all desired as non-citizens. It was just easier with an American passport. But

Samer died from drugs as a young man and threw my mother's American dream on its head. She ponders why she worked so hard to come to the United States. She talks about the 'bad freedom of America' and how it could have been different for us, and I ask as if it was all really worth it.

My family's story and my own personal journey becomes interwoven by the other Arab Americans I encounter and interview; who were also facing challenges based on either being Arab or Muslim. These two words, Arab and Muslims, have been used to instigate and promote hate, bigotry and fear into the heart of America. Oftentimes targeting any individual the bigots deemed to look like an Arab or Muslim, even though the victim may not even be an Arab or from the Islamic faith. It hurts all of us.

For some of us this is our birth home, for others it's our forced home, and our voices need to be heard. Instead of defining what an Arab is; I present several experiences that have universally been true to most Arabs living in the United States. And perhaps to many non-Arabs, also.

For example, we talk with Amal Abusumayah, who was attacked for wearing a Muslim veil. This type of violence and bigotry toward Muslim women is common not only in the United States, but all over Europe. We also meet Marwan, a guitarist from Chicago, born half Arab trying to understand who he is what it means to be Arab. His struggle with identity rings true for many young people with mixed backgrounds.

We also meet the young Jassar girls, who are refugees from America's war in Iraq. Due to kidnappings and threats of murder, the family has been forced to immigrate to the United States. Their story is a common story among many of us young Arabs that came from countries in war, in crisis and turmoil. We just wanted to feel safe.

This documentary explores these moments and how they have informed my own coming of Arab story. Toward the end of the film, it takes a surprising turn when I am a victim of a racially motivated attack. With my wounds still healing my wife and I have our first child together, a healthy daughter. I ponder her future and the new world she will be facing as an American Arab.

*-Usama Alshaibi*

## **BIOGRAPHIES**

**USAMA ALSHAIBI** (Director/ Producer) was born in Baghdad, Iraq in 1969 and spent his formative years living between the United States and the Middle East.

His work in film and video has been screened at numerous film festivals and venues across the globe. In early 2004 Usama and his wife returned to his birthplace in Iraq to shoot his first feature documentary titled *Nice Bombs*. The documentary had a theatrical release in 2007 and a broadcast premiere on the Sundance Channel in March 2008. Alshaibi is the recipient of several film grants, including the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation award, an award from the Creative Capital Foundation for the Arts and a Playboy Foundation award. He is also the winner of the Creative Promise award at Tribeca All Access in New York City.

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**GORDON QUINN** (Executive Producer) Artistic Director and founding member of Kartemquin Films, Gordon Quinn has been making documentaries for over 40 years. Roger Ebert called his first film *Home for Life* (1966) "an extraordinarily moving documentary." With *Home for Life* Gordon established the direction he would take for the next four decades, making cinema verite films that investigate and critique society by documenting the unfolding lives of real people. At Kartemquin, Gordon created a legacy that is an inspiration for young filmmakers and a home where they can make high-quality, social-issue documentaries. Kartemquins best known film, *Hoop Dreams* (1994), executive produced by Gordon, was released theatrically to unprecedented critical acclaim. Its many honors include: the Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival, Chicago Film Critics Award Best Picture, Los Angeles Film Critics Association Best Documentary and an Academy Award Nomination.

His current project as director/producer is *'63 Boycott*.

**JUSTINE NAGAN** (Executive Producer) has been Kartemquin Films Executive Director as well as an Executive Producer on staff since 2008. Projects under guidance have included *The Interrupters*, directed by Steve James, which won nearly every major documentary award, including the Emmy, Independent Spirit Award, and Cinema Eye Honors. With Kartemquin, she directed *Typeface*, a documentary on American typography and graphic design and the doc short *Sacred Transformations*. Formerly she worked as the organization's Director of Communications & Distribution and as the Associate Producer on Peabody-Award winning documentary *Mapping Stem Cell Research: Terra Incognita*, which was broadcast on PBS Independent Lens.

She is currently Executive Producing the largest ever slate of Kartemquin films, including *Life Itself*, *The Homestretch*, and *Almost There*.

**KARTEMQUIN FILMS** is a collaborative center for documentary media makers who seek to foster a more engaged and empowered society. With a noted tradition of nurturing emerging talent and acting as a leading voice for independent media, Kartemquin is building on over 45 years of being Chicago's documentary powerhouse.

Kartemquin sparks democracy through documentary. Their films, such as *The Interrupters*, *Hoop Dreams*, and *The New Americans*, are among the most acclaimed documentaries of all time, leaving a lasting impact on millions of viewers.

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