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OPEN

Sean Foley

written by Sean Foley

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On the Sunday night before the final presidential debate, millions of Americans watched "Homeland." The Showtime television series follows a CIA agent who believes that a Marine and former POW is a secret agent for al-Qaida.

The show has received critical acclaim, counts President Obama and other prominent individuals as fans, and has been rebroadcast in more than 20 countries. But it has not been shown widely in Muslim nations, where NCIS and other American television shows are popular and accessible. Why? Many Muslims would probably view "Homeland" and its central premise as preposterous and sufficiently divorced from reality to be taken seriously.

Indeed, "Homeland" has already generated enormous controversy in Lebanon for its portrayal of Beirut and prompted Lebanese Tourism Minister Fadi Abboud to threaten to take legal action against the show. Writer Louay Khraish insists that "the creators of 'Homeland' have no excuse for their systematic and bigoted portrayal of Beirut and the Lebanese" and is driven to wonder "whether 'Homeland' has an agenda other than entertainment."

The gap in perceptions reflects the central challenge in foreign affairs that will confront whoever is elected president in 2012: reconciling Americans' perceptions about their nation's place in the world with how others view the U.S. In recent years, many Americans have feared that their nation is in decline and vulnerable to global forces originating in the Muslim world and Asia. While many no longer fear American "hyperpower" as they did in the

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Egyptians celebrate the victory of Mohammed Morsi in Cairo in June. Some concerned Americans see the Arab Spring as a golden opportunity for Islamist politicians to undermine Washington. / File / Associated Press

1990s, many still rank the U.S. as the pre-eminent global power and recognize that it has unparalleled reserves of national power.

This is especially evident with the Middle East. More than a decade after the horrific terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Americans continue to worry about Muslim terrorists of all kinds, including those Americans of European ancestry serving in their armed forces — characters who appear on “Homeland.” Some now portray the Arab Spring, which many Americans initially welcomed, as a golden opportunity for Islamist politicians to undermine Washington and to further separate the Arab world and Israel. The attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya, only reinforced these views.

By contrast, few Arabs would deny the power of the U.S., despite the withdrawal from Iraq and the fall of Hosni Mubarak and other longtime U.S. allies. While al-Qaida occasionally mounts attacks and releases videos, U.S. drone strikes have devastated its leadership and made it increasingly unlikely

that the organization could mount operations using turncoat Marines within the U.S. International sanctions organized by Washington are crippling a key U.S. adversary, Iran. U.S. strategic ties to Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Turkey run deep. Even the U.S. position on the Palestinians, which is widely unpopular, has not fundamentally undermined Washington’s power in the Middle East.

Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi is one of many Islamist leaders who have studied in the United States. More will follow him: Thousands of Arabs are enrolled in colleges and universities in Tennessee and throughout America.

One sees a similar picture elsewhere, where a decline in relative U.S. power masks tangible strengths. While Americans see China and other Asian nations as economic and military threats, U.S. trade and investment with Asia remains robust. Despite China’s massive growth, its per capita income is a fraction of America’s. The U.S. Navy is one of the most potent in Asia and has ties with other nations with powerful economies and militaries: India, Japan and South Korea. Although Venezuela frequently challenges U.S. positions in Latin American and international forums, it depends on oil exports to the U.S.

None of this is to suggest that Americans’ concerns about the future are without merit. There are systemic structural challenges to business, government and society that could seriously threaten the nation’s future if not addressed soon.

Nonetheless, whoever is elected president in 2012 must help Americans see their nation’s advantageous position in the world,

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must help them to understand that they should fear neither the present nor the future when U.S. power remains widely recognized and respected around the world.

The U.S. presidential debates gave Americans and worldwide audiences alike the image of two men struggling with their own capacities and incapacities — their understanding and lack of it — in the face of a world whose complexities dwarf those of any previous civilization. Both men have power, intelligence, vast wealth and a dedicated staff; both are elements in the wake of a history that is still in the process of realizing itself.

**Sean Foley is a professor of history at MTSU.**

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