

Political faux pas or fashionable fad?

By: Carmel Delshad

University of South Florida student Will Ottaviani never thought his bold fashion statement would incite anger. On the contrary, Ottaviani believed his colorful Urban Outfitters scarf was a fashionable way to keep warm in New York City; that is, until an Iraq war veteran told him the scarf, a kaffiyeh, was a symbol of terrorism.

“I didn’t know the scarf had a Middle Eastern background until I was verbally assaulted by an Iraq war veteran while in New York City,” said Ottaviani. “He said that I was a liberal terrorist for wearing it because it supported terrorism.”

The kaffiyeh is an Arab headdress most notably seen on the heads of foreign dignitaries in the Middle East.

Once popularized by the likes of former Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, tweens, rockers, actors and music artists now sport the scarf all in the name of “fashion.”

The kaffiyeh is normally of a black and white checked pattern, worn by men in the Middle East. According to an article published on haaretz.com, Assistant Professor Rochelle Davis of Georgetown University stated the kaffiyeh became “symbolic during the Palestinian uprising against the British occupation from 1936 to 1939, and has been a symbol of nationalism ever since.”

Chances are Balenciaga fashion designer Nicholas Ghesquiere did not mean to make a political statement when he featured a kaffiyeh in his Fall 2007 ready-to-wear collection.

USF student Harrison Reed received a kaffiyeh from a friend studying abroad in Syria.

“I didn't really think it was a fashion statement, its just really practical. When it's 30 degrees out it's nice to have your head completely wrapped up. The fact that it looks pretty cool doesn't hurt,” said Reed.

Assu Etsubuneh wears her scarf primarily for fashion reasons.

“I wear them to accessorize my clothing. I have one in plaid, black and magenta. I don’t know the specifics behind the Middle Eastern-inspired fashion or their name,” said Etsubuneh.

Arab American Ahmad Mando views the trend as a catalyst for dialogue between Arabs and non-Arabs.

“I do not get offended at all when people wear it; in fact I get excited because it's becoming a household item,” said Mando. “The more popular it is, the more it is acceptable to wear it, the more I get a chance to be myself without having to worry.”

The popularity of the kaffiyeh and kaffiyeh-inspired scarves is evident in virtually every shopping mall. These scarves can be found in Urban Outfitters (who removed the scarf temporarily), Marshall’s, Hot Topic and Forever21.

Robin Hatel, sales associate at Forever21 in Wesley Chapel’s Wiregrass Mall, said the scarf’s popularity was evident.

“It definitely is a hot seller. The minute we put them out on the floor they’re gone by the end of night. Even guys were rocking them,” said Hatel.

Local Arab food markets that sell Middle Eastern clothing were even touched by the fad.

Sales associate in Tampa's Java Food Market Youssef Bassoumi said that the 15 kaffiyehs in the store sold out quickly, especially after the recent Israeli airstrike in Gaza.

"Most of the people that bought them were Arab girls, showing their support for Palestine," said Bassoumi.

But the question still lingers: at what point does fashion become a political symbol?

Dr. Ted Swedenburg, a professor at the University of Arkansas anthropology department, has noted the growth of the kaffiyeh in his blog.

"A few months after I started blogging I started collecting images of people wearing kaffiyehs and then it escalated from there. I'm obsessive about it," said Swedenburg.

"I wish people did know more about the history of the kaffiyeh," said Swedenburg. "On the other hand, as with anything that circulates in American popular culture that's with Middle Eastern prominence, it does give people with more knowledge an opportunity to say 'Hey, this is what it's about.'"

The scarf fad garnered major attention from national media outlets in Summer 2008. Dunkin' Donuts aired a commercial featuring Rachel Ray, holding her chilled cup of coffee sporting—what else—a kaffiyeh-like scarf.

Right-winged bloggers like Michelle Malkin exploded on their blogosphere, calling the scarf a symbol of "murderous Palestinian jihad. Folks out there remain completely oblivious to the apparel's violent symbolism and anti-Israel overtones."

Dunkin' Donuts quickly pulled the ad and stated, according to the Boston Globe, "[The scarf] was selected by [Ray's] stylist for the advertising shoot. Absolutely no symbolism was intended. However, given the possibility of misperception, we are no longer using the commercial."

"To me the interesting question is, 'What does it mean that Rachel Ray is wearing this scarf and that Michelle Malkin raises a fuss about it?'" said Swedenburg. "The point is that the kaffiyeh isn't just a fashion statement; it reminds us that it means something. The raising of terrorism as an issue is just a way of not actually dealing with the issue, which is the occupation of Palestine."

In a Newsweek article, Lorraine Ali wrote, "It's doubtful the ad would have been pulled if a handful of critics found Ray's garb too Hispanic or too African-American. The real danger here is not the girly scarf...it's that the cries of a few commentators indulging in the worst form of racial stereotyping—and their demonization of an entire culture—was enough to spook a giant corporation."

Nonetheless, Malkin continued her support of Dunkin' Donuts, writing, "It's refreshing to see an American company show sensitivity to the concerns of Americans opposed to Islamic jihad and its apologists."

"[The kuffiyeh] is a symbol of Palestinian nationalism. Overall, it's about a struggle for national liberation, not terrorism," said Swedenburg.

Though the trend may already be on its way out in these summer months, the cultural implications of the kaffiyeh still linger in the minds of Arabs and Americans alike.

"It's not the end of the story. I don't think it means the kaffiyeh is dead as a symbol for Palestine, and it's

a potent one,” said Swedenburg.