

California high school drops controversial Arab mascot

School officials collaborate with local community and Arab-American rights group to reach suitable compromise
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by **Philip J. Victor** @philjvic & **Nadeem Muaddi** @nmuaddi

A California high school that faced mounting pressure to change its team name, mascot and other imagery and traditions that many Arab-Americans deemed offensive has agreed to a compromise, school officials announced on Friday.

Coachella Valley High School Arabs will now be known as the Mighty Arabs, after the school district's board of trustees voted 5-0 on Tuesday to amend the school's team name. They also agreed to change CVHS' Arab mascot to look less barbaric and more distinguished.

The changes followed 10 months of collaboration with the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), a civil rights group based in Washington, D.C.

ADC had lobbied officials at Coachella Valley Unified School District since November 2013 to amend the school's team name and drop its mascot — a grimacing face that many Arab-Americans said promoted negative stereotypes.

"The mascot is basically an angry 'Arab' head — hooknose, long beard, headscarf and all," Abed Ayoub, ADC's legal and policy director, said in November when Al Jazeera broke news of the group's campaign.

At the time, Ayoub insisted that the school's representations of Arab culture — including its use of harem girls in marching band parades and a belly dancer halftime show — were classic examples of Orientalism, a term used to describe Western depictions of Middle Eastern, North African and Asian societies as backward and inferior.

Showing Arab pride

The school's new mascot — described in a statement issued by ADC as "a stoic, strong-jawed man with a neatly trimmed beard" — was chosen with input from members of the Arab-American community.

The image was designed by Jesus Olivares and Sergio Espinoza, CVHS alumni and owners of INKA Screen Printing and Embroidery in nearby Indio, California.

Olivares, who said he found the previous imagery "demeaning" while in high school, told Al Jazeera that the pair created the new logo free of charge after the school district approached them about a redesign.

"It was disrespectful in that it wasn't clear what it really was. Somebody did not study or learn [about the culture] or create something that was true. They slapped it together and put it on the wall," said Olivares, who graduated from CVHS in 1990. "Yet, when you're in high school, it's not as important for you to make a move on something like that."

Olivares said that he and Espinoza set out to design a mascot that embodied "determination and pride," and was "positive ... not wimpy." To do so, they spoke with alumni — some of whom were for changing the imagery, and some against — as well as many Arab-American families and business owners, to determine what was and wasn't offensive.

“I saw it as a way to turn something into a positive. Also, because I was an alumni and went to school there, I felt like I had to give it a positive look instead of the image they had before,” Olivares said.

Despite the controversy caused by the previous mascot, members of the CVHS community insisted they meant no harm to Arab-Americans, but were instead paying homage to their shared history.

The Coachella Valley, located about two hours east of Los Angeles, produces 95 percent of dates grown in the United States. Government officials introduced the crop — originally sourced from the Middle East — to the region in the late 19th century to promote economic growth. Its cultivation has allowed the California desert community to flourish and has even provided it with an Arabesque look that residents have been proud to promote.

‘A learning experience’

From the very beginning, ADC conceded that any offense was likely accidental, but said that steps still needed to be taken to remedy the situation.

“The old logo and the old imagery was very stereotypical, it was very offensive to many in the [Arab-American] community, but at the same time, the school district and the high school and those involved did not mean to offend the community,” ADC’s Ayoub said. “So this was not done with malice and was not done with bad intent.”

Darryl Adams, the school district’s superintendent, echoed Ayoub in saying educators need to “forever keep our eyes, ears and hearts open to the feelings of others even when no disrespect or harm is intended.”

“The realization that the Coachella Valley High School mascot and name was offensive to fellow citizens or any group is one that we cannot ignore,” Adams said. “As educators we are beacons of hope and light in helping students understand their place in society and that place does not include stereotypical images that offend.”

School officials and the ADC said Friday that phasing out the offensive imagery would take place over the coming months. The previous mascot’s image has already been removed from CVHS’ basketball court and it no longer makes appearances at football games. The school has also ceased its tradition of belly dancer half-time shows.

What’s more, school officials plan to redesign campus murals that stereotype Arab culture — including one in which a man and woman in tiny vests and harem pants sit atop a textbook-turned-magic-carpet. In the long term, the school is working toward offering Arabic language courses and even a cultural-exchange program with schools in the Middle East, Ayoub said.

School officials estimate that the redesign will cost between \$15,000 to \$25,000 — all of which they plan to raise from private donations, not taxpayer money.

“This process has been a learning experience for everyone involved,” said ADC President Samer Khalaf. “We have had an opportunity to teach those in Coachella Valley about Arab culture and heritage. At the same time, we have had the opportunity to learn about the history of Coachella Valley and its strong connection to the Arab world.”

“The past 10 months have shown that almost any problem can be resolved through dialogue and cooperation,” Khalaf added. “It is our hope that similar matters, including that involving the [Washington \[Redskins\] professional football team](#), can reach a resolution that respects the culture and history of specific communities.”