Resisting Invisibility: Arab-Americans and the Challenge of Political Activism

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Abstract

Even though they spoke Arabic and came from a predominantly Arabic culture and heritage, the early Arab immigrants who arrived to the New World in the 1870s did not think of themselves as “Arabs”. They did not even constitute a distinct ethnic entity and their main bond of solidarity and interaction was rather based on close familial, sectarian, and regional ties. The lack of a “national” identity - synonymous with group power and solidarity - not only increased their “marginalization” and invisibility, but also posed a real problem as to their classification among other ethnicities. Instead, they were referred to as Turks, Syrians, Arabs, Arabians, Syrian-Lebanese, Asians, Caucasians, White, Black, etc.

As World War I marked a watershed for the early Arab pioneers who, after they decided to settle permanently in their host country, became part of the American society and the American body politic, World War II produced a much deeper impact, opening the door much wider to a new variety of Arab immigrants, educated, politically articulate, and with a better sense of nationality and identity. But the idea of an ethnic Arab community, capable of taking its own affairs in hand, really began to grow in the 1960s, and especially after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war when both newcomers and third-generation descendants of the first stock came to discover how one-sided and pro-Israeli the American media and the American policymakers were.

Despite the fact that the newly-arrived immigrants were mostly Muslim and were exceptionally keen on their cultural heritage, the political activism this paper seeks to address is expressly secular and includes people of all faiths and of no faith at all. This is first and foremost an attempt to scrutinize a mode of thinking of a community, still in search for a sense of identity, but firmly determined to participate effectively in the decision-making process. How could it overcome its “identity crisis” and achieve political cohesiveness? In other words, how could it reconcile its internal differences with the pragmatic need to unify for political efficacy? Such questions and others are worth tackling.

Keywords: Arab Americans, political exclusion, identity question, elections
Introduction

This paper is an attempt to offer insight into the plight of a community, still in search for a sense of identity. It explores Arab American “political invisibility” and seeks to scrutinize a mode of thinking and a mode of expression through the respective experience of a community which has come to light over the last few decades, but which remains inadequately described and poorly understood, despite its restless desire to assimilate.

So, contrary to the popular stereotype that identifies them as a monolithic group, Arab Americans are a complex and diverse community. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the label “Arab American” has even evolved into a catch-all category inaccurately grouping together persons of different national, religious, and ethnic backgrounds. As a result, not only Arab and Muslim Americans have found themselves humped into a new category that obscures their considerable diversity, but such a racialization process seems to further ostracize them and exacerbate their alienation in their homeland.

This paper is articulated around three main questions: first, it investigates the central theme of identity and argues that the Arab American community is anything but a monolith. It demonstrates that, at no point in history, did the lingering prejudice against such a community promote, encourage, or solidify its ethnic identity. It claims that the controversial definition of the term “Arab American” and the ambiguous positioning of this group alongside American racial/ethnic lines further reinforces the difficulties associated with classifying this population. It denotes how being so heterogeneous and multi-faceted makes it more challenging for such a group to identify issues affecting the community as a whole or to agree upon a political agenda that addresses the group common concerns.

Second, the study highlights the lack of group solidarity and shows how Arab American officials, especially members of U.S. Congress, have risen to their positions as individuals, rather than representatives of their ethnic constituents, and how they rarely support issues of concern to the Arab American community. The work concludes by demonstrating how Arab American leaders act as a unified ethnic group and become actively involved in politics only when their interests are immediately threatened, and how threat has become a sort of group “mobilizer” likely to trigger ethnic consciousness.

This paper, ultimately, stresses the fact that if Arab Americans want to gain national visibility and recognition, they need first to voice their concerns through mainstream political organizations if they wish to get a fair hearing and defend their civil rights as full citizens of the United States. So, how could such a community adapt to its new homeland and how could it respond to the challenges in order to maintain its identity in an ever-changing environment? How could it overcome its “identity crisis” and achieve political cohesiveness? In other words, how could it reconcile its internal differences with the pragmatic need to unify for political
efficacy? Finally, what role should Arab American leaders and intellectuals play to provide community stability and resist disintegration in a context of growing ethnic, cultural and religious tension?

The Identity Question: Who Are Arab Americans?

The first challenge is identifying them. Just who is and is not “Arab” is a matter of contention. The 2010 U.S. Census indicates that there are roughly two million people who reported Arab ancestry although leading advocacy groups such as the Arab American Institute suggest that they are a little bit more than 3.5 million, making less than 1% of the American population.

Even though they spoke Arabic and came from overwhelmingly Arabic culture and heritage, the early immigrants who arrived in the late 19th century from the Greater Syria region (especially present-day Lebanon) and who were predominantly Christian, did not think of themselves as “Arabs”. Far from constituting a separate ethnic group, their main bond of solidarity and interaction was rather based on familial, sectarian, and regional factors (e.g. the Syrians did not constitute an “ethnic nation” in America like the Italians, Irish, Greeks, Poles or Jews).

The lack of national identity characterising the first wave, on the one hand, and the obsession with the question of racial discrimination for citizenship eligibility, on the other, reinforced a general confusion about how one should call them. All too frequently, operating as separate ethnic enclaves, they were referred to as Turks, Syrians, Arabs, Arabians, Syrian-Lebanese, Asians, Caucasians, etc. So, until World War I, many Arabs in the U.S. thought of themselves and acted as though they were in, but not part of the American society and its body politic. They referred to themselves as “al-Nizala,” that is travellers or guests who needed to behave properly in their host country, but at the same work hard to accumulate wealth which upon return they would invest back home.

It was not until the 1960s that new blood and new political circumstances altered the direction and the meaning of Arab American ethnicity. Actually, the second wave of Arab immigrants who started to pour after World War II, brought to the United States a much more diverse population, one that differed greatly from the early pioneering group. Where the early Arab immigrants were mainly Christian, uneducated, relatively poor and less inclined to participate in the body politic, the new arrivals included large numbers of Muslims, relatively well-off and highly educated professionals who came with greater resources and were unwilling to surrender their cultural and political heritage. For the first time, one could speak of an ethnic Arab group or a community that identified itself as “Arab American”.

However, despite noticeable progress on the path of group unity, problems related to Arab identity still persist and when people speak in the name of the Arab community, you still have to ask them who they are. For sure, identities are not stable
constituents but vary and change as one can have several identities at a time: national, religious, cultural, etc. As a matter of fact, one does not have to speak Arabic to identify as Arab. A sizeable number among the second and third generations of Arab Americans do not speak a word of Arabic, yet, they consider themselves as full-fledged members of their respective community.

Conversely, members of the Detroit-based Chaldean conclave arguably refute their Arabic ancestry, strongly claiming their Christian heritage. Thus, to discredit public prejudices (widespread especially among African-Americans) stereotyping them as Arabs and viewing them as monopolizing the local food stores and the gas stations, Chaldean Catholics responded: “We’re not Muslims and we’re not Arabs.” Actually, Iraqi Chaldeans have become more Chaldean than they were in the homeland. They have even gone so far as to resurrect their ancient language previously and solely used by the clergy.

But Iraqi Chaldeans are not the only case in point. Right after the 9/11 attacks, some Christian Arab Americans started to wear big crosses so as to distance themselves from their Muslim peers. Some, in search for acceptance into mainstream society, simply changed their names, or say “anglicized” them (e.g. Mohammad became simply “Mo” and Rachid became “Dick”).

On the whole, while it remains difficult to agree upon the label “Arab-American”, or to position Arab Americans as full members of the American polity, as some of them still identify with their country of origin, a significant number among them do recognize the need for more group cohesion to achieve political effectiveness. Paradoxically enough, the second wave of Arab and Muslim immigrants who arrived after World War Two, especially after the passage in Congress of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, instead of reinforcing that much needed sense of group solidarity, nearly disintegrated it as they developed a new identity based more on their Islamic faith than on their national background. In a similar vein, now determined to maintain their place in the body politic of their host country, they started to think of themselves as American Muslims rather than Muslims living in America, that is as “transplants” rather than “implants.”

Politcs and Exclusion

The second main theme this paper tempts to investigate is the lack of interest in politics which characterised the Arab American community, at least until the mid-1960s. Actually, after they decided to settle permanently in the New World - once they discovered they could not return to the homeland with the eruption of the first world conflict - members of the first pioneer group chose rather to assimilate. But, for them, assimilation was not synonymous with full involvement in the decision-making process. Rather, their basic attitude was to be good citizens and to attract as little attention to themselves as possible. So, much beyond voting or being active at the community level, that is establishing local churches, newspapers, social clubs, etc., they saw no pressuring need for political involvement As clearly stated by Michael
W. Suleiman, a former distinguished professor of Political Science at Kansas State University and no doubt one of the prominent experts in Arab American studies,

“Up to World War I, politics among Arab-Americans reflected and emulated the politics of the original homeland in both substance and style. In other words, by and large, members of the group thought of themselves (and) acted not so much as citizens of the United States but rather as subjects of the Ottoman authorities in control of their homelands.”

The 1967 Israeli-Palestinian War was more than a turning-point in Arab American history as, for the first time, it brought together newcomers and third generation descendants of the early pioneers who deeply resented the extreme partisanship the American government showed toward Israel. They were extremely disappointed to see how overtly one-sided and pro-Israeli the American media were in reporting on the Middle-East, a widespread sentiment shared by a sizeable number of Arab Americans and genuinely summarized by Michael W. Suleiman in the following statement:

“The 1967 War in Israel and Palestine was the watershed so far as the Arab-American community was concerned. American media coverage of the war was absolutely horrendous for the Arabs who lived through it. Almost none of it demonstrated sympathy or objectivity about Arabs or Arab-Americans.”

The war produced soul-searching on the part of Arab Americans who started to awaken to their own identity and to see that identity as Arab, rather than “Syrian” or “Iraqi”, or “Egyptian”, etc. Immediately, they reacted by forming organizations and voluntary associations that would first try to give a definition of who they were, especially their sense of identity as a people. They also decided to devote more effort on campaigns to educate Arab Americans and other Americans and inform them about the rich Arab heritage, and especially get them to talk to each other. That became the main goal of the Association of Arab-American University Graduates (AAUG), a major national organization which was formed in 1967 and which sought to advance an Arab rather than a regional or national orientation.

Interestingly, while there is little doubt about a rampant anti-Arab sentiment (further exacerbated by the 1973 Arab Oil Embargo which plunged the West into a deep economic recession) which started to permeate some political circles and parts of the mainstream society, the origins of such attitudes remain relatively ambiguous as they have neither been fully explored, nor thoroughly debated in the academia or by political experts. As a result, the undeclared war against Arab advocacy groups and their leaders took shape in a covert campaign meant primarily to discredit the Arab vote by incessantly stigmatizing Arab leaders and blocking their access to the political arena. In addition to marginalizing and discouraging potential Arab candidates to local and federal offices, anti-Arab campaigners made use of a number of tactics to harass and blackmail other candidates susceptible to be affiliated with any sort of Arab American effort, or tempted by Arab money which they consider as “dirty money” allegedly used to support terrorism. Notable cases in past elections include
funds returned to Arab American businessmen in Chicago by Walter Mondale’s presidential campaign in 1984 and Michael Dukakis in 1988. More recently, during the 2000 elections, Hillary R. Clinton was forced to return “Arab” money after being taunted by her opponent for the U.S. Senate seat in New York.16

The first in a series of watchdog and pre-emptive campaigns against Arab Americans, allegedly for security reasons, was launched in 1972 under the administration of President Nixon. It came consequently to the assassination of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Dubbed “Operation Boulder,” it initiated special measures meant to tighten the grip around Arab Americans, especially the politically active among them.17 But the federal authorities purpose in targeting members of the Arab American community was not to gather information or to keep politically-minded Arabs out of the U.S. as much as it was to discourage Arab political activity among an already dispersed, unorganized, and quiescent population.

The Iranian Revolution and the ensuing hostages crisis in 197918 for the first time confronted American people with the forces of militant Islam. As a result, not only these events hampered the rise of Arab Americans, especially their emergence on the national scene, but seriously tarnished their image in the public opinion as now they have become associated in American people’s minds with terrorism and religious fundamentalism. At the community level, the aforementioned events had far-reaching consequences on the group’s sense of ethnic and national pride. Actually, the rise of anti-Islamic religious sentiments, further nurtured by populist mainstream media, simply impeded any effort of acculturation and forced some to temporarily conceal their Islamic identity.

Notwithstanding, until the late 1990s, Arab American political visibility, access and influence were already on the rise, especially during the Clinton administration which opened the White House to Arab Americans and American Muslims who previously complained about being shut out of the national discourse. In effect, Bill Clinton went further than any other president in U.S. history to give Arab Americans and Muslims a place around the table. For instance, at the religious level, he was the first president to recognize a basic institution of Islam, which is the holy month of Ramadan, and to send an open letter to Muslim believers wishing them a blessed fast. Likewise, he was the first president to celebrate Eid al-Fitr (to mark the end of Ramadan) in the White House. At the political level, in addition to appointing Arab Americans to high positions in his cabinet (e.g. Donna Shalala who served as Secretary of Health and Human Services under his administration, or George J. Mitchell, Senate Majority Leader from 1988 to 1995, who was appointed as U.S. Special Envoy for Northern Ireland from 1995 to 2001), President Clinton was praised for his personal engagement in the Middle-East peace process and his relentless efforts that brought about the signature in 1993 of the Oslo Accords.19

Bill Clinton’s efforts at the peace process in the Middle East signalled the advent a new era in Arab American struggle for political inclusion, and struck a
responsive chord among Arab American leaders, especially as now they have become active partners in the Oslo agreements. This new political momentum, coupled with an overwhelming sentiment that gripped most Arab American advocacy groups, was better expressed by former Columbia University distinguished Professor Edward Said when he praised Clinton’s “human rights- and equality-oriented foreign policy”, stating that

“(T)he new opportunity afforded by the Clinton era is a potential change in context and rhetorical climate which is favourable to those Arabs and Arab Americans searching for a more democratic vision of the future. It is up to Arab American professionals and intellectuals to seize this opportunity to insert ourselves in an organized way into the national agenda through writing, speaking out and political action.”

But the honeymoon period under Clinton’s dual administration was soon to end with the shock of September 11, 2001 that, not only shattered any hope for Arab Americans to part and parcel of the American body politic, but also offered anti-Arab campaigners a rhetorical trope that could legitimize the view of Arab Americans as the members of a cult based on hatred of the American society, despite the evident fact that most of them are Christian.

Expectedly, the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon sparked anti-Arab sentiment across the nation as never before. They especially reinforced negative stereotypes against them and laid bare the vulnerability of Arab Americans who started to fear for their future as U.S. citizens and to question the validity of their civil rights. For now at least, as full and unconditional support of the government’s “War on Terrorism” has become a litmus test to true Americanism, they have laid aside their efforts to gain more political clout in Washington and turned to the basic goal of defending their civil liberties.

By and large, it is hardly a surprise to see that no history of the participation of Arab Americans in politics has been written. At the very moment Arab Americans awakened to their Americanness, realizing that they had become part of American society, a process of socialization into the American politics was set in motion. But the lack of national group solidarity, reinforced by the “loss” of minority status, severely hindered any effort to promote the community interests. Paradoxically, the white “racial” status for which they had fought and which they acquired since 1924, has become a stumbling block and an important hurdle on the path of identity formation.

The inability of Arab Americans to act as a unified ethnic entity led to their further marginalization on the national political scene. Less inclined to get involved into the system or to thoroughly socialize with the U.S. culture and institutions, they very often proceed as monolithic group only to contain any threat that might prove harmful to the community interests as a whole. Notable cases include their combat, in the wake of the 20th century, to maintain their status as whites and to protect their right to American citizenship, or their fight, in the 1970s, to resist attempts by the
Internal Revenue Service (IRS) to revoke the tax exempt status of the Association of Arab-American University Graduates (AAUG).24

So, despite signs of optimism displayed by some outstanding Arab American leaders, like James Zogby25 who, by 1984, argued that with the establishment of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADS) in 1980 and with the increasing numbers of Arab Americans who started to register to vote Arab Americans “were a community coming of age,”26 the Arab lobby is still weak, inefficient and by far of no match for the stronger pro-Israel lobby.27 This is at least what one can deduce from John H. Sununu’s (Governor of New Hampshire from 1983 to 1989) less optimistic stance when, in a conference hosted in 1996 by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, declared:

“... we have had 60 years of the worst, least constructive, most counterproductive involvement in the political process of any group in the United States.”28

Paradoxically, compared to their European counterparts, especially their French peers who stand for ten percent of the French overall population (against only less than one percent for Americans of Arab descent), Arab Americans are better represented along the political spectrum and are disproportionally involved at all levels of government. To cite but a few examples, five Arab Americans served in the U.S. Senate and 9 in the U.S. House of Representatives, three have been governors (Oregon, New Hampshire, and Indiana), and more than thirty have been mayors of U.S. cities.29

Table One provides a comprehensive review of Arab Americans’ experience in both Houses of Congress, the Senate and the House of Representatives, from 1959 to 2006. It reveals that the 17 members of Arab American Congressmen are of Christian background, and all but one (John E. Sununu who is of a Palestinian origin) are of a Lebanese descent.30 The first Arab American man to serve in the U.S. House of Representatives was George Kacem (California 1959-1960), and the first Arab American woman to be elected to the same Chamber was Mary Rose Oaker (Ohio, 1977-1992). The first Arab American U.S. Senator was James Abourezk (South Dakota, 1973-1979). Only 6 of the 17 members of Arab Americans who served in Congress are Republicans, while the remaining 11 are Democrats (representing a 2:1 ratio of Democrats to republicans).31

Interestingly, a review of Arab Americans in the Senate and House of Representatives indicates that they have risen to their positions as individuals and have not been elected thanks to any Arab American financial backing or vote. Likewise, surveys show that they ran to defend an agenda that represented their local but not their ethnic constituents. To cite but a few cases, one should probably refer to a very interesting research conducted by Michael W. Suleiman and published in 2006 by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.32 For instance, the study reveals that South Dakota, which ranks 42rd among states in Arab American population,33 elected two senators of Arab descent (James Abourezk and James
Abdnor), one a Democrat, the other a Republican. The case of Maine is equally important. With an Arab American presence of only 3,365 (that is 0.27 percent of the state population)\textsuperscript{34}, also elected a senator and a representative of Arab origin (George Mitchell who even became U.S. Senate Majority Leader between 1988 and 1995, and John Baldacci who was later elected governor).

The same went for New Hampshire, which the 1990 Census reported as 35\textsuperscript{th} among the states in people of Arab ancestry (with only 4,953 or 0.45 percent of the state population), and which elected John E. Sununu as a U.S. Representative and then a U.S. Senator. Meanwhile, even though considered as the largest concentration of Arab Americans (30 percent of Michigan population) in the United States, Dearborn (in the Detroit area), sent no Arab American to Congress. The election, in 1995, to the U.S. Senate of Spencer Abraham in this state did not appear to be the result of Arab American vote, even though many among them cast a ballot for him.\textsuperscript{35}

Table 1: Arab American Congressmen as up to 2006.

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In a similar vein, a study conducted in 2002 under the supervision of Michael W. Suleiman indicates that, besides the exceptional case of former Senator James Abourezk (D. SD, 1973-78) who demonstrated strong commitment to the Palestinian question, Arab ancestry members of Congress rarely support any issue affecting their co-ethnics (see Table 2). But to M.W. Suleiman, this is hardly a surprise as these people have never been elected thanks to the Arab vote. Moreover, the lack of Arab concentration in decisive electoral districts and mostly the lack of consensus among Arab Americans upon a common agenda, explain and justify the rupture between Arab American high officials and their co-ethnics. Assessing their vote (see column three of Table 2), M.W. Suleiman found that 7 out of 17 American Congressmen of Arab ancestry have often voted “unfavorably”, roughly 6 have expressed a “somewhat unfavorable” vote, but only one, James Abourezk, who has constantly voted “favorably” for any pro-Arab piece of legislation.
Table 2: Analysis of Arab American Vote on Issues of Interest to the Arab American Community (1959-2006).

<table>
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<th>Congresspersons</th>
<th>Percentage Support</th>
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<td>John Baldacci</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Unfavorable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam Benjamin, Jr.</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Unfavorable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patsy Ann Danner</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Unfavorable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrell Issa</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris John</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Unfavorable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Kasem</td>
<td>No votes on issues of interest to Arab Americans</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abraham Kazen, Jr.</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>somewhat unfavorable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ray LaHood</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Unfavorable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Mitchell</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>somewhat unfavorable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toby Moffett</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>more unfavorable than favorable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Rose Oakar</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>somewhat unfavorable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick Rahall</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>somewhat unfavorable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Sununu</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>somewhat unfavorable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Based on Courtney M. Moriarty: Arab Americans and the Legislative Process, p. 103. Undergraduate Honors Thesis, Kansas State University, 2002, under the supervision of Michael W. Suleiman.

For each issue of interest to Arab Americans, Michael W. Suleiman made the decision as to what that position might be (see column three).

Scale:
- 0-30% Unfavorable
- 31-40% More unfavorable than favorable
- 41-60% Somewhat unfavorable
- 61-70% More favorable than unfavorable
- 71-100% Favorable

The split on issues among Arab Americans becomes exceptionally palpable each time the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is put on the table. Actually, while the goals appear to be almost the same, especially the creation of a Palestinian State based on
the pre-1967 borders, the strategies to put forward and achieve such goals remain a matter of contention between the predominantly Christian Arab advocacy groups (mainly the Arab American Institute – AAI, and the Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee - ADS) and their Muslim counterparts (especially the Council on American-Islamic Relations – CAIR). But for some Arab American leaders, given the current climate, especially after the horrors of 9/11, it is simply imprudent to allow the community to focus primarily on the Palestinian issue, when their civil rights are seriously at stake.

Last but not least, it is worth mentioning that even though they have set up strong bonds of group solidarity which they have kept reinforcing over the years, so as to preserve their distinct identity, especially their future in their host country, Arab Americans, or at least some of them, do not think of themselves as the members of a separate ethnic entity, but rather as part and parcel of the American mainstream society. This is at least what James Zogby tempted to arguably demonstrate. Discussing the Arab American vote in the presidential and congressional elections, based on data provided by Zogby International (his brother’s public opinion polling company, founded since 1984), James Zogby asserted that, across the different contests, Arab Americans (who have traditionally been a volatile group with almost equally shared allegiances to the two major parties), have often voted like most of their mainstream fellow-citizens. To take just one example, the 2008 election revealed that, reflecting a nationwide trend, two-thirds of Arab American voters considered the economy as their top concern, followed by war in Iraq, health care and gas prices. “People are talking about health care, education... gas being $4 a gallon, the economy,” commented a 24-year-old graduate student of Arab descent, “Arab-American issues are American issues.”

On another hand, contrary to the stereotype that Arab American voters promote single-issue politics, placing the Palestinian question at the top of their priorities, polls indicate that the issue in question is highly important, but in no way determines the Arab vote. In effect, nearly two-thirds of Arab Americans, polled by Zogby International in 2008, said that if they agree with a presidential candidate on most issues but strongly disagree with the candidate’s “idle” Middle-East policy, they will not consider changing their vote.

Conclusion

On the whole, despite their flagrant shortcomings, especially their self-assumed inability to fully integrate the American body politic and to influence it from within, Arab American leaders and organizations recognize today the urging need to unite around a common agenda that advances their common interests as a group and erects safeguards around their constitutional rights. Notwithstanding, as latecomers in the political arena, a fact which they admittedly attribute to a general disinterest in political education, awareness and participation, but which also stemmed from the lack of agreement on a common identity, Arabs Americans should take their own affairs in hand and work for more political clout and visibility. Faring quite well in
education and highly remunerative occupations, compared even to the average American, they should bank on such a vital asset and reconsider their political strategies. Most of all, they should mobilize at the grassroots level and act as real lobbies (not just as mere advocacy groups) if they wish to get a fair hearing alongside other ethno-religious minorities.

Likewise, Arab Americans should overcome their internal divisions and act both at the state and federal levels, especially as their concentrated communities in some battleground states such as Michigan, Pennsylvania, Ohio, New Mexico, and Wisconsin, could tip the elections outcome in favor of one political party or in favor of the other.

Last but least, even though they have periodically sharpened racial, religious, and ethnic boundaries among Arab Americans, and despite their diverse immigration experiences, with Muslims being unquestionably more stigmatized because of their religion, there is evidence today of increased ethnic solidarity between Arab American Christians and Arab American Muslims. Positive signs show that both groups continue to demonstrate some degree of ethnic cohesion, reinforcing indelibly the links that forged the Arab American unity in the aftermath of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. Over it all, despite the negative stereotypes which targeted Arab Muslims after the 9/11 attacks and which led some of their Christian counterparts to distance themselves from the Arab heritage, both groups continue to work hand in hand to ease some of the internal strains, but especially to promote a cohesive Arab American identity.
Endnotes

1 See www.census.gov/2010census/data.
2 The Arab American Institute (www.aaiusa.org/pages/demographics/).

5 For more information, see Alixa Naff, Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984).
7 This is not a quotation.
9 The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (Pub.L. 89-236, 79 Stat. 911, enacted on June 30, 1968), also known as the Hart-Celler Act, abolished the national origins quota system that had structured American Immigration policy since the 1920s, replacing it with a preference system that enhanced diversity. (library.uwb.edu/guides/usimmigration/1965_immigration_and_nationality_act_.html).
11 The orientation of the early Arab Americans toward their homeland meant that their political activities were also focused on issues that were important in their country or village of origin.
14 Ibid., pp. 4-9.
15 The Association of Arab American Graduates (AAAG) was founded in 1967 by a group of Arab-American academics and professionals as “a non-profit, tax-exempt educational and cultural organization dedicated to fostering a better understanding between the Arab and American peoples while promoting informed discussion of critical issues concerning the Arab world and North Africa.” (Caine.emich.edu/archives/findingaids/html/Association_of_Arab_American_University_Graduates_Collection.html).
19 The Oslo Accords which were signed in Washington D.C. in 1993 between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the government of Israel marked the start of a peace process that would fulfill the “right of the Palestinian people to self-determination.” (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oslo_Accords).
21 See Lynette Clemson and Keith Naughto, “Patriotism vs Ethnic Pride, An American Dilemma:


23In 1924, Congress passed the Johnson-Reed Act imposing a quota system meant not only to curb the immigration influx but also to reshape the American population racially and ethnically. Arab Americans were racially classified as whites.

24At the state level, the Southeast Dearborn Community Council (SEDCC) successfully resisted the city’s efforts to rezone their neighborhood.


31Ibid.


33According to the 1990 Census, there were only 1,237 Arab Americans in South Dakota, that is 0.18 percent of the state’s population.

34The 2000 Census reported Maine as thirty-ninth among the states in people of Arab ancestry.


38Ibid.

39With at least a high school diploma, they number 85%. More than four out of ten Americans of Arab descent have a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to 24% of Americans at large. (See www.census.gov/2010census/data/).
References


