

Patterns of Arab-American Activism

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The activism that I'm going to talk about is by definition secular activism, in both senses of the term. It is an Arab-American activism that seeks to include people of all faiths and no faith, so it is not religiously structured in terms of its participation, its orientation and its goals. It doesn't promote itself as Muslim or Christian or Jewish or anything of the kind. It is a human rights centered activism that takes as its starting point traditional American and western values and tries to fit that into an Arab-American discourse.

But it's also secular in the philosophical sense, as this activism is predicated on the idea that we live in secular time, that human events and human society are the consequences of a genealogy of human choices and human decisions. It does not really allow for any sort of biological determinism or any sort of divine teleology. In contrast with American Muslim activism, it is secular in every possible sense of the word.

Recent secular Arab-American activism has been structured by two major national Arab-American organizations. The American Arab Anti-Discrimination

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Committee (ADC) is a grassroots civil liberties organization, a principal focus of which is to provide legal services and advice to people who face discrimination and to confront patterns of discrimination against individuals, against the community as a whole and in the media - particularly in the entertainment industry. ADC views this discrimination as rooted in large part in disagreements about American foreign policy - in a gap in perception between the Arab-American community and most of the rest of the United States, particularly elite groups. It is ADC's belief that until there is a more rational American foreign policy, more of a congruence of views about what the United States stands for and why in the Middle East and how to interpret events in the Arab world, one cannot really address the discrimination that the community faces: barriers to full political participation, for example, or the kind of negative and hostile discourse in the news media and the kind of representations you get in film and television. Because of that ADC also focuses on foreign policy.

This is integral to our civil rights effort. ADC sees a civil liberties or civil rights agenda as inseparable from a foreign policy agenda. Without the foreign policy agenda, it would be impossible to treat the causes of discrimination. It might be possible to patch the symptoms a little bit, but not the roots and the causes of discrimination.

The other major national Arab-American organization is the Arab-American Institute headed by James Zogby. It is tied into the partisan political

system and encourages voter participation and electoral politics. In addition, there's a plethora of local organizations, large and small.

Before September 11, there were a few major issues on which the Arab-Americans organizations had been working for approximately five years. These were:

(1) racial profiling and official forms of discrimination, particularly in law enforcement, focusing in part but not wholly on racial profiling in airports. There are also problems with, e.g., Customs, and immigration.

(2) the problem of secret evidence and other questions of civil liberties, particularly the civil liberties of non-citizens. Briefly, between 1996 and 2001, at least two dozen individuals were arrested without charge and held for varying lengthy periods of time in jail. They were denied bond and were facing deportation based on evidence that was withheld from them, their attorneys, and the public. It was a Kafkaesque situation in which it was not possible even to try to mount a legal defense because no one knew why they were in jail and access to due process was severely limited.

(3) defamation and bias in the media, particularly the entertainment industry. Anyone who watches TV knows how Arabs are depicted, and it's very well documented in Jack Shaheen's new book *Reel Bad Arabs*.¹ Hollywood has depicted thousands and thousands of Arab and Muslim characters over the past few decades in films, and although there are occasional sympathetic or positive depictions, the overall thrust has been to depict Arabs, Arabic culture and Islam in a very negative and usually violent way. The dominant images are

recycled versions of traditional tropes of late nineteenth century and early twentieth century anti-Semitism. They are slightly recast, transferred from one group of Semites to another.

(4) the question of Palestinian national and human rights. That question, more than any other, occupies attention and brings the community together. It is fair to say that the national Arab-American community began effective political organizing only after 1967, and that the question of Israel and Palestinian human and national rights is central to the Arab-American political consciousness. Of course it has dominated people's attention from the beginning of the second intifada on September 28, 2000 until September 11, 2001. The issue of the Palestinian right of return has become a central feature of Arab-American activism in the last eighteen months.

(5) the sanctions on Iraq. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, most of them children and elderly and almost all of them poor and disenfranchised, have died as a result of the sanctions. All the relevant humanitarian UN workers and others agree with this. It has become an issue of great concern for Arabs in the Middle East and for Arab-Americans and Arab-American activism.

(6) the Israeli occupation of Lebanon, an issue that has now been largely resolved. There is an ongoing problem with Sheba'a farms, and there are both a group of Lebanese hostages in Israel and a couple of Israelis who are being held in a similar manner in Lebanon. The issue occupied a great deal of attention in the years leading up to May of 2000.

Since September 11 everything has changed and the situation is fluid. First of all we're not sure really what we're dealing with in terms of foreign policy. We're being told there's a war on terrorism, but the aims of the war are undefined and terrorism is undefined. We're hearing that this war in Afghanistan is not a war on Arabs and Muslims but it is the first phase of a several phase conflict, the remaining phases of which are absolutely undefined. There are powerful voices calling on the United States, once it has dispensed with Afghanistan, to move on, to address a laundry list of organizations, individuals and even states in the Arab world which manifestly had nothing to do with September 11. This obviously produces great anxiety, in addition to Arab Americans' long-standing grievances with American foreign policy. It's also fair to say there's more concern about Afghan civilian casualties, particularly among Muslims.

Domestically there's a very fluid civil liberties situation. The transfer of arbitrary authority to the federal government in the new anti-terrorism legislation is extraordinary. Essentially, the personal freedom rights of immigrants are, at least theoretically, dispensed with. Under the terms of this law, any non-citizen the Attorney General doesn't like could be arrested and detained indefinitely until the Attorney General feels that they can be let go. A lot depends on how this law is interpreted, how it's enforced and how courts rule on it. But potentially we face a situation infinitely more serious in quality and quantity than we did when we were facing secret evidence deportations.

This is not to mention the wave of hostility and bias that has been coming from the media, although there are reassuring voices as well. But it's now possible for people on the far right like Ann Coulter, Mona Charen and Peggy Noonan to say that all non-citizen Arabs in this country should be expelled (Coulter) and that Arabs should be profiled (Charen, Noonan).²

What has the community done about all these problems? The initial steps were really academic. The Association of Arab-American University Graduates (founded 1967), a quasi-academic organization, attacked the issues by trying to affect academic and political discourse: writing books and articles, discussing the Palestinian cause, the Arab cause and the Arab-Israeli conflict in a scholarly manner.

Since then a whole range of grassroots activist tactics has been developed. There is now a long tradition of protests, vigils, and letter writing campaigns. Some of the long tradition of boycotts have been very effective, particularly against companies doing business in settlements in the Israeli occupied territories. There have been many local protests and local activities.

There are a lot of very large and effective social service organizations that have a subtle - and sometimes not so subtle - role in this kind of activism, such as ACCESS and the Arab and Chaldean Council in Detroit, or the Arab-American Action Network in Chicago. These are essentially social service organizations, but under the right circumstances their efforts get plugged into the broader efforts.

There's also been a lot of attention to media activism. There's a very interesting web site called the Electronic Intifada (www.electronicintifada.net), the work of a very small group of unaffiliated media activists who are using the Internet as an activist tool to address the mainstream press and hold them accountable for coverage and commentary. Similarly, e-mail and e-mail list serves have been employed now as a major tool. In fact, the Israeli and Jewish press have written a lot about how the Arab-American groups in their estimation have made better use of the Internet, particularly e-mail, than Zionist groups have in this sort of contest in the United States over the Israeli-Palestinian thing. The emergence of Al-Awda: the Palestinian Right of Return Coalition, an organization that exists almost entirely in cyberspace, is particularly noteworthy. This is a virtual organization that exists almost entirely in a series of networked list serves and has organized quite a few rallies around the right of return.

What we don't do is organized political lobbying on Capitol Hill of the professional variety that affects legislation. There is not at the moment, as far as I am aware, any Arab-American who works full time as a professional lobbyist for an Arab-American organization on the Hill. It's almost unthinkable that such a situation should be the case and yet it is. ADC has a lot of ties to the Executive Branch but Congress is a no-go area for Arab-Americans. We are working on that. The reason for the lack is that our national organizations are smaller than they need to be and, as Professor Suleiman noted, are not keyed into the community properly. Organizations like ADC aspire to be

representatives of the national Arab-American community but cannot yet claim that.

¹ Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (Olive Branch Press, 2001).

² Ann Coulter, "This is War," Sept. 14, 2001, www.townhall.com/columnists/anncoulter/ac20010914.shtml; Ann Coulter, "Future Widows of America: Write Your Congressman," Sept. 27, 2001, www.townhall.com/columnists/anncoulter/ac20010927.shtml; Mona Charen, "Two Fears," TownHall.com, www.townhall.com/columnists/monacharen.mc20011016.shtml; Peggy Noonan, "Profiles Encouraged," *Wall Street Journal*, October 19, 2001.