

Why Arab- Americans are unable to have a Lobby

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Arabs in America are a vibrant community with many activities and social organizations that cater to the needs of people coming from different countries; however, they do not have an organization that represents all of them, not even a small portion of the estimated 2-3 million Arabs. All pan-Arab associations and organizations established in the past 2 to 3 decades were unable to capture the imagination of the young Arab Americans and lead them to become an effective community; a community that knows its rights and recognizes its limitations as well as its potentials; and is able to learn from its own mistakes and successes. One of the questions that bother many people in the Arab world is why Arabs in America have so far failed to develop an effective lobby. This is a difficult question for anyone to answer with confidence; nevertheless, I will try to provide some clues to answering this seemingly puzzling question in the hope that others will do the same. Writing about an issue of concern to us helps us to understand ourselves and what we need to know and do as a community to claim our rights, promote our interests, and defend our causes.

Before we begin to answer this question, we need to ask first certain important questions; why Arabs left their homes in the first place and decided to immigrate to America. This question has two parts; what are the reasons for leaving, or what are the forces that pushed millions of Arabs to leave their countries; and what are the reasons for going to America and Canada and other western nations. Or, to put it differently, what are the push and pull forces that forced millions of Arabs to leave the Arab world and go to the West. Other questions include; Are most Arabs able to abandon their people and old homelands and traditional cultures? Are they able to embrace the new homeland and its culture instead? How do they see themselves in the new land? How do they conduct their lives? What do they really want? Do they feel happy living where they are and are satisfied with what they do? These are big and important questions; yet, they have to be answered in order to measure our successes, our failures, and how to develop a community with specific goals and practical means to reach them.

If one considers communities that do have effective lobbies, he will find that almost all such communities have lived as minorities in the countries from which they came, some of them had endured living under such conditions for centuries; Jews are a good example, and so are the Armenians. In contrast, Arabs in general did not live as a minority in any of the countries from which they came. Minorities, wherever they may live, tend to feel threatened by the majorities and therefore to organize to protect their interests and strengthen their cultural and business ties. Christian Arabs living in America are better at organizing themselves than Muslims because of their minority status in almost all Arab states. Minorities that succeeded in forming effective lobbies tend to have one single issue, or a major cause to unite them and motivate them to act.

Arab Americans, in contrast, have several issues; the Palestinian cause may be the most important one for most Arabs; but it is not the only one. Religiously conservative Arabs see the protection and promotion of Islam as the most important issue, while liberals give priority to issues related to political reform. Some see human rights in the Arab world as a significant issue, while less educated people do not understand the true meaning of this issue and how it affects scientific progress and economic development in the Arab world.

In addition, Arabs in America are unable to communicate with each other effectively; they generally do not read and, because of this handicap, they have failed to develop printed means of communications where they could talk about issues of mutual concerns, express their opinions, and try to help each other and develop an American subculture of their own. In fact, while most Arabs I know do help their families back home and even the poor there, they are unable to see the need to establish an organization to help the new immigrants and the needy among them.

Jews, for example, have many organizations and several funds to help new immigrants settle, get good training to find rewarding jobs and help them build new lives in America. Philanthropy in Arab history does not exist; we tend to help in emergencies only. Without institutionalizing such a system, new immigrants will not find the assistance that usually need to settle and lead normal lives and feel being an integral part of a caring community that shares with them their joy and pain and hopes. Creating a sense of community through the development of shared interests and ties and effective means of communications is the

only way to create the right conditions for the development of an active lobby to help Arabs in America to claim their rights, promote their shared interests, and defend their causes.

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