

The Arab American Community

Dr. Mohamed Rabie

According to the Arab American Institute, the number of Arab Americans is about 3.6 million people; most of them, however, are new immigrants; they arrived in America during the last 60 years. Though Arab Americans are scattered all over the United States, they are concentrated in several large metropolitan areas such as Houston, Detroit, Chicago, Los Angeles, New Jersey, and Washington DC, There is no doubt that the concentration of immigrants in few places makes life easier, especially for new arrivals; it facilitates the resumption of normal life without having to go through difficult processes of acculturation and sociopolitical adaptation. Nevertheless, the tendency to stick together serves to deny most immigrants the opportunity to acquire the necessary tools to work and compete and succeed in the new society. Consequently, some people fail to know the law of the land and even learn enough English to read a book, understand the news, or enjoy watching a movie. New immigrants, particularly the older and the traditionally conservative ones, tend to stay attached to the homelands from which they came and to continue to follow the customs, traditions, and religious rituals practiced by peoples left behind.

Since members of the Arab American community tend to stay together, they have failed to develop locally grown sociocultural traditions compatible with the American way of life; Arab Americans need to create a subculture that takes into consideration Arab traditions in food, music, the arts, and human relations, and incorporate most American cultural values. This is needed to ease the integration of their children into the American society and become an integral part of it. This failure explains the weak participation of Arab Americans in local and national politics and poor knowledge of how the system functions and be effective in sending more Arab Americans to the legislative branches of states and federal governments and gain more support for Arab causes.

The advent of the internet is one force that contributed to creating and perpetuating this situation. The Internet has helped all cultural and religious minorities living in every western country to stay in contact with their roots and old traditions at all times. Easy access to the Internet and satellite television has enabled like-minded people in all parts of the world to communicate instantly with each other and develop a unique worldview not shared by most other peoples around them. The socially and religiously conservative

minorities, in particular, have developed *cultural ghettos* within which they live and function almost normally, hiding behind sociocultural walls of their making that separate them from the rest of the societies in which they live, and often love to hate.

I conceived the “cultural ghetto” concept in 1996 for the sake of understanding this unusual phenomenon after noticing that it exists in every western state. A traditional ghetto is a place where racial minorities and non-native cultural groups live in isolation and oftentimes in poverty, and suffer discrimination. A cultural ghetto, in contrast, is a space where normal people from all over the world communicate and exchange views and particular information that serve to deepen their sense of isolation and suspicion and heighten their fear of the other. Conservative cultural and religious minorities have erected with the help of the Internet imaginary walls around their minds and souls and denied themselves the opportunity to learn what they need to learn to live normal lives in a fast-changing world that they must live in and help their kids to live in as well.

There is no doubt that Arabs in America have many success stories to tell and be proud of. However, they are individual success stories, not community ones. Arabs as a community have failed to have one single success story worth mentioning. People in the Arab world ask me all the time about the reasons for the community's failure to have an Arab lobby in Washington, especially in light of the great influence of the Israeli lobby on the making of American foreign policy in general and US Middle East policy in particular. There are several reasons and explanations for this failure; however, the intention of this paper is to invite people to think of ways and means to develop an Arab-American subculture. Communities are the building blocks of nations, while cultures are the social glue that holds people together and enables them to form ethnic and cultural communities. Failure to develop locally grown cultures, or to be exact, American and European subcultures, is certain to cause all Arab communities to lose whatever shared traditions and values they have and to slowly disintegrate. And this will cause the new generations to lose the opportunity to stay connected while being integrated with the larger society; it will also cause the old generation to sink deeper into their isolation, creating unbridgeable gaps between them and their children and grandchildren.

On the other hand, the development of satellite TV stations everywhere has enabled Arab communities in general to watch the same news and entertainment programs that their relatives watch in the old homeland. As a result, most Arabs in America and Europe have unconsciously become employees working in the West but living in the East and

following the old cultural traditions and nurturing the same traditional feelings, dreams, attitudes, and beliefs in certain conspiracy theories.

While there are no magic tools or easy ways to develop a unique Arab American subculture, creating associations and social clubs and professional organizations and strengthening means of communications is indispensable to developing subcultures; these are ways and means to help people discover and develop their strengths, crystallize their identities and overcome their weaknesses. In fact, the creation of a community is not possible without shared values and interests, a common language, shared symbols and rituals and occasions to celebrate together, and means of communication to share experiences and promote common causes. No national or cultural community can be built today without having special and trusted newspapers and magazines and radio and television stations.

The telling and retelling of personal and community stories are good steps from which people could begin to create symbols and special occasions and role models to fashion an Arab American identity; a prerequisite for the development of a locally grown subculture that meets the community's needs and enables it to live and function normally in America. A community proud of its identity and culture and role in society can develop sound loyalty to the new lands without abandoning its commitment to the old ones. I believe that without developing a culture that ties people together in the new homelands, Arabs will fail to claim and protect their rights in their adopted homelands and make meaningful contributions to the old ones.

Arabs as a people tend to use words as tools to build walls to hide behind; to employ feelings and invoke memories to write history; to listen to fictitious stories and myths and imagine a happy future; they also use dreams to create new enemies and fight them. Yes; Arabs tend to do all that and more; this is how literature is written and fiction is invented and poetry is constructed. Though nothing wrong with that as long as it is recognized for what it really is; fiction, not facts, or history, or reality. As people write their stories and their friends' stories and their neighbors' stories they must keep in mind that facts are more important than fiction to write a community's history and tell its story. Facing the truth is the best and shortest way, though often the hardest one, to know the self and appreciate the other. Whoever fails to understand himself cannot understand others, and whoever ignores the need to think deeply about himself and his situation and understand his feelings is less likely to succeed in life. Arabs must start writing their

history in America as lived and experienced by ordinary people; people who struggled to survive and survived to taste the fruits of success and the agonies of failure.

I believe that every human being, regardless of his or her culture, color, and place of birth, has a unique story to tell; an interesting tale that has much to teach all of us. However, not everyone has the tools or the time or the talent to write and help us learn from his or her particular life experience. Therefore, people who have the gift of writing and the time to write have a special responsibility to tell their stories and the stories of others they know. In doing so, however, ethnic writers need to avoid what most Arabs tend to unconsciously do; trusting the spoken word, not the written one, being good at finding excuses for failure, and very poor at finding solutions to lingering problems.

Mohamed Rabie www.yazour.com