

The Arab American Community

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Arabs in American are estimated at about 2 to 3 million people; most of them, however, are new immigrants; they arrived in American during the last 60 years. Arabs in America, while scattered all over the United States, are concentrated in several large cities and few states such as the cities of Houston, Detroit, Chicago and the Washington DC metropolitan area, and the states of New Jersey, Michigan and California. 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 sociocultural 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. Some people as a consequence fail to know the law of the land and even learn enough English to read a book, understand the news, or enjoy 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 and values and religious traditions practiced by peoples left behind. As a consequence, the Arab American community has so far failed to develop locally grown cultural traditions.

The advent of the internet, meanwhile, has helped cultural and religious minorities everywhere to stay in constant touch with their roots and cultural traditions; it has enabled like-minded individuals from every part of the world to communicate instantly and develop worldviews different from those accepted by most other peoples. The socially and religiously conservative minorities in particular have developed *cultural ghettos* in which they live and function behind sociocultural walls they constructed to separate them from the rest of the societies in which they live and often love to hate. A traditional ghetto is a place where minorities live in isolation and oftentimes in poverty, develop antagonistic attitudes toward the other, and suffer discrimination. A cultural ghetto, in contrast, is a space where normal people from all over the world communicate and exchange views and information largely unrelated to reality; views and 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 prevented themselves from learning what they need to learn to live a normal life in a fast changing world. The five Muslim college students who left their studies and families in Virginia to go to Pakistan in order to join the Al Qaeda, and the young Nigerian man who tried to blow up an American airplane on its way from Amsterdam to Detroit after spending months of training in

Yemen demonstrate the dangers that cultural ghettos pose to young Muslims born in the West but raised within largely closed communities of faith.

There is no doubt that Arabs and Muslims in America have many success stories to tell and be proud of. However, they are individual success stories, not community ones. In fact, Arabs and Muslims in American as national and cultural communities have failed to have one single success story. People in the Arab world ask me all the time about the reasons for the community's failure to have an effective lobby in Washington, especially in light of the great influence the Israeli lobby has had on the making of American foreign policy in general and US Middle East policy in particular. There are many reasons and several explanations for such a failure; however, this is not our intention at this time; the intention is to invite people to think of ways and means to build Arab and Muslim communities in America and Europe. Communities are the building block of nations, and 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 each community to lose whatever shared traditions and values it may have and to slowly disintegrate; giving the young the opportunity to either integrate with the larger society and slowly abandon their commitment to their older communities or be radicalized, while the old continue to sink deeper in their isolation. Such a development creates unbridgeable generation gaps between the young and old; and sociocultural divides between Arab and Muslim communities in general and the American and European societies in which they live.

While there are no magic tools or easy ways to develop an Arab or a Muslim American subculture, creating associations and social clubs and professional organizations on the one hand, and strengthening means of communications are indispensable to developing special subcultures; they are ways and means to help people identify and develop their strengths, crystallize their identity and overcome their weaknesses. In fact, the creation of a community is not possible without shared values and interests, a common language, some symbols and rituals and occasions to celebrate, and special means of communications such as community newspapers and magazines and radio and television stations and programs. 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 a distinct identity; a prerequisite for the development of a locally grown culture that meets the community's needs and enables it to live and function normally in a different land. A community proud of its identity and culture and role in society is able to develop sound loyalty to the new land without abandoning commitment to old one. In fact, without developing a culture that ties people together in the new homeland,

Arabs and Muslims will fail to protect their rights at home and make meaningful contributions to their old homelands; they will continue to complain and be defensive. However, people forced to defend themselves; their traditions and attitudes at all times are unable to think positively and build sound communities.

Arabs as a people tend to use words as tools to build houses; to employ feelings and memories to write history; to listen to fictitious historical stories and myths to imagine a happy future; and to 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; nothing wrong with that as long as we recognize it for what it really is; fiction, not facts, not history, and not 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 the hardest one to understanding the self and appreciating the other. Whoever fails to understand himself cannot understand the other; 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 and Muslims need to 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, faith 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 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; being good at finding excuses for failure, and very poor at finding solutions to lingering problems.

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