

■ ■ In your book, you bring neglected Arab American activism and Arab Americans social movements to light and delineate their omitted presence in American social history of the 20th century. What prompted this omission for such a long time?



(The Rise of the Arab American Left, p. 181)

Arab Americans in the Southend of Dearborn, Michigan, rally in support of Arab forces during the October War in 1973.

■ ■ I understood from your text that almost from the get-go, most Americans became somewhat pro-Israeli because they were compelled by the “Israeli narrative.” I’d like to know what constituted this narrative and why Arab Americans, and the whole Arab world for that matter, were so powerless against it.

Most Americans were sympathetic with Jewish people because of the horrors of the Holocaust and because they found their Zionist claim on a homeland to be inspiring and understandable. I think there was also a feeling of kinship because of the shared Judeo-Christian culture and because many of the Jews who were establishing Israel had come from the West. Most Americans believed that the land where Israel was

gain understanding and raise consciousness. Otherwise, Arab Americans would continue to be excluded from discourses about civil rights and human rights. Although forming these alliances did not mean that Arab American groups conquered the problem of exclusion, I do think that the coalitions they joined “moved the needle” – that Arab American causes, particularly Palestinian rights, were less marginalized than they had been when the groups were more isolated. In particular, Arab American issues gained more influence on the Left in American politics, and a big reason was their growing association with African

African American leaders helped promote Palestinian issues in their activism

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established had been empty of people, or if there had been Arab people living there, they had voluntarily moved.

It is hard for me to explain why it has been so difficult for Arabs and Arab Americans to counter this narrative. Many scholars have put forth various theories ranging from the Israelis’ political influence in the United States to the scarcity of Arab American population and political organization in the United States, and these theories all hold weight. I think mainstream Americans’ sympathy for Jewish people because of the Holocaust, as well as shame at the history of anti-Semitism in this country, is very strong. Furthermore, most Americans and their political leaders believe that Israel is more recognizably western in its politics and society and therefore more civilized, moral, and stable than surrounding countries in the Middle East.

■ ■ Why was the coalition-building strategy so important for Arab American groups, and how well, as you found out, could the Palestine cause be integrated into anti-racism and anti-imperialism discourses?

Building coalitions with other progressive and ethnic minority groups in the United States was crucial for Arab Americans to attain visibility and influence in the American public sphere. Although there were a few Arab American activist groups who were so nationalist in their orientation that they did not want to seek alliances with non-Arab groups (because they thought doing so would dilute their message or distract them with peripheral issues), I think Arab Americans could not “go it alone” if they were going to achieve any political progress. Arab American activist organizations needed allies who had more influence and popular appeal in progressive circles and, eventually, in mainstream liberal political circles such as the Democratic Party, in order to



(The Rise of the Arab American Left, p. 92)

Abdeen Jabara (left) and Shirley Chisholm appear together at an Association of Arab American University Graduates convention in 1972.

American activist organizations. When African American leaders such as Stokely Carmichael, Shirley Chisholm, and Jesse Jackson worked with Arab American organizations and promoted Palestinian issues in their activism, it gave Palestinian rights an expanded platform in the United States.

The integration of Arab American groups and causes into the liberal-Left was not without its obstacles and tensions. In my book I discuss a few occasions in the 1960s-1980s when Arab American activists were ostracized by other American progressives in hurtful ways. Often these episodes occurred because an American progressive group was pro-Israeli and thought the Arab American group or issue was divisive.

And yet, I want to stress, I have documented many more instances of the incremental inclusion and acceptance of Arab American issues by Americans on the Left, especially by African Americans, over the course of the 1970s and 1980s. I think these episodes of coalescence were meaningful in opening more progressive minds to the Arab American perspective and provided opportunities to see shared aims and to integrate Arab American activism into anti-racist and anti-imperialist discourses – which were themselves, by the way, marginal in the American political environment. While I find that the Arab American minor-

In my view the omission stems from two circumstances. First, for demographic reasons Arab Americans were largely invisible because they constituted a tiny percentage of Americans, especially before the late 20th century. Arab American communities tended to concentrate in just a few cities in the United States, which further contributed to the tendency of most Americans, including academics, to rarely think of them or even be aware of their presence in the country. Arab American scholars have long commented on their “invisibility” - a term I am borrowing - and my work follows in the tradition of trying to rectify that absence.

Second, I think the tendency to ignore or overlook Arab Americans and their activism had an ideological cause as well, stemming from America’s history of stigmatizing people from the Arab world and from non-Judeo-Christian cultures. By the 1970s the stigmas attached to Arab and Muslim peoples increasingly featured the stereotype that they were terrorists and should be regarded with suspicion. Furthermore, many Americans assumed that because they largely came from countries that were enemies of America’s ally (Israel), Arab Americans were anti-Semitic and irrationally hateful. These popular assumptions served to place Arabs Americans into the category of a minority group that did not deserve sympathy or acceptance in many people’s minds, including by many Americans who considered themselves progressive on most issues. I think these prevalent ideas about Arabs and Muslims circulating in American society, combined with the demographic patterns of Arab Americans, caused even American scholars and social activists who embraced multiculturalism to neglect the presence of Arab Americans, out of discomfort and ignorance.