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Media

The Politics of Exclusion

By James Zogby

Most Americans probably remember the ABSCAM scandal of 1980 as a sting operation that netted five corrupt congressmen and one senator on charges of bribery and influence peddling. But to many Arab Americans, ABSCAM had an entirely different meaning. We were already acutely sensitive to the stereotypes of Arabs held by many Americans. The FBI surveillance footage—showing an agent dressed as an Arab Sheik corrupting American politicians—fed into the worst of these images. That the FBI would use and thereby propagate such stereotypes left us feeling vulnerable and angry. Unfortunately, the operation also exposed how little real political power we had, and made it even harder for us to gain access to the political process.

Like many racial and ethnic groups in America, Arab Americans have had to struggle for their political and civil rights over the last quarter century. It was not our right to vote that was challenged. Rather, it was broader, more active forms of political participation that were often denied to us. Our political organizing effort usually met with suspicion, resistance, or outright rejection—even in the most progressive company.

I remember how, in 1978, a small group of concerned Arab Americans I was a member of attempted to join a Washington-based coalition calling for a new, more pacific foreign policy. Although we shared the coalition's agenda, our application for membership was denied. That same year, our group was invited to the White House to participate in an ethnic leadership meeting. Three days after the meeting, a White House official called to inform me that we would not be re-invited because the presence of Arab Americans who happened to be "pro-Palestinian" had proven too controversial.

My brother called me from Philadelphia. "You won't believe what's happening here," he said.

We were caught in a Catch-22. Stereotypes wounded us morally and politically, and left us vulnerable to exclusion and defamation. But our weakness hobbled us from responding adequately to the stereotypes. One instance brought this dilemma vividly to life.

It was 15 years ago in Philadelphia. My brother, John, had joined a small group of other Arab Americans at the home of a local Arab American leader to raise funds for the Democratic Party's mayoral candidate, Wilson Goode.

It was, he told me later, an emotional night. Goode pledged to be the mayor of "all Philadelphians." As fundraisers go, especially by today's standards, it was not overly successful. It only raised about $4,200. But those who were there that night vowed their enthusiastic support. They had been included.

The next day, the Republican candidate publicly denounced Goode for having accepted money from "Arabs." And Goode, to set the matter right, announced that he was returning all the checks.

My brother called me that night from Philadelphia to give me the news. "You won't believe what's happening here," he said.

Well, I did believe it, and in the next few years that story replayed itself in several localities. Some candidates returned contributions; others announced up front that they would not accept Arab American support. Some candidates rejected Arab American endorsements, while others denounced their opponents for accepting support from our community or involvement in their campaigns. In most instances, candidates confided fear of retribution from

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their Jewish supporters—even though most Jewish leaders decried such exclusionary behavior. Time after time, we found ourselves shut out from the political process—not just at the national level, but even in local races.

Sometimes, Arab Americans found that their mere existence had become a campaign issue. A few weeks before the 1985 mayoral elections in Dearborn, Michigan, every household received a campaign mailer from one candidate announcing in thick, one-inch black lettering his solution to the "Arab problem," xenophobic concerns about the increase of Arab immigration into the city. Dearborn happens to be the city with the highest proportion of Arab Americans in its population—over 20 percent.

The Arab American community has made strenuous efforts in recent years to educate Americans about who we are, to end the politics of exclusion, and to secure our rights. These efforts have paid off: I have the sense that anti-Arab American sentiment has generally diminished over the last decade or so. More and more Americans, I believe, have come to realize that Arab Americans are neither terrorists nor oil sheiks, but just ordinary citizens with a paycheck, a mortgage, and their children's college tuition to worry about. Through increased voter registration and political organizing, we have fought our way back into the arena. We have established strong national organizations and gained recognition as a legitimate political constituency.

In Dearborn, for example, our voter strength has gone from fewer than 1,000 in 1985 to more than 7,000 today. So when that city's mayor—the very man who campaigned against us in 1985—appears before Arab American audiences, he now speaks respectfully of his "Arab American friends." He recently appointed an Arab American to a key position in his administration. The same change occurred in Philadelphia, where Arab Americans gave strong and early support to a candidate named Ed Rendell, who, as mayor, has appointed Arab Americans to a number of city commissions.

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Serious problems remain for Arab Americans. In some instances, negative stereotypes continue to inform public policy. Airport profiling, the practice of focusing on Arab-looking individuals as potential terrorists for heightened security checks, unfairly targets us on the basis of our ethnicity. And as recently as last year, the opponent of an Arab American candidate for Congress attacked him because of his ethnicity and those of many of his supporters. The opponent sent a mailer to households of the district complaining of "the foreign-sounding" names of his opponent's Arab American contributors. The recent bombing of the embassies in Kenya and Tanzania may provoke a flare-up of anti-Arab prejudice, as the World Trade Center bombings did four years ago.

But despite pockets of bigotry, real change is occurring as well. There is no better evidence of that fact than the May 7, 1998 appearance of President Clinton before the Arab American Leadership Conference in Washington, DC.

Almost 15 years to the day after William Goode returned Arab Americans' contributions, President Clinton became the first U.S. president to speak before an Arab American conference.

The president's opening words were, "My fellow Americans," and they were met with thunderous applause. It might have been an ordinary greeting in another context, but for Arab Americans it was an extraordinary moment, a watershed in our political history.

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