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Guest Editorial

We Are Not Arab-Americans

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Editor's note: The Arab American Institute (AAI) continues its policy of identifying Assyrian and Maronite Americans as "Arabs", despite a previous attempt to stop this practice. On October 10, 2001 a letter (AINA [10-27-2001](#)) was sent to the AAI by a coalition of nine Assyrian and Maronite organizations; the letter asked AAI to stop identifying Assyrians and Maronites as Arabs, but AAI has continued to do so.

(AINA) Ever so often, certain partisan groups who claim to be grassroots and non-profit organizations use the freedom of expression in the United States to attack the conduct of the other active groups. In particular, The Arab American Institution (AAI), headed by Mr. James Zogby, has repeatedly alleged that measures taken by the Bush Administration to combat terrorism have infringed on the rights of the Arab and Muslim communities in the USA. While it is the right of every American citizen to speak his/her mind, it is our responsibility to correct the blatant misrepresentation of our communities. We believe that the AAI's statements and actions have dual fallacies. The first is the AAI's portrayal of being the representatives of the whole Middle Eastern community in America. Secondly, its allegations of US abuse of Arabs and Muslims, which are false, unethical, and politically motivated. Thus far, Mr. Zogby's has failed to provide any tangible evidence of its claims and allegations. Therefore, it is only fair to conclude that his objections to the US Administration's war on terrorism and to the Patriot Act are not due to his concern about Arab-American rights and civil liberties, but rather for his political ideology and financial means.

Political Ideology

Mr. Zogby adamantly opposed the Patriot Act and its associated necessary security measures, which the US Congress overwhelmingly passed to prevent another attack on our soil similar to September 11, on the grounds that such laws discriminate against Arab-Americans and Muslims and harm their civil liberties. For example, on January 6, 2006, Mr. Zogby asked the U.S. government to end its Security Entry/Exit Registration System² (NSEERS) claiming that Arabs and Muslims paid dearly for such measures.³ While these allegations are very serious ones, he failed to have the courtesy to provide a single proof. Furthermore, Mr. Zogby blindly opposed the US war on terrorism and the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan claiming that these wars cannot be justified, despite the fact that 25 million, Iraqis and 18 million, Afghans have been freed from the tyrant regimes of Saddam Hussein and the Mullahs of the Taliban's. It seems that, as a committed democrat and as a member of the American Civil Liberty Union (ALCU), Mr. Zogby is obliged to fight the Republican Bush Administration regardless of what's at stake if the Administration lost its war on terrorism. His objection is ridiculously vicious stretching from election campaigning to spreading anti Bush propaganda. For example, in his article: Why Arab-Americans should vote for John Kerry, published in the Daily Star on October 27, 2004, Mr. Zogby said: I'm a Democrat" and "[t]his November, I will vote for John Kerry for President of the United States. I will do so, confident that it is the right thing to do for my country and my community."¹ While Mr. Zogby claims that the Democratic Party's policies better serves the interest and the vision of the Arab-American community at home and in the ME. He, however, fails to mention what President Bill Clinton said before a Jewish audience when he was reaffirming his willingness to defend Israel by asserting: "The Israelis know that if the Iraqi or the Iranian army came across the Jordan River, I would personally grab a rifle, get in a ditch, and fight and die."⁴ Second, Mr. Zogby fails to acknowledge that President Bush is the first and only sitting President to affirm the right of the Palestinian people to govern themselves in an independent state.

Financial Gain

On March 14, 2005, Mr. Jim Zogby sent a letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. In it, he complained about the Department of State recognizing the Middle Eastern-American communities as such instead of Arabs, for there are some organizations which do not support his political and ideological views. He referred to these organizations as "exiled groups." While he did not elaborate on their status, we find it necessary to explain that these groups are exiled simply because they want freedom and are civil right activists who refuse to live under the oppressive and tyrant regimes in the Middle East. These are the same undemocratic regimes, which back and finance the AAI. Mr. Zogby went even further to complain about the Director of Public Diplomacy for Middle Eastern and MEPI Affairs at USAID the Honorable Walid Maalouf asking him "not to label the Arab Community" each according to his/her ethnicity. What Mr. Zogby is seeking here is nothing but a continuation of the annihilation of these Middle Eastern minority groups who suffered death and destructions at the hand of the tyrant leaders of the Arab community which Mr. Zogby claims to represent.

Mr. Zogby's own poll contradicts his own allegations and proved that Mr. Maalouf's conduct is proper and true. In his article, Good news in S. Arabia and Lebanon, published January 3, 2006, you affirmed that in the second half of 2005, Zogby

International poll, which covered six Arab countries, found that "[s]ignificant changes are taking place in public opinion, especially in Saudi Arabia and Lebanon, which warrant special attention." Mr. Zogby wrote:

"One final area where a dramatic change occurred in Saudi opinion was in how Saudis identified themselves. In 2002, they indicated a preference to self- identify as "being Arab". Today, they prefer describing themselves as "Saudi". All this points to a growing sense of self-confidence, satisfaction and commitment to their country." He added: "The best news for Lebanon, however, is the degree to which the Lebanese, from all groups, identify with the country -- higher than in any other Arab country. When asked to describe their principal identifier, more than 70 per cent say "being Lebanese" -- double the number in 2002."

We should have the courtesy to respect the wish of the people to label themselves as they desire and not as he deems fit. Furthermore, we urge him to take an advice of his own polls. In addition, the AAI mission statement claims that "AAI is a membership organization based in Washington, DC that represents the policy and community interests of Arab Americans throughout the United States..." It will be of great help for the State Department to make a decision regarding his claim had Mr. Zogby defined Arabism. However, a link on his website does the work for him, which also contradicts Mr. Zogby's claims. In his article, Arab Identity: E Pluribus Unum, scholar Halim Barakat explains:

The prevailing view is that only a small minority of the citizens of Arab countries does not speak Arabic as their mother tongue and lack a sense of being Arab; this minority category includes the Kurds, Berbers, Armenians, and the ethnolinguistic groups of southern Sudan. Fewer still are those who speak Arabic as their mother tongue without sharing with the majority a sense of nationhood, a trend that may exist among the Maronites of Lebanon in times of conflict. Most other minority groups, such as the Orthodox Christians, Shi'ites, Alawites, and Druze, consider themselves Arabs with some qualifications and reservations....Yet, most Arabists, especially today in response to the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism, continue to assert the complementarity, if not the synonymy, of Islam and Arabism [sic].⁵

Accordingly, we believe that Mr. Zogby et. al. should respect the rich diversity of Middle Eastern-American communities by referring to them as such, unless he is referring specifically to the Arab-American small community, which represent only 22% of the Middle Eastern-American communities. In such case, he should be specific and clear.

Conclusion

The AAI claims to be a "non-profit organization committed to the civic and political empowerment of Americans of Arab descent." Such claim is unfounded. The AAI is not a grassroots organization fighting for the public interest as Mr. Zogby claims, but rather a lobbying group fighting for interest groups, i.e. Arab regimes, which fund Mr. Zogby's activities, in coordination with the Democratic Party and the ACLU. Thus, Zogby is misleading the US and the Middle Eastern communities by feeding the public false information and biased studies.

As for blaming the American media and Hollywood for the "misfortune" of Arabs and Muslims, we believe that the American people did their part by accepting the Arab and all other communities in their homeland. Now it is up to these communities to adapt and to adopt the American way of life and its great values.

Regarding President George W. Bush's policies, the American-Lebanese community stands behind you and supports your war on terrorism, as well as your doctrine to spread freedom and democracy in the greater Middle East region for this is the best gift anyone may offer to our American and Middle Eastern people.

We are Lebanese-Americans, Assyrian-Americans, Kurds-Americans, Aramaic-Americans, and some are Arab-Americans. Therefore, the inclusive, sensitive, and politically correct term to use when referring to all these groups is the Middle Eastern-Americans. Thus, we ask Mr. Zogby not to label us according to what suits his interest, for we have already labeled ourselves each according to his/her ethnic background.

¹ http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=5&article_id=9623

² <http://www.ice.gov/graphics/news/factsheets/nseersfs120103.htm>

³ United Press International, January 6, 2006

⁴ <http://www.mediaresearch.org/printer/cyberalerts/2002/cyb20020805pf.asp>

⁵ http://arabworld.nitle.org/texts.php?module_id=6&reading_id=51&sequence=2

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