**Protecting Arab-American Identity**

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April 22, 2024

[Newspaper](https://www.nation.com.pk/newspaper), [Opinions](https://www.nation.com.pk/opinions), [Columns](https://www.nation.com.pk/columns)

It took over a half-century to strengthen the Arab American identity and build organizations to meet community needs. Today this work is under assault by those seeking to erase our gains, fracture the community along sectarian lines, or silence our voices in US politics.

First, a bit of history: Just six decades ago there was no organized Arab American community. Most people of Arab descent in America were descendants of World War I era immigration, primarily from Syria/Lebanon, who formed organizations emphasizing country-specific or village identities. There were also Palestinian village clubs. Like other immigrant communities of this era, the major institutions organizing early Arab immigrants were churches or mosques.

The new, more diverse Arab immigrants and students came to the US with ideas of political pan-Arabism. The offspring of WWI-era immigrants came to embrace Arab American identity for different reasons. They were more integrated into American society, and instead of the narrower country, village, or sect-based identities, they were drawn to a shared cultural heritage—including Palestine, an issue that became central to the community for two reasons. Early major national organizations—the Association of Arab American University Graduates and the National Association of Arab Americans—shared a commitment to community building based on shared heritage and identity, including the issue of Palestinian rights. They deemphasized divisions of religious affiliation, national origin, or immigrant/native-born status. This effort to build a unified voice proved easy for some yet challenged others—especially during Lebanon’s long civil war. Still, we persisted.

[President for comprehensive efforts to prevent heart diseases](https://www.nation.com.pk/24-Apr-2024/president-for-comprehensive-efforts-to-prevent-heart-diseases)

In 1980, former Senator James Abourezk and I launched the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee to combat the negative stereotypes of Arabs in media and popular culture and discrimination. As we traveled from city to city, we brought tens of thousands of Arab Americans, from every generation, country, and religious affiliation, into our fold.

The past three decades have brought significant accomplishments and new challenges for the Arab American community. Arab Americans have emerged as an important constituency courted by political campaigns and been elected to federal, state, and local office. Social service and cultural agencies care for new immigrants and educate others about our contributions to American life. And Arab American Heritage Month has been formally recognized by presidential proclamation, and celebrated by governors and legislatures in almost every state. This increased recognition has increased pressure from forces seeking to stymie our growth and silence our voices. We’ve come to expect it and have steeled ourselves to fight. More difficult has been the effort to divide the community.

[Pakistan, Iran revive historic friendship](https://www.nation.com.pk/24-Apr-2024/pakistan-iran-revive-historic-friendship)

Efforts to sectarianize the community began with George W. Bush and continued in the Obama and Biden administrations—conflating Arab Americans with American Muslims and then dividing outreach efforts to “Christian Arabs.” Initiated at the highest levels of government, it’s spilled over into the media and even civil society initiatives.

Our national organizations are united in rejecting efforts to erase our non-sectarian ethnic Arab American identity and drag us back past divisions. We maintain the right to define ourselves based on our history and shared heritage. We remain unified as we fight against discrimination and political exclusion and in our shared commitment to fight for justice for Palestinians and a more balanced American foreign policy promoting peace, security, and prosperity for all countries of the Arab world.

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