



THE DIFFERENCE

Address by Dr. James Zogby

President of the Arab American Institute

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I thank you for the invitation and the opportunity to participate in this critical conversation. Tragic and terrible terrorist attacks in the past few years have brought to light to the urgency of addressing this issue of how we, in the West, are dealing with issues of integration and assimilation of Arab and Muslim communities in our countries.

I speak to you as a practitioner, an activist and a scholar who has studied this issue. I am an Arab American. I know my community's demographics and have, polled the attitudes of both Arab American and American Muslims.

I also know history. For thirty years I have led the fight against the exclusion of Arab Americans from American politics, against discrimination and against the many threats to our civil rights in order to guarantee full acceptance of Arab Americans in the American political mainstream.

I am a critic of American foreign and domestic politics. But I also acknowledge what my country does well. And this is what I want to address.

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There are important differences between the Arab and broader Muslim immigrant experience in Europe and that of the Arab American and American Muslim communities in the United States.

First and foremost, there is the fact that America itself is different, both in concept and in reality. I have heard third generation Kurds in Germany or Algerians in France

complain that they remain on the margins of their societies. With difficulty they may obtain citizenship, but not the identity of being German or French. On the other hand, becoming "American" is a process that has brought countless immigrant groupings into the US mainstream. Being "American" is not the possession of a single ethnic group, nor does any ethnic group define "America." Within a generation, diverse ethnic and religious communities from every corner of the globe have been transformed into what we know as Americans. Problems remain, to be sure, and intolerant bigots periodically rear their heads, but as US history demonstrates, the pressures of incorporation, absorption and acceptance are decisive.

"Becoming American," in the end, means more than obtaining a passport and a set of legal rights. It also means adopting a new identity and absorbing a shared sense of history. This is especially the case with the first generation born in the US, and those who come after them. They assimilate and inter-marry. They are Americans. In other words, we are not "Arabs in America" rather we become Arab Americans and, not only are we transformed, because at the same time, as each new group has entered the American mainstream, the concept of America itself, has been expanded and transformed.

This changing and inclusive notion of what it means to be an American is reflected in the way we teach our history. As school children we are made to feel that the

war of independence is “our victory”, and the victories in the World Wars were ours as well. Every group is encouraged to find its place in this history and see its heroes in America’s story. We learn, for example, of the early Arab immigrant who fought in the revolutionary war, and of the Arab Americans who were part of the early labor and civil rights movements in US history or the war heroes in World War II etc.

I recall a rather remarkable meeting of US ethnic leaders with former President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore in the White House Cabinet Room. We had been convened by the President as part of his effort to win support for his "One America" initiative, to heal the US's racial divide.

Rather spontaneously, individuals seated around the table began telling their own immigrant stories and the histories of the difficulties their communities faced as they sought acceptance in the American mainstream. At the end of this sometimes emotional session, I observed that all of the stories combined were the collective American story. They were, in fact, the shared history of the “One America” Clinton was seeking to promote.

Because of this unique American experience, recent Arab and Muslim immigrants come into a society that is more prepared to accept them and see them as enriching the already complex American mosaic. Immigration is not new to America; it has defined the nation's experience. Therefore, ethnic and religious organizations abound. A

foundation based on diversity and acceptance already exists with fertile ground prepared to accept new communities and to include them in the ever-broadening definition of America.

Historically, there have been two competing forces at work in the US. On the one side there were forces pushing for inclusion and acceptance of new groups in this ever expanding concept of America. Arrayed against this were darker forces of nativism and intolerance. In many periods in our past, when intolerance reared its head, the forces represented by America's better angels have fought back and won.

After 9/11, for example, when Arab Americans and American Muslims felt threatened by a backlash, support was immediately forthcoming from a broad coalition of Asian American, Hispanic American and African American organizations who together constitute over one-third of the American people.

President Bush spoke out, in defense of Arab Americans and American Muslims and Hollywood responded with advertising campaigns stressing the "oneness" of the American people and cautioning that if we surrender to hate that the terrorists would have won. Even law enforcement officials, on the national and local levels, reacted vigorously against the purveyors of hate and intolerance, many of whom were arrested and convicted for "hate crimes" against my community.

On this same note, it is worth pointing out the importance of the foundation built by an earlier generation of Arab Americans. Because the Arab American community has already formed comparatively strong organizations that have paved the way for acceptance, more recent immigrants, despite difficulties, find a supportive network in place. While the earlier immigrants formed groups that were secular (including both Arab Christians and Muslims from all regions of the Arab World), they have provided both support and models for more recent religion-based organizations.

A word about the Muslim, non-Arab community: our polling demonstrates that there is no exception here. They, too, in the first and second generations, fully assimilate. Twenty-one percent of American Muslims report that they have married individuals of other faiths. Ninety-seven percent have contributed to non-Muslim charities and over 80 percent believe that it is good to participate in interfaith activities.

Another important difference between the European and US experience is the extraordinary social and economic mobility that is possible in the US. I have heard some argue that the reason Europe's Muslims live marginalized and alienated, in ghettos, while Muslims and Arabs in the US are now integrated, is because the immigrants to the US were white-collar professionals, while those to Europe were uneducated laborers. This is simply not true. The US and Europe have each had their share of the Arab "brain drain." At the same time, in recent decades, the US has taken in tens of thousands of North

African Arabs who started as waiters and service workers; Yemenis who came as farm workers and dockworkers, Lebanese autoworkers and Syrian steelworkers, Egyptian and Palestinian cabdrivers and poor Iraqi Shi'a refugees as well as thousands more from South Asia.

They do not remain in the lower socio-economic strata, because they have found that opportunities for enterprise abound. The tragic reality is that in the US, new immigrants do not find themselves locked into a “ghettoized underclass” because *one already exists*. It is the African American community and some groups of Latinos who form America’s poor underclass. New immigrants, whether Arab or Asian, therefore, like the Europeans who preceded them, are able to jump in line ahead of these historically deprived groups and move up the economic and social ladder. This is America’s unique problem. It is not a reality we should ignore. It is, in fact, our national shame. But it is one reason why more immigrants find it more possible to achieve economic and social mobility.

Within a few decades, for example, thousands of Yemenis worked their way out of California's fields into small business ownership in a number of states. Palestinians and Egyptians who began as cab drivers and small store owners, were able to grow their businesses, move to the suburbs and send their children to college. While each new

generation of immigrants may experience initial hardship, the progress made by Arab Americans and American Muslims is a record to take note of.

None of this should suggest that Arab Americans and American Muslims do not face discrimination, share deep frustrations with American foreign policy and have real concern with threats to their civil liberties. But because they are American they voice their anger and concern as citizens, not as aliens.

Events of this summer are worth noting here. The day after July 7, for example, all of the Arab American, South Asian and Muslim groups were brought together in a conversation with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). This was part of an ongoing dialogue and partnership with DHS and an extension of the working relationship that has been built with the new leadership at the Department of Justice.

Not only have all of the groups repeatedly condemned terrorism, but also the government officials with whom we work have continuously reaffirmed their support for the rights of these communities. The DHS conversation was followed by a community briefing with the Democratic leadership of the US Senate and a meeting with the Chairman of the Democratic National Committee. Similar meetings were held this fall with the Republican Leadership.

None of this is to suggest that extremists do not exist in the US. But it is they, and not the communities themselves who are on the margins. The Arab American and

American Muslim groups are ever vigilant to deal with and ostracize these elements.

While this mindset existed prior to 9/11, the shock of that horror of that tragedy only sharpened the resolve of the community to shun extremism, and created a new imperative to act.

That the communities have done this while not being silenced as political constituencies sharply critical of disastrous US foreign and domestic policies is a tribute both to their viability and self-confidence, and to the openness of the US process. That's the difference.

Founded in 1985, the Arab American Institute (AAI) is a non-profit organization committed to the civic and political empowerment of Americans of Arab descent.