Real models for Arab-American advocacy in the U.S.

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It is an inescapable and perennial question among Arabs and Arab Americans why they have found it so difficult to establish a political presence in Washington and exercise influence over U.S. government policies. A Nov. 30 Al Arabiya News panel [2] held in Dubai once again examined this quandary from multiple perspectives.

It is generally believed, and was reflected in the Al Arabiya panel, that there has been little more than a series of failures in such projects, arising from a plethora of challenges, obstacles and insufficient efforts. This is largely true. Yet, there are some important extant and emerging models of Arab-American success that went overlooked in the conversation and have yet to receive sufficient attention in general.

The Arab states face somewhat different challenges than the Arab-American community in trying to influence American policies, although their perspectives, interests and problems sometimes have significant overlap. For the Arab Americans, the problem is essentially a lack of organizations and institutions commensurate with their educational, financial, social and other accomplishments. In all other indicators, the Arab Americans outperform the vast majority of other Americans. But when it comes to building and maintaining political credibility, clout and influence, they seem to be particularly ineffective.

As was raised at the panel, the most typical complaint is the lack of an effective "Arab lobby," or even set of Arab and Arab American lobbying groups to try to influence legislation and policy. And, as was noted on the panel, impediments - both those internal and external to the Arab-American community - really do undermine its ability to be politically effective. Yet, it is not enough to identify these. It is important to look into ongoing projects that demonstrate exactly how, and to what extent, that can happen if people are willing to do what is necessary for success.

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It's important to note that lobbying, which is a very clearly defined and regulated legal activity in the United States directly relating to specific legislation and elections, is hardly the only way of successfully engaging the American policy conversation. Even for more generalized policy advocacy, public education and other related and indispensable activities, hurdles do exist. However, it is equally important to understand that there are no legal or formal barriers to Arab-American political participation. It all comes down to a matter of will and skill.

A shining example

We strongly believe that some Arab Americans, such as the American Task Force on Palestine (ATFP), although it is not a lobby group but a policy advocacy organization, have identified ways of effective Arab-American engagement in Washington. And we feel that ATFP has demonstrated the core elements necessary for such a successful intervention.

First, it must be American at its core; especially if it relates to foreign policy, also, it must put the U.S. national interest first and participate in defining it. Second, it must engage with the system as it exists, and craft receivable messages that can be successfully communicated to policy makers and framers. Third, it must seek to make itself genuinely relevant to the problems facing the implementation of core, consensus American policy goals. Fourth, it must be based on integrity and an unswerving commitment to political and intellectual consistency saying the same things to all audiences in every language and not ever playing into the stereotype of Arab doublespeak.

Any such project will face significant resistance from within and without.

External forces such as extremist pro-Israel and other elements of the ultra-right will try to paint any Arab-American project, especially if it overtly champions the cause of Palestine, as anti-Semitic and possibly terrorist-oriented. Islamophobes will attack anything remotely linked to Islam or Muslims. And elements of the far left will denounce any serious effort to engage with the American political system as "selling out" or collaborating with imperialism and so forth. However, the bulk of the American policy and political mainstream is supportive of such a project.

Far more damaging are the internal constraints facing any serious Arab-American effort at political empowerment based on the indispensable precepts outlined above. The Arab-American far left and the Muslim religious right can both be relied upon to condemn any such project as "collaboration" and even "treason." The alienation of so much of the community here in the United States, and the pervasive misimpression that the system is somehow closed to us makes anyone who engages, particularly if they are successful, immediately suspect. Therefore, not only is any effort stigmatized by a strident, vocal minority within the community, the more successful it is, the more it will be condemned.

Knee-jerk anti-Americanism

Similarly, the normative, knee-jerk anti-Americanism from multiple quarters in Arab political discourse, media and social conversation reinforce these same sentiments within the Arab-American community.

Many Arab Americans remain primarily informed by Arab political discourse, which has two debilitating impacts. First, it means that they are speaking a different political language, no matter how perfect their English may be, than their fellow citizens. They simply cannot be understood because of the chasm in worldviews. Second, insofar as Arab Americans are influenced by Arab discourse emanating from the Middle East, their alienation from and hostility towards their own country and its foreign policy is only exacerbated.

These factors combine to intimidate, bully and discourage far too many Arab Americans who would otherwise been keen on engaging in our country's political and policy dynamic. They are the real reasons why it is proving so hard for Arab Americans, as a community, to be effective in Washington.

We believe we have shown how, by shaking off these traditional negative attitudes and embracing our full status as American citizens with every right, and indeed the responsibility, to help define and shape our national interests, Arab Americans can achieve the long-elusive goals of political credibility and relevance. With meager resources, and facing all of these same difficulties, ATFP has managed to gain a seat at the American policy table on the most sensitive and challenging of U.S. foreign policy issues: Palestine. If this can be accomplished regarding Israeli-Palestinian matters, other areas of concern should be even more accessible.

The challenge now is to extend this model beyond the issue of Palestine to other crucial American foreign policy concerns in the Middle East, and the accumulation of major influence through multiple organizations. Serious, purposeful, focused engagement of the kind pursued by ATFP needs to be replicated at a much broader level and through many different vehicles.

Over the past decade of its existence, ATFP has proven, beyond any plausible doubt, that it is entirely possible for Arab Americans to gain credibility, access, and indeed, influence over the thorniest of American policy issues if the approach is serious, thoughtful and systematic. The corollary is obvious: The main thing that is actually holding the Arabs and the Arab Americans back from gaining real political impact and influence in the United States is… ourselves!

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Ghaith al-Omari is Executive Director at the American Task Force on Palestine (ATFP). Prior to that, he served in various positions within the Palestinian Authority, including Director of the International Relations Department in the Office of the Palestinian President, and advisor to former Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas. In these capacities, he provided advice on foreign policy - especially vis-à-vis the United States and Israel -- and security. He has extensive experience in the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, having been an advisor to the Palestinian negotiating team throughout the permanent status negotiations (1999–2001). In that capacity, he participated in various negotiating rounds, most notably the Camp David summit and the Taba talks. After the breakdown of the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, he was the lead Palestinian drafter of the Geneva Initiative, an unofficial model peace agreement negotiated between leading Palestinian and Israeli public figures. Mr. al-Omari is a lawyer by training and

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TAGS: <u>U.S.-Arab Relations</u> [3]