

THE AAUG: REFLECTIONS ON A LOST OPPORTUNITY

M. Cherif Bassiouni

THE CONTEXT

THE JUNE 1967 WAR WAS, in so many respects, a devastating military/political rout for the Arab world. Its implications are still being felt. In a short period of six days, Israel defeated the armies of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. It occupied Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, the Egyptian-administered Palestinian Gaza Strip, Jordanian-annexed Palestinian East Jerusalem and the West Bank, and the Syrian Golan Heights. The 1967 war completed Israel's control over all of Mandatory Palestine. It established Israel's military superiority over countries that had, until then, been thought a threat to its existence.

After the defeat, Arab governments, particularly the most nationalistic military ones of Egypt and Syria, could no longer conceal the failure of their political, social and economic policies, while Arab intellectuals also revealed how ineffectual they were as agents of change. As a result, many among the Arab peoples started to turn to new ideologies to take up the struggle against American neo-imperial hegemony and Israeli expansionism and military dominance of the region. Some organizations such as Marxists and the Muslim Brotherhood, though not new on the political scene, shared the scene with smaller Islamic groups who, having given up hope for peaceful change, advocated violence as the only remaining option. All of these groups sought the elimination of corrupt and/or American-compliant Arab regimes and, for the

M. Cherif Bassiouni is Distinguished Research Professor of Law and President, International Human Rights Law Institute, DePaul University College of Law; President, International Institute of Higher Studies in Criminal Sciences (Siracusa, Italy); Honorary President, International Association of Penal Law (Paris, France); Former President, Association of Arab-American University Graduates (1970).

PURL: <http://www.legal-tools.org/doc/84f734/>

Islamic ones, the establishment of an Islamic state ultimately leading to an *ummah* of all Muslim states.

Most Arab intellectuals had the same goals, save for that of establishing an Islamic state. Most pursued the goals of secular democratization of the Arab world and the establishment of social and economic justice in the best of Western tradition. Not surprisingly, these secular-nationalist-democrats were opposed by the US and Israel for whom it was better to have extremists as opponents than to oppose those who share the same values and ideals but who refuse to be subjugated in their names. Irrespective of political ideology, the dominant view in the Arab world was that the core source of all problems were the policies and practices of the US and Israel – a view that has since then been consistently reinforced.

The 1967 war was the catalyst for a number of Arab-American intellectuals to get together and address a number of questions pertaining to the modern Arab world and to their identity as Arab-Americans. Two questions in particular raised their level of anguish: 1) how could Israel's military accomplishments be so formidable; and 2) how could Egypt and Syria's military failures be so dramatic? A third question also perplexed them, namely how could the US have committed itself so totally to supporting Israel? The US until the mid-sixties supported Israel economically and politically but not necessarily militarily. Then, abruptly, President Lyndon B. Johnson gave Israel what was called the "amber light" for an attack on Egypt to be executed without warning in order to destroy, by a surprise attack, its air force on the ground as well as other military capabilities. From then on, the US became Israel's principal source of military arms and high tech equipment, ensuring its military dominance in the region.

The 1967 stealth attack on Egypt was so reminiscent of the 1956 Suez war in that the Israeli ground forces employed the same strategy and tactics. In fact, ground forces used the same land routes they had crossed in 1956, deviating in their multi-prong thrusts in some areas by only a mile or two. In 1956, Israel had conspired with France and the UK, while in 1967, it can be said to have conspired with the US. The difference was that the US did not militarily participate in the 1967 war, and thus it preserved plausible deniability. Arabs and Arab-Americans concluded at that time that the US was engaging itself militarily alongside Israel. But the US continued to play a positive role in the peace process, thus sending contradictory signals to the Arabs.

In time, however, these positive signals changed as the US's full military, economic, and political backing of Israel became open and unambiguous. By 2006, the US became a de facto military ally of Israel. The George W. Bush Administration not only backed Israel's attacks on the Palestinian Territories (mostly Gaza) and the invasion of Lebanon, but it supplied Israel's military with ammunition and rockets, including cluster bombs, during the campaign. The wanton destruction of civilian infrastructure and indiscriminate killing of civilians by Israel, which constitute war crimes, makes the US an accomplice. To ignore this common perception among Arabs and others in the Muslim world is to be delusional.

While Egypt had given Israel ample grounds in 1967 to feel provoked, there was no legal basis for Israel's use of armed force against Egypt before referring to the Security Council the issue of Egypt's closure of the Gulf of Aqaba to Israeli shipping and denial of maritime passage through the Suez Canal. Israel had obtained such maritime rights after the 1956 war. But it should also be remembered that in April of 1967, two months before Israel's attack on Egypt, there were a number of air battles between Israel and Syria, leading the latter to expect an Israeli invasion. The USSR confirmed that assessment to Syria and Egypt. The former, having a mutual defense treaty with the latter, asked Egypt to call for the withdrawal of UN forces from the Sinai, there since the end of the 1956 War, to deter Israel from attacking Syria. Israel may have seen this as a prelude to an Egyptian-Syrian offensive against it. From a military perspective, Israel felt that it could not easily fight on two fronts, and that it could not militarily afford to leave the initiative to its two most challenging enemies. From that premise, it was militarily logical for Israel to take the initiative irrespective of any question of legality under international law. That Israel's first attack on Egypt constituted an act of aggression was at the time self-evident. In fact, Israel carried out then the "pre-emptive" war theory the George W. Bush Administration later put into action in Iraq in 2003.

Arab-Americans and a segment of US public opinion were, however, shocked by the fact that in order to conceal its first attack on Egypt, which Israel attempted to justify by claiming Egypt had first attacked Israel, Israel attacked a US naval vessel in international waters between Egypt and Israel. The attack on the USS Liberty was to destroy intercepted communications within Israel and within Egypt that proved Egypt did not use armed force against Israel and that Israel was the first to attack Egypt. Israeli planes manufactured in the US and given to Israel by the people of the US through its Government, deliberately attacked a US ship injuring and killing 34 naval personnel and wounding 173. Even then, Israel's political power and reach made the investigation of the USS Liberty a secret one. It was able to keep the findings of the naval board of inquiry classified for 30 years, at which time there was no negative political fallout from the disclosure that Israel had intentionally and deliberately attacked the US ship in order to destroy the evidence of its aggression.

THE FOUNDING

All of this, as well as other considerations, brought about a meeting of a number of Arab-American intellectuals during the 1967 Middle East Studies Association convention held at the University of Chicago. They gathered ostensibly to discuss what could and should be done by them and their like-minded colleagues in the Arab world to counteract the pro-Israel Lobby and the negative image it was creating of Arab-Americans and the Arab world in American public opinion. To these ends, they founded the Association of Arab-American University Graduates (AAUG).

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Arabs in general, and Arab-Americans in particular, have consistently attributed to the well organized and funded activities of the pro-Israel Lobby, the

successes it achieved instead of recognizing and admitting their failure to challenge the Lobby's definition and framing of the issues. Many among the intellectuals who met in October 1967 at the University of Chicago (location of MESA meetings) fully understood that. They also understood that if Arab oil money were to be put to work to redress the imbalance created in American public opinion by the Lobby and its supporters, the political consequences would be dramatically different. Regrettably, very little of that happened.

Since the late 1920s, Arab intellectuals have felt the responsibility to advance the goals of secular democracy in the Arab world and freedom from colonialism. Arab-American intellectuals in the late 1960s thought they could make a difference. After all, they were the product of America's democracy, and they knew what it was to live in a constitutional form of government where the rule of law prevailed and due process applied.

The pro-Israel Lobby was extraordinarily successful in shaping American perceptions of Arabs and the Arab world and of shaping US foreign policy in that part of the world. The study by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt entitled "The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy" published March 13, 2006, reveals how powerful that Lobby has become. The Lobby and its supporters in the US deny such power, and those who take a contrary position are branded as anti-Semitic. In a similar vein, those who defend the Palestinian cause are charged as pro-terrorists.

There have always been double standards in American policies with respect to the Arab world but today, America's policies are blatant and unabashedly anti-Arab and anti-Muslim with the two being frequently confused in the perception of a general public, conditioned in the last forty years to accept this subjective reality. After September 11, 2001, the perception became solidified, and Islamophobia and Arabophobia have been open and notorious in this country.

THE DRIVING FORCE

Nearly every endeavor in life has a human driving force behind it. In the case of the AAUG, it was the late Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, a Palestinian from Jaffa. As a child, Abu-Lughod lived through the takeover of his country by Zionist settlers, and he also witnessed the 1948 war and the Palestinian exodus that followed. He came from an intensely nationalistic family of modest means. Needless to say, he encountered many difficulties settling in this country. Nonetheless he completed a B.A. at the University of Illinois and a Ph.D. from Princeton University. It was at Princeton that he met Edward Said, then an undergraduate. After a post-doctoral stint with UNESCO in Cairo, he went on to have a brilliant career in academia. With his background and convictions, he would never have made it as a political scientist in Middle Eastern Studies. This field had already been pre-empted by those favorable to Israel. Instead, he went into African Studies, a field which at the time few scholars considered to be academically promising. In 1962, he was appointed to the faculty of Smith

College, and in 1967, he was appointed to the faculty of Northwestern University.

Abu-Lughod was a leader, thinker, political strategist, and above all a warm, affable and generous person. He had all it took for what is considered charismatic leadership. But he also knew he could not repeat the stereotype of Arab leaders. What he had to do was to recruit, motivate and support a number of his contemporaries and members of the younger generation to become committed to political action in the American tradition. He saw his role as guiding others without being too obvious about it, and he succeeded in his chosen role. Abu-Lughod refused to be the organization's first President, urging instead the election of Professor Fauzi Najjar, a mild mannered Lebanese professor from Michigan State University. For sure, Najjar did not have any of the leftist, revolutionary ideas that Abu-Lughod had. In fact, he hardly even had strong Arab nationalistic credentials. But he was a gentleman's academic at a prestigious university and was expected not to be a divisive president during the organization's first year. And so it was. Abu-Lughod followed as president in the second year. It was indispensable to have a strong leader like him to get the organization started, and hopefully on the map of Arab-American intellectuals. He achieved this goal, but his accomplishments were mostly seen through the work of other presidents of the organization whom he guided.

The founding members were as heterogeneous as the spectrum of political views which its members represented. They also reflected a wide spectrum of age, experience, and professional background. To the best of my recollection, Elaine Hagopian was the only woman evident in the founding period, and she too was a friend and admirer of Abu-Lughod. They met at Smith College in 1962 where their faculty appointments coincided.

MY PRESIDENCY

I did not attend the first meeting in 1967, but I was invited a few weeks later by Abu-Lughod to join the initial group. Abu-Lughod chose me to succeed him because I had strong Arab nationalist credentials. In fact, at the time, I was the only member of that group to have fought in a war against Israel. I had served in the Egyptian forces during the 1956 Suez war. My family background was deeply steeped in the struggle against British colonialism – my grandfather having been one of the principal leaders of Egypt's 1919 revolt against the British occupation. But other than that, I was, relatively speaking, a conservative. Surely, Abu-Lughod's views, which I frequently saw as tinged with Marxism, were not appealing to me, though I recognized merit in some of them. But the commonality I felt with Abu-Lughod, as well as with some others in the founding group, was our Arab identification and our common desire as Arab-Americans to offset the distorted perceptions of the Arab world and of Arabs that the Lobby and its supporters were so effectively disseminating throughout the country. More importantly, we were bound by our strong belief in human dignity and by a sense of intellectual integrity that made us naturally rebel against character assassination, political distortions, media manipulations

and above all, the vilification of other peoples carrying a strong undertone of racism.

It was my view then as well as now, that as Americans by choice, we must make full use of our constitutional rights and in particular, of our First Amendment rights, to advance our positions and views. However, Arabs are strong on rhetoric and weak on action. For expatriate Arabs, particularly in the US, this may be due to the fact that they do not come from democratic countries where they could freely exercise such rights. But maybe it is also because Arab-Americans have not shaped their identity and are still faced with an identity conflict. Many have not resolved the simple issue of being fully American in the political allegiance sense of the word, while also being fully Arab in their intellectual, spiritual and emotional vocation. The AAUG did not face, let alone resolve, some of these and other existential issues in order to lay the foundation for the type of action-oriented group that many of us wanted it to be.

At the time I became President, I envisioned an organization having a membership of 10-15,000, with a strong work ethic and the ability to mobilize for specific programs and issues. In my mind it was entirely realistic to have an annual convention with at least 30-40,000 persons. In addition, I felt it was also realistic to have a media relations bureau that would effectively deal with some of the worst distortions of the Arab character and other matters which concerned us. Why none of that happened, even though it was quite feasible, remains an unanswered question. Was it because the AAUG focused almost exclusively on the Palestinian issue? Was it the rhetoric which its leadership and major proponents employed? Was it the apparent left-leaning jargon of those closely-identified with the organization? Or was it simply a failure of Arab social organization? If any organization had a chance at succeeding in these and other matters, it was the AAUG.

My work at the AAUG was in part conditioned by my background. I came from a conservative family background with a diplomat father, a retired Ambassador, and a grandfather who was admittedly a staunch anti-colonialist but part of the Egyptian establishment nonetheless. He was a Senator and President of the Egyptian Senate as well as President of the Bar Association. As such, I was not accustomed to revolutionary lingo. I remember with deep emotion the Detroit convention when Eqbal [aka Iqbal] Ahmed made an extraordinary and fiery speech which he concluded with the words that American anti-Vietnam demonstrators had not burned the American flag but had "cremated it." [Actually, Ahmed made this comment in regard to British-Pakistani Scholar, Tariq Ali who was supposed to address the AAUG that year but was denied a visa because of the flag "cremation." Eqbal Ahmed was invited in his place.] I heard myself uttering, "wow." He also said something at that speech which epitomized the paralysis of Arab political action and evidenced the weakness of that culture's social system. He challenged Palestinians to a Gandhi-type peaceful walk on Jerusalem. His words were, in effect, "imagine what would happen if a million Palestinians walked peacefully to Jerusalem?" The image was extraordinarily powerful, and what it evoked then is still true today. Ultimately, it is not violence or brutal force that wins wars, but

it is conviction, commitment and political action based on moral principles that do.

Eqbal's speech preceded my election in 1970 and had an emotional impact on me, but as the incoming president, I concentrated my work on pragmatic matters like membership recruitment, organization, publications, and public action in the US. At the time, the AAUG had 170 members, and when I left it a year later, it had over 700 members. This may not seem much, but at the time, it was an extraordinary result. Arab-Americans were reluctant to join an organization they feared could be labeled political. They feared being targeted by the pro-Israel Lobby and its supporters, known to find means to punish those who took opposing positions. But as experience also demonstrated, getting Arabs to renew their membership and pay their dues consistently year after year was as difficult a task as keeping them engaged and disciplined in consistent work. I suspect over the years the AAUG had thousands of members, and that most of them were new ones. The old members did not have the perseverance or discipline to remain members and pay their dues, except for a small core of dedicated individuals. That core ultimately ran out some years ago.

For such an experience to occur among Arab intellectuals in the United States is telling. Everyone knows that Arabs are individualistic, seek leadership, and have difficulty with organization and discipline. But for these characteristics to extend to Arab-Americans was something that most of us involved in the AAUG experiment thought would not happen. Regrettably, this turned out to be the case, and no other Arab-American organization has ever succeeded in overcoming this difficulty. Nonetheless, for a few years, some of us in the AAUG made the point of unity. There were no leadership struggles in the early years; the presidency was not vested in anyone; and we were hard-working and serious. Thus, we hoped to inspire future generations.

I worked on recruiting members and developing a policy for publications, in particular establishing Medina University Press with Abu-Lughod to publish books that would present an Arab perspective. Nonetheless, I found myself involved in matters that, as a jurist with little to no political experience, I was ill-prepared to deal with.

In 1972, the Lobby and its supporters started a campaign in the aftermath of the assassination of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics. It was a campaign that linked terrorism with Palestinians. This was later altered, particularly after September 11, 2001, to link terrorism with Muslims, or at least with Muslim extremists whose definition varies according to political persuasion. Hence, anyone who opposes Israel's expansionist policies or the neo-con agenda is to be considered either a terrorist or a potential terrorist, and organizations that take views contrary to Israeli and neo-con views find themselves listed by the US government as terrorist groups.

The successful results which the Lobby and its supporters achieved – with a great deal of input by the neo-cons and the Christian right since post-9/11 – have their genesis in the post-'67 war campaign by the Israeli Lobby to depict the Palestinians as violent and after 1972, as "terrorists." The Nixon Administration bought that line although with much less enthusiasm than the

present Bush Administration. Nevertheless, the FBI launched "Operation Boulder" which was a specialized database within the Bureau of Arab-Americans, particularly those who engaged in political activity. To say that this was clearly against the First Amendment is an understatement. Then as now, some Americans are less equal than others. Anti-Arab, as well as now anti-Muslim, discrimination is considered almost legitimate.

Operation Boulder was something new for the FBI which discovered that there was an Arab-American community in this country. This was still a time when J. Edgar Hoover's criteria for joining the FBI were very much the norm. The clean-cut, crew-cut mainstream American boys from the Midwest, the plains states and from a non-multiracial areas prevailed. Most of them had never heard Arabic, and most of them had never attended a meeting of Arabs. As these FBI agents fanned out in Chicago, Detroit, New York, and other major urban centers to find out what the Palestinians were up to, they were overwhelmed by the vehemence of the speeches and the demeanor of the participants. The FBI's reactions were based on the life experiences of its agents, coming as they did from a radically different culture than Arabs. By the time the FBI gathered field reports, it perceived Palestinians as capable of starting a wave of terrorism in the U.S. This led to targeting Palestinian organizations and their leaders, hauling many of them before interrogations, intimidating others and engaging in violations of what the First Amendment protected. These tactics were also used at the time against anti-Vietnam and African-American activists. But while the anti-Vietnam and Civil Rights Movement gained popular acceptance and credibility in the US, there wasn't too much support for the pro-Palestinian movement.

The Attorney General at the time was Edward Levy, a distinguished law professor at the University of Chicago whom I knew. I took it upon myself to go and see him in Washington to plead the Palestinians' First Amendment rights. I urged him to terminate Operation Boulder. Through him I met with the acting FBI director whose tenure was short-lived and who was not up to dealing with the issue. I also met with a number of Senators, including Senator Bill Saxsbee of Ohio. As a result of those meetings, I prepared one of the first AAUG publications, *The Civil Rights of Arab-Americans: The Special Measures*, published in 1974.

Both Ed Levy and Bill Saxsbee were helpful. It should be noted that Ed Levy, who was Jewish, did not hesitate to take a principled position when I appealed to him. Little did I know that because of this initiative, the FBI started a five-year investigation of me, and that they gathered information in my file, the collection of which is prohibited by the privacy act as being protected by the First Amendment. I used the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in September, 1999 to gain access to my file. When I asked that the material be expunged, it was denied by the Federal District Court in September, 2004. By then, September 11th had occurred; the entire judicial climate towards FOIA and the Privacy Act had changed. Positions against Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans hardened. For all practical purposes, historic constitutional protections were set aside, and laws like the Patriot Act legitimized practices

reminiscent of the discriminatory excesses which occurred during WWII. The post-2001 years are no longer the era of an Ed Levy who, as Attorney General, felt bound by the Constitution and the rule of law. Unlike Levy, Attorneys General Ashcroft and Gonzalez are uninhibited when it comes to violating the Constitution and the rule of law. The Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals in an unprecedented decision affirmed the District Court's opinion – and my petition for *certiari* is currently pending before the Supreme Court.

It was this experience which led me to inquire if other AAUG founders were in the same position. To my surprise, it turned out to be the case. To the best of my knowledge, nearly all of the founders who became presidents were under FBI investigation. Again, to the best of my knowledge, only Attorney Abdeen Jabara filed suit to expunge his record under FOIA, but he was not successful. Considering, however, that some in the Christian right would have Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans de-naturalized and deported, or put in internment camps like Japanese-Americans in WWII, one might conclude that this was all quite benign. But let those who think that way remember the lessons of the past and not delude themselves. If the combined interests of the extreme right-wing Christian movement, the neo-conservatives, and the Lobby could have their way, Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans would be given a choice of becoming "good Arabs" and "good Muslims" or be deported — reminiscent of the one offered the Jews at the time of the Spanish Grand Inquisition.

There is one incident during my tenure as AAUG President that remains vivid. It was at the Evanston convention held at the Orrington hotel in 1970. The organization, through Abu-Lughod, had recruited Edward Said who was becoming more and more popular and recognized as an intellectual force in this country. But until 1967, Edward Said was basically an Anglophile professor of comparative literature whose intellectual and emotional connection with the Arab world appeared quite superficial. I had known Edward in Cairo since 1948 after his parental family fled Jerusalem in 1947 [The Said family spent earlier periods in Cairo where Edward's father had a business.] In Cairo, he was enrolled in an English school and was considered an Anglophile, which by my standards and those who, like me, were deeply rooted in Egyptian nationalism, was a cardinal sin. Edward later went to Princeton and then to Harvard where he pursued his interests in comparative literature, demonstrating his great intellect. There was no indication of any commitment to Arab nationalism. By the time the Evanston convention of 1970 took place, Edward was virtually at the forefront of leftist revolutionary Palestinian thinking.

The AAUG Board was meeting in one of the upper floors, on the mezzanine, while a group of Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) aficionados was meeting outside the framework of the convention in a room on the mezzanine level. Edward was one of their speakers. In the midst of our mundane administrative board deliberations on the affairs of the organization, someone rushed into the room telling us a group of Israeli students was in the lobby, and they were led by General Harkabi, a former head of Israeli military intelligence and a brilliant intellectual who advocated dialogue with the

Palestinians. By coincidence the Israeli students had their annual meeting in Evanston a few blocks away. Harkabi was their keynote speaker. Someone must have told them that the AAUG was meeting a few blocks away, and the idea developed that they should come and have a dialogue. But instead of sending an emissary or calling, some 90 Israeli students came unannounced led by the good general. The first ones to hear of the Israeli presence were the PFLP persons meeting in the mezzanine. They became incensed. Edward Said called it an unacceptable "provocation." Not knowing what to expect, I ran out of the board meeting, took the elevator down to the mezzanine, and as I stepped out of the elevator, Edward was leading those attending the PFLP meeting to confront the Israelis. Harkabi and the Israeli students were walking up the circular staircase from the lobby to the mezzanine. Fearful of a clash, I stepped between the two groups and in fact, found myself on the mezzanine landing close to the first step of the staircase going down, squeezed between the two groups. The staircase wasn't too wide – it could hold about 3-4 people abreast. I extended my arms open, and if I can say so without being taken irreverently, in a Christ-like manner, to try to keep Edward – who was yelling at the top of his lungs "provocateurs!" leading the crowd behind him – from confronting the Israelis. Simultaneously, the Israelis coming up the stairs came to an abrupt stop at the top of the staircase, but they were being pressed further up by those at the bottom who did not see what was happening at the mezzanine landing. I literally felt the weight of bodies from behind and in front pressing me as I was asking General Harkabi to turn back. He tried to explain, shouting over the crowd's noise, that they had come in good faith and good will as a gesture of peace. To be truthful, they wanted to dialogue and wondered why the Arabs were so closed-minded. From behind me, Edward was screaming in my ear about getting them out of the hotel. I was close to being overwhelmed by the situation. The Israelis to their credit backed down as I kept my arms extended while I walked down the stairs holding back Edward and the PFLP group until the Israelis turned around in the main lobby and left through the revolving door without harm. The incident remained in my mind as a symbol of the lack of understanding that separates Israelis and Palestinians.

The prevailing ideology in the AAUG was intransigently Palestinian. The leadership and most of the members believed in the "reconstitution of Palestine" as a "secular democratic state." This meant the political end of Israel, and that was, in my opinion, a non-starter. I was in favor of a two-state solution which at the time was derogatorily called the "truncated state" solution. From the moment I joined the organization to when I left it, my position has not changed though I met with substantial opposition from within the organization precisely for this position. Even my good friends, founders and past presidents Husni Haddad and Naseer Aruri took oral and written positions against me for supporting a two-state solution. Regrettably, time proved me right. However, in the meantime many opportunities were lost.

The goals and expectations of Israelis and Palestinians are too diametrically opposed to be reconciled within a single "democratic, secular state" as many Palestinians advocated at the time. It would take what I believe

was Anwar Sadat's courage at Camp David to posit a reality which many Palestinians to this date still resist.

Like others, I cannot help believing that had the Palestinians accepted the 1978 Camp David Accords and come to the Cairo Mena House conference calling for the final settlement of the Palestinian question, as it was called at the time, there would have been a Palestinian state established probably by 1981. That which was rejected then is what the Palestinian leadership is trying to achieve today, though this will hardly be possible with 400,000 Israeli settlers who have taken over an estimated 20% of the West Bank and East Jerusalem and which they are not likely to return. This was one of the many lost opportunities.

On a different matter, I have never ceased to be amazed by how Arab intellectuals are unable to understand, relate to, or empathize with the 2,000 year history of Jewish oppression throughout the world, and in particular, the horrible acts that have befallen them as part of what is now called the Holocaust. In fact, I have always found it deplorable that throughout the Arab world, there is such a lack not only of understanding, but above all a feeling for the plight of the Jews throughout their history, and more particularly in recent times. It is this insensitivity that has permitted the type of Arab political diatribe evoking Jewish extermination which has hardened positions between Israelis and Arabs in general. To counteract this, I published in *Rose Al Youssef* in Cairo in January 2006 the only article in the Arab world, and I suspect in the Muslim world, denouncing Iranian President Ahmedinejad and Muhammad Mahdi Akif of the Muslim brotherhood for having denied the Holocaust. I argued that the legitimacy of the Palestinian cause was not served by the denial of another historic injustice. Subsequently, both leaders took a different position, arguing that they were only questioning the numbers of Holocaust victims.

Forty years ago, I raised these and other issues which rendered me unpopular among my AAUG friends. The "zero-sum" approach many of them took was one that was reciprocated on the Israeli side. In my judgment, this type of approach can only lead to the escalation of conflict. If in the end the goal is reconciliation, which goes beyond a simple peace agreement, there has to be greater human understanding. The latter is something that intellectuals have the responsibility to bring about.

THE LEGACY

The ideas debated at the AAUG were probably at the highest intellectual level, something that had not been witnessed anywhere in the Arab world during that time or since then. This was the era of Arab intellectuals who were secular nationalists and pro-democracy. The intellectual ferment it brought about among Arab-American intellectuals and intellectuals in the Arab world was never duplicated by any other organization. The awareness it created among Arab intellectuals and professionals can be credited for giving rise to many Arab-American professional organizations throughout the country. Some of these ideas have proven right over the years, even though at the time they

seemed radical. Consider for example, the fact that Abu-Lughod and Said, among others, argued Israel was turning Palestine into Bantustans, much like *apartheid* South Africa had done. Today it is evident that a Palestinian state on separated portions of Gaza and the West Bank, surrounded by Israeli settlements, will be nothing more than Bantustans – and that the relationship between Palestinians and Israelis will be the same as in the *apartheid* days of South Africa between the white settlers and the indigenous Africans. I have to muse here that nearly 30 years later, what I considered to be Marxist revolutionary language which I could not then accept, turned out to be so true today. I am grateful for Abu-Lughod and Said whose views enriched me intellectually.

The great expectations of the AAUG's founders and many others who became part of it simply withered away, as did the hope of Arab secular democracy under the rule of law. The time of great expectations for secular democracy in the Arab world has now passed. Instead, we now face Islamic views calling for a Muslim *ummah* where religious diversity and tolerance would be non-existent, and where anti-Western and anti-American sentiment would prevail in an essentially totalitarian and monolithic system of government. Those who knew best simply could not achieve what was best for the Arab world, and they surely were unable to make their voices heard in the US. But hope springs eternal, and some day, maybe in the course of this century, the best may still materialize.

The AAUG was an intellectually seminal organization, but its impact was short-lived. The reason lies in the basic flaw of the Arab make-up. This weakness prevented the proponents of Arab national secularism aiming at democracy and social justice from succeeding in advancing this agenda in the Arab world. Instead, today's response is the popular slogan, "Islam is the answer." The US, which professes to seek democracy in the Arab world, while totally supporting Israel in every respect, is in large part to blame for the present state of affairs.

The disintegration of the AAUG, notwithstanding the late Hala Maksoud's last-ditch efforts to save it, is proof that the greatest weakness in the Arab social makeup is its inability to organize, work with discipline, pursue long-term goals and overcome acute individualism. The AAUG however, leaves an intellectual legacy through the work of its past leaders and its influence on succeeding generations. Surely Ibrahim Abu-Lughod and Edward Said stand out in that respect. In addition, some like Naseer Aruri and Elaine Hagopian are the keepers of that old flame.

The names and accomplishments of many of the AAUG leaders will be remembered for years to come, as will their intellectual influence.

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