

Arab Americans and the Obama's Legacy: Between Rhetoric and Reality

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Abstract

Although they constitute a tiny minority of the overall American makeup (less than 0.5 percent), Arab Americans have become an increasingly visible community over the last few decades. Their emergence as one of the most successful minorities in the United States could be explained by a bunch of achievements they have made in different domains: education, jobs, and politics. But, many would equally attribute their success to a strong belief in the American dream and a manifested will to assimilate.

The paper aims to assess Arab Americans' support for Obama in the 2008 and 2012 presidential face-offs. It is especially an attempt to fathom the degree of political engagement and collaboration between the community's component groups, namely Christians, Muslims, native-born and immigrants. It analyzes their voting patterns, examines issues of concern that mobilize their vote, and scales the extent they are likely to reach in galvanizing support around a common Arab agenda.

Another important goal of this study is to investigate the gap between Obama's rhetoric and action regarding issues that mobilize the Arab constituency. It tempts to demonstrate how the massive Arab rally behind the Democratic candidate, in both contests, was more than a question of faith placed in what many referred to as the "black Kennedy." It was rather the corroboration of a process that began in 2002, and that drifted away from the Republican Party sizable numbers of Arab constituents who felt exceptionally targeted by George W. Bush's security measures, in the aftermath of 9/11, and repulsed by a hard line anti-Arab and anti-Muslim rhetoric that started to dominate the GOP.

Keywords: Arab Americans, party identification, voting patterns, Obama's legacy

1. Introduction

Although Arab Americans have emerged as a visible group over the last few decades, they still trigger a number of questions regarding their numbers, their ethno-religious makeup, their political leanings, especially their assimilation into the mainstream fabric and their sense of belonging. The limited quantity of studies conducted so far about them revealed disparate information about a community that is widely misunderstood and constantly changing.

This paper aims to investigate the sweeping support Arab American voters demonstrated to the Democratic candidate, Barack Obama, in 2008 and 2012. It analyzes their vote, namely their drift away from the Republican Party since 2002 as a consequence of Bush's new security measures, identifies issues of common interest to their sub-communities, and assesses the degree of political engagement and collaboration among their component members and their respective advocacy groups. This study, eventually, tries to gauge Obama's record, especially to measure the gap between his pre-election rhetoric in favor of Arab Muslims constituents, and concrete actions he took to shake up the *status quo* in that direction.

This article is organized around three broad themes:

First, it draws up a comprehensive statistical profile of a community for long misrepresented in popular discourse and culture. It deconstructs false assumptions making of it a monolith, and demonstrates that, in addition to demographic challenges determining its real size, the lack of knowledge of this group very often leads to the belief that all Arabs are Muslim and that all Muslims are Arab. It, ultimately, explores the diverse factors behind the massive Arab move away from the GOP, a move that did not only concern Arab American Muslims *per se*, but equally a substantial number of their Christian peers who, despite signs of assimilation and a relative allegiance to the Republican Party, felt targeted by an all-encompassing anti-Muslim rhetoric that pushed them into the Democratic fold.

Second, it investigates the Arab voting patterns, right from the 2000 presidential contest, and the overwhelming support

Arab American voters evidenced to the GOP candidate, George W. Bush. It analyzes the main factors behind the shift in party identification, perceived since the 2002 midterm election and that persisted up to the 2016 face-off. It demonstrates how, regardless of sometimes their diverging stances on issues of interest to the community as a whole, Arab component groups gravitated toward the Democratic Party with the conviction that the latter spoke better to their concerns. It suggests finally how, more than anything, the candidacy of Senator Barack Obama, in 2008, came as an epitome event that galvanized the Arab vote and sparked feelings of hope across the community.

Third, it discusses the outcome of Obama’s two mandates in terms of Arab and Muslim achievements, both at the domestic and foreign levels, and tries to measure the gap between the promises he made to secure the Arab and Muslim vote, and the degree of personal commitment to the issues these constituents care more about, namely civil liberties, racial profiling, an evenhanded treatment of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and withdrawal from Iraq.

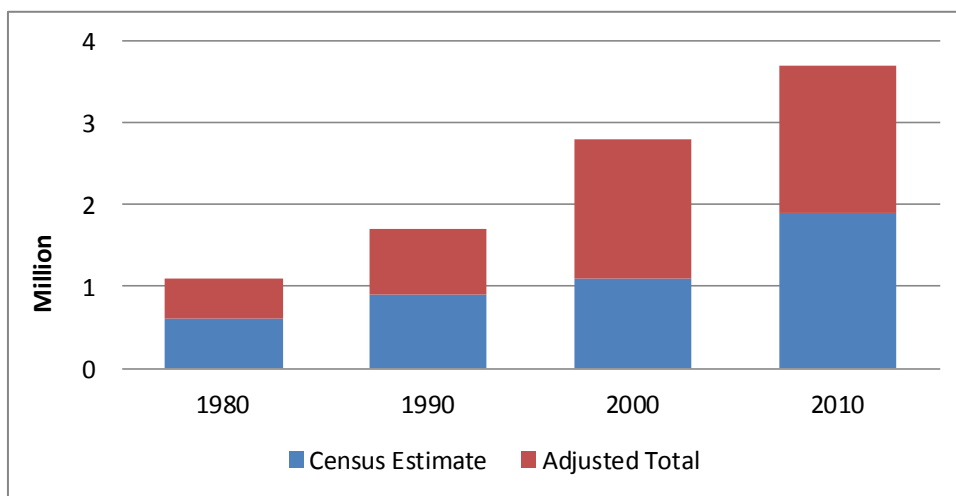
2. Overall Profile

The first challenge studying Arab Americans is counting them. Contrary to popular belief, this is an extremely diverse community, comprising a plethora of component groups, mainly Christians and Muslims, who trace their roots to twenty-two Arab-speaking countries. Although they designate different peoples, the labels “Arab” and “Muslim” are often used interchangeably, and neither of the two subgroups are accurately factored in the U.S. Census. Hence, the need to disaggregate them.

Interestingly, the non-availability of rigorous statistical data pertaining to this group has, over time, given way to contrasted estimates provided by non-governmental organizations, and often tainted with political interest and opinion manipulation. Thus, despite the fact that they are often stereotyped as belonging to each other’s group, Arabs and Muslims are not the same, and as such, they should be approached separately.

According to the Arab American Institute (AAI), a Washington D.C.-based organization and one of the most influential Arab American advocacy groups, there are today nearly 3.7 million Americans who claim an Arab ancestry (Arab American Institute [AAI], 2014). This figure is based upon a survey conducted, in 2014, by Zogby International, and which adjusts estimates provided by the American Community Survey, fixing their number at around 2 million (see Graph 1) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). (Note 1)

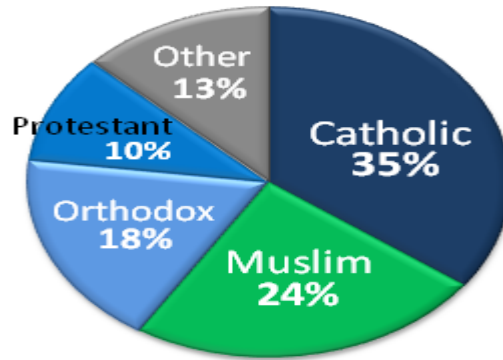
Arab immigrants began to arrive from the Levant since the 1880s. Mostly Christians, they came as temporary residents and then decided to settle permanently. Actually, the flow did not stop ever since, but continued successively from other countries, namely Egypt, Iraq, Palestine, Morocco, etc. The arrival of Muslim waves in the aftermath of World War II, notably after the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act that repealed the quota system, started to raise concerns about their assimilation, and added to the confusion over their ethno-religious identification.



Graph 1. Arab American Population Growth

Source: Arab American Institute Foundation (2014)

Today, contrary to what many Americans hold, the majority of Arab Americans are not Muslim. According to a 2002 Zogby International survey, 63 percent among them are Christian, 24 percent are Muslim, and 13 percent either identify with another faith or do not practice at all (see Graph 2). A sizable majority among them (nearly 82 percent) are native-born (Zogby International [ZI], 2002).

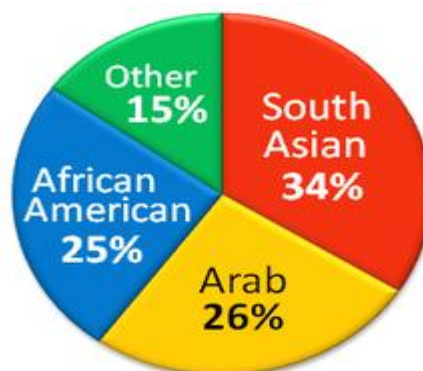


Graph 2. Religious Make-up of Arab Americans

Source: Zogby International (2002)

The same applies in the other way round. Out of an estimated Muslim population of about 3.3 million in 2015 (that is less than one percent of the total U.S. population), roughly one-quarter (26 percent) report an Arab descent. According to recent polls (see Graph 3), the single largest component of American Muslims are South-Central and Southeast Asians (35 percent), followed by African Americans (30 percent) (Allied Media Corp., 2002). (Note 2) Thus, contrary to prevalent misconceptions regarding their community, American Muslims are today not only one of the most ethnically and racially diverse groups in the United States, but also one of the fastest growing ethno-religious minorities. Pursuant to projections by the Pew Research Center, the U.S. Muslim population is likely to grow even faster than those of other faiths (mainly Hindu and Jewish), reaching 8.1 million people (that is 2.1 percent of the total population) by 2050, an increase it basically attributes to an influx of arrivals from conflict zones in the Middle East (namely Syria and Iraq), and to a higher birth rate among Muslim women (Pew Research Center [PRC], 2016).

Firmly determined to take their own affairs in hand, and regardless of their reduced numbers, Arab Americans could even vindicate contribution to the American success story. In fact, in view of its upward socio-economic mobility, this is one of the communities that has banked on the American dream and that has made significant progress both at the educational and occupational levels. According to estimates by the U.S. Census Bureau, 89 percent of Arab American adults hold at least a high school diploma, 45 percent (compared with 27 percent of Americans at large) have a bachelor’s degree or higher, and 18 percent possess a postgraduate degree, that is nearly twice the American average. With regard to occupation, Arab Americans seem to be doing as well as the average American, with 73 percent employed in the service sector, but with an overall median income that is higher than the national average (\$56,331, in 2008, compared with \$51,369 for the average American) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014).



Graph 3. Ethnic Composition of U.S. Muslim Population

Source: U.S. Department of State (2009)

Much could be said of the American Muslim population at large. Recent data suggest that the percentage of American Muslims who have graduated from college (26 percent) is about the same as the national average (28 percent). The same trend is mirrored at the income level, with 14 percent of Muslims reporting household incomes of \$100,000 or more, compared with 16 percent of American adults (PRC, 2011).

Finally, when it comes to personal identification, a relative majority of the Arab community members (both Christians and Muslims) self-identify as Arab American (43 percent), against 19 percent who mention their country of origin, and 19

percent who indicate both. As reflected in Table 1, 54 percent of Arab Americans describe themselves by their ethnicity and make no reference of their religion (AAI, 2016).

Table 1. Personal Identification

Self Description	Total	Native Born	Foreign Born	Dem	Rep	Ind	18-34	55+	Catholic	Orthodox/Protestant	Muslim
Country of Origin	19	18	22	20	20	15	23	10	29	15	14
Arab American	43	41	51	45	37	50	35	49	29	50	54
By Both	19	19	17	21	18	15	31	10	20	9	25
Neither	18	20	10	12	24	20	9	29	20	25	6
Not Sure	2	2	*	2	2	*	2	2	2	1	*

Source: Zogby International (2016)

3. Party Identification and Voting Patterns

When it comes to politics, the Arab American minority could be anything but a monolith. Indeed, even though Arab participation and involvement in the decision-making process is a recent story, Arab Americans have rarely acted as a bloc, nor have they agreed and worked on a common agenda that defends the bulk of their interests. (Note 3) What we have, instead, is a community often divided across national, ethnic, and religious lines, that acts as a single group only to respond to immediate challenges menacing its core interests. So, even though they arrived as early as the 1880s, Arab Americans had to wait until the late 1960s to self-identify as such, a major shift widely attributed to the 1967 Six-Day War that laid bare American partisanship in favor of the state of Israel (Suleiman, 1994).

However, while indelibly far-reaching when used as a tool to enhance exchange and promote social cooperation between the different component groups, especially to perpetuate a common cultural heritage, group diversity could produce but limited results in terms of political achievements. It could even hinder any political initiative aimed to defend the community's vital interests, and dwarf the group's visibility as a new political force to reckon with. In terms of party identification as well as top priority issues likely to galvanize the Arab vote, one could evoke a plurality of Arab constituencies fragmented across diverse lines, ranging from Christians, Muslims, native-born, foreign-born, onto new and old immigrants.

As a matter of fact, while by no means a voting bloc, Arab American voters have frequently changed sides, based on party platforms, candidates' charisma and leadership, and what both have to offer to the constituency as a whole. Even though they do not pack as big an electoral group as Hispanics, for instance, who account for 17 percent of the population, or African Americans (13 percent), they have become aware that their vote could be decisive in a close-call race. In effect, their concentration in a handful of battleground states (representing about 5 percent of the vote in Michigan, 2 percent in Virginia, 1.5 to 2 percent in Ohio, 1.5 percent in Florida, and 1.5 percent in Pennsylvania) could impact the general outcome of any presidential election (AAI, 2008). (Note 4)

However, contrary to popular assumptions, Arab Americans do not have the same voting patterns. For instance, U.S.-born and mostly Christian Lebanese who stand for the largest subgroup of the community, have nothing in common with newly-arrived immigrants (both Christians and Muslims), except and in some cases, a shared cultural heritage. Indeed, while the former, now fully assimilated, behave like other mainstream ethnicities (Irish, Italian, Polish, etc.), nurturing constant support for one of the two major parties, the latter comprises volatile voters, swinging from one party to another.

Interestingly, after voting quite massively for George W. Bush in 2000 (45.5 percent against 38 percent for Al Gore, the Democratic candidate) (ZI, 2002), Arab American electors started to trend away from the GOP, a move that disproportionately affected all components of the community, and that was confirmed in the 2002 midterm election. Several factors fueled the drift which came chiefly as a reaction to Bush's new security measures implemented in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Arab American voters also reacted to U.S. invasion of Iraq, 18 months later. They specifically responded to a growing anti-Arab and anti-Muslim rhetoric that started to dominate the Republican Party, culminating (amongst others) in the nomination and election of Donald Trump in 2016.

According to a poll commissioned by the Arab American Institute and conducted in 2008 by Zogby International, the percentage of Arab Americans identifying as Democrats increased significantly between 2002 and 2008 (39 to 54 percent), while that of those identifying as Republicans dropped slightly (31 to 28 percent). (Note 5) What is more, while up to the year 2000, only a plurality among Arab Americans self-identified as Democrats (40 to 38 percent), in 2008, twice as many Arab Americans said they considered themselves as Democrats than as Republicans (54 to 27 percent) (ZI, 2008). (See Table 2).

Table 2. Party Identification

	2008	2006	2004	2002	2000	1996
Democratic	54	45	43	39	40	38
Republican	27	31	32	31	38	36
Independent	17	19	16	14	28	23

Source: Zogby International (2008)

The growing discontent with Bush's policies found an echo in the 2004 election, illustrating the above-mentioned trend. The Republican candidate received only 28.5 percent of the Arab vote, against 63 percent for his Democratic rival, John Kerry (ZI, 2004). In a similar vein, the election of Barack Obama in 2008 further widened the gap between the two major parties in terms of Arab affiliation and support. In fact, not only the Democratic candidate who won the general election by a landslide (52 percent against only 45.7 for the GOP nominee John McCain) secured the bulk of the Arab vote (67 percent against 28, representing the greatest support ever recorded for a presidential candidate among Arab American voters), but also won their hearts. Thus, contrary to their sanction vote in 2004, their massive support of Obama in the 2008 contest appeared to be more on his Party platform than anything else. As shown in Table 3, Arab Americans chose to vote for the Democratic candidate because of a variety of reasons, mostly his stance on domestic issues.

Contrary to his Republican adversary who stressed *status quo* in terms of general policy, Obama's message of change resonated on a large scale with Arab American voters who felt more aligned with the issues and values the Democratic candidate championed. Now, one could speak of a single Arab constituency that not only felt alienated by the GOP perspectives that no longer spoke to them, but also repulsed by a growing *Islamophobic* rhetoric within that party, that "scapegoated" their entire community and swept Muslims and Christians alike. As a result, the gap that once demarcated Christian and Muslim, native-born and immigrant, new and old immigrant, disappeared, giving way to a semblance of group cohesion much needed to respond to new challenges and threats.

Table 3. Why Obama?

	Overall	
	Oct.	Sept.
I Vote Democratic	16	10
Domestic Issues	42	43
Foreign Policy	13	7
I like him as a Man	4	11
McCain/Republicans	15	20

Source: Zogby International (2008)

Notwithstanding, rallying massively behind a common agenda defending Arab vital interests does not and in any way imply that the members of the Arab community vote as a bloc. (Note 6) Similarly, adapting its strategy to changing political contexts and cleavages to defend a wide array of issues provides a supplementary evidence that the group now called "Arab Americans" is not a single-issue constituency. Accordingly, their vote does not differ that much from the vote of other mainstream Americans with whom they share the same concerns regarding the future of the nation, on top of them jobs and the economy, healthcare, education, and national security. Even though they seem more sensitive to certain subjects pertaining to the American foreign policy, namely the Arab-Israeli peace process, the invasion of Iraq, and the civil war in Syria, their vote is neither confined to, nor dictated by a compelling pro-Arab agenda.

As evidenced in Table 4, asked to cite the two most important issues in the 2008 election, 79 percent of Arab American voters named jobs or the economy, while only 38 cited war and peace in Iraq. Concomitantly, when asked which candidate would best handle these issues, 69 percent who cited the economy and 65 who cited war in Iraq favored Obama over McCain. Unexpectedly, Palestine, as a focus, ranked only eighth among Arab American top priorities. This could be explained by the major shift that deeply affected the overall Arab strategy, and that came as an immediate consequence of the 9/11 shock. In truth, Arab American leaders realized that galvanizing their energies around such a controversial issue in a new context of war on terror and Arab and Muslim stigmatization would bring about only limited results and would further marginalize their efforts fighting for their civil liberties (AAI, 2002).

Table 4. Most Important Issues for Arab Americans

	Overall		Handle Issue Best	
	Oct.	Sept.	Obama	McCain
Jobs/Economy	79	63	69	23
War In Iraq/Peace	38	37	65	31
Health Care	19	20	68	17
Gas Prices	8	16	**	**
Terrorism/Nat. Security	7	10	56	36
Education	3	8	**	**
Taxes	5	6	65	24
Palestine	<1	1	**	**
Lebanon	-	1	**	**
Civil Liberties	<1	-	68	21

** Not Asked

Source: Zogby International (2008)

This, once again, deflects charges about the Arab American vote being guided by the single issue of foreign policy. Additionally, Arab and Jewish voters seem more likely to share, not only the same commitment to peace in the Middle East, but also a common vision of what constitutes a positive American engagement in that region. This is what we ostensibly deduce from a survey commissioned, in 2007, by Americans for Peace Now (APN) and the Arab American Institute (AAI), and conducted by Zogby International. According to the poll, strong majorities in both communities, four-fifths of Jewish Americans (80 percent) and Arab Americans (77 percent) believe that President Bush's handling of the Arab-Israeli conflict was not effective. Likewise, two-thirds of Jewish Americans (68 percent) and Arab Americans (64 percent) said they were more likely to support a presidential candidate who played an active role in the Israel-Palestinian peace process. Lastly, as demonstrated in Tables 5 and 6, strong majorities in both the Jewish and Arab communities manifested full-fledged support to the right of both Israelis and Palestinians to live in a secure and independent state of their own, but both remained largely unaware of these common views and underestimated each other's support for a two-state solution (ZI, 2007).

Interestingly, even though the Arab-Israeli conflict matters much for Arab American voters, it could by no means be placed ahead of their concerns for domestic issues, notably their resolve to defend their civil liberties. Arab American leaders understood that whatever consensus they might reach at this level, they could never impact national policies in this regard, especially countering the pro-Israel lobby, led by the powerful American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).

Table 5. Israel Right to Secure an Independent State

	Jewish American			Arab American		
	2007	2003	2002	2007	2003	2002
Agree	38	96	97	88	95	95
Disagree	2	2	1	10	2	4
Not Sure	<1	<1	2	6	5	1

Source: Zogby Analytics (2007)

Table 6. Palestinian Right to Secure an Independent State

	Jewish American			Arab American		
	2007	2003	2002	2007	2003	2002
Agree	90	82	86	96	93	96
Disagree	9	15	8	3	3	2
Not Sure	1	3	6	1	5	2

Source: Zogby Analytics (2007)

With the 2008 election looming, such an issue (Middle East conflict) would not even factor large in the national debate, according to Dr. James Zogby, founder and president of the influential Arab American Institute. Speaking in a Foreign Press Center briefing, in 2007, he asserted:

"... frankly, the Jewish American vote and the Arab American vote, which would be the two groups most decide – who would most decide their vote on an issue like this, their votes are largely decided. Jewish Americans are going to largely vote Democratic. Arab Americans are, for many reasons, going to largely vote Democratic. And so why complicate the picture with an issue that is not going to be understood in most of the country." (Zogby, 2007)

To Zogby, once again, there is no officially registered Arab American lobby in Washington D.C. All we have are professional lobbyists hired by some rich Arab countries with a mission "to clean up their image" rather than to defend an Arab agenda. He argued:

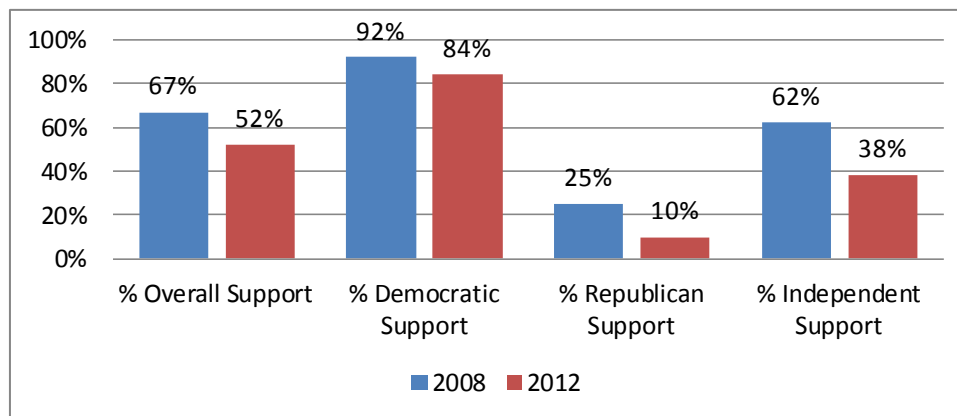
“There are many Arab lobbies. Each Arab government hires lobbyists to do their work for them. And we Arab Americans are not a lobby. I think that the thing in the Jewish community that’s interesting is that the Jewish community is supportive of Israel and the Israeli government works very closely with elements in the American Jewish community around a coverage of ideas and issues and interests, and that has created the sense of an Israel lobby.” (Ibid.)

Conversely, Zogby refutes the stigma that the American Jewish community is part of the Israel lobby. In his view, there are diverse Israel lobbies today in Washington, some unconditionally support the Israeli government, but others raise funds to promote peace, as demonstrated in the above-mentioned survey. (Note 7)

In sum, instead of professional lobbies defending Arab interest, there is a cluster of Arab American advocacy groups operating at the federal and local levels to advance an Arab agenda (if ever there is one). By large the most influential, the Arab American Institute (AAI), which was established by James Zogby in 1985, was created to “nurture and encourage the direct participation of Arab Americans in political and civic life in the United States.” (Note 8) It endeavors to enhance Arab American participation in the decision-making process through voter registration, education, and mobilization. Of almost equal clout, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) was founded in 1980 by U.S. Senator James Abourezk to, in consonance with its web page, protect civil rights and civil liberties of Arab Americans, promote mutual understanding, and preserve Arab American cultural heritage. (Note 9) Both organizations are based on Capitol Hill in Washington D.C. (Note 10)

For its part, the 2012 presidential election brought only limited change to Arab American voting patterns, party identification, and top priority issues that mobilized their vote. Even if Obama maintained a commanding lead among Arab voters, winning 52 percent of the Arab vote against only 28 percent for Mitt Romney, the Republican challenger (see Graph 4), he lost credibility among a significant portion of that constituency (approximately 15 percent of his 2008 chose not to vote for him) (ZI, 2012). To them, the incumbent simply carried on with same old policies, especially with regard to U.S. foreign policy. Hence, despite his decision to withdraw American troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, Obama did not do much to resurrect the Middle East peace process. Rather, his administration, in their view, was still supportive of the state of Israel. What is more, the U.S. involvement with NATO in 2011 to topple Muammar Qaddafi in Libya had been, for them, a complete and utter debacle as it not only failed to establish democracy in that country, but also left it in total disorder.

Statistics gathered by Zogby International in 2012 (*Ibid.*) also revealed that, despite their relative disappointment with Obama, Arab Americans continued to defect from the Republican Party, with an increasing number identifying as Independents (24 percent). Though party identification for both parties has decreased since 2008 (see Graph 5), Arab American Democrats still outnumbered Republicans by a 2-1 margin (46 percent to 22 percent). It is worth noting in this context that, contrary to their foreign-born counterparts who are generally seen as “swing voters,” native-born Arab Americans (both Christians and Muslims) seem to identify strongly with their party of origin.

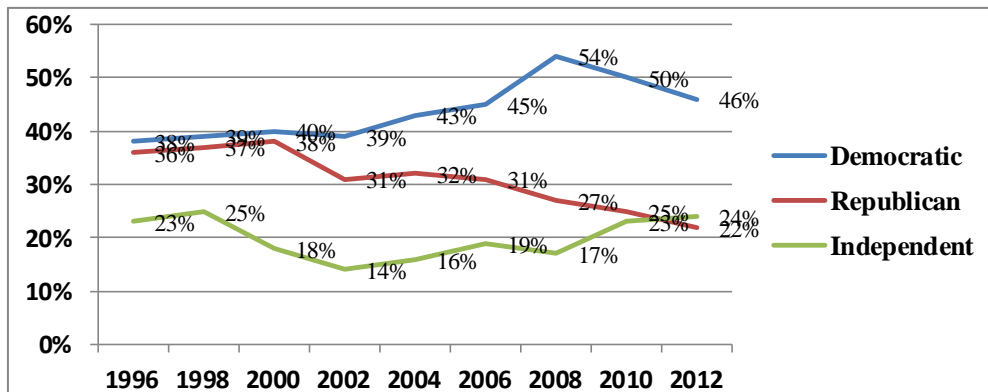


Graph 4. Obama Voters: 2008 vs. 2012

Source: Zogby Analytics (2012)

On balance, the 2012 face-off was not very different from the previous one. Issues that drained Arab votes were much the same. Like most Americans, an overwhelming portion of Arab Americans (82 percent) considered jobs and the economy as the most critical issues facing the nation (see Table 7). Foreign policy came as the second most cited issue (27 percent). This could be explained by a strong connection Arab constituents have maintained with their countries of origin. Concomitantly, at least 80 percent of Arab voters considered the Israeli-Palestinian conflict important to their vote, and nearly the same percentage rated U.S. outreach to the Arab and Muslim worlds (*Ibid.*). Eventually, when

asked “who will do a better job” on a range of domestic and foreign policy concerns, Arab Americans cited Obama in every area: jobs and the economy (55 percent against 33 percent for Romney), health care (61-27), Israeli-Palestinian conflict (50-28), taxes (55-31), civil liberties (57-26), and U.S. outreach to the Arab and Muslim worlds (59-21) (*Ibid.*). “We are health care, education, employment, civil rights, we will never have an impact on U.S. foreign policy if we can’t get our communities involved and impassioned about issues here at home. So that is what we are trying to do,” asserted Linda Sarsour (head of the Arab American Association of New York), responding to critics portraying Arab American voters as single-issue constituents (Salama, 2012).



Graph 5. Party Identification Trends

Source: Zogby Analytics (2012)

Overall, even though Obama did not duplicate the wide margin he had over John McCain in 2008 among Arab American voters (67 percent to 28 percent) who felt the Democratic president did not do anything for them, he received the bulk of their vote in 2012. In addition to the fact that the Democratic platform spoke better to their concerns, notably the constructive role it promised to play, initiating social reform, expanding health care coverage, and investing in public education, the mounting anti-Arab and anti-Muslim rhetoric within the Republican Party had been more than decisive. Many Arab Americans chose to vote for Obama as the “lesser of two evils.” *In toto*, despite data showing that 40 percent among them personally experienced ethnic discrimination (55 percent among Arab Muslims), 56 percent remained confident their children would have a better life than they would (ZI, 2012).

Table 7. Top Issues Facing the U.S.

Issues	Total %	Democratic	Republican	Independent
Jobs and the Economy	82	81	87	86
Foreign Policy	27	34	23	27
Health Care	15	15	10	14
Budget	10	4	23	9
Taxes	8	10	9	3
Education	6	7	3	8
Politics	6	6	1	7
Not sure	4	5	2	4
Morality	3	1	9	4
Terrorism	3	4	2	5
Immigration	3	4	3	2
Environment	3	2	0	6
Crime	2	1	0	3
Welfare	2	2	0	2
Utility/Gas prices	2	2	1	0
Social Security	1	1	3	1
Palestine	1	1	1	0
Lebanon	0	0	1	0
Other	11	10	9	9

Source: Zogby Analytics (2012)

4. Obama’s Legacy

Arab Americans’ “love story” with Barack Obama did not start in 2008, when they massively voted for him. Signals of positive and constructive interaction appeared a few years before when, as keynote speaker in the 2004 Democratic National Convention, the Senator from Illinois asserted: “If there’s an Arab American family being rounded up without benefit of an attorney or due process that threatens my civil liberties. It’s fundamental belief - I am my brother’s keeper,

I am my sister's keeper - that makes this country work. It's what allows us to pursue our individual dreams, yet still come together as a single American family. 'E pluribus Unum.' Out of many, one.' (Note 11) Obama's message of hope in a context of exacerbated tensions and war on terror came as a signal of profound change likely to reverse the course of history, especially reduce anti-Arab and anti-Muslim stigmatization.

However, the Arab American overwhelming rally behind the Democratic nominee, in the 2008 contest, could not be restrictively explained by Obama's commitment to issues that their community cared mostly about, namely civil liberties, racial profiling in airports, an even-handed treatment of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, closing Guantanamo, and withdrawal from Iraq. It also translated group faith in the candidate's charisma, notably his personal engagement to trigger substantial renewal. To many Arab voters, he simply incarnated a new breed of politicians, a miracle-maker some would say, capable of instigating major reforms that would break with the past. As clearly expressed, in 2007, by Arab American activist and outstanding leader, James Zogby:

"It appears from the excitement he generates that Barack Obama has tapped into a deep vein in the contemporary psyche. While it is always useful to parse out the positions he has taken on critical issues, and even to weigh in the balance the importance of 'experience' versus 'judgment,' or 'change' versus 'Washington' (these being the matters discussed by the candidates) they, alone, do not explain the phenomenon we are witnessing. Something more profound is occurring in this election. And it appears to be wrapped up in the person of Barack Obama, himself." (Quaid, 2007)

Actually, while it is difficult to gauge a candidate before he gets into office, the newly inaugurated president's much anticipated speech at Egypt's Cairo University, on June 4, 2009, not only resonated with large segments across the Arab American and American Muslim communities, but also signaled the advent of a new era in U.S. relations with the Arab and Muslim worlds. He declared: *"I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world; one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect; and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles – principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings."* (Note 12)

The "Cairo Speech," as it came to be known and which won him the Peace Nobel Prize in 2009, gave the new president an international aura and conferred upon him a *bona fide* legitimacy to urgently address hot global issues that his predecessors had been unable to elucidate, namely handling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, ending U.S. presence in Iraq with diplomacy, and opening channels of dialogue with Iran over its nuclear program. At the domestic level, he was expected to demonstrate strong leadership managing jobs and the economy, countering budget deficit, expanding health care coverage, investing in public education, and ending surveillance and racial profiling in airports.

With the unforeseen victory of Donald Trump in 2016, and the coming back of Republicans to the White House, Arab Americans turned a new page in their history in the United States. Seven years after the "Cairo Speech," time has come for them to size up Obama's record after two administrations exceptionally rich with eventful and turbulent history, especially discern action from rhetoric. For, in addition to promises he made at the domestic and foreign policy levels, Obama had to grapple with challenges that cropped up over the course of his mandate, namely defeating ISIS in Iraq and neighboring countries, ending the conflict in Syria, and meeting the humanitarian needs of the Syrian refugees.

All in all, while it is premature to cast a steadfast look at Obama's legacy, as part of it could only be assessed in the long run, it is worthwhile to draw a number of firsthand conclusions, after two terms in office eminently fraught with uncontested accomplishments as well as irrefutable failures. From an Arab American perspective, even if his supporters and detractors alike recognize exogenous constraints that may have hindered his plans for action and over which he had no control, they just wanted to make sure that the 44th president was worth the trust many among them vested in him.

In effect, even though he inherited a disastrous economic situation at home, and an extremely tense context outside, a context further fueled by unrelenting regional conflicts, civil wars, and sectarian rivalries, President Obama could boast quitting office with highly praised achievements. Overall, not only has he left America in a better shape than his predecessor, but also took far-reaching measures likely to affect generations to come. Obama ended his second administration remarkably popular among a strong majority of Arab Americans (60 percent) who gave him a good or excellent job performance rating (see Table 8), compared with a nationwide approval rating of over 55 percent (Edwards-Levy, 2017).

Table 8. Overall President Obama's Job Performance

Performance	Total	Dem.	Rep.	Ind.
Excellent	31	49	10	20
Good	29	32	11	37
Fair	19	13	24	30
Poor	20	6	53	12
Not Sure	1	*	2	1

Source: Zogby Analytics (2016)

More than anything else, Obama was credited for getting the nation out of the doldrums of one of the worst financial disasters since the Great Depression of the 1930s, and that severely hit the country in 2008. What is more, under his presidency, nearly 15 million jobs were created, bringing the unemployment rate from a high of 10 percent in October 2009 to just around 5 percent by the end of his second mandate. (Note 13) Likewise, the 2010's Patient Protection and Affordable care Act that extended health care coverage to some 23 million Americans, gave the former president overall positive scores. To 57 percent of Arab Americans, Obama did a great job handling U.S. economic policy, a top priority that, to a large extent, motivated their vote in 2008 and 2012 (see Table 9).

Table 9. Overall President Obama's Performance in Handling U.S. Economic Policy

Performance	Total	Dem	Rep	Ind
Excellent	27	40	5	26
Good	30	41	9	29
Fair	19	9	27	24
Poor	21	9	53	14
Not Sure	4	1	7	7

Source: Zogby Analytics (2016)

Notwithstanding, while Obama's domestic achievements could be celebrated on a large scale, reflecting his engagement to enhance economic growth and reduce the gap between the haves and the have-nots, his foreign policy accomplishments, by contrast, are another story. As a matter of fact, only 44 percent among Arab Americans had a positive view regarding his handling of U.S. foreign policy (see Table 10). To some among his staunchest critics, the former head of the executive even left behind him a less safe and more destabilized world than it had been in 2008, when his Republican predecessor handed him the keys to the Oval Office.

Table 10. Overall President Obama's Performance in Handling U.S. Foreign Policy

Performance	Total	Dem	Rep	Ind
Excellent	18	30	5	8
Good	26	36	10	27
Fair	24	21	15	32
Poor	31	14	70	29
Not Sure	1	*	*	5

Source: Zogby Analytics (2016)

Admittedly, Arab and Muslim enthusiasm for Obama's presidency proved short-lived as the latter not only failed to keep most of his promises, namely ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, closing the controversial prison at Guantanamo Bay, and taking a hard line against terrorism, but also proved ineffective as he did little or nothing to bring about real change and stop the war machine in the Middle East. Furthermore, to a sizable number of Arab Americans and American Muslims, his political and diplomatic choices during his two terms in office proved short-sighted, as the candidate they supported in both elections turned out to be that kind of leader who places *realpolitik* ahead of personal convictions.

Amongst others, Obama was blamed for inflaming hostilities in the Arab and Muslim worlds toward the United States when he decided to carry out a relentless drone program in Pakistan and Yemen that resulted in the death of thousands of innocent civilians. In 2016 alone, American drones dropped more than 26,000 bombs on Muslim countries, that is three every single hour of every single day (Werlman, 2017). Similarly, in an attempt to break completely with Bush's policy, favoring war over diplomacy, Obama duplicated many of his predecessor's mistakes. For instance, his premature withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, in 2009, further exacerbated sectarian tensions in the region and ushered in the rise of ISIS and a myriad of local jihadist groups.

However, Iraq was not the only testing ground for Obama's foreign policy. Syria was another case in point. In effect, his decision to backtrack on overthrowing Assad's regime, ignoring his "red line" against the latter, was, according to his Arab American detractors, a supplementary evidence of his inconsistency handling complicated issues. The same could be said about his support of military intervention in Libya, in 2011, to oust Qaddafi and his regime from power. Not only

it, in their view, utterly failed to bring about the hoped-for democracy, but also plunged the country in a state of chaos and lawlessness with no end in sight.

Last but not least, a great deal of Arab American disappointment over Obama's foreign policy centered around his failure to create an independent Palestinian state alongside the state of Israel. Actually, despite relentless efforts by Secretary of State John Kerry and Special Envoy Martin Indyk to relaunch peace talks, Israel continued its policy of settlements on confiscated Palestinian lands in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Worse, Obama sanctified Israeli incursion with a record \$38 billion in military aid, giving, according to them, a mortal blow to the two-state solution. "*We may be able to push the boulder partway up the hill and maybe stabilize it so it doesn't roll back on us,*" (Keiswetter, 2017) Obama admitted, implicitly recognizing the restricted margins offered for him to maneuver at this level. But to many of his Arab detractors, the man simply "*started as Carter and ended as Nixon*" (Kabalan, 2016).

By and large, while it is important to highlight Obama's foreign policy shortcomings, dictated oftentimes by ground realities beyond his own control, they should by no means obscure substantive accomplishments in favor of Arab Americans and American Muslims across the board. For instance, on January 22, 2009, just two days after his inauguration, President Obama reversed the most controversial counterterrorism policies of his predecessor, ending torture and bringing the United States into full compliance with the Geneva Convention. On May 2, 2011, he eliminated Osama bin Laden, founder of terrorist organization al-Qaeda. He offered financial and logistical support for emerging democracies in the Arab Spring, and stood up for Muslims on multiple occasions, denouncing hate crimes against them in a number of his speeches, and condemning politicians who had stigmatized them. Most importantly, by abstaining, on December 23, 2016, from a major United Nations Security Council vote regarding illegal Israel settlements (UNSC 2334), he simply made it clear that America would not stand with Israel indefinitely (Eadeh, 2017).

On the whole, although Arab Americans have been among those disappointed by the Obama episode, and some of them even translated their disillusionment by a vote for Donald Trump in 2016 (26 percent) (Note 14), a majority among them (59 percent) still hold a positive attitude regarding his policies toward the Arab world (see Table 11) (AAI, 2016).

Table 11. Attitudes toward President Obama's Policies toward the Arab World

Attitude	Total	Dem	Rep	Ind
Very Positive	19	30	3	12
Somewhat positive	40	45	19	47
Somewhat Negative	20	14	30	25
Very Negative	17	10	39	12

Source: Zogby Analytics (2016)

Again, when asked which challenges were the most decisive for U.S.-Arab relations, 46 percent cited defeating ISIS, 38 percent said ending the conflict in Syria, and 34 percent suggested resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. By contrast, 49 percent believed the Obama administration was ineffective addressing the Islamic State issue, 60 percent the Syrian quagmire, and 54 percent the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (see Table 12).

Table 12. Challenges in Dealing with the Arab World and President Obama's (In)Effectiveness Addressing Them

Issues	Important	Effective	Ineffective
Responding to the challenge of defeating ISIS in Iraq and Syria	46	32	49
Resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict	34	21	54
Ending the conflict in Syria	38	20	60
Meeting the humanitarian needs of the Syrian refugees	21	26	45
Helping the stabilize and rebuild Iraq	8	29	38
Maintaining trust and close ties with allies and friends in the Arab World	23	39	34
Working to counter the threat posed by Iran	12	28	32
Not Sure	4	19	6

Source: Zogby Analytics (2016)

5. Concluding Remarks

Arab Americans are one of the least studied groups in the United States. They have become visible only over the last few decades when they decided to take their own affairs in hand and defend their vital interests. Regardless of their small size or how they self-identify, they have become aware that to get a fair hearing and trigger political and ethnic consciousness, they need first to achieve group cohesiveness.

Contrary to widely-held assumptions, Arab Americans do not constitute a voting bloc, nor do they promote single-issue politics with the Middle East conflict as a top priority. Typically volatile in their voting patterns and behavior, they have

rarely galvanized their energies to support a single political party, let alone a single presidential candidate. Their massive rally behind Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012 has been rather a precedent in their recent political history. The shift in party identification that, after 9/11, drifted away from the GOP substantive numbers of Arab activists, came in a new context of war on terror, and has been dictated by a plurality of factors. It came principally as response to a growing anti-Arab and anti-Muslim rhetoric that started to overbear the political discourse, especially within the Republican Party.

The Arab overwhelming support of Obama in both contests could also be explained by the Democratic candidate's commitment to issues the community members care more about, as mainstream U.S. citizens first (namely jobs, the economy, education, healthcare and security), and as adherents of their respective constituency (civil liberties, racial profiling in airports, an even-handed treatment of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, closing Guantanamo, withdrawal from Iraq, and recently the Syrian quagmire). It is worth mentioning in this context that even though U.S. foreign policy matters much for them and, to certain degrees, determines their vote, to a sizable number among them, it could by no means overshadow domestic issues, or affect their resolve to defend their civil liberties.

On the whole, with the unanticipated victory of Donald Trump in 2016, Arab Americans came to close a singular chapter in their history in the United States. Actually, the end of the Obama's episode not only signaled the advent of a new era exceptionally fraught with doubt and uncertainty, but also gave way to an overall assessment of his two mandates, both at the domestic and foreign levels. To a significant number among them, Obama's presidency was far from being flawless. Despite noticeable accomplishments at the national level that deservedly scored him high political ratings by the end of his second administration, his foreign policy record, by contrast, has been dampened by unfulfilled promises and dashed hopes. To many of his disillusioned Arab supporters, the much praised president simply failed his mission, and had only to pass an unfinished business to his successor.

Notes

Note 1. Actually, data gathered by Zogby International suggest that figures published by the Census Bureau underestimate the real size of Arab Americans, as they identify only a portion of the Arab population through a question on ancestry. For instance, Somali and Sudanese are not aggregated as Arab in the Census reports.

Note 2. In fact, as the federal government made it illegal to gather data based on religious, there is no accurate figure regarding American Muslims. The ranges that are generally given, varying from 1.9 million (according to the American Jewish population) to 6 to 7 million (according to the Council on American-Islamic Relations), are politically-tainted and by no means reflect reality.

Note 3. As a matter of fact, prior to World War II, namely the arrival of the second wave of Arab immigrants that included large numbers of well-off and highly educated Muslims, Arab Americans had been less inclined to participate in the body politic. The 1967 Arab-Israeli War constituted a major turning-point in Arab American political activism, in so far that not only it brought together diverse sub-groups who resented American sidedness with the state of Israel, but also paved the ground for the emergence of an ethnic group that identified itself as "Arab American."

Note 4. It is worth mentioning here that the winner-take-all system, as applied in U.S. presidential elections, makes that candidates are not elected by the national popular vote. Instead, the candidate who receives a majority of votes in any state, wins the state's electoral votes. As such, the least popular vote counts, as it may tip the balance in favor of one candidate or the other.

Note 5. It is interesting to notice in this context that the U.S.-born component of the Arab Community (namely the second and third generations) have traditionally voted for the Democratic Party.

Note 6. For more details, see Strum, P. (Ed.) (2006, May 6). *American Arabs and political participation*. Woodrow Wilson International Center of Scholars; Kaufmann, K. M. (2004). *The urban voter: Group conflict and mayoral voting behavior in American cities*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

Note 7. For more information see: Bard, M. G. (2010). *The Arab lobby: The invisible alliance that undermines America's interests in the Middle East*. New York: Harper, Broadside Books; Mearsheimer, J. & Walt, S. (2007). *The Israel lobby and U.S. foreign policy*. London: Penguin Books; Marrar, K. M. (2009). *The Arab lobbying and U.S. foreign policy: The two-state solution*. New York: Routledge.

Note 8. See <http://www.aaiusa.org/about-institute>.

Note 9. See <http://www.adc.org/about-us/>.

Note 10. It is interesting to elucidate in this regard that the term "lobby" is misleading as Arab American advocacy groups are not registered as professional lobbies. However, in virtue of Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), they enjoy a tax-exempt status that allows only limited "lobbying" activity. For more information, see Zarifian, J. (2015). Les lobbies 'ethniques' aux Etats-Unis et la question de leur influence sur la politique étrangère américaine.

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- Note 11. Keynote Address at the Democratic National Convention (July 27, 2004). Retrieved from <https://my.ofa.us/page/content/aahome>.
- Note 12. Obama's Speech in Cairo. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html>.
- Note 13. Editorial. (2017, January 19). Obama's legacy: Achievements marred with disappointments. *The Arab American News*. Retrieved from <http://www.arabamericannews.com/2017/01/19/obamaa-legacy-achievements-marred-with-disappointments/>
- Note 14. It is important to note here that a plurality of Arab Americans (31 percent) among those who voted for the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton (60 percent) cited a vote against Trump and the Republicans as their primary consideration.

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