

**ANOTHER VIEWPOINT
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**WORKING FROM WITHIN: ARAB INITIATIVES IN THE UNITED STATES
AND IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

Elias H. Tuma

Two recent experiences in the United States and two in the Occupied Territories of Palestine have something in common and deserve special attention. The two U.S. experiences are the Arab American Democrat's Club of the 39th Assembly District in Los Angeles, California's GRASS ROOTS PLATFORM, and the Council of Arab American Organization's involvement in the Mayor's election campaign in San Francisco, California. The former deals with national politics but from the local scene. The latter deals with local politics but with an eye on the larger picture of Arab Americans.

The two Palestinian experiences are the attempt by Hanna Siniora, Editor of the Arabic daily Al Fair, to run in the Municipal elections in Jerusalem, and the campaign by Mubarak Awad of Jerusalem, to resist Israeli occupation by passive resistance and non-violent means. Again one of these experiences deals with local affairs but with wider implications, and the other deals with national affairs from a grass roots position. All four experiences, however, indicate awareness of the hostility of existing conditions towards a minority and a readiness of the constituents to challenge that hostility and try to overcome it by working from within. They indicate also that the Arabs in America and the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories have discovered the futility of fighting from the outside or of just complaining about their state of affairs. They have found that they themselves must be the main defendants of their rights and

that they can defend them best by working from within, and by taking responsibilities and emphasizing the positive in their beliefs, capabilities, and expectations. It is evident that in all four situations the dominant or challenged party has taken notice.

There are, however, major differences between the experiences in the US and those in the Occupied Territories. The Arab American community in the US supports the efforts of the leaders in the 39th Assembly District in San Francisco. In the Occupied Territories Hanna Siniora and Mubarak Awad stand virtually alone in their efforts to combat discrimination and subjugation of Israel. The Palestinian Arabs tend to consider participation in municipal elections in Jerusalem as recognition of the annexation of the city by Israel and therefore oppose it. And they consider passive resistance or nonviolence as too idealistic to succeed and therefore oppose it. Yet, a little deeper consideration of these four situations would highlight the similarity between all four experiences, the potential viability of all four of them, and the enormity of the gains that may be realized if these experiences are carried through to their logical conclusion.

The Arab-American Democrats of the 39th Assembly District have embarked on a multipurpose program. They have undertaken a program of self-education in democratic government. They also have signaled to the rest of the community that they exist and have rights, that they care and are ready to participate, and that they have something positive to offer, not only to guarantee their own rights, but also to make the system work better for all the constituents. The Arab-American Democrats of the 39th Assembly District have expressed these objectives by formulating and presenting a GRASS ROOTS PLATFORM which is clear, comprehensive, and feasible. It also shows the concern of the Arab-American for the welfare

of others in the community. Furthermore, it is highly consistent with the overall goals and objectives of the Democratic Party to which they belong. Given their sizeable number and their good organization, it is inevitable they the Party will take notice and try to intergrate their platform in the larger platform of the Party.

Last month the Council of Arab Organizations of San Francisco took direct steps and got involved in the Mayor's election in the city, including direct contact with the candidates to evaluate their positions on the relevant issues before endorsing any of them for mayor. An important feature of their assessment of the candidates was their decision to separate the city affairs from other (international) affairs. Given that candidates may have favorable views on local affairs but not so favorable ones on international affairs, the Council decided to free itself from prejudices that could have counterproductive and alienating effects on them. There is little doubt that the Council's efforts, like those of the Arab-American Club of Los Angeles, was that similar experiences are taking place elsewhere in the United States, which deserve to be recognized and emulated, just as the Los Angeles and San Francisco experiences are being appreciated and recommended for emulation.

In contrast to these experiences, Hanna Siniora, a Palestinian leader in East Jerusalem suffers from discrimination and bias against the Palestinian residents of Jerusalem, which he attributes in part to the fact that the Palestinians boycott city elections and therefore are not represented on the municipal council. Effort to correct the bias and give the Palestinians equal benefits within the city have not succeeded, partly because these efforts come in the form of attacks on city policies, or in the form of petitions and requests by a constituency that is not represented on the council. Mr. Siniora, therefore, has considered the possibility of running for

a seat on the council in order to fight for the missing rights from within. Apparently he is getting some encouragement from certain Jewish groups but much discouragement from the Arab population in the city. The Palestinian Arabs are critical of his initiative on this score because they are afraid that participation in the city elections could be interpreted as formal Arab recognition of the annexation of Jerusalem by the Israeli government.

There is some truth in these fears and also some misunderstanding. No doubt the Israeli government will use participation in the municipal elections to its advantage in the political conflict with the Arabs. However, the Israeli government can get little additional advantage since it has virtually ignored all other parties and acted as if Jerusalem is legally unified and annexed. Furthermore, participation in the local elections and representation on the city council relate only to civic affairs and any reinterpretation of this function can have little effect on the political status of the city, or on the relations between the Israeli government and the Arab governments or the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Finally, it is to be expected that any platform on which Mr. Siniora would run explicitly disclaim any political recognition of annexation by Israel. However, by denying support to Mr. Siniora, the Palestinians of the Occupied Territories and the PLO condemn the Arab residents of the city of Jerusalem to continued discrimination and deprivation. They also deprive them of the power of working from within to achieve their objectives, an approach which has proved to be one of the most effective in fighting prejudice, discrimination, and bias. Hanna Siniora should be congratulated for his thoughtful endeavors and dedicated efforts, which deserve full Palestinian encouragement and support, as well as emulation in every similar situation.

The experience of Mubarak Awad, the passive resistance fighter against Israeli occupation is a little different: it is criticized by both Arabs and Jews, in Israel and in the Occupied Territories. The Arabs oppose it or at least do not support it because they consider it too idealistic to bring about any tangible results. The Jews in Israel, except the progressive peace groups, oppose Awad's movement because it is a powerful force against the occupation: it is appealing to the peace groups, it is embarrassing to the occupiers, and it is a blow to the Israeli claims that the Palestinians are terrorists. The movement is also a major force in international public opinion against Israeli oppressive policies and against continued occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. The government of Israel has openly shown its displeasure with Awad's pacifist approach by refusing to extend his stay in the Occupied Territories, even though Palestine is his native home, and he is a United States citizen who needs no visa to Israel. Israel of any such movement that uses non-violent means and which works from within against its oppressive and colonial policies in the Occupied Territories.

However, it is much less understandable why the Arabs fail to support Awad's movement. Efforts to criticize occupation and attack it by various means, including violence, have failed to bring about any positive results. They have failed to stop the building of settlements; they have failed to stop oppressive measures against the Arab inhabitants; and they have failed to convince the Israeli government that the Occupation must be ended. In contrast, in a short period of time Awad's movement has begun to make a difference, as indicated by the behavior of the government of Israel. The Palestinian Arabs would do well to heed Awad's call for passive resistance and a non-violent struggle to end of occupation.

Elias Tuma is a professor at the University of California, Davis; however, all views expressed are those of the authors and do not in any way implicate the University.

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Future issues of AVP will address “The Palestinians: Refugees or Citizens?”