

**CITIZENSHIP, NATION, AND TRANSNATIONAL  
MIGRATION:  
THE CASE OF ARAB-AMERICAN ACTIVISM**

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## **Introduction**

Recent accounts of migrant transnationalism have explored the seeming decline of citizenship both as a set of legal rights and responsibilities and as a sense of social membership tied to a single nation-state. The growing prevalence, for instance, of dual citizenship and denizenship points to a disjuncture between the ideal of citizenship and migrants' actual identities, political practices, and allegiances. Likewise, new transnational modes of community formation, in which peoples' lives are organised across territorial boundaries, render problematic traditional understandings of social membership based on immigrants' assimilation into national life. But has citizenship been rendered obsolete by the transnational? Does a sense of social membership rooted in the nation-state still matter for contemporary migrants?

Current scholarship on migration, we believe, is quite right to challenge the state-centrism of traditional migrant studies (and of the social sciences, more generally). But arguments relating to migrant transnationalism perhaps have been overstated, and an exclusive focus on transnational activities and 'homeland' affiliations may underplay the ways in which citizenship—as a legal construct entailing rights and responsibilities and as a sense of social membership tied to a nation-state—continues to structure immigrants' political identities and activities.

We use evidence gathered from a preliminary study of Arab-origin communities in the United States to illustrate these arguments. In particular, we draw on (1) a content analysis of websites sponsored by Arab American organisations and (2) intensive interviews conducted with the leaders of six Arab American social, cultural, and political organisations in the San Francisco Bay Area. This evidence reveals that organisational activities are primarily concerned with asserting the 'American' credentials of Arab American citizens. In many instances, a concern with homeland politics serves as a means of asserting citizenship claims and coexists with efforts to contest the exclusionary basis of social membership in American society. The evidence also reveals that Arab-American organisations and websites sustain a range of geographical networks and linkages—not only transnational, but more often, local and national. This evidence, albeit limited in scope, urges a more measured approach be taken to the notion of transnationalism. This requires, in turn, that more attention be paid to the motivations and intent of organisations and their participants. The final section of this paper will explore some implications of these findings for future research.

## **Transnationalism, migration, and citizenship**

### *Interpreting the contemporary migrant experience*

The growing popularity of the concept of transnationalism stems, in part, from a general dissatisfaction with state-centric understandings of society, identity, and politics (Agnew, 1999). Scholars within traditionally state-centric disciplines, such as International Relations and political geography, have increasingly advocated new conceptualisations of political community and territory that reflect the realities of globalisation. These scholars argue that socio-political life often escapes the constraints of the territorial state, and that new spaces of interaction are forged across and between many territories (Mandaville, 1999). While

locatedness is still important for understanding the forms and meanings of political identity, the primary space of the political cannot be assumed to be the nation-state.

Proponents of the transnational perspective identify migration and 'diasporic communities' as key forces in the creation of these new spaces of interaction, and a great deal of the empirical literature on transnationalism involves the study of migratory groups. Literature on transnationalism and migration has been guided by the idea that contemporary migrants' lives are no longer structured within the nation-state, but instead, span national boundaries leading to the creation of 'diasporas' rather than simply 'minorities'. Theorists thus often describe migrants as culturally 'bifocal', as holding multi-local attachments, and as orchestrating lives through circuits and spatially extensive networks (Cohen and Vertovec, 1999; Kearney, 1995; Rouse, 1992). Emphasising the lack of rootedness among contemporary migrants, Clifford (1994) describes them as 'not here to stay'. Such views challenge the notion of 'immigration' as a process with a definitive beginning and end and a clear starting and ending point. Indeed, some theorists have discarded the term 'immigrant' all together, adopting instead the concept of 'transmigrant', which is meant to capture the circularity of human mobility and the perpetuation of cross-border networks (Basch, et al, 1994).

While normative evaluations of transnationalism vary within the literature (with some viewing it as disrupting communities and national societies (Renshon, 2000) and others regarding it as freeing people from the exclusionary national identities (Gilroy, 1994), the literature on transnationalism is consistent in its assertion that contemporary migration differs fundamentally from migration in other eras. Because today's migrants face a radically different set of social circumstances rooted in globalisation than did earlier migrants, their experiences cannot be easily understood using a traditional language of either assimilation or 'ethnicity'—both of which rest on conceptions of culture and society as contained within nation-states. As we describe below, the conceptualisation of people's lives, identities, and social networks as organised across territorial boundaries of nation-states has important implications for our understanding and theorisation of citizenship.

### *Transnationalism: The end of citizenship?*

Politics have commonly been thought to emanate from the nation-state; citizenship, in this respect, has served as the primary framework of political and social identity. At the most basic level, citizenship refers to a formal relationship between an individual and the state based upon a given set of rights and responsibilities. The institutions of states regulate the conditions under which citizenship may be extended, the ways in which individuals should act as citizens, and the procedures under which rights and mutual responsibilities are met. But while citizenship signifies a legal relationship between state and individual, it historically has been bound with ideas of collective identity embodied by 'the nation'. As Baubock (1992) states, citizenship is about rights for members of the community, but the limits of that community are, in practice, defined through the construction of social membership vis-à-vis the nation.

Conceptualisations (and ideals) of modern citizenship have been based upon an assumed congruence between legal membership, political identity, nationhood, and the territorial state (Taylor, 1994). Many trends associated with globalisation and transnational migration, however, suggest a disruption of this historical pattern and indicate the weakening of the

citizenship ideal as the main framework for the expression and enactment of legal rights, political identity, and social membership.

To begin, human rights discourses emerging over the past several decades have challenged the idea that rights should be contingent on national origins. International human rights regimes and supranational governance structures hold signatory states responsible for upholding internationally-defined norms and rights vis-à-vis citizens and non-citizens alike. So while transnational migration has created a situation in which non-citizens constitute a significant segment on the population in many countries, these non-citizens often hold legal and formal rights associated with full legal and social membership (Soysal, 1994). Brubaker (1989) uses the term 'denizen' to describe the growing number of non-citizens in Western states who are nonetheless able to exercise some measure of rights and participation. The ability for different types of non-citizens to access and to exercise legal rights varies enormously—a highly skilled worker in London's financial sector, for instance, is in a more advantageous position than an asylum seeker. But the practical and normative challenge that this situation poses to traditional conceptions of citizenship is profound. The nation-state constructs a citizenship that is exclusive at its very core. It is therefore problematic for representation, participation, and legitimacy when nation-states include large numbers of people who cannot or will not become citizens, but who in some cases exercise many of the same legal rights of citizens.

Complicating matters is that some sending states (e.g. The Philippines, Haiti, Mexico, Singapore, and Nicaragua) actively encourage the participation of expatriates in their home countries' political systems, often to foster remittances (Itzigsohn, 1999 ; Laguerre, 1999) and expatriate investment in national development programmes (Lessinger, 1992). To the extent that transnationalism sponsored by sending states decouples citizenship from the territory in which individuals live, it contributes to the reconfiguration of the relationship between individuals, states, and state institutions. This is perhaps most clear with the rise of dual citizenship, which divorces the institutions that regulate citizenship for individuals from the territorial state within which the individual lives.

Dual citizenship, denizenship and the like, challenge the idea that citizenship is constructed through a single nation-state and highlight that both legal rights and social membership may be constructed outside the bounds of the nation-state. The cultural transformations described earlier—that is, the creation of diasporas and the maintenance of social, economic, and political networks across state boundaries—further disrupt the ideal of congruence between citizenship, nation, and territorial state. With the nation-state no longer acting as a bounded political, territorial, and cultural entity, the question must be asked whether citizenship (at least as traditionally theorised) matters anymore, especially to immigrants.

### *Reconsidering the end of citizenship*

While few argue unequivocally that citizenship is obsolete, many do suggest that both legal, formal membership and nationally-defined norms fail to hold the same degree of significance for contemporary migrants as in the past. Mandaville (1999), for instance, contends that individuals exist in a new global market of political loyalties with multiple sites of political activity and participation. Diasporas, in particular, he argues, 'specifically resist statist attempts to fix the parameters of political community within territory' (p. 665). Ong's (1999) research, meanwhile, suggests that the meaning of formal membership in the nation-state been reduced to the labour mobility afforded by a particular passport. And others speak more

broadly of the nation-state's inability to command the allegiance of those inhabiting their borders or to exert a common sense of purpose or identity—a process viewed either positively (e.g. Gilroy, 1994) or alarmingly (e.g. Schuck, 1989 ;Renshon, 2000) depending on one's political leanings.

Such claims, however, seem to be based more on impressions and anecdotes than on systematic empirical research. A major shortcoming of research on transnationalism, in this respect, is that it tends to focus on organisations and groups that are clearly and/or self-consciously transnational and to conclude that the identities and political activities within particular immigrant groups are uniformly disruptive of national boundaries and identities. The relationship between transnationally-orientated organisations and those which are not transnationally-orientated (such as community social service providers) is not often explored. More importantly, this research seldom asks migrants directly what citizenship means to them, and how their different political and social behaviours (transnational and otherwise) fit into broader understandings of citizenship and social membership.

We wish to propose that the concept of transnationalism, by shifting attention away from the host society context, may be presenting an incomplete picture of immigrants' political motivations, intentions, or identities. In fairness, some transnational theorists, such as Basch, et al (1994) do explore migrants' position in host society political systems, linking transnational behaviour, in part, to migrants' sense of exclusion from the 'mainstream'. But the transnational framework tends to emphasise migrants' communal insularity and their continued involvement with their home country (see Anthias, 1998) at the expense of a clearer understanding of how migrants and their children interpret and enact citizenship and negotiate social membership in the host society context, where the vast majority will remain and settle.

Meanwhile, questions of who can and should be citizens, who are entitled to the rights of citizenship, and who 'fit in' to dominant models of citizenship and social membership occupy an ever more prominent place in public debates—as witnessed in long-standing conflicts in Europe and North America over welfare rights for immigrants, bilingual education, multiculturalism, and the like (for instance, Zolberg and Woon, 1999; Asad, 1990; also, Piper, 1998). These debates reveal that the ability to access and to exercise rights remains tied to notions of social membership rooted in nation-states— notions which have not been weakened noticeably through globalisation (Guarnizo and Smith, 1998; also Kofman, 2000). So even if citizenship cannot be considered the sole framework for the structuring of political identity or legal rights (if indeed it ever was), we must continue ask how social and formal membership defined through the host nation-state may be relevant to immigrants' political behaviour and identity. While we do not advocate a revival of traditional assimilation theory, we believe that it is important to understand how immigrants view their 'assimilation' into national life, and how their sense of social membership and exclusion in the host society informs their identities and political activities.

The remainder of this paper uses the case of Arab American activists and organisations to illustrate the ways in which social and formal membership rooted in the nation-state remain significant in the context of transnational identities and flows. Our analysis suggests that the growing network of Arab American groups must be understood not only in terms of diaspora, transnationalism, and globalisation, but equally in terms of discourses and practices of citizenship and membership which have developed historically in the United States. Arab American activism reflects both a concern with and affinity to 'homeland', but also a tense

engagement with notions of ‘race’, assimilation, and citizenship firmly situated in the American context.

### **Explanation of the study**

This study focuses on Arab American communities.<sup>i</sup> Since the 1960s the US has experienced significant growth of its Arab-origin population as a result both of changing immigration policies (namely, the lifting of nation origins quotas in 1965) and of political-economic crises in Arab states. It is estimated that 3 million people in the United States have Arab ancestry.<sup>ii</sup> Most of the growth of Arab-origin populations has resulted from in-flows of skilled professionals (many via post-graduate programmes in computer science, engineering, and medicine). Refugee movements from Iraq, Lebanon, and the occupied Palestinian territories have also been an important source of Arab immigrants at various points since the 1960s. Data from the 1990 census show that Arab-Americans are more highly educated than the population at large, with 36 percent holding bachelor degrees (compared with 20 percent in the US population overall) and about 15 percent holding post-graduate degrees. High levels of education translate into higher incomes: the mean income of Arab Americans is about 23 percent higher than the population as a whole. Arab Americans also claim the highest per capita ownership of business of any ethnic group in America (AAI, 2001).<sup>iii</sup> Major concentrations of Arab immigrants are found in Detroit, Los Angeles, Washington, DC, New York, and the San Francisco Bay Area.<sup>iv</sup>

We have focused on Arab Americans for two reasons. First, Arab immigrants appear to be archetypal transnational or diasporic subjects. As such, they often have been celebrated, especially in the case of Lebanese immigrant communities, which are noted for their extensive commercial networks (Shehadi and Hourani, 1992). But more recently, and in a decidedly less celebratory fashion, people of Arab heritage in the United States have been associated in the press and the popular imagination with terrorist cells linked globally through elusive criminal masterminds. As we will elaborate in a later section, Muslim Arab communities, in particular, have been portrayed as irrevocably foreign and as linked more closely with the Middle East than with Middle America.

The second and closely related reason for focusing on Arab American communities is that they embody a tension between formal citizenship and social membership. Arab immigrants are able to secure formal citizenship with relative ease, but Arabness, as explained in greater detail below, has been consistently marginal to notions of community and nationhood in American society. ‘In’ America but not necessarily ‘of America’—at least according to some commentators (Pipes, 2002)—Arab Americans present a rich case with which to explore the interaction between transnational identities and activities, citizenship, and social membership.

In studying Arab-American communities, we have been especially interested in organisations (including lobbying groups, foreign policy activist, social service providers and social-cultural clubs) and organisations’ use of communication and information technologies (CITs). A primary reason for focusing on organisations is that leaders and members of such groups are often actively negotiating issues of community, membership, and citizenship. These issues, of course, are important to people outside of organizations, but they are perhaps more salient and more explicitly discussed in organizations.<sup>v</sup>

Our interest in organisations’ use of communications and information technologies (especially the internet) emerges from recent speculation about the impact of CITs on citizenship, political participation and identity. The internet has been touted as a means of

reinvigorating democracy (Elkins, 1995; Selove, 1995) and facilitating new and potentially revolutionary forms of transnational politics (citations). CITs also have been viewed as the means by which migrants are able to maintain social and political connections in more than one place, thus making possible transnational communities and identities (citations). But generally speaking, such claims regarding the power and impact of CITs are more a product of speculation than of sustained empirical analysis.<sup>vi</sup> Because CITs are considered a primary force in the transformation of political identity and participation and in the transnationalisation of immigrant communities, it is imperative to scrutinise how these technologies actually are being used by immigrant groups and immigrant activists.

The research, as stated earlier, is still in its preliminary stages, consisting thus far of a survey of [#] Arab-American websites and interviews with six leaders of Arab-American organisations in the San Francisco Bay Area.<sup>vii</sup> The internet survey evaluates each website in terms of (1) its intended purpose and user base; (2) the structure of the group sponsoring it; (3) the types of identities promoted in it; (4) the geographical area it represents; and (5) the type and scale of social network it sustains. The results of the survey are summarised in Table 1. The survey is intended to shed light upon the types of political claims emanating from the Arab American community and the extent to which such claims relate to citizenship, social membership, and/or 'homeland' politics and identities. It is also intended to reveal the types of relationships sustained by and/or created through the internet and whether such relationships can be characterised as transnational, national, local (or located at some other scale).

A major goal of the interviews was to uncover what organisational participation means to individuals—for instance, whether participation is viewed as a strategy to forge transnational communities, to promote integration, and/or to assert formal rights. While such questions seem rather basic, they are seldom asked directly to individuals, and 'transnational' intentions tend to be assumed from participation in identity-based organisations. It is in understanding motivations for organisational participation—as explained by participants themselves—that we can better understand the relationships that exist between identity, citizenship, and place.

The study results, to be sure, do not indicate the ways in which 'ordinary' people (i.e. non-activists) may be using the internet to fulfill political goals or to foster particular identities—this is an aim of our future research. Our interviews with leaders of six Arab American organisations, however, do begin to reveal the political motivations that exist in the community and the ways in which activists use CITs to create social and geographical networks.

### **Transnational political action in Arab Immigrant Communities**

There has always been a strong transnational or 'homeland' element in Arab American activism. Particularly after World War I, Palestine became an important focus of political action in some Arab American circles, and a number of community spokesmen emerged in the 1920s to lobby the American government on the Palestine issue and to convey an anti-Zionist message to the American public (see Davidson, 1998). Palestine has continued to be a major impetus for organising. The first large national-level and explicitly 'Arab-American' organisations, for instance, emerged after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. The National Association of Arab Americans, the Arab American Institute, the Anti-Defamation Committee and the Association of Arab American University Graduates began to press for changes in American policy toward Israel and Lebanon. More recently, these organisations

have questioned American policy in Iraq and have served as a dissenting voice in various US military campaigns in the Middle East and other Muslim countries. 'Homeland' issues relating broadly to the Arab world have thus galvanised both recent waves of Arab immigrants and second- and third-generation Arab Americans, and the identity and coherence of the community remains closely tied to the politics of the Middle East.

The internet appears to be enhancing the political and personal linkages between the Arab world and the Arab diaspora—which has a growing presence not only in the US, but also in Latin America, Australia, and Europe—and internet-based activism reveals the transnational possibilities offered by communications and information technologies. A number of internet sites link together the Arab diaspora and connect them to news, business, and events in Arab countries—creating, in effect, a sort of virtual 'Arab world'. Britain, in particular, has been an important base for Arab-orientated websites and electronic networks<sup>viii</sup>

Some sites are highly political and attempt to form global networks of support for particular causes in Arab countries. A great deal of recent internet activism relating to the Arab world revolves around the current intifada in the Israeli-occupied territories. Links to web sites such as the 'Electronic Intifada' circulate world wide through e-mail<sup>ix</sup>. While it is difficult to quantify the effects of these sites, they seem to serve as an important 'front' in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, at least in terms of propaganda. Another internet-based forms of activism relating to the intifada include the circulation of electronic petitions (many of which are also signed by non-Arabs) to US and UN officials calling for the condemnation of the Israeli occupation and advocating the 'right to return' for Palestinian refugees. More recently, electronic petitions have been circulated demanding the indictment of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon for the 1982 massacres of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.<sup>x</sup> The promotion of boycotts via the internet against companies doing business in Israel (Intel has been a major target) is another recent phenomenon.<sup>xi</sup>

Not all sites are explicitly political. For instance, the Birzeit Society, which uses the internet to maintain personal connections between emigres from the West Bank city of Birzeit, regards its efforts as 'cultural' and non-political. For Hani Kalieh<sup>xii</sup>, the San Francisco-based leader of the Birzeit society, the web provides a way to create a diaspora—a genuine community that transcends national boundaries. As he puts it, the web 'fosters a closer relationship between people. It maintains old ties between people whether it is friendship or relative relationship...It will expand the community and keep communications stronger.' He continues, '[W]e try to make the website a medium for our people to keep communicating with each other ...I want people to be able to click on the website and see what is going on everywhere about every Birzeiti in the whole world.' [membership numbers?] [Mention Arab-orientated philanthropic actions ; also LAA]

The internet therefore seems to be an important political and social medium with a strong transnational and diasporic component. The internet, it must be emphasised, is not the only such medium. Arabic-language satellite television—including al-Jazeera and London-based MBC—is available world wide, and Arabic-language newspapers circulate widely in Europe and North America. It is difficult to determine the extent to which information and communications technologies have strengthened transnational (or pan-national) Arab identities in Arab immigrant populations at large, or to which they have fostered social action and personal networks 'on the ground'. But many websites and other forms of media do appear serve as the basis of a virtual 'Arab world' in that they allow for members of the Arab diaspora (and individuals in Arab countries) to access news and information in Arabic and

about the Arab world around the clock. Moreover, this news and information is often of the variety that is suppressed in the Arab world itself, such that immigrant populations may become important seedbeds of political change and political discontent in Arab countries.

### **National Narratives and Arab American Activism**

However, transnational identities and networks cannot be viewed in isolation of the national and local contexts in which Arab immigrants are situated. Our web survey and our interviews suggest that Arab American activists, while identifying personally with the Arab world and with ‘Arab causes’, are more concerned with being recognised as a legitimate, assimilable, ‘mainstream’ group of citizens than with maintaining links with the homeland. For these individuals, the position of Arabness in the discourses of social membership and structures of citizenship—notably discourses revolving around ‘assimilation’—are central to their motivations for organisational participation and activism.

#### *The Arab/American Dichotomy*

The position of Arabs and Arabness in the US assimilation narrative—which describes the ‘national experience’ in terms of the adaptation of successive waves of immigrants to ‘American’ norms and values (Jacobson, 1998)—is ambiguous at best. The uneasiness of Arab identities in the US can be understood, in part, with reference to the wider geopolitical context of US-Arab relations. Broadly speaking, Arabness and Islam (with which Arabness is often conflated) has been constructed as inimical to the West and to Anglo-American ideals of civility. The construction of the West/Orient dualism, as Said (1978) has demonstrated, while rooted in the age of colonialism, remains remarkably consistent in contemporary rhetoric about Arabs and the Arab world. Stereotypes of Arabs as terrorists, murky oil sheikhs, flag-burning fanatics, and submissive veiled women are rampant not only in Hollywood, but also in common, public discourse and most certainly in the selective media coverage of political events in Arab states (Said, 1981). That America’s relationship with Arab countries is frequently strained (and often overtly hostile) serves to reinforce these negative images.<sup>xiii</sup>

The position of Arabness in American society has become all the more problematic in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington DC in September 2001. Criticism levelled against America’s lax immigration laws and border controls following the attacks revealed a growing sentiment that the United States had compromised its security and its way of life by allowing entry of people from ‘suspect’ ethnic and national categories. For some commentators, the only way to solve the problem was to restrict immigration and to subject Arabs and Muslims to greater restrictions and surveillance.<sup>xiv</sup> In fairness, a number of public officials strongly defended Arab and Muslim Americans. But insofar as these officials deemed it necessary to instruct the American public that Arabs and Muslims can be ‘good Americans’ and are not necessarily terrorists or terrorist sympathisers, such pleas for tolerance were rather telling of the pariah status of Arabness in the public consciousness.

If Arab Americans occupy an uneasy position vis-à-vis assimilation narratives, so too do they find themselves marginalised vis-à-vis discourses of multiculturalism that circulate among political liberals. Multiculturalist thought has encouraged some—especially activists, university students, and academics—to position themselves outside of the ‘white’ mainstream, and to assert affinities with other groups of ‘Third World’ origins (see, for

instance, Samhan, 1999). But success on this front has been mixed and geographically uneven. In some universities and in some areas with large Arab-origin populations (such as Michigan), Arab Americans have been recognised as a ‘legitimate’ ethnic minority group and have been made eligible for minority-preference programmes. Arab Americans have also gained some legitimacy as an ethnic voting bloc in recent elections. Yet Arab Americans just as often find themselves excluded both from the ‘celebrations of diversity’ found on university campuses and from the halls of power in local, state, and national governments. <sup>xv</sup>

Thus, while Arab immigrants have been incorporated into the American labour market in a relatively advantageous position, their position in the systems of social identities that operate in American society—identities relating to nationhood, ‘race’, and social membership—have been far more tenuous. The marginality of Arabness in these systems of identity, according to many activists, compromises the social membership and citizenship of Arab Americans, especially insofar as Arab immigrants have uneven access to the political process and to civil rights [footnote]. As Joseph (1999, p. 258) notes, ‘Full citizenship entails a sameness...[T]he persistent representation of Arabs as essentially different and not comprehensible to the Western mind is designed and has the effect of precluding the full citizenship for Arabs as Americans’.

#### *Positioning Arabness in the American nation and polity*

Our survey of Arab-American websites and our interviews with Arab-American activists suggests that this national context, rather than a ‘transnational’ social arena, seems to be driving a great deal of Arab-American activism. Many of the websites in the survey employ a language of social membership, citizenship, and nationally-based rights, and/or assert a ‘hyphenated’ identity sanctioned by discourses of multiculturalism and pluralism. In other words, while many Arab American organisations are concerned with US foreign policy toward the Middle East, they seem far more eager to prove their American credentials and to stake their claim to the rights and privileges of American citizenship than to build ties with the ‘homeland’. In this regard, Arab-American activists engage in the politics of assimilation—attempting to assert their suitability for full societal membership—as have generations of immigrants before them.

The website of the Arab American Institute (AAI), for instance, [describe more about the organisation] touts the all-American credentials of prominent community members, revealing (almost ‘outing’) the Arab heritage of such notable political figures as John Sununu, George Mitchell, and Donna Shalala, whose loyal service to the United States is indubitable. A pamphlet published by the AAI (with a red, white, and blue design, no less) further enumerates the accomplishments of Arab Americans and includes the statement in bold letters, ‘We Arab Americans and our families are proud of our heritage and proud to be Americans. It’s this pride that keeps us all asking, “what can we do for our country?”—the good old USA’.

The sites of other ‘mainstream’ Arab American organisations are similarly insistent in stating their American credentials. The Arab American Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), an organisation dedicated to monitoring racism, media bias, and civil-rights infringements against Arab Americans, quickly issued statements condemning the terrorist attacks of 11 September and asserting the loyalty of Arab Americans to the American nation. ADC president Ziad Asali, in a press release published on the ADC website, ‘[T]his attack

was aimed at all Americans without exception and the Arab-American community shared every bit of the heartache and anguish that all Americans have been enduring... Clearly, the best answer to such a despicable attack is for all Americans to join hands and come together to support each other in our time of need. Arab Americans are among the most eager to do just that...' The ADC also started a foundation to raise money for the victims of the attacks, and took out a full paged advertisement in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* (reproduced on-line) stating, 'We stand with our country and fellow citizens in fully supporting our leadership at this difficult time in our nation's history'. Several other organisations, including the on-line forum 'Café Arabica' and the Chicago-based Arab American Action Network, likewise affirmed their Americanness and patriotism on-line with messages of sympathy and with accounts of Muslim and Arab-American victims. It should be emphasised that such while such expressions of loyalty, patriotism, and civic-mindedness were very pronounced after 11 September, they featured prominently in organisational websites prior to the terrorist attacks, as well.<sup>xvi</sup> Arab Americans, in this regard, have reacted not only to this particular event, but also to a more general perception of Arabness and Muslimness as inherently foreign and hostile to 'American' interests.

Assertions of loyalty to state and nation have also punctuated the concerns expressed by Arab American activists toward new 'homeland security' measures. Even prior to 11 September, websites administered by the ADC, Café Arabica, www.ArabAmerican, the Birzeit Society, and others focused on cases of 'racial profiling' and critiqued Justice Department scrutiny of Palestinian charities in the US and the use of 'secret evidence' in court proceedings against legal residents of Arab origin<sup>xvii</sup>. Since 11 September, these organisations have been even more vigilant, recording racist remarks by US politicians against Muslims and Arab Americans and protesting the targeting of Arab Americans by law enforcement officials. In doing so these websites and organisations have drawn heavily on notions of civil rights and social membership in much the same way that Hispanic, African-American, and other minority organisations have done for the past several decades. [expand with one or two examples]

The main goal of the Arab-American associations identified on the internet, therefore, is not so much to build transnational networks as to achieve full membership in the American polity and nation by asserting citizenship rights and by positioning Arabness—much maligned in mainstream America—in a wider system of acceptable and innocuous 'ethnic' signifiers. These intertwined goals of promoting Arabness as a positive, 'American' cultural identity and as establishing Arab immigrants and their children as members of the American polity and 'community' were mentioned repeatedly by our interviewees. For instance, Dina Saba, chairwoman of the San Francisco Arab Film Festival and a member of the Arab Women's Solidarity Association, argues that 'We're so stereotypically looked upon as very bad, negative people. It's important for us to be proud of who we are and where we come from...Not just be proud of it internally, but vocalise it and educate people about who we really are.' She continues,

We are part of this community... In order for us as Americans to make a movement and to start changing people's minds and to educate, just like the film festival does, we need to be part of the community and embrace it and start changing it to the way we want it. But we can't do it sitting on the outside.

Similarly, Hani Khalieh, chairman of the San Francisco branch of the Birzeit Society (mentioned above), states, 'You've got a group of people in this country that say, "Arabs are

here to destroy this country. Arabs are here because they don't like us..." Thus, he continues, 'we try to educate the American public on who we are. We try to educate them on issues that affect our relationship with them whether it is about the Palestinian conflict or about our culture in general.' When asked whether a sense of citizenship informs his involvement in the Birzeit Society, he responds,

Absolutely. We coordinate with other Arab-American organisations like the AAI [Arab American Institute] and the ADC [to] encourage our people to vote in both directions and voice their concerns. We participate sometimes with the ADC on issues that promote non-discrimination against our community...protecting rights and promoting the need for our community to get involved in American politics—especially the younger generation...

In a final example, Father Labib Kobti, the pastor of the Arab Catholic parish of San Francisco and the director of Al-Bushra, a website focused on religious and political issues in Jerusalem and the Occupied Territories, describes himself as having a dual mission. On the one hand, he states, 'I want them to keep their identity, their specificity, with their traditions, customs, way of life, way of thinking—the good ones.' On the other hand, 'I want [the Arab community in San Francisco] to feel part of the American system as any other American in America—that they become real Americans, good Americans.'

These findings suggest that Arab American communities, when acting collectively, wish to represent themselves as part of 'middle America'. Arab Americans on an individual basis certainly maintain links with the Arab world through Arabic-language newspapers and satellite television, as well as regular travel. Such phenomena are to be expected in a relatively new immigrant community. But in terms of political stance, Arab Americans appear to be more interested in shaking off their 'foreignness' than in embracing transnationalism, and their primary concern is to position their communities as members of the American nation and as full citizens with equal access to legal rights and privileges. This process bears a strong resemblance to the assimilation politics pursued by many immigrant groups in the past who have similarly been viewed by the mainstream as irredeemably foreign and fundamentally at odds with American civic virtues.<sup>xviii</sup>

Many transnational theorists suggests that the socially marginal position of contemporary migrants encourages transnational behaviour; but it may be equally possible that marginality encourages greater attachment to the structures and discourses of citizenship and national membership. The claim, therefore, that we are now in a new phase of transnational migration marked by sustained links with homeland and unbounded identities warrants further exploration.

### *Geographies of Arab-American networks*

The geographical networks sustained within Arab American communities through communications technologies raise further questions about the nature and extent of transnationalism. As stated in a previous section, activists use the internet to politically mobilise Arab Americans (and others) around certain 'homeland' issues, such as the Intifada and sanctions on Iraq. Activists also use the internet to foster diasporic connections and transnational networks (as with the Birzeit Society). These internet sites—along with new Arabic-language satellite stations and newspapers—draw upon and reinforce a sense of

‘Arabness’ that transcends national boundaries. Yet the networks created through the internet are just as often nationally- or locally-based as transnational, and while some draw on a transnational (or pan-national) sense of Arabness, the purpose of the sites is only seldom to create transnational and diasporic linkages.

It should be emphasised, first, that websites have varying structures and set-ups. Some, like the Electronic Intifada, are managed by a small group of activists (not all of them Arab American); they provide political information to the general public and do not have a membership attached to them. Others are portals to on-line forums with restricted memberships. Still others are simply informational sites for ‘bricks-and-mortar’ organisations with memberships and constituencies at national, regional, or urban scales. Consequently, the social and geographical networks created through the internet are extremely varied. In some instances, the internet does indeed foster transnational activities: the Electronic Intifada undoubtedly reaches global audience; Aranib does provide a forum for members of the Arab diaspora in Britain, Canada, the US, and Australia; and the Birzeit Society does allow for members of the Palestinian diaspora to maintain their Arab, Palestinian, and Birzeiti identities regardless of their physical location. As Father Kobti states of his own website, [www.Al-Bushra.org](http://www.Al-Bushra.org), ‘It is very interesting how the internet opens you to different kinds of people. So you put this on [the site], and people will give it to others, and you don’t know who is getting it’.

But just as often, activists are using the internet to sustain social and geographical networks that are geographically circumscribed and to publicise or coordinate activities that are geographically and politically limited in scope. An interesting example is Al-‘Awda, an organisation focusing on the ‘right to return’ for Palestinian refugees. Al-‘Awda relies almost exclusively on the internet to coordinate political activities, and the internet, according to one of Al-‘Awda’s original members, has been a crucial means of empowering Palestinian activists and circulating Palestinian viewpoints world wide:

The thing about the Internet is that it spread so quickly. This was something that went from purely an intellectual organization to a popular organization within months... There was one article I posted on this list-serve that went around the world in literally days. And it ended up on Al-Ahram, the [Arabic-language] weekly... It went from the Al-‘Awda list-serve and then people who were on other list-serves just posted it there, and things just spread really quickly.

But while Al-Awda focuses on a ‘homeland’ issue and provides a portal for globalised political activities (e.g. through list-serves), the organisation does not, for the most part, operate transnationally. Rather, it works through a network of local activists who use list-serves to circulate ‘action alerts’ and to organise and to publicise protests, demonstrations, and events in US cities [\[footnote UK branch\]](#). Activists in localities make arrangements ‘on the ground’ for protests and events. The content of activism may be considered ‘transnational’, and there is a transnational component to the group’s activities. But the social-geographical networks created by the organisation exist primarily between local bases of activists in the US.

In most cases, the geographical base of members/users is even more limited. The major national Arab American organisations and their internet capabilities, for instance, are geared almost entirely to a US-based membership. These sites clearly allow for far more effective

mobilisation of group members (e.g. through on-line petitions and e-mail 'action alerts' for public policy decisions affecting the community) than would be possible through regular mailing lists or 'telephone trees'. But it is not entirely accurate to call the activities they promote 'transnational', even though some of them concern the affairs of the Arab world. For groups like AAI and ADC, the internet enhances the existing organisational structure, serving mainly as a resource for a nationally-based membership and as a means for coordinating and mobilising activities among this membership.

Other groups with an internet presence address Arab communities at an even more localised level. ACCESS and the San Francisco Arab Cultural Centre, for instance, are important service providers for recent immigrants and lower-income Arab Americans in the Chicago area and the San Francisco Bay Area respectively. For both of these organisations, the internet is used mainly for publicity among local Arab American communities rather than for global (or even national) network-building. Other local groups do use the internet more intensively, but their membership base and scope of activity is equally limited. Groups such as [name Georgia and Ohio groups, etc.], as their names suggest, are created specifically to link together localised groups of people. Shilla, an on-line forum for Arab-American professionals in the San Francisco Bay Area, is another example of the use of the internet to create local, face-to-face networks.

Our interviews with organisational leaders further indicate the more circumscribed nature of the social-geographical networks created through Arab American organisations. All of the activists interviewed speak of their commitment to Arab and Arab-American causes and to the 'Arab community'. Their use of the term 'Arab community' is transnational at one level: Dina Saba, for instance, states, 'A community is people that have common interests, common background... But there is something that links you back—each person is linked back to the mother country.' However, just as often, their use of the term 'Arab community' (or 'Arab-American community') suggests both a degree of propinquity and an acknowledgement of their permanent presence in the United States. They speak of themselves, for instance, as members of 'small communities' within the 'larger American community'. Their relatively limited sense of 'Arab community' is reflected in their activism: while they may utilise the internet for some aspects of global activism (especially the circulation of news, opinion pieces, and 'action alerts'), they direct many, if not all, of their actions toward building local, face-to-face networks. The main, tangible outcome of activism, in other words, may be more localised than 'transnational.'

## **Conclusions and directions for further research**

Questions of citizenship and social membership, in sum, have become increasingly complicated as it becomes possible for individuals and groups to maintain and to exercise membership in multiple political-territorial entities. Migration theorists, consequently, have adopted a new theoretical framework of transnationalism for analysing migrant experiences. The transnational perspective asserts, in particular, that the concept of assimilation, because it assumes that immigrants' lives are bounded within the receiving nation-state, is no longer adequate for interpreting fluid, migratory lives. Such conclusions are supported by numerous examples of transnational practices and relations enacted by migrants and, in some cases, fostered by sending states.

We support efforts to rethink traditional concepts used to interpret immigrant experiences. But we question whether approaches rooted in host society contexts should be replaced by a transnational paradigm. Transnational theorists emphasise migrants' enduring connections to their 'homelands'. But we wish to propose that immigrants' political activities and identities continue to draw on conceptions of citizenship and social membership bound to the receiving context, and that the social networks created by immigrants may be more local or national than transnational. We also wish to propose that assertions of homeland identities and affinities—inasmuch as they are present—may have the effect, intentionally or unintentionally, of integrating immigrants more fully into structures and social discourses of the receiving society (Layton-Henry, 1990 ; Karpathakis, 2000).

Our evidence, while limited, suggests that notions of citizenship, identity, nationhood and even 'assimilation' still hold a great deal of importance for some immigrants—or at least for the leadership of many immigrant organisations. At a minimum, our findings caution against assuming that migrants share a uniform attachment to homeland or that participation in identity-based activities reflects 'transnational' goals or intentions (Guarnizo and Smith, 1998). There may be a range of rationales and motivations for participating in identity-based organisations, not all of which revolve around attachments to origins, and these are likely to vary between generation and class groups, as well as gender (e.g. Labelle and Midy, 1999; also, Anthias, 1998). It is imperative, therefore, to evaluate identity and political participation from the point of view of migrants (and their children) themselves, bearing in mind that 'transnationalism' is a term used exclusively by academics.

There has been a plethora of empirical research on transnationalism, but more often than not, this research focuses only on clear examples of transnational behaviour. Methodologically, then, future research must address immigrant groups' political behaviours in their totality—that is, we must consider both transnational associations *and* those that are not obviously transnational, such as neighbourhood groups and ethnic-based social service providers. What are the aims of different associations and their leaders? At what scale do these organisations sustain social-geographical networks? To what extent do they invoke ideas of rights, responsibilities, belonging or exclusion? Second, future research must scrutinise immigrants' motivations for participating (or not participating) in different kinds of associations. Do people wish to maintain ties with homeland? How do they view themselves in relation to the 'mainstream'? How do they conceive of citizenship and social membership? Such questions seem basic, but they have been neglected in current research at the expense of our understandings of migrant experiences.

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<sup>i</sup> The term 'Arab American' refers to individuals who trace their origins to the Arabic-speaking countries of Southwest Asia and North Africa. Arab settlement in the US dates from the late-19<sup>th</sup> century, when perhaps 250,000 people—mainly Lebanese Christians—migrated to the cities of the East and the Midwest.

<sup>ii</sup> Arabs are not recognised as an official ethnic or 'racial' category in the US, but the ancestry question used on recent census forms (as well as estimates from immigration and work permit data) suggests that about 3 million people claim at least some Arab heritage (Bureau of the Census, 2001; AAI, 2001). It is believed that the majority of contemporary Arab immigrants are Muslim, though the Arab-origin population overall is about two-thirds Christian due to early waves of Lebanese immigrants (AAI, 2001).

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<sup>iii</sup> There are, however, disadvantaged segments, and overall, almost 11 percent of Arab Americans live under the poverty line. In parts of the Detroit and Los Angeles metro areas, Arab Americans earn significantly under the median income (US Census, 1990).

<sup>iv</sup> Los Angeles is home to the largest Arab-origin population in the United States (estimated at 283,335) and is the primary destination of new Arab immigrants. Detroit and Dearborn, Michigan, have the second-largest Arab-origin population, and the highest concentration of Arab Americans of any US city. An estimated 40 percent of children in Dearborn's public school system are of Arab ancestry

<sup>v</sup> Our focus on organisations also arises, in part, out of methodological concerns. We have found that it is not feasible to locate individuals of Arab origins through random sampling techniques, because many Arabic (and especially Muslim-Arabic) surnames are found among non-Arab groups, and because some Arab-origins families 'Americanize' or 'Anglicize' surnames. Moreover, given that many Arab-Americans have voiced their displeasure at being targeted and profiled, especially following 11 September, we feel that to randomly identify study participants would be counter-productive. Meeting with organisations has provided us an identifiable pool of people who claim Arab origins while giving us the opportunity to explain our goals and interests and to develop relationships of trust.

<sup>vi</sup> Claims regarding the power of the internet to transform communities and politics has generated an increasing amount of scepticism (for instance, Calhoun, 1998; Zook, 1996).

<sup>vii</sup> Need to explain how websites and organisations were identified

<sup>viii</sup> electronic networks include the Arab Network in Britain, Arabic news service, Palestinian campaigns and freedom-of-press watch

<sup>ix</sup> discuss similar sites, such as PalestineCampaign.org, etc.

<sup>x</sup> Activists, in this regard, are often relying on ideas stemming from international law and human rights and drawing parallels between the Palestinian plight and other 'global' human rights issues, such as the Holocaust, the genocide of Muslims in Kosovo, and Apartheid in South Africa. There are other, more indirect ways in which Palestinian supporters worldwide have used the internet. In one instance, activists used e-mail networks to encourage Palestinian sympathisers cast their votes on a CNN website for the best journalistic photograph of 2000. Individuals receiving the e-mail were asked to choose a photograph showing a young Palestinian's murder by Israeli Defense Forces—a picture which circulated widely both in the Arab world and in the Western press, and which became a rallying symbol for Palestinian activists both within and outside the Occupied Territories.

<sup>xi</sup> Website and electronic networks have emerged to promote other Arab causes besides the intifada. The Arab Press Freedom Watch, based in London and founded by a key figure in the El-Jazeera satellite television network, monitors and publicises actions taken against journalists in Arab states, provides legal help for Arab journalists, and campaigns for greater press freedoms through international non-profit organisations as well as Arab-based human rights groups.

<sup>xii</sup> Names have been used with the permission of interviewees.

<sup>xiii</sup> Sadly, the voices of tolerance have not been fully heeded. Muslim and Arab American communities (as well as Sikhs, who have been mistaken for Muslims) have reported hundreds of hate crimes and have discouraged in some instances the wearing of Islamic garb to prevent racist attacks. One poll conducted by the low-brow daily US Today reported that half of those surveyed support the mandatory use of identity cards for people of Arab origin.

<sup>xiv</sup> It should be emphasised that this ambiguity, while heightened since the 1960s, is not a new phenomenon. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, for instance, Lebanese immigrants, like many other non-Northern European groups, were regarded as racially distinctive vis-à-vis the 'white' majority and therefore outside the bounds of the American nation and community. American laws restricting naturalisation and citizenship to members of the 'white race' revealed the particularly awkward position of Arabic-speaking groups in existing systems of racial categories. A number of cases were brought before federal courts to determine whether 'Syrians' were to

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be considered 'Asian' (and therefore ineligible for citizenship) or 'white' (Samhan, 1999, p. 216-217). The Arabic-speaking community mobilised to prove their whiteness, and eventually, the court accepted the argument that Syrians and 'Arabians' belonged to the 'Semitic' branch of the 'Caucasian race'.

<sup>xv</sup> Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan both rejected 'Arab American committees' for their presidential campaigns, but, interestingly, accepted 'Lebanese American' committees, perhaps because long-established and largely Christian Lebanese American communities seemed less of a political liability. Walter Mondale returned the campaign contribution of a group of Arab-American businessmen, and Hillary Clinton in the most recent senate elections returned a contribution from a Muslim group. Moreover, opposition surfaced early in the George W. Bush administration to the inclusion of Muslims in his 'faith-based' proposals (*Economist*, 2000)

<sup>xvi</sup> Such efforts were perhaps to be expected on the part of the leadership of large national organisations, but they were also strikingly apparent in Arab American communities at large. Not only did many Arab Americans plant American flags in their front gardens (Singer, 2001), they also came out in support to enhanced 'profiling efforts'. A poll taken in Detroit, which is home to the largest concentration of Arab Americans, revealed that a strong majority of Arab Americans in the area (61 percent) felt that extra questioning or inspections of people with 'Middle Eastern features or accents' by law enforcement officials would be justified following 11 September. According to the poll, Detroit's Arab Americans also overwhelmingly supported President George W. Bush's actions during the crisis (Niemic and Windsor, 2001).

<sup>xvii</sup> Describe racial profiling and secret evidence cases.

<sup>xviii</sup> This is a recurring theme in American social history. Efforts to establish suitability for full social membership, for instance, were rife in Jewish-American literature at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when writers such as Mary Antin attempted to prove to her non-Jewish audience that the urban immigrant ghettos—viewed as centres of radicalism, disease, and general foreignness—were in fact breeding grounds of democratic values (Karafilis, ).