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A FEW days ago what's left of the Arab American University Graduates organisation, AAUG, (and its not much) held its annual conference in Washington.

Once substantial gatherings that addressed crucial issues in a serious and noteworthy manner, today's AAUG has been reduced more to an incestuous club where mostly old-timers meet in a style often reminiscent of college reunions.

Simply put, what life there is in today's AAUG is mostly in the form of memories, what future there is for Arab American intellectuals is surely in the hands of others.

Keeping itself at least "academically alive", AAUG partly attempts to justify its ongoing existence by managing to continue to regularly publish its journal, the *Arab Studies Quarterly*.

But when it comes to books, pamphlets, and timely materials, AAUG these days is but a mostly empty shell of what it was supposed to be back when it was founded in the wrenching aftermath of the 1967 war. And when it comes to being taken seriously by anyone other than themselves, AAUG lives in a dream world.

In recent years, even with so much more attention in the US to matters relating to the Mid-east, AAUG has been nearly totally paralysed as well as nearly financially destitute. It's a reflection, of course, of the heightened schisms within the Arab World itself on the one hand; an expression of the relative impotence of academics and intellectuals in many quarters these days on the other.

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the condition of Arab intellectuals worldwide. In a sense sitting in on an AAUG "town meeting" — one specifically called to discuss the state of the ailing organisation — is like a hospital visit to a dying relative who is being kept alive through intensive care at an expense that even family members increasingly question.

Whether AAUG's illness is terminal is debatable of course.

But other than being a "forum" for independent views — a forum "not bought by oil dollars" to quote a few speakers — AAUG seems completely unable to transcend the internal divisions that plague the Arab World, the "homeland", which is the primary connecting thread that brings AAUG people together in the first place.

No one can of course expect AAUG to actually overcome the near civil war dimensions of today's divisions in Arab affairs. But still one would have expected this once premier show-case for Arab intellectuals to have a serious goal and a meaningful purpose beyond being

an incestuous forum to talk to and at each other.

Within this overall framework, the symbolism of AAUG's unspoken boycott against those on the Palestinian "peace talks" delegation represents an interesting contemporary schism between Arab American intellectuals in the US and those who came from the "homeland" to talk peace in Washington — people whom one would have thought would have a common interest in at least trying to support each other.

Most people who came to the conference were completely unaware of the behind-the-scenes manoeuvrings that resulted in this boycott. And the few people who were aware are probably not very happy that the situation comes to light in this way and would object to the very term "boycott", preferring instead to suggest that the Palestinian delegation was just being low-key and AAUG doesn't adopt formal positions about such matters.

And yet, looked at from a political point of view, boycott it was.

From



Washington

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AAUG BOYCOTTS PALESTINIAN TEAM

Though staying at another hotel just a few miles and a few minutes away from the Omni Shoreham where AAUG met, no one from the Palestinian delegation to the peace talks — and the talks were actually going on in Washington the very days AAUG met — even came to any of the social functions. Furthermore no one from the delegations was invited to the banquet, or to speak on a panel, or even to sit in on the sessions that related to the diplomatic situation.

The inside story is rather difficult to come by in all its details; but it goes something like this:

It seems that in recent months as the AAUG board of directors was putting the conference together some on the board not only wanted to invite the members of the various "peace talks" delegations, but also wanted the head of the Palestinian delegation, Dr Haider Abdul Shafi, to be given a special award at the Saturday night banquet.

At one point the award was tentatively approved. And that's when the infighting really began as it was this step — trying

to honour the Palestinian delegation head, Abdul Shafi, with an award — that seems to have caused a backlash that resulted in the end in a kind of quiet mutual boycott.

As things turned out, there was no award (to Abdul Shafi or to anyone else) and no invitations were extended to the Palestinian delegates or to any of the other delegates on other delegations for that matter. And in return it seems no one from the delegations came to any of the affairs or sessions which were for the most part, open to all.

In short, there was so much internal opposition to giving any award to Abdul Shafi — especially from key Palestinian members of AAUG — that the very idea had to be dropped and the whole matter kind of swept under the rug.

Back home in the occupied territories, these schisms are being fought out far more brutally and with far more tragic results.

Here, among the "intellectuals", today's political battles are being waged through these kinds of symbols and gestures.