

# The Arab American News is a credit to the Arab American community and demonstrates what can be done with conviction and determination

## From



Mark A. Bruzonsky

## Washington

# An 'independent' voice

INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM HAS on the whole gone the way of the old independently-owned corner drugstore — very hard to find.

And the main reasons for the disappearance of both independent journalistic publications and family-owned drugstores are in some ways similar.

The old-style corner drugstore, so prevalent in years past, became outdated by a number of basic new economic realities that simply altered the conditions on which its existence had been predicated.

The independent, family-run and managed entity increasingly came up against the impossibility of offering either the product selection or the discount pricing which the modern "chain store" concept made possible. Nor could such a local store advertise and promote itself in ways that would allow it to remain competitive.

As for journalism, in an age of instant TV news, saturation radio coverage, and chain newspapers, trying to publish independently in a way that can attract both advertisers as well as subscribers is a daunting task.

Niche publications covering in-depth subjects of particular interest to a special audience have proliferated. But general interest publications, like the all-purpose corner drugstore of yesteryears, have found themselves either folding or selling out and being absorbed into larger entities which of course have in the process taken their independence.

Yet unlike the old corner drugstore, now nearly extinct, there still are pockets of independent journalism surviving — though rarely prospering.

When it comes to coverage of American politics, for instance, there are bi-weekly publications like *The Nation* and *In These Times* — the former with over 100,000 subscribers, the later about 35,000.

Other independent and progressive publications, though monthly, are *The Progressive*, *Z*, and *Mother Jones*; with a few publications such as *The American Spectator* providing a similar-type approach but for those on the political Right.

When it comes to matters relating to the Mid-East, and to those American ethnic groups that identify with one or another of the protagonists in that region, the American Jewish community has dozens of loosely coordinated and reasonably independent newspapers in major cities around the country.

*The Baltimore Jewish Times* and *The Washington Jewish Week*, for instance, are quite substantial weekly publications that provide a wide assortment of topics and a fairly high level of professional journalism; if not of political points-of-view, on matters that have any bearing on Israel.

As for the still-nascent Arab American community, however, while there is a variety of small publications, few of them qualify for the term "independent", few of them can be considered "professional journalism"; and fewer still have much worth reading beyond social chit-chat and organisational accolades.

Among the main reasons for this situation are a few more simple realities.

First of all, unlike among American Jews, the Arab American community is fractured into many pieces reflecting the very schisms and divisions of the homeland.

Second, unlike the situation with American Jews, there is not much of a serious tradition among Arab Americans when it comes to building and supporting professional and tough-minded institutions to represent them. The few institutions that do prevail function mostly in the social arena, are funded mostly from abroad, and usually are at best involved with "soft" matters such as anti-discrimination rather than "hard" political issues.

And third, if you trace back either the money that was behind the launch of most Arab American publications or the political purpose for which such publications were created usually one finds substantial sums coming from well-heeled sources in the Arab World.

Beyond the inhibitions on "independence" caused in these circumstances, in many cases this also leads to a flurry of activity when the money is flowing followed by a quick retraction, or termination, when the money stops. For none of the publications that have been spawned in these circumstances have ever developed a readership and advertising base that could sustain them.

This has been the case, for instance with *The Return* and *The Jerusalem Press Service*. Heavily-funded by Yasser Arafat, Ramonda Tawil, today Arafat's mother-in-law, came to Washington about a decade ago and squandered huge sums publishing a slick monthly that never had more than a few hundred subscribers. Today this whole effort has shrunk down to a daily faxed press service which has never been able to stand on its own and whose expenses far outweigh its accomplishments.

And there are plenty of other examples that could further serve to illustrate this situation.

George Nader's monthly, *Middle East Insight*, has always been suspected of being funded by a combination of Rightwing Lebanese working in tandem with Zionist elements — and the content has surely reflected such concerns.

*Middle East International*, published in London, has always been hampered-in and semi-controlled by wealthy interests in the Arab Gulf, so much so that the top members of its board are well-known for being in the pocket of governments in the Gulf.

The Siblani speak not as outsiders but as proud Americans. Theirs is the language of 'we' Americans; they speak about 'their' country and its policies; and they advocate change based on the conviction that 'their' America should not be pursuing such policies of injustice and hypocrisy and in the long run will suffer because of the continuing policy mistakes

□ The single most important cause of ... US-aimed terrorism is this country's long history of indiscriminate support for a Jewish state at the expense of the human rights of the largely Muslim Middle East.

□ There is something morally very wrong with a government that bombs a country to raise its standing in the popularity polls. But that seems to be exactly Bill Clinton's motivation here. And if he thought he was teaching a lesson to terrorists around the world with his reprehensible action, he's right. Their opinion that the only language the US understands is force was confirmed.

—Quotes from editorials in the July 3-9 issue of *The Arab American News*

*The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* — while in some ways representing a valiant effort by a group of Americans with long-time experience with the Arab Mid-east — could not continue to exist without the beneficence of wealthy Gulf patrons, themselves with government connections. Accordingly, both the editorial and news content of this at least well put together monthly that has expanded considerably in recent years clearly reflects this sponsorship.

One exception, however, that continues to attempt to defy these modern political and journalistic "realities", is *The Arab American News*.

Today a fold-over tabloid newspaper published in Dearborn, Michigan, *AAN* has shrunk in recent years from the full-size newspaper it was in previous years. But the shrinking has at least made it possible to keep the enterprise from going under, to keep it independent, and to keep hope alive for a better day in the future.

Even with all of its failings — and there are many — in *The Arab American News* one still has a rare example of independent journalism coming from the Arab community in the US.

Published by a struggling husband and wife team, Osama and Kay Siblani, *AAN* will be nine years old this September. It's masthead — which carries a sub-head, *News and Views From the Middle East & The Arab American Community* — still says "published weekly". But that has hardly been the reality for some time now.

Hard-working and committed as they are, just keeping *AAN* alive has itself been a very challenging, laborious, and at times excruciatingly difficult enterprise for the Siblani's.

Having no financial backing from any Arab country or political faction, and always speaking up with nonsense, straight-forward, hard-headed political analysis, *The Arab American News* has gone through many rough periods during which papers were delayed and sometimes even cancelled. At other times money for printing was in hand but not money for mailing.

Refusing to play the game in which one Arab American group and organization compliment another — thus leading to a situation in which no one is really doing very much very well in addition to the fact that no one is really held to much of a standard of accountability — *AAN* has gone its own way relentlessly speaking out about the hypocrisy and duplicity of American Mid-east policy and occasionally exposing

things that the Arab American establishment would have preferred remained hidden from public view.

Compared to the previously-mentioned weekly publications produced within the American Jewish community, truth be told, *AAN* is not a very substantial publication.

But viewed as an example of courageous independent journalism in an exceedingly difficult environment, *AAN* is a little oasis of thoughtful news and commentary.

For instance in the most recent issue, on the editorial page, the following political truisms find expression in print in a thoughtful and provocative manner.

Speaking of US policies in the Mid-east and how this is what has brought about the wave of terrorism in the US so much in the news in recent weeks:

"This biased policy that encourages the mixing of politics and religion in a Jewish state but decries the same thing in a Muslim context; that turns a blind eye to the Jewish state as it works feverishly to become the world's sixth nuclear power but decries Muslim efforts to acquire nuclear weapons; that will mobilize half a million troops and conduct an unprecedented bombing campaign killing thousands of civilians in Muslim Iraq to uphold internationally defined borders but looks the other way when the Jewish state invades and occupies other countries; that will commit resources and formulate policy to facilitate the emigration of Jews from the former Soviet Union to Israel on humanitarian bases but refuses to intercede on behalf of Bosnian Muslims being raped and slaughtered by Serbs or Kashmiri Muslims being raped and slaughtered by Indians; this biased policy is what lies at the heart of our current vulnerability."

While *AAN*, especially in its shrunken current state, is not a publication being noticed nationally; and while the Siblani's lack the resources to change all this in the foreseeable future; nevertheless *AAN* is a credit to the Arab American community and demonstrates what can be done with conviction and determination.

The Siblani's — Osama born in Lebanon, his wife Kay, an American by birth — speak not as outsiders but as proud Americans. Theirs is the language of "we" Americans, they speak about "their" country and its policies, and they advocate change based on the conviction that "their" America should not be pursuing such policies of injustice and hypocrisy and in the long run will suffer because of the continuing policy mistakes.

And so *AAN* struggles along, offering the largest Arab American community in Detroit and Dearborn, as well as Arab Americans nationwide, an opportunity to proudly speak up — even if at the moment not too many are hearing.

This is the old "independent" journalism of the past. Let us hope it still has a future.

Those wishing to contact *The Arab American News* — and many should both to provide support and to take out subscriptions — should call (313) 582-4888 or Fax (313) 582-7870.

# WHAT ABOUT

## Palestinian cit

A QUIET CONTROVERSY has developed between Lebanon and Jordan over the identity of Palestinians and Jordanians residing in Lebanon and what the responsibility of the respective governments towards them. The key question in this controversy are: Who is a Palestinian and who is a Jordanian? How in they are? Who may stay in Lebanon and who have to go back to Jordan?

MOUNIH

Saudi Gazette

According to the Lebanese press, the issue at the centre of discussions held in Beirut between Lebanese Labour Minister Abdul Amin and his Jordanian counterpart Al Karim Al-Kabriti. Both Lebanon and Jordan have large Palestinian communities. Those in Lebanon are estimated at around 500,000. Over 60 per cent of Jordan's population of three million are Palestinians or of Palestinian descent.

Since the share of Palestinians from the Arab-Israeli war in 1948, Lebanon has received several waves of other Palestinians. The big wave in the early 1970s in the wake of the 1967 Palestinian war which forced most Palestinian commandos out of Jordan.

Thousands of them fled to Lebanon with families. Many of them had Jordanian passports and in Lebanon's view, are Jordanians for whom the Amman government is responsible. Jordan on the other hand, argues that the fact these Palestinians have Jordanian passports does not mean they are Jordanians. Amman says the passports were issued to them to facilitate their travel abroad and secure employment.

The issue is particularly significant in the context of current fears in some Lebanese quarters of attempts to resettle the Palestinian population in Lebanon as part of the Mid-east peace agreement. Lebanese and Jordanians discussed the issue in the light of the following considerations:

■ Most Palestinians who came to Lebanon during the civil war entered the country with Jordanian passports. But as soon as they settled they became part of the Palestinian community and dropped their Jordanian passports.

■ Through the 16 years of civil war in Lebanon and until the end of the 1980s an unknown number of Arabs came from Jordan, but it was difficult to determine whether they were Palestinians, Jordanians or of other origins because the state's security services were not functioning. Although many of these Arabs want to be registered in Lebanon as Palestinian refugees, not possible to classify them as such because among them are Jordanians who fled their country for mere economic reasons.

The question for Lebanon is whether it is responsible for hosting all the Palestinians — registered or not — present on its soil or just those who entered the country legally, that is, the prior knowledge and approval of the Jordanian government. In the latter case, Lebanon would be responsible for hosting the following group of Palestinians:

□ The Palestinians who have sought shelter in Lebanon to escape the 1948 war and the bitter

YOU WERE ABLE TO GET MORE AID FOR RUSSIA? OH, HAPPY DAY...

