

NAAA

Arab American 'lobby'

ONE would have thought that the Intifada would have emboldened and enlivened Arab Americans. But that seems not really to be the case, at least not among the Arab American establishment.

The latest example of what should be thought of as a form of organisational self-deception, a kind of political easy-way-out, is what is going on these days with the National Association of Arab Americans — the "N Triple A".

Over the years NAAA has specifically staked out Congress as its turf, having taken to calling itself the primary organisation in the US representing Arab-Americans in Congress, "the Arab-American lobby" if you will.

But this kind of NAAA "Arab-American lobby" seems to be far more show than substance, far more rhetorical facade than political reality. Hardly anyone in Washington, but for its own skimpily membership, takes NAAA seriously as a lobby. And for good reason.

Take for example the recent NAAA annual conference held in mid-June.

It was a small, almost pathetically weak gathering. Except for the banquet — to which corporations and embassies bought up and handed out lots of tickets as always — participants numbered, at most, a few hundred. Many of the speakers found themselves talking to a few dozen NAAA people in a rather small meeting room.

What in past years could at least pass itself off as a political convention this year was reduced to reflecting the more candid reality — a group of well-off Republican-oriented Arab Americans coming together for a kind of reunion pretending to have political clout. At one point the chairman even asked how many young people, "under age 29 and a half", were in the room. He seemed surprised when those standing totalled less than two digits.

Coming in the midst of the escalating violence and repression in occupied Palestine it is, of course, sad to see NAAA shriveled to such an extent. But the tragedy of it all is that there's a political message sent by NAAA, a double-barrelled message.

The message is that of general approval for Bush administration policies coupled with a confirmation of the lack of any effective counter from Americans of Arab ancestry to the still omnipotent Jewish lobby.

It's true — by way of compensation, in a sense — that the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) has grown in size, and somewhat in clout as well as NAAA has shriveled. But ADC has never purported to be a serious Arab-American lobby with the purpose of countering the powerful American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) — the nerve-centre for the multi-tentacled Jewish-Israeli lobby which continues to wield such political terror in this town. ADC has instead worked in the "soft" and "easy" areas of racial discrimination, modelling itself more on the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith than on AIPAC.

True also that NAAA has, to some extent at least, recognised its predicament and in recent

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Washington

weeks hired a couple of competent, young Americans of Palestinian background as president (Jawad George) and associate executive director for public affairs (Khalil Jahshan) with promises of reorganising and reenergising itself. And yet, as in NAAA's past, financial and social rewards to far outweigh serious political objectives for those who control this self-styled Arab American lobby.

For it does little good to focus on future aspirations or to enumerate all the excuses why things are as bad as they are, as difficult as they are.

Nor does it make much sense to rationalise that there are other groups a bit better so things shouldn't be considered to be totally bleak.

It's far better, it seems to me, to candidly examine the actual state of affairs of an organisation like NAAA and realise that the basic political situation of Arab American impotent and meanness hasn't really improved over the past decade, and in some ways has even gone worse.

In NAAA's case this is all taking place while there's even a supporter in the White House — long-time NAAA member John Sununu, the White House chief of staff, who did, indeed, attend the banquet though he did not sit on the podium nor say anything.

Thus at the very time when Arab Americans could use their entree to the corridors of American power for serious impact they are instead playing a kind of footsie with the Bush administration praising a phrase here, a gesture there all the while things get worse for the Palestinians day by day and the Mid-east arms race continues to escalate towards an eventual explosion.

It's a disgraceful situation really, all the more so in view of the real suffering the Israelis and their American benefactors are inflicting while the Bush administration continues the generally duplicitous and disingenuous ways of the Reagan years. It shouldn't be forgotten of course, that the current president, and most of his key advisers, were Reagan administration officials as well.

With only a few thousand members and a financial base largely made up of contributions from abroad rather than real support here at home, NAAA has allowed itself to drift into political lethargy at the very time a real Arab American lobby is most needed.

Indeed, it could just be that the ability to continue to get its all important financial support from abroad — where words and slick pamphlets can more easily substitute for real accomplishments — may just be among NAAA's greatest problems.

Past years saw excessively lucrative salaries and bonuses (in the six figures) to senior NAAA officials and a facade of self-important unjustified by the realities of political life in Washington. Images were "sold" overseas that were never translated into actuality back at home. NAAA became like a overblown balloon — big in image but largely empty inside — and large amounts of external money couldn't forever substitute for organisational reality and political sophistication.

For if NAAA had been forced to find its support here at home — from its own grassroots, from the tens of thousands of concerned Americans of Arab ancestry, from the growing number of people in this country upset about the excessive power of the Jewish lobby and the plight of the Palestinians — it would probably today be a more potent and more serious organisation.

But the building of a truly grassroots and thus potentially effective Arab American lobby seems still far off. Not only is NAAA still finding it much easier to go overseas for support, but NAAA's very orientation continues to cater to the conservative elements here at home.

In essence, the total political content of the NAAA convention was rather simple — "support the Israeli-US elections plan for its the only game in town." One long-time observer even commented to me that the whole affair seemed to be orchestrated with a script approved at the State Department. Indeed, it appeared NAAA bent over backwards to find a variety of speakers, including American Jews and Israelis, all of whom had in common the basic message that the so-called "peace process" is working and that "elections," a la some variant of the Shamir plan, must be the next step.

Gone was talk of an international conference, stopping the daily Israeli killing of Palestinians, true even-handedness by the US suspension of arms and funding to Israel, ways to halt the dangerous Mid-east arms race. All that was out this time around.

Former Congressman Paul Findley told the audience that the Bush administration had already taken "historic steps" on the road to peace in the Mid-east. Congressman David Obey warned that the Arab World has missed many opportunities in the past" and besides "what alternative is there to accepting Mr Shamir's limited offer". The State Department representative, Oan Kurzer, assured everyone that "engagement, dialogue

and negotiations" are the way, belittling any other approach and brushing over his department's refusal to even let the widow of assassinated PLO leader Abu Jihad attend the conference. Rita Hauser told everyone she fully agreed leaving the impression she is a kind of combined State Department mouthpiece and female Abba Eban. And Knesset member Ran Cohen gave assurances that "we can widen and deepen this Shamir initiative".

And, of course, the choice of award winners reflected this politically naive and intellectually lightheadedness as well.

All the awards centred around the "great breakthrough" of the US-PLO "dialogue" and the urgency to keep hope alive through the "elections" scheme. Rita Hauser and her misnamed "Centre" for Peace" got the lunch award the first day; Ambassador Richard Murphy got the main award at the banquet: the ambassadors from Egypt and Stockholm were honoured for their roles in bringing about the "dialogue".

Meanwhile, a first-class analyst of the Israeli scene and a courageous advocate for true peace, Israel Shahak, in Washington for other reasons, was at the last moment told he could come and "be recognised" at the banquet, but not speak. Wisely he chose to stay away muttering epithets of disgust for NAAA.

Even though the Reagan years were among the worst for Arab interests, and especially for the Palestinians, NAAA nevertheless chose to give its yearly award for public service to non-other than the former assistant secretary of state Richard Murphy, the "yes sir" fellow who for eight long years kept following his orders while professing himself to be personally more reasonable and compassionate.

As the director of the Palestine Research and Educational Centre, Muhammad Hallaj, has written about this matter.

"Honouring Murphy's contribution to peace and justice in the Mid-east is not only undeserved; it is a dangerous disregard of the interests of Arab Americans who deserve more than a bone from their public servants. It is the wrong message with tells politicians that the Arab American community is the one constituency which can be safely ignored and even offended and be grateful for it."

"Mr Murphy," Hallaj added, "was the principal actor in the articulation of American Mid-east policy during the Reagan, Shultz era. He was either a participant or an instrument, or both, in the development and promotion of the most irrational and biased expression of American foreign policy on record. If he was the unwilling victim of the most anti-Arab administration ever, he ought to pitied...not honoured."

But pity would not be the right response to today's NAAA and to the shameful political display put on at this years annual convention.

More fitting would be an awakening on the part of those truly concerned with a fair and just and principled American role in the Mid-east — and especially with alleviating the suffering of the Palestinians — that their's, NAAA's, is not the way and that their's, NAAA's, is not the address to turn to.