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ARAB AMERICANS AREN'T OUR ENEMY

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The proliferation of hate crimes and discrimination should be uniting Jewish, Arab and Muslim Americans

THE LAST PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN BROUGHT IT home: Muslim and Arab Americans are part of American politics to stay. Indeed, they are eagerly courted by the candidates, a testament to the growing sophistication of political groups such as the Arab-American Institute and the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee. Arabs and Muslims in America are increasing in numbers and, both as individuals and communities, in political influence. That causes trepidation among some American Jews, who'd like to wish those communities away or define them as the enemy. But the simple fact is that Jews and Muslims will both remain a part of American political life. That reality demands that American Jews reexamine their relations with Muslims and Arabs with an eye toward dialogue, tolerance, and mutual acceptance.

American Jews must not stand in the way of Arab and Muslim civic activity. To do so would only play into the hands of the anti-Semitism that (regrettably) already exists in some radical quarters. Rather, efforts at inclusion and dialogue should be made to strengthen moderate voices within both communities. Beyond this practical argument, there is also a moral one: Was there not a time when the admission of Jews as full partners in American society was a matter on which others looked askance? For American Jews to take up where the nativists and McCarthyites left off would surely be the most absurd of ironies.

And yet, at times, it seems they are doing just that. The 1999 outcry against Arab-American Joseph Zogby's work in the State Department is an example. Even putting aside the fact that many Jews serve at State - some in leading roles directly related to the Middle East peace process - what possible benefit to Jews, or to America as a pluralistic society, could be derived from such an outcry? Did Zogby's denouncers really believe that they could keep Arab-Americans out of the State Department? Why would Jews - given all that they have had to overcome - seek such an outcome?

Nor is it reasonable for American Jews (of all people!) to start arguing that ethnicity should not play a role in foreign policy. The question is whether the legitimate debate over U.S. policy in the Middle East cannot be tempered with tolerance and civic-mindedness. The Israeli-Arab conflict must not become a basis for the perpetuation of religious or social hatreds: Regardless of what happens in Israel, Judaism is not at war with Islam or the Arab world. The goals of Jewish and Arab-Muslim interaction should be to ensure that this debate takes place in a fashion worthy of the deep values shared by all sides. Efforts such as those by Jewish and Muslim groups in Los Angeles to agree to a "code of conduct" - a jointly formulated document that affirms a basic civil partnership among all Americans without whitewashing differences of opinion - is surely a positive start. As the code states: "While we may disagree, even passionately, on some important issues, we believe that dialogue on every issue should be conducted vigorously with civility and respect." On the occasion of its signing, Rabbi Alice Dubinsky, a party to the code, told the Los Angeles Times: "Here in L.A., Muslims and Jews are neighbors... We can no longer cling to fear and prejudices." Yet too many

Jews - both individuals and organizations - have remained aloof from these efforts.

Moreover, the unfortunate proliferation of hate crimes and discrimination against ethnic minorities should be uniting Jewish, Arab and Muslim Americans. So should issues like prayer in schools and separation of church and state. Despite their foreign-policy differences, the communities should and can be partners in a domestic agenda of tolerance. An instructive example: in December, the Ku Klux Klan attempted to forge ties with Chicago-area Arab groups by holding a "Solidarity with the Palestinians" rally in Skokie. The local Arab-American Action Network, together with other Arab groups in the area, rejected the idea, declaring that "the Ku Klux Klan is trying to portray Judaism as the common enemy of the Palestinians and white supremacists. But neither Judaism nor the Jewish people are the enemy of the Palestinians. Our struggle... is against the government of the State of Israel, not against the Jewish people." Such comments well befit the spirit of what Jews, Muslims and Arabs throughout America should strive to achieve: agreement to disagree, as common members of a tolerant, open society.

Yes, Muslim and Arab Americans have a radically different foreign-policy agenda than do Jewish Americans. It is also understandable that, given this different - and at times, strongly anti-Israeli - agenda, American Jews would feel unease and dismay. Yet these views are legitimate, and deserve to be treated as such. Wantonly applying the label of "anti-Semite" or "terrorist" to those with honest differences of opinion, or otherwise trying to box them out of the political debate, can only create resentment and cheapen social discourse.

The real solution is a policy of active pursuit of positive dialogue and cooperation, in which American Jews face their Arab and Muslim counterparts openly, confidently and with acceptance. Only thus will they contribute to a future that is truly free, open and tolerant; only thus will there be any hope of introducing a measure of moderation into the debate.

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