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# Citizenship, Identity, and Transnational Migration: Arab Immigrants to the US

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**CITIZENSHIP, IDENTITY, AND TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION:  
ARAB IMMIGRANTS TO THE UNITED STATES**

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## **CITIZENSHIP, IDENTITY, AND TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION: ARAB IMMIGRANTS TO THE UNITED STATES**

### **Abstract:**

The aim of this paper is to assess immigrants' social and political activities, the spatiality of their identities, and the ways in which these are implicated in their conceptualisation of citizenship. We first examine the ways in which scholars discuss changes in the ways in which citizenship and political identity are expressed in the context of international migration. We argue that much of the discussion of transnationalism and diaspora cling to an assumption that citizenship remains an important – though not defining – element of identity. Our position, by contrast, is that migration is one of a number of processes that transform the relationship between citizenship and identity. More specifically, we argue that it is possible to claim identity as a citizen of a country without claiming an identity as “belonging to” or “being of” that country, thus breaking the assumed congruity between citizenship, state, and nation. We explore this possibility through a study of Arab immigrants in the US. Our findings, based on interviews with activists and an analysis of Arab-American websites, suggest that concerns with both homeland and national integration are closely related to each other and may simultaneously inform immigrants' political activism. Methodologically, these findings indicate a need to identify multiple axes of political identification and territorial attachment that shape immigrants' sense of political membership.

“Building this website doesn’t alienate us from the rest of the country, the reality is, it makes us closer in unifying our efforts to combat the challenges we are facing and our future generations might face.” *ArabAmericanGuide.com*, <http://www.arabamericanguide.com>, as viewed 9 February, 2003.

Western democracies are in the midst of debates about citizenship, identity, and what it means to be a member of a political community in an age of globalization. For many scholars and political commentators, forces associated with globalization, particularly those associated with global migration, challenge the idea of an individual as a citizen in a single nation-state. Some suggest, for instance, that the increasing prevalence of dual citizenship and denizenship (long term residency without naturalisation) has disrupted the exclusive relationship between citizen and state, and has created in its stead a multi-tiered system of societal membership (Brubaker, 1989). At the same time, it is argued, the recognition of international human rights norms by Western immigrant-receiving states has conferred most social, economic, and political rights associated with nation-state membership to non-citizens, thereby emptying citizenship of much of its content and significance (Soysal, 1994). Some analysts go so far as to suggest that the erosion of the nation-state’s role with regard to citizenship signals a rescaling of citizenship in which localities and supranational organisations become the primary sites in which citizenship is regulated (Held, 1993; Holston & Appadurai, 1999). The expanding literature on transnationalism, which highlights immigrants’ persistent ties to their homelands, likewise suggests a host of challenges to traditional conceptions of citizenship (Basch, et al., 1994; Vertovec, 1999), even for the second generation.

Embedded within many of these interrelated arguments about contemporary citizenship are claims about the role of technology in transforming the political identities and activities of immigrants. A common contention is that, while previous generations of migrants were cut off

from their homelands by massive distances and had no choice but to assimilate, today's migrants are able to maintain political, economic, and emotional linkages through new and relatively inexpensive modes of communication and transport. As Castles and Davidson (2000, p. 18) argue, 'assimilation is no longer an option because of the rapidity and multidirectionality of mobility and communication'.

However, amidst the scholarly and popular debates about migration and the fate of modern citizenship, basic questions relating to the ways in which immigrants themselves perceive, experience, and practice citizenship and political membership remain unanswered. In this paper, we wish to explore the meanings that immigrants attach to identities and to assess the relationship between citizenship, identity, and immigrants' social and political activities. We are especially concerned with the spatiality of citizenship and the geographical linkages generated by immigrants' community-building and political activities and by their varied connections to different places.

We begin by examining different arguments about the ways in which contemporary migration processes have altered citizenship and the expression of political identity. While we embrace recent efforts to show citizenship in a more complicated light, we also caution against analyses suggesting that contemporary immigrants, rather than assimilating, remain wedded to homeland-based or particularistic identities. We suggest, in contrast, that it is possible to claim identity as a citizen of a country and to negotiate membership within the bounds of 'belonging' without claiming to 'be of' that country. We explore this possibility through a study of Arab immigrants in the US. Our findings, based on interviews with activists and an analysis of Arab-American websites, suggest that concerns with both homeland and national integration are closely related to each other and may simultaneously inform immigrants' political activism.

Methodologically, these findings indicate a need to identify multiple axes of political identification and territorial attachment that shape immigrants' sense of political membership.

### **Migration, Citizenship, and Identity**

Most Western models of citizenship link a sense of belonging to a territorialized political community most often represented by the nation-state. (Castles & Davidson, 2000; Jacobson, 1996). Citizenship, in this respect, offers a bounded equality that reflects the historical articulation of national communities (Piper, 1998; Brubaker, 1989). This boundedness poses a contradiction between individual, abstract, 'universal' rights and particularistic notions of cultural community and nation (Bauböck, 1994; also, Kymlicka, 2001). Citizenship serves equally as a mode of inclusion and incorporation in society *and* as a legal and cultural framework for excluding those who deviate from societal norms (Walby, 1986; Young, 1990; Yuval-Davis, 1997; Lister, 1997). Though immigrants and other 'deviant' groups may enjoy formal citizenship status (or many of the privileges and rights of formal citizenship), they often remain excluded in substantive terms from dominant sectors of society (Piper, 1998) and from dominant representations of society (Mitchell, 1997). It therefore becomes necessary to distinguish between formal citizenship and substantive citizenship—that is, between one's legal status and one's ability to realise the rights and privileges of societal membership.

In recent years, scholarship on citizenship has addressed not only the tension between inclusion and exclusion inherent in the modern citizenship ideal, but also the seeming breakdown of the political-territorial framework that has come to define this ideal. Many scholars describe the challenges facing modern citizenship in terms of a trend toward 'transnational' (e.g., Bauböck, 1994) or 'post-national' (e.g., Soysal, 1994) societies, but it should be emphasised that

many such challenges, in fact, stem from nation-states themselves. First, some sending states have come to view their émigrés as a valuable source of remittances, investment capital, and votes, and have fostered linkages with their diasporas (Lessinger, 1992; Laguerre, 1999). In some cases, sending states have encouraged dual citizenship as a way of maintaining a hold on their expatriates (Itzigsohn, 1999). The significance of this trend for modern conceptions of citizenship is in the expansion of boundaries of political action beyond a single nation-state. As Itzigsohn (1999) argues, the integration of diasporas in the political life of the sending country calls into question the exclusivity of the citizenship model by multiplying geographical fields of political participation and by detaching one's political identity from one's country of residence.

Second, many policies of receiving states disrupt national models of citizenship. Under pressure from growing numbers of foreign residents, many receiving states in the West have adjusted their legal systems, citizenship policies, and models of integration in a manner that diminishes the significance of formal citizenship and of national ideologies. Soysal (1994), for instance, shows that Western states, having subscribed to international human rights norms, have begun to permit dual citizenship and to extend the rights of citizenship to non-citizens. Joppke (1999), meanwhile, points to the growing separation between nationalist ideologies and notions of political community, particularly under the auspices of 'multiculturalism'. For Joppke, multiculturalism and liberalized citizenship regimes challenge the very essence of the national citizenship framework by 'partially reversing a two-hundred-year tradition of increasingly "ethnicized" citizenship in Europe' (Joppke, 1999, p 645).

While sending and receiving states chip away at the territorialized model of national citizenship from one end, immigrants themselves, many suggest, chip away at it from the other in a variety of ways. For some, the decoupling of national identity and societal membership, and

the recasting of national citizenship as 'human rights', has opened new spaces for the mobilisation of ethno-religious particularisms among immigrant communities. More inclusionary rights, as Soysal (2000) suggests, clash with exclusionary practices of identity, as minorities appeal to discourses of equality and individual rights to make group-specific claims. Joppke (1999), similarly, contends that the liberalisation of citizenship regimes and their divorce from national ideologies has opened Western liberal democracies to a variety of particularistic claims. Joppke argues that in the case of the United States, for instance, immigrants commonly reject assimilation and are socialised into a 'racial minorities' paradigm 'around which an elaborate regime of civil rights protection and identity production has been built' (p. 633; see also Waters, 1999). In what may seem a paradoxical politics of citizenship, many immigrants appear to claim citizenship rights, even as they eschew an identity as only or primarily a citizen (Brubaker, 2001).

The growing scholarship on transnationalism takes up these issues through a focus on the ways in which immigrants attempt to expand fields of social action and social life beyond the nation-state. Specifically, this literature highlights the continued engagement of immigrants with their place of origin, facilitated by high-speed communications and transport technology (Cohen and Vertovec, 1999; Vandenberg, 2000; Vertovec, 2001). The main premise of this approach is that while transnational activity existed in the past, contemporary transnationalism is novel in scope and in its persistence, and reflects not simply immigrants' longing for home, but a new political geography structured between localities (Mandaville, 1999; Itzigsohn, 1999; Smith, 2001). Immigrant groups (or diasporas and transmigrants) are said to exist in a new global market of political loyalties, engaging in a complex politics of 'here and there' and resisting

attempts by the state to “fix the parameters of political community and territory” (Mandaville, 1999, p. 665; also, Appadurai, 1991) and to assimilate newcomers into a national culture.

The issue of transnationalism, while presented as a new theoretical development, relates in some ways to longer-standing discussions about exclusion and marginalisation of immigrants described above. When migrants have the feeling they will never be accepted into the host society – whether due to cultural or religious differences, media representations, or state actions – they experience the disjunction between legal categories of citizenship and the more expressive sense of belonging to or identification with the political community (e.g., Haddad, 1998). For some people, this is expressed in the ‘long distance nationalism’ identified by Fouron and Glick Schiller (2001), while for others it may take the form of a heightened attachment with country of origin as a way of differentiating themselves from others in the country in which they live (Haddad, 1998; Tseng, 2002). In this context, one might well expect to see the kinds of ‘disjunctive’ forms of citizenship discussed by Holston and Caldiera (1998) in which rights formal aspects of citizenship are extended, even as social and substantive rights are not. When this happens, formal citizenship may be decoupled from identification with the nation-state.

Combining all of these arguments, it seems that the development of new ideologies of integration and national membership and the reconfiguration of rights in the context of large-scale migration have undoubtedly reshaped citizenship and the interactions between immigrants and members of host societies. At the very least, it appears that citizenship can no longer be seen as some end-point of an assimilation process—if, indeed, it ever could. Leaving aside normative judgements as to whether this is ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ it is evident that some immigrants use a legal standing a citizen to work to further particularistic claims, sometimes under the political banner of multiculturalism (Soysal, 2000; Kymlicka, 2001; Brubaker, 2001). From this

basis, immigrants (and other marginalized groups) have reformulated identity and citizenship in ways that do not force an all-or-nothing identification with the nation-state.

But it is not entirely clear that citizenship as a political identity or as a framework for societal membership rooted in the nation-state is diminishing in significance to all immigrants. Not all forms of immigrant politics reflect a wholesale attachment homeland or to particular religious or ethnic identities (Labelle & Midy, 1999; also Castles & Davidson, 2000). At least some forms of immigrant and minority activism appeal to notions of citizenship, integration, and national membership in pressing their claims in host societies. As Statham (1999) reports in his study of immigrant politics in Britain, very few political claims pressed in public arenas revolve around demands for group rights or recognition of cultural differences; on the contrary, most of the political mobilisation he observed reflects demands for inclusion in national society, full citizenship rights, and, indeed, 'integration'. Kymlicka (2001) likewise rejects the argument that contemporary immigrants are uninterested in or incapable of integrating into national societies, and argues that the overwhelming aim of immigrant activism is to negotiate an equal position in adopted societies and to become accepted as part of the 'mainstream,' even as complete assimilation in a cultural sense is rejected (also, Brubaker, 2001).

It seems, then, that immigrants may engage simultaneously in a 'politics of difference' and a 'politics of sameness' (Nagel, 2002) in which multiple identity claims shape political activism and outlooks, even as groups act and assert themselves as citizens. Rather than providing definitive answers, current scholarship identifies several *possibilities* with regard to the impacts of new forms of legal citizenship (e.g. denizenship) and ideologies of societal membership (e.g. multiculturalism) on immigrants' identification with and participation in national societies. These possibilities may construct citizenship in scales and political spaces

beyond the nation-state, as well as within it. In the remainder of this paper, we explore these possibilities through an examination of activism by first and second-generation Arab-Americans, focusing on those living in the San Francisco Bay Area.

### **Analysing Arab-American Political Identities**

This analysis is part of a larger study of political incorporation of Arab immigrants to the US and their offspring. The study is centered on immigrants who are involved organisations that serve the Arab-American communities in four cities: Detroit, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Washington, DC. The framework of the broader study shapes our analysis, as we explain below. In this section of the paper, we present our framework and rationale for focusing on Arabs who are involved with community-building organizations.

#### *The study population: Arab immigrants in the United States*

The empirical focus of this pilot study is the Arab-origin community in the United States. Since the 1960s the Arab-American population<sup>1</sup> has grown rapidly as a result of both changing immigration policies in the US (namely, the lifting of national origins quotas in 1965) and political-economic crises in Arab states that have precipitated large flows of refugees and labour migrants. Based on country-of-birth statistics and responses to the open-ended ancestry question on recent censuses, it is estimated that 3 million people in the United States trace their origins to the Arabic-speaking world. It is believed that the majority of contemporary Arab immigrants are Muslim, though the Arab-origin population overall is thought to be two-thirds Christian due to early waves of Lebanese immigrants (Arab American Institute (AAI), 2001). Major concentrations of Arab immigrants are found in Detroit, Los Angeles, Washington, DC, New

York, and the San Francisco Bay Area.<sup>2</sup> The Arab-origin population is highly-educated and financially well-off relative to the population at large, and Arab-Americans claim the highest per capita ownership of business of any ethnic group in America (AAI, 2001). There are, however, disadvantaged segments (particularly among refugees from Iraq and Lebanon and among Yemenis), and overall, almost 11 percent of Arab-Americans live under the poverty line.

We have focused on Arab-Americans for two reasons. First, Arab immigrants appear to be archetypal transnational subjects, associated both with extensive commercial networks (particularly in the case of the Lebanese (e.g. Shehadi and Hourani, 1992)), and, in the eyes of many in the West, with global terrorist networks. The second, but related, reason for focusing on Arab-American communities is that they embody a tension between formal citizenship and social membership. Arab immigrants have been relatively advantaged in gaining admittance to the US because of their high levels of education and professional qualifications and their participation in post-graduate education. Like other post-1965 immigrants, once permitted to settle legally in the US, they have been able to secure formal citizenship with relative ease. Arab immigrants have high rates of naturalisation relative to other immigrant groups; for example, 67.2% of Egyptians migrating to the US naturalize, the 9<sup>th</sup> highest rate of any nationality (BCIS, 2003). However, Arabness has been consistently marginal to notions of community and nationhood in American society (Joseph, 1999). 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. 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 media coverage of political events in Arab states (Said, 1981; Haddad, 1998).

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>3</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.

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. '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 interactions between identities, political activities, and citizenship.

### *Analytical Strategy*

In order to understand the spatiality of immigrants' political identities, we undertook a two-prong analysis of web-sites associated with Arab-American organisations and of intensive interviews with leaders of a sub-set of those organisations. Our intention was to examine the public representations of political identity on the web-sites and to have the people who directed the organisations reflect on what those representations were intended to convey. We also asked the leaders to position themselves relative to the American political community and to talk about the meaning of citizenship in their lives.

Before providing more detail about the analysis, however, we would like to justify four decisions that structured our analysis: our focus on organisations, on specific cities, on websites and on leaders. Each one of these decisions as to focus would seem to lead to 'extreme' positions or to findings that are not 'representative' of Arab-Americans as a group. As such, it is important to be clear as to the rationale for our decisions and what they allow us – and do not allow us – to take from the analysis.

Our focus is on organisations that are involved in serving the Arab-American community in the four cities; most of them are 'bricks and mortar' organisations that began off-line and added an on-line component. We target organisations because they provide an easily identifiable pool of people who claim Arab origins. By joining the organisation or participating in its activities, individuals act on the basis of affinity with Arabness, and therefore actively negotiate issues of community, membership, and citizenship. While it might be desirable to understand the ways in which people who do not claim Arab-origins negotiate political membership, the current political climate in the US is not conducive to randomly targeting people with Arabic last

names. Even at the best of times, that is a difficult strategy, as many Arab-origin families anglicize their surnames, and many African-Americans have assumed Arabic (and especially Islamic-Arabic) surnames. Furthermore, many Arab-Americans have voiced their displeasure at being targeted and profiled. Through their participation in organisations, however, we have some sense that our respondents claim an identity as Arab; our goal is to understand how that identity works with their understandings of citizenship.

We focus on the organizations that are located within specific cities for two reasons. First, and as noted above, this is part of a larger study that focuses on those cities. Second, but related, we focus on organizations that are located within cities so that we can evaluate the full range of locations in which organisations are active – locally within the US, nationally, transnationally, and locally within the Middle East. Again, our purpose is to examine the *possibilities* for different spatial strategies. Our decision to focus on organizations in our four study cities ensures that we will have some organisations that maintain a local focus within the US. This is in contrast to studies that have specifically sought out the transnational activities, rather than considering the ways in which transnational strategies may be contextualized by place-based realities of organisations.

In selecting websites, we hoped to tap into two issues. First, the World Wide Web is an example of a communications technology that facilitates transnational linkages. The Internet in general has been the subject of lively debates as to whether it will lead to a re-invigorated political community that incorporates diverse constituencies in dialogue or whether it will lead to greater fragmentation and diffuse political ties. In the case of immigrants, there is some discussion (and concern) as to whether this will foster long distance nationalism and a removal from the political community of the host society or whether it will allow migrants to participate

in political communities constituted in two locations (Smith, 1998; Vandenberg, 2000). Against these claims, Staeheli and her collaborators (2002) find little evidence of political mobilisation of any sort by immigrants on the Internet. The current study is designed to provide evidence to enter the debate as to whether and how immigrant organisations use the Internet to build political communities and the spatiality of those communities. The second reason for focusing on the web-sites is purely pragmatic: they are a public representation of political identity that is designed to send messages to members, prospective members, and the Internet public at large (Sosnoski, 1999). These are not hidden messages or messages that are difficult to decode; they are designed to convey images that will be meaningful to the community the organisation serves as well as to impart a level of external legitimacy to the community and its members. They are part of the social network that connects individuals, communities, and outsiders (Garton, et al., 1999).

Finally, we rely on leaders of organisations for a variety of reasons, many of which reflect the practicalities of doing this research. Leaders are easier to find, at least initially, and they are more likely to be able to respond to questions about the web-sites, organisation goals with respect to the web-sites, and the politics of citizenship the organisation and its members may pursue.<sup>4</sup>

Given these decisions, we clearly cannot make an argument about the representativeness of our data or our findings. But such is not our purpose. The diversity within the Arab-American community makes statements about central tendencies or “Arabs as a group” very difficult – if not meaningless. We are interested here in the *range* of expressions of political identity and the *possibilities* for combining political identities with different understandings of

citizenship. We wish to avoid the problems of over-extending an argument based on a limited evaluation of one particular group.

Fifty-two websites were evaluated in the first stage of our analysis. As described above, the websites are linked to organisations associated with Arab-American communities in the four cities. Not all organisations in the cities, however, maintain a website, and this may have the effect of leading us to ‘oversample’ organisations that have an appearance of an international or transnational emphasis. For example, many religious organisations that focus only on the locality do not maintain a website, perhaps relying on regular attendance at services to convey information to congregants. And based on other information we have collected, it appears likely that these organisations are also less likely to have political goals in their mission statements. Yet it is equally likely that the public pronouncements and activities promoted on the websites shape perceptions about the organization, its members – and Arabs as a group. The websites thus become an important source of information about Arab-Americans that shape further actions and attitudes, irrespective of their representativeness. And the other possibility is that the apparent over sampling serves to ‘correct’ the emphasis on locality-based organisations described previously.

The websites were evaluated in terms of the kinds of issues they addressed, the geography of the issues, the capacity-building elements of the sites, and the kinds of interaction made possible through them.<sup>5</sup> Our concern is to understand the ways in which organisations present themselves as members of American political communities and how ‘Arabness is situated within that. In a sense, we want to understand the ‘here and there’ of political identification and citizenship as represented on the websites.

There is only so much that can be read from a website, however, so we turn to interviews

with leaders of a small set of organisations. These interviews included questions about both the individual and the organisations with which they are involved. With regard to individuals, we asked questions about identities, motivations for participation in Arab American organisations, conceptions of citizenship, and how activism relates to a sense of belonging in a community or multiple communities. We also asked individuals whether they are involved in any other organised activities (Arab-American-oriented or otherwise) and, if so, how different involvements fit together. With regard to organisations, we asked individuals to comment on the aims of the group, the linkages the group maintains with other groups both in the US and abroad, the way in which groups present themselves to the wider public (for instance, through organisational literature and internet sites) and how this related to notions of citizenship and membership in different communities. We also asked specifically about the ways in which the organisation uses the Internet and what they hope to achieve through their websites. We use this information to get a sense of the ways that the groups use communications technologies to forge social and geographical networks. The individuals were associated with organisations in San Francisco, reflecting that area's status as the most wired region of the US and the fact that organisations in this area were most likely to maintain a website.

The organisations represented by the interviewees are diverse in terms of political aims and strategies, and in terms of the scale on which they operate. One organisation, for instance, is homeland-oriented in its activities, sending direct aid to war-torn Lebanon, while also sponsoring social activities for the local Lebanese and Arab community; another is focused almost entirely on the local Arabic-speaking population and securing city services for this population. Still another is focused on Arab-world issues, though activism is oriented toward local and national political leaders and often involves alliances with a variety of local and national activist groups.

The structure of the organisations represented in this pilot study range from large membership associations to a ‘one-man show’ that operates mainly through the Internet. It should be noted, however, that all of these organisations have a degree of public visibility through their lobbying efforts, their sponsorship of public events, and their websites; we did not target organisations that shy away from the public gaze. The individuals interviewed, a mix of Christians and Muslims, are all highly educated and enjoy middle class status and US citizenship. For all those similarities, they employ a variety of strategies and thus allow an initial exploration of the range of possibilities that organisations may follow. All of the interviews were conducted prior to September 11, 2001.

### **Internet Activism and the Geographies of Citizenship**

Our analysis of Arab American websites, along with questions on technology usage asked of our interviewees, were intended to evaluate conflicting claims about the nature of contemporary citizenship by systematically examining the identities and political aims expressed on-line and the geographical networks created through these sites.

The websites present a complex picture of the associations between identities, activism, and geography. Sites were first coded in terms of the kinds of issues and activities that were promoted through the sites; a summary of this coding is presented in Table 1. As a general category, community building seemed to be the most important functions of the organisations and the websites. One strategy for community building was to promote cultural awareness for Arab and non-Arab audiences. This took several forms, including teaching about language, cultural, history, and society. Many of the sites attempted to convey a sense of pride and to build a consciousness of Arabness. The Lebanese American Association, for example, aims to provide

a place for Lebanese in the San Francisco region to come together and develop shared values and to learn about Lebanese culture and history. It sponsors a variety of events for the Lebanese community, including picnics, language tutorials, and galas to raise funds for Lebanese school children in the Bay Area and Lebanon.

**Table 1**

	<b># of Websites</b>	<b>% of Websites</b>
<b>Total # Websites</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Organization Type</b>		
On-line only	5	10%
On-line and off-line	48	92%
<b>Mission of Organizations</b>		
Cultural Awareness	26	50%
Arts	4	8%
Education	21	40%
Language Training	5	10%
Civil Rights in US	14	27%
Advocacy for Middle East	12	23%
Advocacy for Arabs in US	14	27%
Political -- other, general	5	10%
Immigration Issues	6	12%
Religion	6	12%
Community Building	34	65%
Charity -- Middle East	10	19%
Charity/Social Services, US	11	21%
Business Promotion	4	8%
Media	9	17%
Women	5	10%
Children/Youth	3	6%
Families	1	2%
Sexuality	2	4%
<b>Site Includes Capacity for</b>		
Political Mobilization	20	38%
Information Sharing	34	65%
Community Building	33	63%
<b>Interactivity</b>		
Links to Information Resources	30	58%
List serv/e-mail group	15	29%
Chat Room	5	10%

A second strategy might be seen as more political in orientation, as there are a cluster of sites that address issues that are important in a variety of locations and scales. These sites, for example, promote issues related to civil rights, policies affecting Arabs in the US and issues in the Middle East. The word “cluster” here is significant, as most of these sites advocated all three kinds of political issues, rather than only one. Typical of these sites is the website for the San Francisco Bay Area chapter of the Arab Women’s Solidarity Association. The organisation promotes “Arab women’s active participation in social, economic, cultural, and political life.” This site includes statements in support of Palestinian refugees, links to political sites supporting civil rights in the United States and elsewhere, and a statement demanding the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee behave in a more democratic fashion. In addition, there are links to feminist organisations that are not ostensibly focused on Arabs or immigrants.

While the political orientations of these sites is notable, it is important to put them into the broader context of this sample. Fewer of the sites have an overtly political message than we anticipated, given the sample; only about one-third of the sites were oriented toward advocacy. To the extent that there is a politics present in this set of sites, it is more likely to be an identity or a cultural politics that promotes cultural awareness and pride in Arab culture. And it may be a rather passive politics. Less than half of the sites seemed to be used for political mobilization; many more were involved in information provision and community-building. These latter two activities are essential, of course, for more overt political action, but the relatively small number of advocacy sites suggests that the literature on transnationalism should, perhaps, be applied more narrowly. Certainly countries of origin may try to bind émigrés to their homeland, but these sites suggest that the ties co-exist with an attachment to the US, as well.

Thus, the picture emerging from the websites is one of complex attachments. Technology appears to be used to promote cultural pride and a multi-layered political identification, rather than either political separation or exclusive engagement with homeland. Indeed, many of the sites promote a red-white-and-blue image of Arab-Americans, touting the all-American credentials of notable political figures such as John Sununu, George Mitchell, and Donna Shalala, whose contributions to mainstream American politics are clear. After September 11<sup>th</sup>, these sites were quickly modified to assert the loyalty of Arab-Americans to the American nation. The Arab American Institute created a 'United We Stand' poster sold through Amazon.com, while ArabAmerican.com added a 'Play the American Anthem' feature to their website. It should be emphasised, however, that while such expressions of loyalty, patriotism, and civic-mindedness were pronounced after the terrorist attacks, they had featured prominently in the sites prior to that event.

At the same time, the connection with homeland issues and politics, such as the Intifada, the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, and the plight of Iraq's children under US/UN sanctions has to be recognized. And there is evidence that the Internet is used to create global, electronic networks that break free from localities and nation-states and that tap into multiple conceptions of political identity. For instance, the Birzeit Society<sup>6</sup> uses the Internet as a means to transcend national boundaries and to create a network for Birzeiti émigrés worldwide. As a leader of the organisation puts it, '[the web] fosters a closer relationship between people. It maintains old ties...It will expand the community and keep communications stronger'. He and other members of his organisation have ambitions to create a 'virtual Birzeit' for the benefit of Palestinian youth who have grown up in exile in North and South America, Europe, and Australia, complete with a digital tour of the city and a global e-mail network.

Another example of the geographical extensibility of the Internet is Al-Bushra, a website administered single-handedly by a priest from his parish office in San Francisco. Al Bushra is an electronic network focused on religious and political issues in the Arab world. Al Bushra consists, first, of a vast, public-access electronic archive of information on Jerusalem, Palestine, Eastern Christianity, and Islam, which the priest views as a vehicle for informing a global audience about the plight of the Palestinians and, more specifically, the endangerment of Palestinian Christian communities and shrines. The second component of Al Bushra is a series of e-mail list-serves used to circulate political action alerts with respect to Palestinian issues to thousands of people worldwide. The priest uses these list-serves to mobilise support for various pro-Palestinian causes, and to press Christian ecumenical councils and the Catholic hierarchy in Rome and the United States to issue human rights statements in support of the Palestinians. In his use of the Internet, the priest sustains a broad network that taps into numerous pools of activists: those identifying with Palestine and the Arab world, those identifying themselves as Christian, and those more broadly concerned with human rights issues.

But there are also many cases in which activists use the internet to sustain social and geographical networks that are far more circumscribed and to publicise or coordinate activities that are geographically and politically limited in scope. For instance, the Internet capabilities of the major national Arab American organisations, such as the AAI and the ADC, are geared almost entirely to a US-based membership. These sites clearly allow for 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 for the most part, the Internet simply enhances these groups’ existing organisational structure, serving as a resource for a nationally-based membership and as

a means for coordinating and mobilising activities among this membership (such as e-mail petition drives targeting congressional representatives and the White House). Groups such as the San Francisco Arab Cultural Centre (SFACC) are even more limited in scope. This organisation uses the Internet mainly for publicity among local Arab-American communities rather than for global (or even national) network-building. Shilla, an on-line forum for Arab-American professionals in the San Francisco Bay Area, has a greater reliance on the Internet than SFACC, but its membership base and scope of activity is equally limited.

Our findings, then, suggest that the associations between identities, activism, and space may be more complex than the theoretical literature indicates. Our analysis highlights the need to distinguish between the *content* of websites, the nature and geographical scope of the *networks* sustained by the websites, and the actual, *on-the-ground* activities coordinated through the websites. By separating these different components of the websites, the complex geographies of identity and political participation become evident, with implications for the way we understand contemporary citizenship. Our analysis indicates that information technologies may serve a variety of purposes for immigrants, not all of them intended to challenge the boundaries of citizenship. Several claims about societal membership and citizenship are circulated on-line—some relating to homeland identities and others referring to membership in the American polity and nation. A key point, however, is that these claims may not necessarily be mutually exclusive. On the contrary, the message conveyed by many of these websites is that by transforming the way that ‘mainstream’ America thinks about Arab causes and the Arab world, Arab immigrants will gain acceptance and full social and political membership in American society.

### **Uncovering identity and motivations for political activism**

As stated above, the format and content of our interviews with Arab-American activists was intended to redress the lack of attention paid to immigrants' conceptions and practices of citizenship. In the interviews, we directly asked study participants to explain identity and the significance of their activism and organisational participation to their sense of belonging in a community or communities. In this section, we discuss the comments made in these interviews, focusing on the ways in which interviewees articulate identity and conceptualise social membership, and the ways in which they interpret the relationship between legal membership and belonging in a community. The responses indicate a range of ways of expressing Arab, American, and Arab-American identities that are taken into their political activism and interpretation of citizenship. We examine these issues through a consideration of the ways in which leaders discussed their identities and then the ways in which they felt identity influenced their activism.

#### *Interview identities: American? Arab? Arab American?*

All of the interviewees describe themselves using a hyphenated identity that links the US and their homeland. At some level, this is not surprising, as the respondents were selected for interviews based on their leadership positions within Arab-identified organisations. It would therefore seem reasonable that they identify as Arabs. Their identification with America, though, is complex. Five of the respondents spoke of the need to instil a sense of pride in being an Arab, especially for young people in the community. It is important, they argue, to show the richness of their culture and to show how that can enhance 'Americanness.' A leader of the Lebanese

American Association, for example, argues that it is important to think of the relationship between Arab and American cultures as being something like a marriage in which the union should be to the benefit of both. This is perhaps the reason that efforts to promote community and cultural awareness were so prominent on the websites.

Implicit in the arguments of the respondents, however, is a pronounced tension between being Arab and being American. When the chairperson of the San Francisco Arab Film Festival and a member of the Arab Women's Solidarity Association was asked how Arabness fits into American society, she responded:

It doesn't! It has been a struggle. I consider it a dual identity, and I don't think it smoothly fits into the American culture, just because of the values and the way we're all raised... The Arab culture is very limited in the sense that you can't really do anything outside of a box, and if you do, you're frowned upon. Whereas the American culture, I think, you're on the outside of the box trying to get in! You're trying to find some kind of culture, something to hold on to.

Two men spoke directly about the discriminatory attitudes of 'mainstream' America that made their work with their organisations necessary. A sense of disillusionment, frustration and anger leads another to conclude:

I'm more Arab than American. As the British say, 'You know you want to be an American because it has all the things that you want.' But culturally, I think I'm more of an Arab.... In the Arab world, you say you have a passport, it means you have an American passport. It means you're a human being, because you have no rights if you have any other passport. So, 'You have a passport?' 'Yeah, I'm an American.'

This man identifies himself as Palestinian- and Arab-American, but clearly separates out a feeling of belonging in a cultural or social sense from a legal status. While acknowledging US citizenship, citizenship is related more to legal standing than to some sense of identification with the US. Yet in many regards, this man is highly committed to American politics. As president

of a local anti-discrimination organisation, he has developed ties with numerous non-Arab based civil rights groups; several months after our interview, he announced his candidacy for a congressional seat in the Bay Area.

### *Identities and political participation*

We also asked the interviewees about their social and political networks, and how their identities tie into their activism. For some of the interviewees, there is a transnational element to the activism that reflects strong personal attachment to place of origin. Leaders of two of the organisations help to deliver various forms of aid to their places of origin, while the pastor of the Arab Catholic Church in San Francisco, maintains an activist network with religious leaders in Palestine, where he was trained in the priesthood. It would be misleading, however, to take this transnational activity in isolation of other activities, aims, and identities expressed by the interviewees. In all cases, the respondents hold goals of building a more inclusive society in the United States, and they are concerned with heightening awareness of Arab culture in American society. This tension between maintaining homeland linkages and ‘integrating’ into American life is evident in one person’s comments on the Arab community in San Francisco:

I want them to feel part of the American system as any other American in America – that they become real Americans, good Americans. The second thing, I want them to keep their identity, their specificity, with their traditions, customs, way of life, way of thinking – the good ones. And bring them to others.

These intertwined goals of raising awareness of the Arab world, promoting Arabness as a positive cultural identity, and of establishing Arab immigrants and their children as members of the American polity and ‘community’ were mentioned repeatedly by our interviewees. For instance, one woman 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, 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, another person 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 his organisation, a hometown association, 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...

What is striking about these responses is the way they draw upon different layers and conceptions of social and political membership. It is difficult to describe the activities and viewpoints of these groups exclusively as transnational or as embracing multiculturalism or as assimilatory. While deeply engaged with politics in the Arab world, they are equally concerned with positioning their communities as members of the American community and polity. While they do not speak explicitly of assimilation, they assert a need to accommodate, participate in, and contribute to American society while encouraging American society to accept Arabness.

The interviewees' responses can perhaps best be characterised in terms of a tension between discourses of homeland, ethnicity, and citizenship—a tension that reflects, on the one hand, the marginality of Arabness and 'Arab causes' in American public discourse and policy and, on the other, the pull of discourses of citizenship and membership in an American nation. Political activism, correspondingly, seems to be driven by these multiple aims.

### **Conclusions**

The limited nature of this analysis does not allow us to make grand pronouncements about the nature of contemporary citizenship, but it does prompt us to turn a critical eye toward current debates on citizenship. By distinguishing between identities, networks, and on-the-ground activities and forms of participation, the analysis we have presented here allows us to consider citizenship as enacted and imagined at multiple scales. Soysal (2000) speaks of the complexity of scales of citizenship, arguing that contemporary immigrants press particularistic claims in supranational forums (such as the European Court of Justice) using a language of universal, human rights. But our analysis suggests that immigrant activism cannot be reduced to this scenario. Looking at the range of sites created by Arab-American activists, one could equally say that immigrants assert social membership in the nation-state by organising in local community centres, pressing for city-wide services, and lobbying the national government on both civil rights and foreign policy issues. The point is that many possibilities exist in terms of the ways in which immigrants identify themselves, organise themselves, and participate in different political communities. These relationships must be actively investigated rather than assumed. The systematic analysis of the content and functioning of Internet sites provides one

means of investigation, though this analysis should be extended to the ways in which immigrants (activists and non-activists alike) use the Internet and other communications technologies.

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, 1999).

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 & 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 & Midi, 1999; 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.

Methodologically, future research should 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? It seems important, as well, to 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 are crucial in the context of contemporary debates about citizenship.

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## Notes

<sup>1</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. In using this term, we do not assume that all people from this region consider themselves Arab, or that Arab or Arab-American signifies a uniform culture.

<sup>2</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 (AAI, 2001)

<sup>3</sup> 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, Lebanese immigrants, like many other non-Northern European groups, were regarded as racially different from the 'Anglo-Saxon' majority and therefore outside the bounds of the American

nation and community. A number of cases were brought before federal courts to determine whether ‘Syrians’ were to be considered ‘Asian’ (and therefore ineligible for citizenship) or ‘white’ (Samhan, 1999, p. 216-217).

<sup>4</sup> We note, as well, that we will interview the general membership of organisations in a later stage of the research.

<sup>5</sup> The full set of websites was initially visited in the fall of 2002. Because websites change over time (something we noted in the lead-up to war in Iraq), we downloaded the sites over a one- week period in early February 2003. In another portion of the study, we will assess changes in the sites over time. It is possible that the sites have more information about events in the Middle East, given this timing. We note, however, that most of the sites mentioned issues related to Palestine and the Intifada, rather than to the war in Iraq.

<sup>6</sup> While respondents gave us permission to use their names, we have decided not to use them in this paper, as the permission was given prior to September 11, 2001. Since much of the information we describe is publicly available on the Internet, we felt that using the organisation name was appropriate, but have chosen not to identify our specific respondents.

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