

MUSLIMS IN AMERICA

November 24, 1999

Muslims-Americans have argued that their voice is missing from the American political system. Jefferey Kaye of KCET-Los Angeles reports on how the Muslim community is attempting to change that.

SALAM AL-MARAYATI: Now, I also want you to have a straight line.

- Sept. 2, 1999:* Negotiations continue between Palestinians and Israelis.
- May 18, 1999:* A report on the Israeli election's aftermath.
- May 18, 1999:* Mr. Barak tells his supporters that the "time for peace has come."
- May 17, 1999:* A background report on the Israeli elections
- Dec. 22, 1998:* The Knesset calls for early elections
- Dec. 15, 1998:* President Clinton visits Israel and Gaza.
- October 26, 1998:* **An appointment in controversy**
- JEFFREY KAYE: 38-year-old Salam Al-Marayati has lived in the United States since 1965 after he left Iraq with his parents. When he is not coaching his two sons' basketball team, he is representing his community as executive director of the Los Angeles Muslim Public Affairs Council. Al-Marayati is also a member of the city's human relations commission and is active nationally in interfaith and intercultural forums. But this summer when Congressman Richard Gephardt, the House Minority Leader appointed Al-Marayati to the ten-member National Commission on Terrorism, some Jewish organizations tried to block the nomination. Rabbi James Rudin of the American Jewish Committee, suggested Al-Marayati condoned terrorism

The CIA's new role in the [Middle East peace process](#).

October 23, 1998: [Samuel Berger](#), the National Security Adviser on the "land-for-peace" agreement.

October 23, 1998: Three [Middle East experts](#) discuss the deal between Israeli and Palestinian leaders.

October 23, 1998: A Kwame Holman report on the [Middle East peace agreement](#).

October 21, 1998: Are the [Israeli and Palestinian leaders](#) making progress in their talks?

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[American-Arab Anti-discrimination League](#)

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RABBI
JAMES
RUDIN,
American
Jewish
Committee:

Basically his position on terrorism is quite different and his understanding of terrorism, his definition of terrorism is so different from the United States Government's position, that it was, in our judgment, that he should not serve on this commission.

JEFFREY KAYE: The Zionist Organization of America, the ZOA, called Al-Marayati an extremist and circulated lists of what they said were his pro-terrorism and anti-Israel statements. Morton Klein is ZOA president.

MORTON
KLEIN,
President,
Zionist
Organization
of
America:

We opposed Al-Marayati because of his long record over many, many years of rationalizing and justifying terrorism. Instead, he blames Israel. That is not criticism. That is really enormous animosity towards Israel that goes really beyond the pale.

JEFFREY KAYE: The ZOA criticized Al-Marayati for, among other things, his position on Hezbollah, which has fought Israeli troops occupying southern Lebanon. Al-Marayati justifies Hezbollah's military actions.

Muslim Women's League

Council on American-Islamic Relations

SALAM AL-MARAYATI, Muslim Public Affairs Council: If the Lebanese people are resisting Israeli intransigence on Lebanese soil, then that is the right of resistance and they have the right to target Israeli soldiers in this conflict. That is not terrorism. That is a legitimate resistance. That could be called liberation movement, that could be called anything, but it's not terrorism.

JEFFREY KAYE: Supporters of Al-Marayati - Muslims and Jews -- rallied to his defense but to no avail. Gephardt rescinded the appointment, saying it would take too long for Al-Marayati to obtain a security clearance. Gephardt replaced Al-Marayati with a Lebanese-American Christian, Juliet Kayam, who has a security clearance and who has not been publicly critical of Israel. Congressman Gephardt declined to be interviewed for this story, but many Muslim and Arab-American activists say they weren't surprised by his withdrawal of the Al-Marayati nomination. They feel Al-Marayati was the victim of an unfair litmus test, which they say often excludes them from the political process.

Hussein Ibish of the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, sees the Al-Marayati case as part of a disturbing pattern.

HUSSEIN
IBISH,
American -
Arab Anti-
Discrimination
Committee:

The frame of
that litmus test appears to be that
pro-Israel organizations in the
United States will judge whether
Arab American and American
Muslim appointees have been
critical of Israel or not. And if they
have been critical of Israel policies
and policies of the State of Israel,
then they will be, in many cases,
judged unfit for office by those
groups and the unfortunate
precedence set in the Al-Marayati
case that senior politicians, like
Representative Gephardt, may go
along with this.

A rejection of politics, not religion

JEFFREY KAYE: Two other Arab
and Muslim American appointees
have also faced similar protests
recently. One was Dr. Laila Al-
Marayati, Salam Al-Marayati 's wife.
In May, when President Clinton
appointed her to the U.S.
Commission on International
Religious Freedom, the Zionist
Organization of America called for
her removal. As president of the
Muslim Women's League, she had
been critical of Israel.

DR. LAILA
AL-
MARAYATI:
I think what
we're seeing is
an

unwillingness to listen to an opposite
point of view. It's easy to have

conversations with people that one agrees with and it's difficult to sit and listen to somebody who has a different opinion. But unless we can do that, we will never get any closer to understanding each other.

JEFFREY KAYE: Despite the opposition to her appointment, Laila Al-Marayati remains on the commission. Another critic of Israel, attorney Joseph Zagbi also came under attack by pro-Israel groups after getting a State Department job. Zagbi, who is of Lebanese ancestry, later resigned. Jewish leaders say their opposition to individual appointments has been on the basis of politics, not ethnicity or religion.

RABBI JAMES RUDIN: It's not based on whether one is an Arab or Muslim or Jew or a Christian. It depends on the person case by case, individual by individual. There is no litmus test.

JEFFREY
KAYE: The
controversi
al
appointmen
ts have
enlivened

the debate over whose views should be heard in the shaping of US Mideast policy. There are about six million Muslims in the US, many of them of Arab descent and approximately six million Jews. But unlike the comparatively influential Jewish community, Muslims and Arab Americans have been virtually excluded from policy-making circles, particularly, says Hussein Ibish, if they are critical of Israel.

HUSSEIN IBISH: There's no Arab American who's involved in making policy on the Middle East peace process. So we find this is, you know, not a basis for sound policy. We think that it ought to be inclusive. But what you're seeing is the defense of a monologue, of a monopoly of discourse, which leads to a one-sided policy that's not healthy.

JEFFREY

KAYE: The substance of the conflict often debated in public forums, is decades old. In a recent TV appearance, Al-Marayati and the ZOA's Morton Klein debated familiar issues, the nature of terrorism and the state of Israel.

SALAM AL-MARAYATI: I accept Israel's existence.

MORTON KLEIN: Do you support its existence?

SALAM AL-MARAYATI: I accept its existence. Do you support...

MORTON KLEIN: Well, you signed a document that side it should not exist. Do you repudiate this signature?

SALAM AL-MARAYATI: I accept its existence.

Fundamental differences

JEFFREY

KAYE:

Fundament

al

differences

are also

reflected in

responses to violence on the part of Israel and by Arabs. For instance, in March, 1997, the military wing of Hamas, the Islamic resistance movement, claimed responsibility for a suicide bomb in Israel. It killed three people and wounded forty-eight. A statement from Al-Marayati's Public Affairs Council mourned the loss of innocent lives. At the same time it denounced Israel for bombing refugee camps in Lebanon. On the subject of terrorism it said: "Because the Palestinian people have no avenues to redress their grievances, some of them have been pushed beyond the margins of society and have adopted violent reactions to express their despair and suffering."

MORTON

KLEIN:

Would

anybody be

trying to

explain the

murder of poor

people in America murdering other Americans by saying, "well, they're desperate because they're so poor?" No. We would say this is abominable and outrageous and nothing justifies murder.

SALAM AL-MARAYATI: We have taken an unequivocal consistent stand against all acts of terrorism, regardless of the background

ethnically or religiously of the perpetrator or the victim. And so when a Muslim commits an act of terrorism, we stand very loudly and clearly against that Muslim that committed that act of violence.

When a Jew commits it, we expect the same from the Jewish community.

JEFFREY KAYE: Al-Marayati also says the US should consider sanctions against Israel for its mistreatment of Palestinians. Such opinions critical of Israel should be taken seriously by US policymakers, say prominent Arab Americans and Muslims. But the American Jewish Committee's Rabbi Rudin says it's not just a matter of honest policy differences. He says the appointees he opposed did not meet basic criteria for sensitive government jobs.

RABBI JAMES RUDIN: Were they qualified? Did they have the expertise? Did they have the experience? Did they reflect the policies of the government that was appointing them to these positions? And therefore, we opposed them.

Opening a dialogue

JEFFREY KAYE: The voices of Muslim and Arab American critics of Israel are beginning to be heard. Recently Salam and other Arab Americans went to the White House for a closed-door meeting with National Security Advisor Samuel Berger. Al-Marayati says American Muslims should not be seen simply as dissidents. He says they understand the causes of Mideast violence and says had he be allowed

to serve on the terrorism commission, he would have advocated a strategy to isolate terrorists politically.

SALAM AL-MARAYATI:

Usually Islam is stigmatized as the religion that condones terrorism. So if we were able to make that distinction that Islam is against terrorism, that these extremists are really a fringe element of the Muslim community, we would then take away the religious validation of these extremists.

JEFFREY KAYE: Ironically, the controversy over the Al-Marayati appointment has actually led to increased dialogue between Muslims and liberal Jews. After Al-Marayati's appointment was rescinded, liberal Jewish leaders in Los Angeles came to his defense. They argued that other Jewish organizations were narrow-minded.

RABBI
LEONARD
BEERMAN:
Salam Al-
Marayati is a
very forceful

and faithful proponent of the Muslim cause. I do not agree with everything that he said over the years, but he has... he certainly has wanted his people to have a more honorable and more dignified place in the American mind.

RABBI HARVEY FIELDS: We need to be talking to them. We need to be in dialogue with them. And therefore, I was deeply disturbed and upset with what had happened in terms of this appointment.

JEFFREY KAYE: Jewish support for Al-Marayati reflects a change of attitude among American Jews, who are more openly critical of Israel than in the past. Recently in San Francisco, Al-Marayati found a warm reception from liberal Jews.

MAN: At least some of the Jewish organizational structure sees what has been their reality for a whole generation as crumbling, it's no longer there. And I think it is a very exciting time for educational work.

SALAM AL-MARAYATI: We have allowed others, and would I define them as the extremists, to dictate the agenda on us. And that's why Muslims and Jews have had this apprehension in America.

JEFFREY KAYE: Participants at this meeting reason that if opposing sides in the Middle East could work together, so could Jews and Muslims in the United States.

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