

**Signs and Wonders
(And Reasons to Hope)**

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Signs and Wonders (and Reasons to Hope)

Ron Stockton

When I was a young professor in the 1970s, we understood how the world worked. There were two camps, the Western camp and the Communist camp. Both sides were armed to the teeth with nuclear weapons, and both sides knew that using those weapons would produce a disaster. When either side tried to unbalance the status quo, there was a quick response. When we encouraged an uprising in Hungary, they crushed it. When Castro took power in Cuba, we tried to overthrow him, they put in nuclear weapons, and we prepared to sink their ships. That was a close call. When they sent their army to support a Communist regime in Afghanistan, we armed Islamic militants to overthrow that regime. That left two million dead Afghans and created a failed state that made a space for Osama bin Laden. Brutality was the name of the game, as long as the key players were not attacked. We called it the Balance of Terror.

Then we woke up one day and the Soviet Union was gone. It just disappeared. I cannot tell you how joyful we were at this New World Order in which war was a thing of the past. But then things began to go wrong. In 1990, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, something he would never have done had the Soviet Union, his major supplier, still been in place. Then Yugoslavia broke up and there were massacres and hundreds of thousands of Serbian, Croatian, Albanian, and Muslim refugees. When the government of Somalia disappeared, it left chaos in its wake and another failed state. Rwanda had a 90-day genocide that killed over half a million people. Then came September 11 when 19 free lance murderers killed nearly 3,000 people using box cutters and hijacked planes as weapons. And I haven't even mentioned the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which has left thousands dead, and will get worse.

We political scientists have had real trouble understanding this ugly new world. In 1993 Samuel Huntington wrote an article for *Foreign Affairs* called "A Clash of Civilizations?"¹ It was a flawed article but it had an interesting point. He suggested that in the aftermath of the Cold War, the major world conflicts would cross culture zones. He was particularly interested in the tension between the Western and the Islamic worlds. Huntington saw a political struggle at the core of this cultural conflict. He said

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the Western powers had created international structures -- the UN, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization -- which allowed them to dominate Islamic countries and their resources. His arguments were disturbingly parallel to what Osama bin Laden said about the same issues. As Osama put it, "I believe in a clash of civilizations."²

Huntington said that conflicts would occur not only *across* cultural zones but also *within* countries that were culturally divided. Bosnia, Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan come to mind. He also said that individuals who were out of place, that is, in a country not dominated by their culture, would be vulnerable. This has particular relevance for Arabs and Muslims in Europe and in the U.S., where tensions have been high. It also has relevance for Christians in countries such as Iraq and Lebanon, where there is an out migration. Sad to say, one of George W. Bush's legacies will be that he decimated the ancient and noble Christian population of Iraq, which is now a fraction of its pre-war population.

I have been particularly interested in Arab Americans in southeast Michigan where I live, and was part of a research team that conducted a major survey in that community. My colleagues and I interviewed 1,016 Arab Americans and Chaldeans, as well as 508 persons from the general population. We have a book coming out on this study next year so I will not go into details at this point. If anyone would like to see the *Preliminary Report* of that study, they can send me an email (Rstock@Umich.edu).³ Meanwhile, let me comment on some current events, and how they fit into broader patterns.

I have noticed some disturbing incidents in the presidential campaign. Two come to mind. First, John McCain's chief Michigan fund raiser, a Lebanese American from Dearborn, was forced to step down. Then Barack Obama's liaison to the Muslim community had to step down. Both were respected individuals with long records of service. Neither was accused of wrongdoing but both were attacked because of "concerns" about affiliations that to Arabs and Muslims seem hardly controversial. In other words, they were pushed out of the political system because they were active in their community.

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You might ask, are these just isolated incidents or do they fit a pattern? Indeed, they do. Arab Americans have two qualities that make them distinct. One is that they are an ethnic population charged with concern for their homelands. This quality is not rare in itself but the nature of their welcome in the U. S. is different from the experience of many other ethnic nationalist groups. Cubans, Jews, Lithuanians, Armenians, Irish, Poles all found sympathy for their national causes. The same is not true with Arab Americans. When they insist on justice for their homelands, they are suspected of being unpatriotic.

Second, Arabs and Muslims are the only groups in the country singled out for systematic monitoring and even harassment. Not only do the security forces have them under surveillance but private organizations and political interest groups attempt to reduce or marginalize their involvement in politics. Professor Michael Suleiman calls this a “politics of exclusion.”⁴ The stories are endless: persons appointed to advisory committees or staff positions or granted public service awards have their appointments and honors challenged and even cancelled. Political candidates return donations from Arab Americans, both Christians and Muslims. Often the grounds are vague. Individuals are said to have made a loosely-defined “anti-Israeli” or “pro-terrorism” statement or are linked to someone with such views.

These rejections involve the very nature of citizenship. Citizenship is not just a passport and the right to vote. It involves the right to full political engagement, including the right to assemble in organizations that disagree with public policy, the right to petition for redress of grievance through challenges to authority, and the right to participate in the political process. As Professor Yvonne Haddad notes with regards to returned campaign donations, “many in the community feel disenfranchised, given the importance of donations in providing access to elected officials and determining American policies.”⁵

President Bush may have contributed to the problem. In his speech to the Islamic Mosque in Washington after September 11, Bush drew a distinction between radical and mainstream Muslims.⁶ This distinction was beneficial at the time, protecting a vulnerable minority, but it contained a trap not immediately obvious. It compelled Muslims to claim the mantle of moderation. Put bluntly, they were

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presumed guilty unless they distanced themselves from Islamic militancy. Muslims could theoretically be accepted as individuals if they proved by words and expressions of patriotism to be “moderate” Muslims rather than “radical.” But even then, there were limits. Leaders were repeatedly subjected to accusatory statements such as, “Why do you (or why do *they*) not renounce terrorism?” This question doubles as a non-falsifiable accusation without an acceptable answer. One high-profile Muslim group that organized a mass petition against terrorism entitled “Not in the name of Islam” and put together a coalition of religious leaders to issue a *fatwa* (a religious opinion) declaring attacks on civilians to be a violation of Islamic law, was still continually attacked for not renouncing terrorism. The technique was disturbingly reminiscent of the McCarthy-era query, “Are you now or have you ever been a Communist?” Such questions are designed to besmirch. They also imply that the person asking them has knowledge of misconduct and the moral authority to demand an answer. Any answer – an affirmation of innocence or a contemptuous refusal to respond – will be considered evidence of guilt or deceit.

But even when *individuals* are accepted, the community is still at risk. Their situation echoes what Sartre wrote about the French Jews. The view of Jewish rights dating to the French Revolution had always been “everything for Jews as individuals, nothing for the Jews as a community.” This put Jews into a dilemma of being accepted *only if they were not Jews*: “The perpetual obligation to prove that he is French puts the Jew in a situation of guilt. If on every occasion he does not do more than everybody else, much more than anybody else, he is guilty, he is a dirty Jew—and one might say, parodying the words of Beaumarchais: To judge by the qualities we demand of a Jew if he is to be assimilated as a ‘true’ Frenchman, how many Frenchmen would be found worthy of being Jews in their own country?”⁷ A similar predicament is pressing upon Arab Americans today, especially Muslims.

I think of my friend who visited an orphanage in Lebanon and gave a \$100 bill to the woman in charge. That orphanage was run by Hezbollah. Does that make him a supporter of terrorism? And what about myself? During the time of apartheid in South Africa, I was affiliated with an organization called the International Defense and Aid Fund. Our goal was to bring about majority rule in South Africa. We

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were friendly to Nelson Mandela, then in prison. The South African government had defined the IDAF as a terrorist front group, and just this year the US State Department took Mandela off its terrorist watch list. Did that make me a supporter of terrorism, or was I just a good citizen? You decide.

What stands out in this situation is the remarkable way in which foreign policy attitudes have a clear civil liberties dimension. Foreign policy issues are not simply an array of topics on which people can freely debate multiple points of view and adopt the one they like. For some Americans, issues of foreign policy become difficult tests of citizenship, and certain points of view cannot be fully or frankly debated. The post-9/11 crisis has challenged American society in different ways; it has challenged Arab Americans by making their political views central to the way others view them both as members of American society and as potential threats to it.

But there are what the Bible calls “signs and wonders,” what we here would probably call “reason to hope.” To start with, there is real progress at the local level. Let me read a passage from our book:

Arab Detroiters are uniquely situated in positions of local power and influence. The City of Detroit, for example, is a border town, home to the Ambassador Bridge and the Detroit-Windsor Tunnel which carry between them nearly a third of all traffic crossing the US/Canada border. The Ambassador Bridge is rare among American border crossings in that it is privately owned and operated. It is rarer still for being owned by an immigrant from Lebanon, Manuel Maroun. Likewise, when international travelers arrive at the Detroit Metropolitan Airport, they pass through a terminal bearing the name of another Lebanese American, former Wayne County Road Commissioner Michael (aka Mohammed) Berry. Flight schedules and ground traffic at the airport are managed by Hassan Makled, Director of Airfield Operations, who, like Berry, is an active member of the Islamic Center of America [a large mosque]. All this coming and going is carefully monitored by Detroit and Wayne County Homeland Security Task Forces, both of which are led, in part, by Lebanese American law enforcement officers who are also Shi’a Muslims. These men are among more than 60 deputized Arab Americans in Wayne County alone, where Azzam Elder, a Palestinian American, was recently named Deputy Wayne County Executive. Elder is one of at least 34 Arab Americans in Michigan to hold a political appointment, while the state is home to at least 21 Arab American elected officials. This list, with its perhaps surprising inclusion of Arab Americans who work for Homeland Security Task Forces, is perfectly mundane in Detroit. It does not include the much larger number of Arab

Americans who sit on the boards of local hospitals and the United Way, serve as Regents of state universities, or are active participants in the local ACLU, UAW, Civil Rights Board, or many of the State's important non-profit organizations. While no other state can rival Michigan's high number of Arab public servants, similar patterns of community service by Arab Americans can be found across the U.S.⁸

Second, in spite of some bad laws, our court system is still in place. The Supreme Court has challenged the Bush administration more than once, for example insisting that people kept in Guantanamo have rights. And the notorious sleeper cell case in Dearborn was thrown out by the judge, with the federal prosecutor himself under investigation for misconduct. These are good signs.

Finally, there have been five Arab American Senators, three cabinet members, and at the recent Republican convention there was a very moving five-minute film about a Navy Seal who won the Congressional Medal of Honor. His father had been a marine and he always wanted to be a Seal. He joined the program and excelled, and his unit was sent to Iraq. One day, an enemy soldier threw a live grenade into an enclosure where he and three other Seals were standing. He threw his body onto the grenade and saved his colleagues but was himself killed. At his funeral in California, almost every Seal on the west coast showed up. After the service, the Seals paraded past his casket. Seals have a metal insignia that identifies them, and one by one, they pressed those insignia into his casket until it left a shining sea of metal. That Seal's name was Mike Mansour, which anyone who knows Lebanon would recognize as a Lebanese family. Mike was an Arab and an American, and he was honored for his patriotism. There are a lot of bad things that happen in this country, but there are also good things. And you don't have to die for your country to get respect. You can vote; you can organize; you can discuss issues; you can come to meetings like this, and then do something.

Let's focus upon what we can change, and what is going right – what the Bible calls “signs and wonders” -- and not be distracted or dragged down or discouraged by the negative stuff.

⁸ Howell and Jamal in DAAS Research Team, *Citizenship and Crisis*. Russell Sage Foundation, 2009.