

# Including Arab Americans in the Biden Administration is not Enough

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In a series of unprecedented moves, President Biden has included six Arab Americans in his administration; partnered with Arab Americans; increased the refugee admission cap; explicitly named the problem of anti-Arab bigotry and committed to end it, and ended the Muslim Ban. Yet rather than quickly deeming these as “victories” for Arab American communities, we need to look beyond individual policy stances or political slogans. Instead, we need to explore the root causes of the problems that Biden claims his partnership with Arab Americans will address and ask ourselves to what extent the Biden administration is committed to unraveling the underlying systems that maintain anti-Arab bigotry or the structures that make policies like the Muslim Ban possible. A “root-cause” approach allows us to envision structural changes that can ensure not only an end to anti-Arab bigotry but also a world where anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism become unimaginable.

As a scholar of Critical Ethnic Studies, I have relied upon a “root-cause” approach to explore the systems that hold anti-Arab bigotry in place. For instance, it is well established that the problem of anti-Black racism in the U.S. is rooted in the systems of policing and prisons and that the disenfranchisement of Native Americans is rooted in histories of land confiscation. This explains why, in 2008, most Black racial justice advocates understood that as long as these systems remain intact, the election of a Black president was not going to end anti-Blackness. This also explains why Indigenous advocates affirmed the important election of two Indigenous women to Congress after the Standing Rock sit-in while reminding us that this will not stop the U.S. government’s “willy-nilly trespass[ing] through indigenous land.”

Indeed the root-cause of anti-Arab bigotry, or what we more precisely describe as anti-Arab *racism*, is imperial war. It is well established that the post-Cold War period is one of the many histories out of which anti-Arab racism developed in the U.S., when the U.S. committed to imperial expansion in the Arab region, including enabling and facilitating—through military and diplomatic support—Israeli settler-colonialism. To justify U.S.-led wars, a “terrorism” framework, which portrays all Palestinians and Arabs as Muslims and all Muslims as potential terrorists, was institutionalized, especially after 09/11, through interconnected domestic and global policy and corporate media rhetoric. In this sense, the global reach of anti-Arab racism is intertwined with the policies impacting Arab Americans. Militarist agendas in the Arab region, such as bombings or sanctions rely on the same “terrorism” framework as the militarist agendas deployed against Arab Americans, such as surveillance, FBI entrapment, or No-Fly Lists. In this sense, the question we need to be asking is what the Biden plan is—if it offers a vision for ending the global war on Arabs and Arab Americans. If not, what does it mean to be included, and to be held responsible for a system that structurally, institutionally, and politically not only devalues but justifies the detention, deportation, displacement, surveillance, and in many cases, killing of Arabs or Arab Americans through the racist “terrorism” framework.

A critique of the neoliberal politics that guide the Democratic Party can also help guide an analysis of the significance of Arab American inclusion within the Biden Administration. Neoliberal politics appropriate the discourse of multiculturalism, diversity, and inclusion to cover up the violent systems of racial capitalism, U.S. settler-colonialism, and white supremacy. In other words, multicultural “inclusion” obscures the centrality of racializing Arabs and Arab Americans as “potential terrorists” within the neoliberal economic agenda of the war on terror. We might then ask whether and to what extent the inclusion of Arab Americans in the Biden Administration not only falls short in relation to the kinds of systemic changes many Arab Americans hope to see but more importantly, whether their very inclusion helps to normalize the system of capital accumulation through war-mongering that allows the US to maintain global power. Critic of neoliberal multiculturalism Jodi Melamid explains that a politics of inclusion is not only limited, but makes neoliberalism appear just, while obscuring the racial antagonisms and inequalities on which the neoliberal project depends.

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Indeed, celebrations of Biden’s plan to partner with Arab Americans obscure not only his past support for the U.S. wars on Afghanistan and Iraq in the 2000s but also the future that many progressive scholars and activists are projecting wherein the Biden Administration will not only continue, but expand the War on Terror through the “domestic terrorism” framework. Expert analyst of domestic counter-terrorism policies Nicole Nguyen explains, “Despite Biden’s promise to end the Trump administration’s Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention Program, given its targeting of Arab and Muslim communities, he announced plans to expand funding for TVTP. TVTP relies on the concept of “radicalization,” which tends to conflate particular strands of Islam with the turn to violence and terrorism.” Whether explicitly designed to target Arabs and Muslims or not, surveillance and policing strategies like TVTP, Fusion Centers, or social media vetting surveillance programs reinforce anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism and racial profiling. Given Biden’s career-long history of supporting Israel’s aggression towards Palestinians, there is also little hope that he will end Trump’s 2019 Executive Order, “Combating Anti-Semitism,” which defines criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism and consolidates the repression of Arab American activism. While Biden publicly pledges to protect the free speech of all Americans and reject efforts that criminalize free speech, he simultaneously rejects the BDS movement and by extension, supports the criminalization of free speech for Arab Americans. Indeed, Material Support Laws used in federal terrorism prosecutions have a similarly chilling effect, creating a culture of fear around community-based activism, social service work, and philanthropy. This explains why progressive Arab American scholar Noura Erakat told me, “I’m not excited about seeing Palestinians in office just as I’m not excited to see a Black woman as the UN Ambassador, given her politics on BDS and Palestine. Identity politics can be misleading. I’m not interested in being in alliance with Palestinians because they are Palestinian. I am in

alliance with Palestinians who share a politics of justice.” Rashid Khalidi shared a similar stance with me, “In the broader scheme of things, the presence of Arab Americans in the Biden Administration will make very little difference: the red lines where Israel is concerned are too bright, and Palestine remains the third rail of US politics. Moreover, these few Arab-Americans are heavily outnumbered by the many passionate advocates of Israel in the top ranks of the Biden administration, Congress and the Democratic Party machine.”

To be sure, Arab American inclusion represents a shift, even if tokenistic or symbolic. At least the Arab Americans Biden included are not explicitly pro-war. Yet I do not expect Biden’s agenda to scratch the surface, let alone attend to the root causes of anti-Arab racism that are necessary for unraveling its many effects. Given Biden’s opposition to the International Criminal Court’s war crimes probe of Israel and the strike in eastern Syria both, just last week, the inclusion of Arab Americans appears to serve as a marketing strategy or brand, rather than a sign of systemic change. This does not mean we should opt-out of electoral politics altogether. Indeed, opting out is a privilege we cannot afford. Yet my hope is that the Arab Americans who have been included in the Biden administration follow the lead of people like congresswoman Rachid Tlaib who has opened up new possibilities for an integration of electoral politics with grassroots movements that are necessary for holding elected officials accountable to the people disproportionately impacted by unjust racial, gendered, and socio-economic policies while striving for systemic transformation for the long haul. For instance, perhaps they could help uplift grassroots, people-centered policy platforms such as, “Abolishing the War on Terror and Build Communities of Care” or the “Feminist Peace Initiative’s Movement-Driven Policy Framework” both of which integrate Arab American commitments to racial justice within a coalitional racial justice platform that neither compromises on the significance of ending the war on terror and racial profiling as global and domestic concerns nor ignores the significance of people-centered anti-poverty initiatives that ensure access to food, shelter, and education for all. Through the integration of social movements and policy agendas, Arab Americans need a collective vision far more radical than neoliberal multicultural inclusion. We need to affirm the expectation, the hope, and the possibility of a society rooted in the principles of collective care and dignity for all, a society where no one is disposable, and where any and all forms of containment, racism, colonization, and war become, as Black feminist abolitionist Mariame Kaba says about policing and prisons, truly unfathomable.

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