Landmark Events in the Development of an Arab/MENA American Psychology

Twenty years ago when I was applying to graduate schools, a professor at the University of Toledo mailed me pages from a series in The Toledo Blade newspaper highlighting the history and contributions of Arabs in Toledo. He encouraged me to join UT to conduct research on acculturation and mental health of Arab immigrants. Thus began the first steps of my journey in Arab American psychology.

For many years it was a lonely journey. There were only a few scattered publications from other disciplines that could be sewn loosely together in a feeble literature review; only a few scattered colleagues who periodically stitched up dreams of a professional organization that repeatedly unraveled; and only a few scattered voices mulling over how to better fashion mental health services to fit the culture of Arab American clients.

As I was researching the history of Arab/MENA American psychology for this article, it was with awe and humility that I reflected on how the field has grown. Although still a small field with many gaps and disconnects, there are now research articles, books, mentors, events... and most exciting of all, a professional organization where Arab/MENA American psychologists and those interested in Arab/MENA American psychological issues can feel at home.

It was more than 20 years of developing a distinct body of psychological scholarship on Arab/MENA American populations and repeated efforts to organize Arab/MENA American psychologists that formed the conditions that led to the establishment of AMENA-Psy. This special issue of Crossroads is dedicated to highlighting some of those "first ever" milestones along the way.

Mona M. Amer, PhD
A chapter on "Arab Families" was added to the second edition of the popular interdisciplinary textbook *Ethnicity and Family Therapy* edited by Monica McGoldrick, Joe Giordano, and John K. Pearce. The chapter author was Washington, D.C.-based clinical and forensic psychologist Nuha Abudabbeh. In the 1980's Abudabbeh was a trailblazer in establishing culturally tailored psychosocial services and a radio call-in mental health program for the Arab American community, which influenced her writing of the chapter. For over a decade this chapter remained a primary psychological resource on the Arab American population for psychology students and researchers.

The first symposium at the annual APA convention to focus entirely on Arab Americans was held at the August meeting in Chicago. Speakers were counseling psychologist Senel Poyrazli and graduate students Mona Amer and Nada Al-Timimi (now, Nada Collins). The symposium presented a socio-demographic overview; mental health considerations and coping; and suggestions for culturally sensitive care. The session was scheduled during an unpopular time slot and very few people attended, signifying the limited interest in Arab American psychology at the time.

The Middle East and North Africa Regional Conference of Psychology was held in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. This December meeting gathered psychologists from around the region and a few from the U.S. Informal meetings among Brigitte Khoury, Nora Alarifi Pharaon, and other psychologists formed the genesis of the dream of creating a pan-Arab psychological association to collaborate and share expertise and respond to the post 9/11 anti-Arab backlash.

Arab psychologists held a networking meeting at the annual August APA convention in Honolulu, which over time became a tradition. These meetings continued almost annually for nearly a decade, and were an occasion to discuss latest research and trends in Arab American and Arab psychology, to offer social support, and to dream of the development of an Arab American or pan-Arab professional organization.
Two years after the Dubai conference, Nora Alarifi Pharaon initiated efforts to formalize a professional body of pan-Arab psychologists. The project took shape during the annual Arab psychologists' networking meeting at the APA convention in Washington, D.C., which was a formal discussion hour. She collected names and contacts, and established the Caucus of Arab and Arab American Psychologists (CAAP) as a LinkedIn.com group that grew to 32 members. At the time there was a scarcity of American-based Arab psychologists interested in networking together so an international network was more realistic.

The California-based Iranian Psychological Association of America was established as the first psychological organization focused on a specific MENA American community. The organization has remained active since, and raised its visibility in August 2010 when the association organized a booth at the APA annual convention exhibition hall.

Naji Abi-Hashem presented a continuing education workshop at the annual APA convention focused on understanding and working with people of Arab and Middle Eastern backgrounds. The content reflected many of the topics he had written about in his publications. This workshop continued to garner interest over the years and has been repeated seven times.

The American Experience: National Summit to Assure the Well-Being of Arab & Muslim Youth was held March 25-27 in Dearborn, Michigan. It was organized by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to enhance dialogue between federal agencies and about 200 invited leading experts from the Arab and Muslim American communities. The summit included workshops and discussions with behavioral health providers, educators, researchers, faith-based leaders, youth, family members, and representatives of leading community organizations.

Two training DVDs focused on culturally sensitive psychological care for Arab American clients were released the same year. Counseling Arab Americans: Diversity, Treatment Goals and Interventions was published by Microtraining Associates and featured presenters Sylvia Nassar-McMillan and Julie Hakim-Larson along with clinical vignettes. Naji Abi-Hashem's DVD on Working with Arab Americans was released by the American Psychological Association as part of its Multicultural Counseling Video Series. This was the first time leading publishers of psychotherapy videos took interest in the Arab American population.

The Middle East/North African (MENA) Working Group, co-chaired by Germine (Gigi) Awad and Kevin O. Cokley, was convened in March by the APA Committee on Ethnic Minority Affairs (CEMA). Members were Sylvia C. Nassar-McMillan, Nora Alarifi Pharaon, and Veronica A. Kassab; and consultants were Mona Amer and Rita Stephan. The mandate of the working group was to examine the status and implications of recognizing Arab Americans as an ethnic minority group, marking the first time that a part of APA governance dedicated interest to this population.

The International Symposium on Arab Youth: Developmental Pathways for Identity was held at the University of Windsor, Canada on May 29-30. The conference was organized by psychology professors Julie Hakim-Larson and Rosanne Menna, and sponsored by the Society for Research in Child Development.
and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The conference featured oral and poster presentations by leading experts from North America and Middle East, as well as students. The keynote speaker was leading acculturation researcher John W. Berry. This was the first and only conference of its kind to focus exclusively on disseminating and promoting scholarly psychological works related to North American Arabs.

The first psychological book concentrating on the Arab American experience was released in September by Springer, with a 2014 copyright. The title was *Biopsychosocial Perspectives on Arab Americans: Culture, Development, and Health*. Co-editors Sylvia C. Nassar-McMillan, Kristine J. Ajrouch, and Julie Hakim-Larson organized the text into 18 chapters by leading scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds. Chapters examine socio-demographic and cultural characteristics, psychosocial development, and health and psychological wellbeing among Arab Americans. The book takes a risk and resilience approach to issues impacting Arab American communities.

2014

At their January midwinter meeting, the Executive Committee of APA Division 45 (then called Society for the Psychological Study of Ethnic Minority Issues) passed a motion to add a voting Arab/Middle Eastern American member-at-large slate to the executive committee structure. Later in the year, the change was voted into the Bylaws by 80.36% majority of the general membership of Division 45. This is the first diversity representative seat occupied by an Arab/MENA category in any APA division.

On August 13th, The American Middle Eastern/North African Psychological Network (“MENA Network”) was established by Germine Awad, using the GoogleGroups online platform. It was intended to be a way to connect Arab and MENA American psychologists and begin to mobilize towards establishing a formal organization. Co-moderators were Mona Amer and Nora Alarifi Pharaoh.

2015

Efforts to develop an Arab American psychology student organization were initiated by Michael Awad and Lamise Shawahin. The two graduate students co-led a conversation hour on February 13th at the annual Columbia University Teachers College Winter Roundtable. The discussion highlighted common sentiments among MENA students of feeling left out of psychological discourse on race and ethnicity, and it underscored the need for greater collaboration and support between MENA students pursuing their degrees in psychology.

In April, Gigi Awad ran uncontested to become the first Division 45 Arab/Middle Eastern American Member-at-Large representative to serve on the Division 45 Executive Committee.
At the August APA convention in Toronto, Canada, Gigi Awad organized the first formal meeting as Division 45 Arab/Middle Eastern American representative to review annual updates and discuss issues related to the community. At this meeting, held in the Division 45 hospitality suite, a sign-up sheet was circulated for those interested in working on the development of a formal organization.

Michael Awad and Lamise Shawahin continued their efforts to establish a student organization called the "Association of Middle Eastern & North African Psychology Students" by assigning volunteers to committees and organizing a meeting at the August APA convention in Toronto at the Division 45 hospitality suite. At the meeting students agreed to consolidate efforts with professionals to establish a single association focused on Arab/MENA American psychology.

In the wake of the Hoffman scandal that implicated APA officials of colluding with Department of Defense, on August 14th the MENA Network released the "Open Letter to the American Psychological Association & the Psychological Community by the American Middle Eastern/North African (MENA) Psychological Network." The statement was spearheaded by graduate students Ayşe S. Ikizler and Engin Ege, who met with Mona Amer and Michael Awad to conceptualize the initial draft that was modified by many members of the Network. The statement garnered 234 signatures and was widely distributed on professional listservs. Because many psychologists of Arab and MENA background raised concern regarding potential negative repercussions for signing the letter, the signatories were open to allies, and names were listed in alphabetical order.

The Handbook of Arab American Psychology was published by Routledge/Taylor & Francis. It was co-edited by Mona Amer and Germine Awad, and continues to be the largest psychological publication to date on Arab Americans with nearly 50 authors and co-authors contributing to 28 chapters. This reference book provides a comprehensive review of the Arab American experience from psychological lenses including immigration, acculturation, and identity; lifespan development along with gender and family; special populations such as refugees and international students; behavioral health; psychological and health interventions; and research methods and trends.
A full-day strategic planning retreat was held on August 7th during the APA convention in Denver aimed at establishing the framework for a professional association. The retreat was organized by Mona Amer, Germine Awad, and Nabil El-Ghoroury and sponsored by the Arab American Institute Foundation, APA Board of Convention Affairs, and APA Division 45. The conveners invited nine participants of diverse backgrounds (gender, ethnic, national, location, specialization, career status), many of whom met each other for the first time. They were: Michael Awad, Mona Elgohail, Greg Gormanous, Nadia Talal Hasan, Ayşe Ikizler, Maryam Kia-Keating, Nora Alarifi Pharaon, Lamise Shawahin, and Laila Abdel-Salam as secretary. Prior to the retreat, a survey was disseminated via the MENA Network to gain comprehensive feedback on the development of an organization. The retreat was a landmark event in establishing AMENA-Psy's title, vision, values, objectives, organizational structure, and preliminary plans.

On August 12th, the first meeting of the Steering Committee to establish AMENA-Psy was held via conference call. All participants who had attended the strategic planning retreat agreed to join the steering committee, which worked for one year to establish the organization.

The Handbook of Arab American Psychology was awarded the 2016 Evelyn Shakir Non-Fiction Award at the 10th Annual Arab American Book Awards held in October. The book awards ceremony is an annual event of the Arab American National Museum, a Smithsonian affiliate that is dedicated to Arab American history and culture. This was the first time a psychological text received an award.
AMENA-Psy was officially incorporated by the state of Texas in December. The founding Board of Directors were Gigi Awad, Mona Amer, and Nabil El-Ghoroury. Formalization and development of the AMENA-Psy organization occurred rapidly during the year 2017.

AMENA-Psy was publicly launched on Friday August 4, 1:30-3:00 p.m. at the Division 45 suite at the annual APA convention in Washington, D.C. The meeting drew over 40 participants ranging from undergraduate students to senior scholars in the field. At the meeting, members of the Steering Committee outlined the journey to establishing AMENA-Psy, reviewed the association’s mission and objectives, encouraged participants to join the association as dues-paying members, and divided participants into working groups to develop ideas for future priorities in the areas of practice, research, education, advocacy, and student/professional development.
On October 6th, 2017, the founding Board of Directors and rest of the Steering Committee finalized the Association’s bylaws, which outlined issues related to membership, leadership structure, elections, and other operations.

### 2018

Elections for the first AMENA-Psy Executive Board was held via Internet voting in December 2017, with the Board assuming office at the start of year 2018. The Nominations Committee that organized the elections included two members of the AMENA-Psy Steering Committee (Lamise Shawahin, chair, and Nabil El-Ghoroury), and two professionals external to the organization (Eddy Ameen and Ayşe Çiftçi). A total of 52 out of 103 eligible members voted, for a participation rate of 50%. The elected officers were Mona Amer, President; Ayşe Ikizler, President-Elect; Laila Abdel-Salam, Secretary; Germine Awad, Treasurer; Maryam Kia-Keating, Member-at-Large - Research/Education; Nora Alarifi Pharaon, Member-at-Large - Practice/Applied; and Samiha Jallouqa, Member-at-Large - Student.

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### The American Arab, Middle Eastern, and North African Psychological Association

**AMENA-Psy ongoing activities:**
- Advocacy statements
- Annual awards
- Online discussion list
- Networking opportunities and events
- Roundtable discussions
- Conference sessions
- Research roundups
- Newsletter
- Suggested resources for research, teaching, and practice
- Observer representation on APA Council of Representatives
- Collaboration with other organizations on diversity initiatives

**Upcoming projects:**
- Mentoring program
- Practitioner referral directory
- Thesis/dissertation supervisor database

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**Our mission** is building a supportive network to enhance the professional development of the American Arab/MENA psychological workforce, as well as to promote the well-being of Arab/MENA communities in North America through research, education, advocacy, and the advancement of ethical practice.

**Our vision** is a thriving American Arab/MENA psychology.

**Our values:**
- Social justice and responsibility
- Respect and compassion
- Inclusiveness and diversity
- Family and community
- Culture and tradition
- Innovation and advancement

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