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Imagined Communityby **Joseph Braude**Only at **TNR Online**

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At first glance, you might say that Dick Cheney couldn't have put it better himself. The preelection issue of *Al-Zaytouna*--a pro-Hamas Arabic-language newspaper printed in Bridgeview, Illinois--endorses John Kerry for president. "The question is not so much whether John Kerry is better than George Bush," writes editor-in-chief Usama Abu Irsheid on the biweekly's front page, "but whether we want four more years of Bush." (The paper is published in Arabic; translations are mine.) He says the Patriot Act has "been cast upon our necks like a sharp sword" and declares that it would be "nihilistic on the part of our community not to vote, particularly as the very future of our existence in this country is at issue." Republicans might be inclined to take heart at what amounts to a backhanded compliment: the concern on the part of prominent Palestinian Islamists that their embattled infrastructure in America will be totally snuffed out unless Bush goes home to Texas.

The political preferences of a pro-Hamas newspaper are, obviously, irrelevant. (You could easily find equally awful people--say, Klan members--expressing vigorous support for Bush.) What's noteworthy here is that somewhere between the claim of "racist assaults on our religion" and familiar tropes assailing the administration's policy toward Israel lies the blurring of a key distinction--between America's millions-strong Muslim community on the one hand, and the subset who actively support Islamist militancy on the other. Whether this ethnically diverse community has truly closed ranks or a pro-Hamas editor is merely pretending it has, there's a problem here that Democrats and Republicans alike will need to address after next Tuesday.

A sense of embattlement often brings people together who would otherwise disagree. Four years ago, a sense of embattlement brought together secular Muslims, radical Islamists--and, of all people, Bush. After the talks in Camp David between Ehud Barak and Yasser Arafat broke down, and the second intifada broke out, esteem among Arab Americans for a White House-brokered peace hit an historic low. The new alliance of PLO and Islamist fighters in the Palestinian territories was echoed by expressions of solidarity among secular and Islamist-leaning Arabs and other Muslims in the United States. "The majority [of American

Muslims] determined to vote for the Republican candidate at that time ... against the Democrat Al Gore and his running mate Joe Lieberman," writes the *Al-Zaytouna* editor, "...the position of the community having been largely determined as the result of a call from Islamic institutions which had gathered together ... to establish a clear choice for the direction of the American Arab and Muslim vote." I recall visiting several American mosques during that period and noticing leaflets signed jointly by the leaders of Saudi-funded Islamist groups in the United States--overwhelmingly Palestinian and Egyptian imams--urging the faithful to vote for Bush.

After Bush's inauguration, many of the same imams engaged in some public boasting. After all, the swing state of Florida hosts a large Muslim community and just a few hundred votes had made the difference. Illinois-based cleric Jamal Sa'id, an outspoken supporter of Palestine's "Islamic resistance," praised a large crowd in Arabic at a fund-raising event I attended in Chicago for the Islamic Association for Palestine, declaring that their votes may have altered history. Palestinian Islamic leaders including Nihad Awad of the Council on American Islamic Relations and Abdel Rahman Alamoudi of the American Muslim Council each appeared on Middle Eastern satellite television hailing the Bush victory as evidence of their community's newfound political prowess. Glib claims of having tipped the electoral scale apparently became part of the fund-raising pitch for these organizations, both in the United States and overseas. They determined that both their fundraising power and their political prestige depended on their ability to make the American Muslim community seem to be a coherent whole, capable of speaking--and voting--with a single voice.

Now, of course, the same Islamist leaders are regretting their support of Bush--some from behind bars. Alamoudi was indicted by John Ashcroft's Justice Department in March 2004 for allegedly receiving \$340,000 from Libya--a sanctions violation. The Islamic Association for Palestine, which used to appear on *Al-Zaytouna's* masthead, is a shadow of its former self, as numerous key staffers have been named in a 50-count terrorism indictment. So is its fund-raising affiliate, the Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development. Indeed, for the tightly-knit community of Wahhabi-oriented activists in the United States, the claim that Bush-era justice has landed "upon our necks like a sharp sword" is barely an exaggeration.

But which necks exactly are on the line? And how many don't deserve to be there? *Al-Zaytouna* makes its opinion clear. The pages of recent issues contain pointed coverage of each new indictment, uniformly asserting the innocence of those charged. In the October 15 edition, a favorable review of a new book, *Silent Victims: The Plight of Arab & Muslim Americans in Post-9/11 America*, reinforces the notion that all Arab and Muslim Americans are under siege in the United States today, regardless of their politics, regardless of their actual innocence or guilt.

Muslim groups that do not toe the Wahhabi line, on the other hand, tend to take a more nuanced view. For example, Ahmed al-Rahim of the American Islamic Congress told a Washington think tank in late 2003 of his "embarrassment" at the arrest of "prominent members of the old guard Muslim leadership. ... Now it seems that the government is beginning to crack down--at least on direct ties to terror

states and terror groups. It is a case of chickens coming home to roost." Other Arab and Muslim organizations have hailed some of the major terror indictments of the past year in press releases of their own. Middle Eastern immigrant communities undoubtedly suffer from a unique social stigma in the United States, particularly after September 11, and baseless arrests have occurred far too often. But the assertion that the community faces a plight akin to Japanese Americans during the Second World War, as *Al-Zaytouna's* review of *Silent Victims* suggests, is not accepted by all American Muslims.

Whether Kerry or Bush wins the election, the new administration will face the challenge of engaging a polarized Arab and Muslim-American community, both as constituents and as partners in the struggle against militant groups. There is a crisis of leadership among the various organizations, their members, and a larger number of Muslims who do not identify communally. The "community" has not fully extricated the extremists in its midst--nor has it closed ranks as the pages of *Al-Zaytouna* would have us believe.

JOSEPH BRAUDE is the author of *The New Iraq: Rebuilding the Country for Its People, the Middle East, and the World*.

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