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# Operation Boulder and its Effects on Arab-American Communities of the 1970's

## **Keywords**

Arab-Americans, Arabs, Surveillance, Boulder, FBI, Harassment, Immigration

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Molly Wancewicz is a sophomore at Rice University studying Political Science and History. This paper was written in Fall 2017 for her freshman writing seminar, with the mentorship of her professor Suraya Khan.

**Operation Boulder and its Effects on Arab-American  
Communities of the 1970's**

Molly Wancewicz

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Operation Boulder, a United States government surveillance program deployed in 1972 under the direction of then-President Richard M. Nixon, launched a large-scale federal investigation of both Arab immigrants to the U.S. and Arab-Americans.<sup>1</sup> In this context, the term “Arab” is used to mean a person originating from an Arabic-speaking country in the Middle East or North Africa, while “Arab-American” refers to a person of Arab lineage who was born in the United States. For the purposes of this paper, the Arabs and Arab-Americans referred to are only those residing in the United States. Before the project was canceled due to its overuse of resources, Operation Boulder led to the investigation of 150,000 Arabs.<sup>2</sup> During the operation, government agents employed invasive and discriminatory tactics in their investigations of Arab immigrants and Arab-Americans. Further, a combination of historical evidence and contemporary analysis indicates that these federal investigations intended to suppress and divide Arab communities. However, though the U.S. government was able to dampen community activity initially, their surveillance tactics ultimately resulted in mobilization and cooperation within the Arab community in the U.S., resulting in a strengthened ethnic and cultural identity.

#### U.S. GOVERNMENT TACTICS

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<sup>1</sup> Michael R. Fischbach, "Government Pressures against Arabs in the United States," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 14, no. 3 (Spring 1985): 88-89, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2536955>.

<sup>2</sup> Middle East Research and Information Project, "Operation Boulder Ended," *MERIP Reports* 37 (May 1975): 32, JSTOR.

A collaboration between United States government agencies employed a wide variety of tactics to intimidate, harass, and surveil Arab-Americans. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Immigration and Naturalization Service, Central Intelligence Agency, Internal Revenue Service, State Department, and U.S. Customs Service collaborated on a large-scale investigation targeting Arabs in America, both immigrants and Arab-Americans. The initial tactic used to ramp up surveillance in the early stages of Operation Boulder was a tightening of immigration and visa requirements: the United States government required Arab immigrants and Arab-Americans who travelled internationally to obtain transit visas. Though government officials originally promised that these regulations would only affect those suspected of terrorism, the restrictions were applied to Arabs writ large, regardless of their criminal history. This spillover indicated a future trend of ostensibly innocent immigrants and Arab-Americans being surveilled and targeted based on their national origins alone. Travel and immigration restrictions soon expanded beyond a simple requirement for special visas: Arab immigrants began to face extra screening when trying to enter the United States, which resulted in some visa requests being denied. Further, government agents utilized this additional screening as an opportunity to uncover small technical errors in the previously approved visa applications of Arabs now living in the U.S. The discovery of these errors was used as justification to deport

Arab immigrants, though such technical inconsistencies had previously been overlooked in immigration processes.<sup>3</sup>

U.S. government agencies also employed more invasive tactics in their investigation of Arabs living in the U.S. For instance, in the case of the Arab attorney Abdeen Jabara, government officials used wiretaps as part of “an intensive harassment campaign” that lasted nine years.<sup>4</sup> Further, officials also aggressively questioned Arab-Americans, even those not suspected of any crime. FBI officers made practice of arriving at the homes of Arab-Americans in the early hours of the morning and demanding that Arab-Americans submit to an interrogation immediately, often justifying their actions to subjects and their families with false statements that the person being questioned was suspected of involvement in an anti-United States organization. The government officials also used exploitative tactics during interrogations, such as lying to detainees and telling them they would not need a lawyer. Finally, the U.S. government even went so far as to organize burglaries to steal intelligence on investigation targets. For instance, the FBI carried out a burglary on the office of a leader of the Arab Information Center and allegedly stole the names of the Center’s agents.<sup>5</sup> Federal use of exploitative tactics to gain information about the U.S. Arab community

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<sup>3</sup> Fischbach, "Government Pressures," 91.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 89-91.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

sowed fear among Arab immigrants and Arab-Americans and provided federal investigators with an ever-growing pool of targets.

#### JUSTIFICATION OF TACTICS

The United States government justified its surveillance of Arab-Americans by asserting that this oversight was necessary to protect the security of U.S. citizens of Israeli background.<sup>6</sup> Government officials bolstered this claim by pointing to the “Palestinian commando action” that occurred at the 1972 Olympic games in Munich.<sup>7</sup> At the Olympics, a Palestinian terrorist group took members of the Israeli Olympic team hostage, killing some and then engaging in a firefight that left the remainder of the Israeli athletes dead.<sup>8</sup> Representatives of the U.S. government argued that the Munich attacks could be attributed to “Arab history and tradition of extremism and violence which has contributed the word assassin to the international lexicon.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore, officials posited, surveillance of Arab-Americans was necessary to prevent Munich’s violence from being replicated on U.S. soil.

However, both data available in the early 1970s and the information that emerged from Operation Boulder indicate that the above justifications lack merit.

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<sup>6</sup> Fischbach, "Government Pressures," 89

<sup>7</sup> Joe Stork and Rene Theberge, "Any Arab or Others of a Suspicious Nature...," *MERIP Reports*, no. 14 (February 1973): 3, JSTOR.

<sup>8</sup> A+E Networks, "1972: Massacre Begins at Munich Olympics," History.com, last modified 2009, accessed November 21, 2017, <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/massacre-begins-at-munich-olympics>.

<sup>9</sup> Stork and Theberge, "Any Arab," 4.

In 1972, there were no acts of terrorism that were verified as having been perpetrated by Arab-Americans, suggesting that there was no precedent for the U.S. to initiate such an extensive domestic surveillance program.<sup>10</sup> In addition, through every investigation that was instigated under Operation Boulder, zero violations of United States law were ever discovered.<sup>11</sup> Because the surveillance campaign was both groundless and fruitless, contemporary and current minority advocates argued that other motivations had given rise to Operation Boulder.

#### TRUE MOTIVATIONS

Pro-Israeli movements likely contributed to the perpetration of Operation Boulder, though the U.S. government preferred to emphasize the national security justifications for the surveillance program. The timing of a Zionist information campaign against Arab immigrants provides support for the assertion that the U.S. utilized Operation Boulder to strengthen its ties to pro-Israeli advocate groups. Shortly before the surveillance operation was launched, Zionist organizations based in the United States warned authorities that Palestinians associated with Arab guerilla warriors could be among the immigrants and Arab-Americans pursuing education in the United States. Around the same time, Near East Report,

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<sup>10</sup> Elaine Hagopian, "Minority Rights in a Nation-State: The Nixon Administration's Campaign against Arab-Americans," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 5, no. 1/2: 101, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2535685>.

<sup>11</sup> Fischbach, "Government Pressures," 90.



a Zionist lobbying organization, publicly reported that Arab students were circulating Palestinian “propaganda” in the U.S.<sup>12</sup> As the operation progressed, the United States government explicitly acknowledged that it was collaborating with the Israeli government on Operation Boulder, and domestic Zionist groups such as the Jewish Defense League boasted close involvement with the surveillance campaign.<sup>13</sup> In addition, bidirectional information exchanges between pro-Israel lobbies and U.S. government officials reinforced the political motivations behind Operation Boulder. Up to two years before the operation was launched, U.S. government officials sought information on Arab political activism, and some of the first sources they turned to were U.S.-based Zionist organizations.<sup>14</sup> Conversely, as Operation Boulder progressed, government agencies often provided American pro-Israel groups with information on prominent Arab-American political activists.<sup>15</sup> Evidence of communication and collaboration between U.S. officials and Zionist groups aligns with the logic of the situation: pro-Israel forces would, naturally, want Palestinian activists in the U.S. to be surveiled. Intelligence gathering on Arabs would benefit the Israeli side of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by providing insider insight into Arab political activism and strategy. Further, the fear of prosecution by U.S. officials likely

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 88-89.

<sup>13</sup> Stork and Theberge, "Any Arab," 6.

<sup>14</sup> Fischbach, "Government Pressures," 98-99.

<sup>15</sup> Hagopian, "Minority Rights," 102.

deterred Arab-Americans from political activity, which would benefit the Israeli side of the political equation.

Suppression of Arab political activity was also a prominent, though unspoken, goal of Operation Boulder. Arab-Americans engaged in political activity with the goals of influencing both domestic and foreign policy, as liberalizing immigration laws convinced many Arab-Americans that “interest group politics” could lead the U.S. to pursue a “more even-handed approach to the Middle East.”<sup>16</sup> Organizations such as the National Association of Arab-Americans focused on pressing the U.S. government to back Palestinian interests in the Middle East. They believed that tolerance for Arabs abroad would spill over to expanded rights for Arab-Americans.<sup>17</sup> Other political groups focused on improving the welfare of Arabs in America, and they pursued this goal by engaging in the political process and rising within the government.<sup>18</sup> The United States, partially because they backed Israel in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and did not want pro-Palestinian forces pressuring them or rising in their ranks, supported the suppression of this political activity. Michael Fischbach posits that surveillance was used first to scope out, then to flatten, the Arab-American

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<sup>16</sup> George Fujii, ed., "H-Diplo Roundtable XIX, 2 on Imperfect Strangers: Americans, Arabs, and U.S.-Middle East Relations in the 1970s," H-Diplo HNet: Humanities and Social Sciences Online, last modified September 11, 2017, accessed November 20, 2017, <https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/194098/h-diplo-roundtable-xix-2-imperfect-strangers-americans-arabs-and>.

<sup>17</sup> Hagopian, "Minority Rights," 111.

<sup>18</sup> Michael W. Suleiman, "Islam, Muslims, and Arabs in America: The Other of the Other of the Other...," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 19, no. 1 (1999): 42, EBSCOhost.

political landscape. He notes that U.S. government surveillance focused on the extent of the associations between Arab-Americans and “Arab political organizations abroad.” In-person surveillance and interviews that took place in Arab enclaves allowed the FBI to gather information on the political atmospheres and leaders of certain communities. Fischbach suggests that the U.S. government was deeply concerned about Palestinian influences on U.S. politics and society, writing, “[T]he latter concern, that of Arab viewpoints reaching American ears, was of equal concern as alleged security threats.”<sup>19</sup> Michael Suleiman argues that tactics such as early-morning visits and interrogations were intended to create a “chilling effect,” and that they “intended to intimidate and silence political debate about Middle East issues.”<sup>20</sup> The focus on politically active Arabs instead of any actual perpetrators of violence combined with the imposing tactics employed suggests that U.S. government interests were political, not security-related. Further, the surveillance’s focus on discovery of more targets and its failure to uncover any evidence of legal violations by Arabs in the U.S. indicate that the core goal of Operation Boulder was creating enough fear to suppress, or chill, Arab political activity.

Another clandestine objective of Operation Boulder consisted of destroying Arab networks of internal community support: government officials

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<sup>19</sup> Fischbach, "Government Pressures," 87-90.

<sup>20</sup> Suleiman, "Islam, Muslims," 41.

used targeted tactics in order to entice Arab-Americans to turn on one another, effectively deconstructing communities. For instance, when U.S. officials visited Arab-Americans' houses and demanded to begin interrogations, they questioned not only their target but also the family and friends of the target. This mode of questioning encouraged Arab-Americans to report any possible wrongdoings of their own close relations, as well as shifting blame and resentment towards the original target for supposedly causing the poor treatment enacted by government officials.<sup>21</sup> Younger Arabs faced even further pressure to report the activities of those they knew due to the career- and life-altering threat of being deported before obtaining a university degree.<sup>22</sup> Via these tactics, U.S. government officials intended to build up a "network of informers" to assist their investigations. Government agencies intended not only to separate communities in order to inhibit the formation of political momentum, but also to alienate Arab-Americans involved in politics from the rest of the Arab-American community that formed their possible support base.<sup>23</sup> Operation Boulder's aims to undercut community ties serve as another method of creating a chilling effect, as the destruction of communities tends to inhibit mobilization towards political activity.

Some separation of communities did happen through Operation Boulder's successful cultivation of a network of informants. A number of Arab-Americans,

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<sup>21</sup> Fischbach, "Government Pressures," 90.

<sup>22</sup> Hagopian, "Minority Rights," 102.

<sup>23</sup> Stork and Theberge, "Any Arab," 3-5.

either because they did not know the law or because they believed they had nothing to hide, complied with illegal lines of questioning and implicated people close to them, leading to a cycle of more and more illicit interrogations.<sup>24</sup> As a result of intimidation tactics applied by the federal government, pressure and subsequently shame circulated about the Arab-American community and threatened to close down Arab-focused sources of scholarship. For instance, many university cultural and intellectual programs that studied the Middle East faced pressure to close down due to the intense scrutiny being applied to their activities and those of their scholars. The assumption that Arab scholarly views were unreliable or unsound stemmed from the U.S. government's concerted effort to discredit pro-Arab political views, and this doubt decreased the scholarship produced by the Arab-American community.<sup>25</sup>

However, though something of a chilling effect was achieved, the U.S. government ultimately failed in tearing apart Arab-American communities: overall, political mobilization and community cohesion resulted from Operation Boulder. Originally, the generation of Arab-Americans and Arab immigrants that was affected by Operation Boulder lacked a substantial ethnic identity. Instead, the most prominent characteristic shared by Arab-Americans in the 1970s was their assimilation into American culture, and most Arab-American communities

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<sup>24</sup> Fischbach, "Government Pressures," 90.

<sup>25</sup> Suleiman, "Islam, Muslims," 38.

held only fractured pieces of their cultural identities.<sup>26</sup> As a result, most Arab-Americans shared few characteristics with one another and experienced a general separation. However, Michael Fischbach writes that this disconnect was overcome by the Arab-American response to Operation Boulder: Arab organizations and Arabs in the U.S. banded together to protest the surveillance as a form of discrimination and a violation of rights.<sup>27</sup> The community response was characterized by an unprecedented cooperation between political, social, and cultural Arab organizations. For instance, members of the Association of Arab-American University Graduates (AAUG) published an ad in the New York Times condemning Operation Boulder as discriminatory. Even Arab organizations that had never before engaged in political activities and did not focus on Middle-Eastern issues, such as Arab-American social clubs, attached their names in support of the advertisement. Elaine Hagopian attributes this change to the organizations' perceived "responsibility to the community," suggesting that the events of Operation Boulder connected organizations to new causes and created a cohesive Arab-American community.<sup>28</sup> Other organizations took on roles beyond their original intentions in order to help foster and protect the Arab-American community. For instance, the members of the AAUG with legal training formed a committee on civil rights to combat illegal harassment. Although the AAUG

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<sup>26</sup> Hagopian, "Minority Rights," 107.

<sup>27</sup> Fischbach, "Government Pressures," 90.

<sup>28</sup> Hagopian, "Minority Rights," 103.

never intended to be a body that dispensed legal advice, the pressure exacted by the U.S. government motivated AAUG members to pool resources and provide services to the Arab-American community.<sup>29</sup> Changes such as those that occurred within the AAUG indicated organizations' willingness to expand beyond their original missions in the service of the broader Arab community, suggesting more community cohesion and cooperation.

Overall, the U.S. government deployed surveillance tools under Operation Boulder in a targeted effort to appease Zionist interests by destroying Arab-American political activity and community networks. Though some degree of a chilling effect did occur, the discriminatory practices perpetrated by Operation Boulder eventually led a previously fractured and disconnected immigrant group to band together in solidarity, create resilient social and political networks, and formally protest the actions of the U.S. federal government.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

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