

Hisham Al Hasan

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alhasan@mit.edu

MIT-ASO: the History of Arab Students' Activities at MIT 1958-Present¹

Since the foundation of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1861, MIT has spearheaded a new approach of education, the “useful arts.” MIT’s novel approach, emphasizing practical application of knowledge, has become a model that has proved successful over the years. By the time 1920-1950, MIT has emerged as a powerhouse of intellect, an institute at the forefront of defense research during and after WWII, and a national model of military-industry-science collaboration. MIT’s institutional philosophy has served as a model both nationally and internationally. Not only did MIT attract national students from all over the U.S. but also, MIT attracted foreign students from many countries worldwide. In fact, now, MIT is considered one of the leading U.S. universities in regard to its international student body. MIT’s international student body has long contributed to campus culture at MIT. Among international students, were Arab students that can be traced back to the late 1950s.

According to MIT’s International Students Office, MIT has long been hosting large numbers of international students from the Middle East, that currently count for about 4.92% of total student body, 155 students, while the number of international students from Africa count for 3.33%, 105 students. On the other hand, the number of Arab students, from the Middle East and Africa, including Israelis and Armenians, count

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for 132 students. However, obtaining the exact number of Arab students present in the student body is a difficult task since many Arabs at MIT are either citizen of Arab countries or citizen of other countries with Arab origins (International Students Office). During the early 60s, 1961-1964, the Arab student body mainly consisted of Egyptians, whom were mostly graduate students, and Iraqi students, whom were mostly undergraduate students, with a few students from other Arab countries such as Syria and Lebanon. However, during the mid 60s, 1964-1967, students from Jordan were also present among the Arab community. On the other hand, during the late 60s, 1967-1969, countries such as Saudi Arabia and Morocco, were also present in the Arab community (Debs).

The Foundation of the Arab Club

The “Arab Club”, as MIT-ASO was called in its early days, was formally organized in October 1958, led by Rurik Halaby ‘64, Qais Fattah 64’, and Imad Ta-her (“The Tech, Online Archive” V. 80, No. 40). In addition, according to Farouk El-Baz, a special graduate student that attended MIT in 1962/1963, the “Arab Club” was established as a chapter of a larger organization, the Organization of Arab Students, an organization originally formed in Missouri School of Mines and Metallurgy at Rolla, upon El-Baz’s arrival in 1962 (El-Baz). However, this information is unlikely, since the “Arab Club” has been mentioned in “The Tech,” in 1961 (“The Tech, Online Archive” V. 80, No. 40), in and *Technique*, 1961, the yearbook of MIT class of 1961 (*Technique*, 1961), which are dated prior to El-Baz’s arrival, 1962. (Pictures taken from *Technique*, 1961, can be seen below)



American School Cairo Reunion, M.I.T., Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1957
Adel Sarofim '57, Mohamed Hamza '58, Lotfi El-Sherbini, and Nabil Sarofim



Bellydancer and Policeman, picture (Technique, 1961)

Arab Club, 1961-1964

During the first era, 1961-1964, many of the “Arab Club” activities were related to the political scenery present in the Middle East. Among the political activities that appear to have an effect on the direction of activities of the Arab students at MIT, the Arab-Israeli war of 1948, a war that took place as a result of the Arab countries’ rejection of the “United Nations Partition Plan” for Palestine in 1947, that supported the presence of both an Arab and Jewish state, that is now known as the two state resolution. In addition to the Arab/Israeli conflict, another conflict has been reported to have affected Arab students’ activism at MIT, the socialism agenda of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the 2nd president of Egypt that had led Egypt to a new era of political modernization and social reform, that had taken a rivalry position with the socialist agenda of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, a secularist Arab nationalism political party that had calls for rebirth of the Arab world against the Western imperialism, thus calling for Arab unity. For example, according to Debs '64, the majority of the Arab students were in favor of the socialism agenda led by Gamal Abdel Nasser or the Ba'ath Party, while the remaining students were undecided between the two agendas (Debs).

The political tension in the Middle East, as a result of the socialist movement, was recorded to have led to social activities: playing of Arabic movies on campus obtained from the Cultural and Educational Bureau of the Embassy of Egypt in the U.S, picnics, and limited cultural activities, such as participating in the International Bazaar festival, a cultural festival where foreigners presented dishes and formal costumes of their home countries (Debs). Parallel to these events, according to El-Baz, Arab students held a yearly gathering that brought together Arab students, faculty, and friends from

universities in the greater Boston Area, specifically, MIT, Boston University and Harvard University. Further more, in 1961-1963 the “Arab Club” formally published the *Arab Reporter* and started the *Arabic Hour* on the MIT radio station, where El-Baz was an announcer (El-Baz).

Arab Club, 1964-1967

During the era, 1964-1967, the Arab Club’s activities continued to be politically and economically driven. For example, in 1966, as a result of Intra Bank of Lebanon going bankrupt, thus, causing a serious decline in the Lebanese economy, the Arab Club started the Lebanon Seminar “Lebanon: Capitalism or Liaise Faire.” The seminar was held for a whole weekend in the MIT Student Center ending with a presentation of Arabic food and Arabic culture by a music and dance performance troupe from New York. The seminar featured Dr. George Sfair of the troubled Intra Bank, and Basim Musallam of Harvard University. The event included an overview of Lebanon’s history and culture, political organization, free enterprise economy, banking system, and an overview of problems that confront Lebanese immigrants to the U.S. (“The Tech, Online Archive” V. 86, No. 44), (“The Tech, Online Archive” V. 86, No. 40).

Atif Debs and Usama El-Baz, farouk El-Baz’s brother who later became advisor to the current president of Egypt, presented the Arabic culture by making Arabic dishes to comfort about 2000 students. Debs stated: “I cannot forget spending that Thursday night making Hummus for 2000 people, and with Usama El-Baz making Baklava for the same number! Of course we provided Arab entertainment to the whole student body with a music and dance troupe from New York” (Debs). The idea of conducting a seminar on Lebanon was influenced by the previously conducted seminar on Egypt at Harvard

University earlier in 1966. The Lebanon Seminar's success impressed the leadership of the Organization of the Arab Students (in the U.S). As a result, the OAS was keen on having its 1967 convection at the MIT Student Center. According to Debs '64, this event has lead to an unexpected chaotic series of event. Debs is quoted "Little that we knew that history would take a turn on June 5, 1967!" (Debs)

The year 1967 was highly politically influenced as a result of the Six-Day War, 1967, a war that took place between Israel and its neighboring Arab countries: Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. The conflict expanded as the other Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Sudan, Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria, sent troops, arms, and aid to the Arab countries in combat. In the aftermath of the war, the political geography of the area changed as Israel gained control of Egyptian land of Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, East Jerusalem of Palestine, and the Golan Heights of Syria. Prior to the Six-Day War, the "Arab Club" had invited Noam Chomsky, MIT Institute Professor of Linguistics, famously known for his criticism of foreign U.S. policy, to speak on the Middle East. According to Makhoul '70, at that time, Chomsky had not previously spoken on political issues in the Middle East. This event was held at the MIT Student Center that was overflowing with students attending the event. The audience was surprised with Chomsky's support of President Arafat of the Palestinian Liberalization Organization, PLO, although Chomsky was known of his support for a two-state solution between Israel and Palestine. After the event, Chomsky received harsh criticism from some of the attendees for his position, reaching to threats of attacks against him (Makhoul).

According to Makhoul '70, as a result of the tension in the Arab world, at the aftermath of The Six-Day War, MIT Arab students felt the need to be more informed about the history of the political conflicts in the Middle East. Makhoul '70 stated that MIT Arab students were commonly invited to speak in forums in regard to the Arab/Israeli conflict.

Later during the year 1967, the convention of the Organization of Arab Students “The Recent Setback in Palestine” that was held at MIT. In the event, Fayez Sayegh, a Palestinian that served as a Permanent Representative of Kuwait in the United Nations for many years, gave a provocative keynote speech, “declared inflammatory by the local press (Debs).”

Past the convention, it has become clear that the key factor in the MIT-ASO development during 1967-1970, and all other Arab organizations for that matter was the Israel-Palestinian Conflict. In a show of solidarity, all the local Arab organizations worked together for the cause. Another important event that took place after the convention in year 1967, was the “Middle East and Peace” discussion held by the Office of Foreign Students at MIT, which included not only the Arab Club and its associates but also the MIT Israel Club. It was the first time for Debs '64 “talking” to an Israeli, according to him, where all prior opportunities were dominated by shouting from both sides. Consequently, a chain of attempts at dialog ensued (with some failures) which ultimately led to the beginning of a series of talks held by the Arab club, where it invited speakers from the Israeli side to promote understanding. Eventually, the point was reached and the club proved that it had a case. In conclusion, Rabbi Polak of MIT-who

was a guest speaker at one of the talks-held a graduation party for Atif Debs where many friends attended from the Arab Club, Israel Club, and the Hillel Society (Debs).

Arab Club, 1970-1977

All during the 70's the Arab Club continued being active in the community despite a lack of human capital sometimes in the period. For example, in November 1970, the Association of Arab American University Graduates (AAUG), established in 1968, held its third annual convention at the Sheraton Hotel, Boston. Having been active in the past years during the 1960s, The MIT Arab Club was invited to attend. And, due to its effective leadership among other active Arab groups in the greater Boston Area, Kazimi '71 would later become president twice in 1980 and 1987 while Makhoul '70' also served as president of AAUG. As a result, AAUG held its first few meetings at MIT, Makhoul '70 recalls. This leadership position of MIT Arab Students in the AAUG has helped strengthen the relationship between the Arab community at MIT and other Arab communities present in other universities in the greater Boston area, such as, Harvard University, Boston University, and University of Massachusetts (Kazimi).

In addition to the Arab Club's activity with the AAUG, other events were taking place on MIT's campus. For example, one of the most memorable events in the beginning of the 70 was the holding of an Arab play starring the famous Egyptian actor Adel Imam at MIT in 1972. Subsequently, the Arab Club continued sponsoring seminars and bringing attention to pressing issues facing the Arab world, i.e. racial profiling and Darfour (Kazimi).

Kazimi '71 reports upon his return to MIT as an Assistant Professor, Nuclear Engineering Department, during year 1976, the Arab Club continued to hold activities with the same theme, "Arab/Israeli conflict." For example, in year 1977, in one of the Arab Club events to discuss the Arab-Israeli conflict, the invited speaker was Shafiq Al Hout, a representative of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in Lebanon at the time. Which worried MIT, because it was against the official position of the US in regard to the PLO-the US did not recognize the PLO, as a legitimate representative-and there was a danger of his presence stirring disruption (Kazimi). According to an article in *The Tech*, "PLO representative will not speak ("The Tech, Online Archive" V. 97, No. 45)," dated, October 1977, there was a demonstration against the talk by organized by MIT-Hillel. Promptly, the then provost of MIT, Walter Rosenbleth, contacted Kazimi '71 in an attempt to persuade the Arab Club to un-invite Al Hout, yet it was too late at that point. Ironically, Shafiq Al Hout was unable to attend the event as a result of attending a PLO meeting in Beirut, Lebanon ("The Tech, Online Archive" V. 97, No. 45). But, was able to come some years later to give the speech. Instead of Al Hout, it was Arab American Universities Graduates (AAUG) President, Abdeen Jabara, who gave the speech in a heated, albeit undisturbed night (Kazimi).

MIT-ASO: 1978-1998

In the era, 1977 to 1997, there weren't any documents found stating the activities of the Arab Club. Research on that specific time interval was done on both, MIT ASO documents and *The Tech*, MIT's oldest and largest newspaper. This can be explained by the fact that the Arab community is no longer presented in one organization, the MIT

ASO, but by many small organizations at MIT, for example, The Lebanese Club, The Egyptian Club, Palestine at MIT, and The Kuwaiti Club.

In the era 1997-1998, MIT ASO appears to be politically active, as evident in the sponsorship of events, speeches, and workshops. For example, in 1997, the MIT ASO, along with other organizations, sponsored a day-long workshop, “The Middle East: Strategies of Hope,” hosting the prolific author on Arab politics and nationalism, Edward W. Said, English Professor at Columbia University. During the workshop, Said advocated his ideas and hope for peace in the Middle East, by mainly touching on political, social, and cultural struggles that were standing against the advancement of Arab nations. Among the political struggles in the Middle East, Said specifically touched on the Arab-Israeli conflict, advocating coexistence between Arabs and Israel in a suitable manner (“The Tech, Online Archive” V. 117, No.50).

In February 1998, the MIT-ASO organized an event meant to protest possible airstrikes by the U.S. against Iraq that later took place in December 1998. The U.S. along with the United Kingdom started a major four-day bombing operation on Iraqi targets from December 16-19, known as the December 1998 bombing of Iraq, also known as Operation Desert Fox, which is claimed to be in response to Iraq's failure to abide by with United Nations Security Council resolutions, in addition to intervention with United Nations Special Commission inspectors. The event attracted some 300 attendees to debate and condemn U.S. policy in the Persian Gulf region in the aftermath of the Gulf War, 1990. Among the main speakers at the event, Howard Zinn, professor of History at Boston University and Issam A. Lakkis, a representative of the Arab Student's Organization. In the event, Lakkis stood against Iraqis paying the price for a “a contract

that went wrong between Saddam Hussein and the U.S. administration,” referring to the U.S. support of Saddam Hussein, Former President of Iraq, in the Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988, in a pursuit to balance power in the Persian Gulf Region after the overthrow of the Shah of Iran, 1979. The event was covered by several local and national media agencies, for example, ABC News, CNN, and Fox25 (“The Tech, Online Archive” V. 118, No.7).

MIT-ASO, 1999-Present

In the period 1999-2005, the MIT-ASO’s events appear to be less politically driven. In December 2003, MIT-ASO organized an Arabic cultural musical event presenting classical music from the Andalusian Period up till the Egyptian music of the 1900s (“The Tech, Online Archive” V. 123, No.61).

In 2004, MIT-ASO initiated an activity that is now considered the organization’s main event of the year, MIT Arab Students’ Organization Science and Technology Awards Banquet (SciTech). The SciTech awards honor notable Arabs and Arab Americans who contributed to the fields of science and technology, in an attempt to foster the emergence of a pioneering scientific minded Arab and Arab American community. The SciTech banquet presents four awards: the Lifetime Achievement Award, the Young Professional Award, the Graduate Student Award, and the Undergraduate Student Award. The competitors are judged by MIT Arab Professors, such as, Prof. Munther Dahleh, MIT Professor of Electrical Engineering, Prof. Mujid Kazimi, MIT Professor of Nuclear Engineering and Professor of Mechanical Engineering, and Prof. Ahmed Ghoniem, MIT Professor of Mechanical Engineering. The program which started 2004 has honored several notable figures in the past six years,

most notably Dr. Farouk El-Baz, Research Professor and Director of the Center for Remote Sensing at Boston University, Dr. Mostafa El Sayed, recipient of the 2007 U.S. National Medal of Science, Regents Professor in the School of Chemistry and Biochemistry, and Director of the Laser Dynamics Laboratory at Georgia Institute of Technology, Dr. Ahmed Zewail, recipient of the 1999 Nobel Prize in Chemistry and Professor at the California Institute of Technology, Dr. Elias Zerhouni, Former Director of the National Institute of Health (NIH), Dr. Huda Zoghbi, Professor of Pediatrics in Neurology and Neuroscience at the Baylor College of Medicine, and Dr. Charles Elachi, Director of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory at NASA and Vice President of the California Institute of Technology.

In September 2006, MIT ASO and the MIT Muslim Students Association (MIT-MSA) invited MIT Professor Emeritus of Linguistics and Philosophy, Noam Chomsky, to address the Middle East Crises, referring to the history and present day situation in Palestine-Israel conflict, Lebanon, Iran, and Iraq. The event attracted many attendees, such that the event organizers had to relocate the lecture to a larger lecture hall in a pursuit to host all of the attendees. During the speech, Chomsky criticized the Western media bias of the Middle East and the U.S. affairs in the Middle East. Among Chomsky's critiques, Chomsky referred to the situation in Iraq as a "hideous catastrophe ("The Tech, Online Archive" V. 126, No.41)," stating the inability of Americans to realize the amount of destruction caused by the U.S. in Iraq as a result of the failure of Western Media to publicize. Chomsky stated, "we don't see [the] destruction of [a] nation ... because we are carrying it out; it is invisible ("The Tech, Online Archive" V. 126, No.41)."

According to Eman Kandil '09, one of the organizers of the event, the main cause of the event is the promotion of awareness of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In addition to Noam Chomsky's lecture in September 2006, MIT-ASO and MIT-MSA, supported the controversial Palestine Awareness Week (PAW), a week-long program that takes place every Spring, traced back to 2006. PAW host different events focusing on spreading awareness of the situation in Palestine by inviting scholars from academia or human rights organizations, and by showing documentaries, for example. According to PAW Planning Committee, "The main objective of PAW is to educate. This simply entails the presentation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in context — as the struggle of millions of Palestinians for racial equality, economic traction, and national identity ("The Tech, Online Archive" V. 127, No.23)." On the other hand, PAW has received criticism and opposition by MIT Students for Israel, for example, Matt Fisher wrote on behalf of MIT Students for Israel commenting on PAW's events during Spring 2010, that such activities do not lead to productive results. Fisher stated, "This type of debate leads to circular, unproductive conflict and rhetoric. We get too caught up in arguing over inconsequential facts, and rarely talk about what we want out of a resolution. Without a set of goals in place, facts and counter-facts about who did what and when they did it first primarily serve to mire the discourse ("The Tech, Online Archive" V. 130, No.23)." Moreover, PAW has received criticism for hosting "repetitive events", for example, Stephen Fried '09, President of MIT Students for Israel, commented on PAW inviting Noam Chomsky, as the main speaker in 2009, Fried stated "in my honest opinion, been trapped in this obsolete (shall I say Chomskian?) paradigm for the last four years. Let's peel away the hypocrisy and the pretense: I challenge

Palestinian activists to recognize this over-politicized flag-waving for what it is: counterproductive (“The Tech, Online Archive” V. 129, No.25).”

In 2006, MIT ASO initiated an annual program that aims to increase awareness of U.S. colleges and the application process, College Admission Arab Mentorship Program (CAAMP). CAAMP hopes to reach hardworking, intelligent prospective students who are unaware of the educational opportunities in the United States and/or the application process. MIT-ASO in collaboration with MIT Admission Office, organizes various information sessions and workshops that touch on topics, such as, financial aid for international students and student visa application process. The first CAAMP “mission” reached over 700 high schools students in the Middle East and Northern Africa. The two subsequent trips managed to reach around 2,500 and 2,700 students respectively. The program allowed the students to interact with the different cultures of the Arab world, and with various educational institutes to further improve the program. “I think it’s a great idea,” said Stuart Schmill ’86, Director of MIT admissions, who said his office had helped the students prepare for the trip and connected them with MIT alumni in several countries. “There’s a lot of talent across that region we’d like to develop, Schmill stated (“The Tech, Online Archive” V. 127, No. 65).”

Conclusion

The MIT-ASO, throughout its history, has been an active group on campus, as evident from the events sponsored by the organization, the involvement of the members of the organization with activities in the larger Boston area, and the leadership role the Arab and Arab American students held among other Arab communities at universities.

Although MIT ASO was an active student group during its history, its activities in response to the Arab-Israeli conflict were among a general trend. During 1970s, it was common among Arab students at U.S. universities, as evident in the activities of Arab American University Graduates Association (AAUG). However, needless to state, MIT-ASO's founding members were active leaders in their communities, as evident in the AAUG presidency by John Makhoul '70 and Mujid Kazimi '71. In recent years, MIT-ASO, not only remained effective on campus and in the greater Boston area, but also active nationally and internationally through its initiatives, specifically, CAAMP and SciTech Awards Banquet. I hope that this paper has shown how MIT Arab and Arab American students were related to the international events taking place, and most importantly, how MIT reacted to the tensions in the Middle East.

According to the records of the MIT-ASO, among the earliest MIT Arab students to arrive on campus were Adel Sarofim '57, he held the position of Lamot du Pont Professor of Chemical Engineering at MIT from 1989-1996, Lotfi El-Sherbini, Mohamed Hamza '58, Director of IASTED and is its Founding President, Dr. Farouk El-Baz, Research Professor and Director of the Center for Remote Sensing at Boston University, a special student that conducted research at MIT in 1962/1963, who was one of the founding members of MIT ASO, Dr. Atif Debs '64', President and Founder of Decision Systems International, Rurik Hallaby '64, Chairman and Founder of AgriCapital Corporation, and one of the leading founders of MIT-ASO, Qais Fattah '64, Head of the Technical University of Baghdad, and one of the founding members of the MIT-ASO, Imad Ta-her, Dr. Ahmed Chalbi, President of the Iraqi Governing Council 2003-2004, Dr. Ali Allawi '68, Minister of Finance in the Iraqi Transitional Government between 2005 and 2006, Kanaan Makiya, Sylvia K. Hassenfeld Professor of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at Brandeis University and former Advisor to the Iraq interim governing council by the Coalition Provisional Authority, Dr. John Makhoul '70, Chief Scientist of BBN, Mohammed Bakr '71', President of the MIT Club of Saudi Arabia, Mohamad Azima '71, Dr. Hani Findakly, Vice Chairman and Director of Clinton Group Inc., Dr. Mujid Kazimi '71, TEPCO Professor of Nuclear Engineering; Professor of Mechanical Engineering; Director, Center for Advanced Nuclear Energy Systems at MIT, Assaf Kfoury, Professor, Computer Science Department, Boston University, who is also a political activist and author of several publications on middle eastern politics, And Said Asfahani, a Lebanese MIT student during the late 60s, Safwan Benjelloun '74, a student from Morocco, and senior advisor to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Pictures of Some of the First MIT Arab Students in the 60s and 70s



ATIF S. DEBS



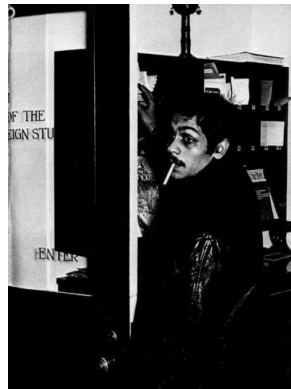
Qais N. Fattah
I



Rurik B. Halaby
I



Mohamad K. Azima



Ali Allawi '68



Mohammed A. Bakr



John Makhoul '70



Kanaan Makiya



Mujid Kazimi '71



Ahmad Chalabi '69



Hani Findakly



Assaf Kfoury



Members of MIT-ASO Executive Committee posing with MIT President, Susan Hockfield and Elias Zerhouni, Former Director of the National Institute of Health (NIH), during SciTech Awards Banquet, April 2010. (Picture courtesy of Hisham Al Hasan)



MIT ASO Exec. Comm. and Award judges (MIT Professors) posing with award winners at the SciTech Awards Banquet, 2010.
1st standing left, Prof. Mujid Kazimi, 4th standing from left, Prof. Munther Dahleh, 6th standing from the left, Elias Zerhouni, Former Dir. of NIH, 4th standing from right, Prof. Ahmad Ghoniem.
(Picture courtesy of Hisham AL Hasan)

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