

Area's Arabs seek Mideast peace

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now stationed there as members of U.S. combat forces.

"My congregation is feeling very depressed," said Shalhoub. "We're Arab-Americans and we have relatives in those countries, but our sons and daughters are also serving in Operation Desert Shield."

Metro Detroit, including suburban Oakland and Wayne counties, is home to an estimated 250,000 Arab-Americans.

While the Dearborn area contains a sizable Muslim community, other western Wayne and Oakland suburbs contain large numbers of Christian Arabs.

Chaldeans, Christian Arabs tracing their heritage to Iraq, have long been members of the Southfield and West Bloomfield communities.

Palestinians, who trace their heritage to the troubled West Bank, have tended to settle in western Wayne suburbs.

WHILE MANY people in both groups retain strong ties to the Middle East, they bristle at any notion of divided loyalty.

"The main point is that Chaldeans are loyal," said Josie Sarafa, Southfield resident and coordinator of bilingual programming at Birmingham Groves High School. "Chaldeans are in this country because they want to live in a democracy."

"My feeling is if I could be a good citizen of the old country, I couldn't be a good citizen of this country," added Shabben. "My first priority is here — the U.S. I've been here 40 years."

Ahwal said Arab-Americans are particularly hurt that so many people automatically assume their loyalty lies elsewhere.

"I've had reporters call me who assume I have a double loyalty and I'm dismayed by that," Ahwal said. "My sister is getting ready to go over there with the U.S. military and her husband (also in the U.S. military) is already there."

The threat of war, she said, is no less frightening to Arab-Americans than to Americans in general.

"I'm the guardian of my nieces and nephews and it's very difficult knowing there's the chance they could lose their mother and father," Ahwal said.



'We're Arab Americans and we have relatives in those countries, but our sons and daughters are also serving in Operation Desert Shield.'

— Rev. George Shalhoub, St. Mary Antiochian Orthodox Church

Still, Arab-Americans said many of their countrymen fail to realize that, in the Middle East, national boundary lines are often as close as suburban city limits — making widespread warfare a distinct possibility and raising fears over distant relatives.

"IN THE Middle East, countries are often only 100 miles away from each other. There's great fear, not only for relatives in Iraq, but for those in Lebanon, Syria and other countries," said the Rev. Shalhoub of St. Mary's.

The Merriman Road church is holding a candlelight prayer vigil at 8:30 p.m. Monday.

"We're inviting people of all faiths," Shalhoub said. "We want Christians, Jews and Muslims to all pray together."

"This war will be one unlike any other. The question is does anyone have the right to start something that could lead to Armageddon?" Shalhoub said.

The multi-national spirit extends to the Islamic Association of Greater Detroit Mosque in Rochester Hills, according to its secretary, Syed Mohammad Ali Khan.

"All thoughtful people hope the U.S. and Iraq will negotiate and avoid war," said Khan, who was born in India. Members of his mosque come from a variety of countries including Pakistan, Turkey and Egypt. "We're all praying for

peace," said Khan.

Churches have been a rallying point and source of strength for suburban Arab-Americans.

"Besides being hurt and saddened by the breakdown of negotiations, we are praying," said Sam Yano, a member of Mother of God Chaldean Church, Southfield. "We pray every day that God will work a miracle."

But while they may pray with Americans of all backgrounds, Arab-Americans know their skin color and accents make them a potential target for racism as tensions mount.

In the time honored tradition of his faith, however, Shalhoub is counseling his congregation to turn the other cheek.

"We have heard (of incidents) from some of our high school students. But this is something we don't want to play up. It's something, I suppose that's only normal in a situation like this, something German Americans faced during World War II," he said. "From our standpoint as a church, we're an integral part of the Livonia community and the community has been very good to us."

Others, however, liken the situation more to the fate suffered by Japanese Americans in the days after Pearl Harbor.

Statements by Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein linking a Palestinian solution to new talks on a Palestinian homeland draw a bittersweet response from many Arab-Americans.

"The last thing I want is for Sad-

dam to be my salvation," Ahwal said. "But we did give him ammunition by ignoring the Palestinian question for so long. If Iraq pulls out of Kuwait tomorrow, there's still a Palestinian question to be resolved."

Birmingham resident Barbara Aswad, a professor of Middle Eastern studies at Wayne State University, said she believes President Bush is "inflexible" by refusing to link discussions on the Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait to Israeli-Palestinian difficulties.

"WE'VE HAD a one-sided foreign policy in the Middle East for 40 years," she said. "And it's coming home to roost."

Allegations by Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz that the United States pursues a double standard with regard to actions by Arab nations have also struck a responsive chord.

"I was born here, I love my country. But I'm very disillusioned," said Jean Farida, a West Bloomfield homemaker. "If the U.S. invades a Panama or Grenada, it's called national interest. If Iraq invades, it's called aggression."

"Kuwait is a tiny little portion that was stolen from Iraq and made into a country by the British."

Despite the failure of U.S.-Iraqi talks, many Arab-Americans still hope for a diplomatic solution.

"I hope the diplomats work hard," said Henry W. Saad, a Birmingham resident who is an attorney with a Detroit law firm.

Other Arab-Americans say they oppose war — all war — because they've seen so much of it.

"I don't want war, period. And I'm speaking as an American, not as an Arab-American," said Ahwal, who lived in the Middle East at the time of the Six Days War in 1967 and has periodically visited thereafter.

"It bothers me that President Bush says it will be a quick, clean war, because I know what war is like," Ahwal said. "Not many people my age know what war is like. But I do."

West Bloomfield Reporter James Radebaugh and the Associated Press contributed to this story.

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— Josie Sarafa Southfield

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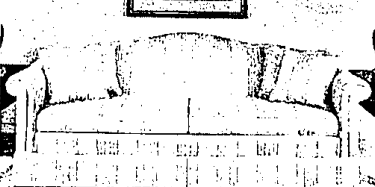
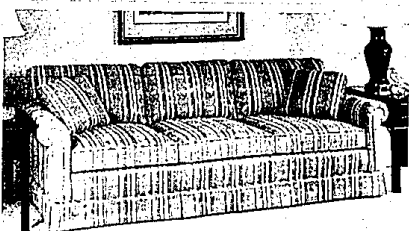
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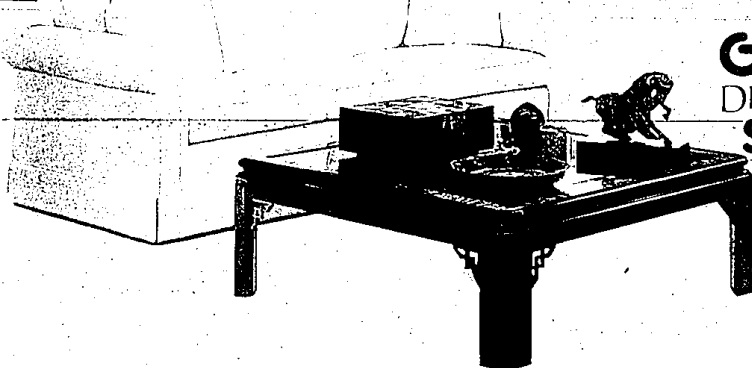
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