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Interview

Interview - Durriya ben Badani's

Durriyaben Badani's work with the US Department of State (1998-2001) included work in three agencies - The President's Interagency Council on Women as an Advisor for the Near East and South Asia, on the Speechwriting team for former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and finally as an Economic Officer at the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan.

What she considers most important though, is that she was able to serve both as a liaison for Muslim-American NGO groups in Washington, and as a reference on Islam for the State Department when greater understanding on this subject was critically needed.

"The State Department is the foreign ministry for the United States," Durriyaben explains to me, "which means that it is the primary agency charged with shaping US foreign policy." The issue that most concerns Muslim-American NGO's is the issue of Palestine and Israel, specifically the transparent bias towards Israel on the part of the U.S in its role as 'mediator.'

Other issues included the Annual Human Rights reports published by the State Department. "These were perceived," she says, "to highlight extensively human rights abuses committed by Arab and Muslim States, but remained relatively muted on Israel, documented by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch [global human rights organizations] to have committed gross human rights violations against the Palestinians in the realms of torture and detention."

By forming a relationship with many of the NGO's, Durriyaben enabled them to have greater access to the State Department on a myriad of issues, and the Department in turn, was able to have a better understanding of the Muslim-American community and its needs.

"After 9/11 though," she adds, "most of the NGO's are forced, to focus almost exclusively on domestic issues for Muslims in the US, such as racial profiling, secret evidence and abuses of the Patriot Act."

Finally, I ask Durriyaben if from her experience in the public political arena, she has any insight that she would like to share, that might benefit the Muslim-American community.

"Yes," she replies. "In Washington D.C., there are a multitude of powerful interest groups and lobbies. These include AIPAC (American-Israel Public Affairs Committee), the NRA (National Rifle Association) and the pharmaceutical companies, to name but a few. They are able to exert a tremendous amount of influence over public policy - whether it be fewer gun restrictions in the case of the NRA, a closer relationship with Israel for AIPAC or less interference from the government in the case of the drug companies.

The reason they are able to exert this power is both due to their savvy political organization and to the intense engagement and commitment on the part of each of the members.

There are powerful lessons to be learned from this for the Muslim-American community. It is vitally important for us to engage in the political process by becoming knowledgeable in the issues we care about; voting in the general elections; contacting your congressman or senator and seeking positions within the U.S. government.

Under the guidance of Sh. Malek al-Ashtar Bhaisaheb, the Houston jamaat did a tremendous job of gaining greater recognition for our community at the highest levels of our government.

The U.S. is a country founded on the belief of 'a government by the people, for the people.' Why not take advantage of that as Muslim-Americans and ensure that our voice is also heard?"