In the face of the humiliating Arab military defeat by Israel in 1967, a group of Arab American intellectuals formed the Association of Arab-American University Graduates (AAUG) to “ward off the intense and often indiscriminate attacks against [the community] and against its old homeland.” This was the first major political organization of Arab-Americans. Though it was not a representative organization that could claim to reflect the entirety of the greater community’s views, the AAUG nevertheless engaged in transnational debates and activism that shaped the Arab-American community’s discourse and perspectives on Arab nationalism and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Through an analysis of the Association of Arab-American University Graduates, I seek to understand how the Arab-American community internalized political events overseas and used them as a catalyst for their own action. I explore the question of how their immigrant experience transformed their understanding of the Middle East and the United States. This paper examines the role that the Israeli-Palestine conflict played in the awakening of what was often deemed an “apolitical” community of Arabs in the United States. An examination of the memoirs and personal writings of several key founders and members of AAUG allows one to glean interesting commonalities and themes. These intellectuals were typically second or third wave immigrants from Greater Syria, and usually received higher education at American institutions. They left their homes in Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, or Egypt during politically volatile periods for education, and may not have initially concerned themselves with politics. All of them felt a yearning for home – even a feeling of exile – and a sense of isolation in the United States, but it was the Israeli takeover of Palestine that finally prompted their self-identification as Arabs and political advocates. Various sources reveal that the alienation these immigrants felt in the United States allowed them to identify with the Third World despite their American academic and financial successes, feelings that AAUG members expressed clearly in numerous writings. Ibrahim Abu-Lughod was the second president of the AAUG and wrote prodigiously about the Arab-Israeli conflict and his experiences as a Palestinian professor at Northwestern University. His memoir, Ibrahim Abu-Lughod: Resistance, Exile, and Return, provides an inside view of the AAUG’s formation and activity. The numerous publications that the AAUG disseminated included the most prominent Arab-American intellectual voices at the time and helped counteract the dominant discourse on Arabs and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This paper looks at Edward Said’s memoirs, Out of Place (1999) and After the Last Sky (1986) to see how one of the foremost Arab intellectuals developed his identity as someone who never quite belonged and was always moving, never settled. His first experiments with political writings arose through contact with the AAUG, and he presented an early form of his Orientalism thesis at an AAUG conference. I also examine Hisham Sharabi’s Embers and Ashes: Memoirs of an Arab Intellectual (first published in Arabic in 1978, translated in 2008) as another example of how the immigrant experience coupled with the Israeli-Palestine conflict fostered activism and Arab nationalism. Abdeen Jabara’s personal writings as a lawyer and founding member of AAUG will also feature prominently, especially since he later founded the Palestine Human Rights Campaign in 1978. Finally, the organizational correspondence and publications as found in the AAUG’s newsletters, Informational Paper Series, Monograph Series, and journal titled Arab Studies Quarterly (edited by Edward Said and
Fouad Moughrabi provide additional sources for this examination of how intellectual Arab-American immigrants constructed their identity as Arabs in exile yearning for a free Middle East.