



HOW ANERA CAME TO BE

ANERA

Improving Lives in the Middle East

Since 1968

John Richardson, author of this publication, was ANERA's first Executive Director and second President. He is a retired U.S. government official and author of *The West Bank: A Portrait*.

The author wishes to thank the many participants in ANERA's creation who provided oral and documentary support for this piece. Betty Sams, widow of Founder Jim Sams and an active participant in the events leading up to ANERA's creation, was gracious in obtaining and providing access to Jim's ANERA files.

An unusual set of circumstances and factors led to ANERA's creation in the wake of the June 1967 Middle East war. ANERA grew out of a partnership that continues to this day between the Arab-American community and the American corporate-philanthropic community involved in the Middle East. It is a partnership that has shaped ANERA's unique personality and the strong personal and institutional links it has forged with a wide spectrum of concerned Americans.

American Near East Refugee Aid (ANERA) is one of the leading American non-government organizations (NGOs) active in the Occupied West Bank and Gaza and surrounding countries, supporting economic self-help projects and providing emergency relief following hostilities between Israel and its Arab neighbors. ANERA's seven regional offices (Jerusalem, Nablus, Ramallah, Hebron, Gaza, Amman, and Beirut), its robust operating budget of more than \$76 million, and its record of minimal management expenses and maximal direct project support are all reasons for the organization's leadership role.

Perhaps less well known is the unusual set of circumstances and factors that led to ANERA's creation in the wake of the June 1967 Middle East war. ANERA grew out of a partnership that continues to this day between the Arab-American community and the American corporate-philanthropic community involved in the Middle East. It is a partnership that has shaped ANERA's unique personality and the strong personal and institutional links it has forged with a wide spectrum of concerned Americans.

The June 1967 War was a disaster for the Palestinians and for the Arab World as a whole. The swift and decisive Israeli victory brought military occupation of Egypt's Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip, Jordan's West Bank, and Syria's Golan Heights. At the time the West Bank was home to 440,000 indigenous Palestinians and an additional 280,000 Palestinian refugees

who were expelled or fled in fear from their homes during the creation of Israel in 1948. Gaza was home to 90,000 indigenous Palestinians and to 190,000 refugees from the 1948 war. Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967 created a new Palestinian exodus, with 240,000 refugees (new and old) streaming into East Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt.

The humanitarian crisis triggered a massive response from Americans of many backgrounds. Of particular interest to ANERA's story are two communities already identified: Arab-Americans and traditional non-Arab organizations linked to the region by cultural, missionary, educational, and corporate interests. The Arab-American organizations shared strong religious, cultural, and/or family links with the Middle East. Most by and large conducted their activities locally, based on religious and geographic origins, while the NGO/corporate entities worked on a national basis. The Arab-American community, led by Americans of Lebanese-Syrian and Palestinian ancestry, responded immediately to the crisis by collection campaigns for food, blankets, medicine, clothing, and funds that were sent to organizations in the Middle East able to distribute these items to the needy. Some of the Arab-American groups were already well established; others were created for the purpose. The largest and most effective of the Arab-American humanitarian efforts, and key personalities associated with them, included the Arab Relief Agency in Detroit (Karim

Ajluni); U.S. OMEN in Los Angeles (Hadi Salem) and San Francisco (Joe Asfour); Cleveland Mideast Relief Committee (Joe Nahra); United American-Arab Appeal in the Boston-Quincy area (Sam Hassan); Pal-Aid in Chicago (Ribhi Kalla); and the Arab Emergency Relief Committee in Washington (James Sams). Entertainer Danny Thomas headlined a successful fundraising program in Detroit, and fundraisers were organized in other cities, including New York, San Francisco, Chicago, Cleveland, and Los Angeles.

The other principal stream of humanitarian activity that grim summer consisted of American organizations linked to the Middle East not by family ties but by cultural, educational, humanitarian, and corporate links. In the immediate aftermath of the war a key organization responding to the crisis was American Friends of the Middle East (AFME), which established the "Arab Refugee Relief Information Service" (ARRIS), AFME-funded and housed in its Washington office. ARRIS set out to identify active programs and to serve as a clearinghouse for information about humanitarian initiatives generated by the new Palestinian refugee crisis, eventually including over 110 separate activities and maintaining contact with over 200 groups and individuals. AFME's Middle East field offices provided information and advice as well as useful contacts. ARRIS sponsored a national appeal, "Who Speaks for the Arab Refugees?," which appeared as an

advertisement in a number of prominent newspapers. Another traditional American humanitarian group was American Middle East Rehabilitation (AMER), whose roots went back to the first Palestine war in 1948. Its head was Dr. Emmett Holt, a distinguished New York pediatrician, assisted by Arab-American physician Dr. Rosa Lee Nemir.

The best-known and most influential organization created in response to the Palestine refugee crisis of 1967 was Near East Emergency Donations (NEED), Inc. NEED was an American corporate initiative responding to high-level political encouragement for large-scale assistance to Palestinian refugees that would also partially offset the massive fund-raising campaigns in support of Israel and its conquests. Former Presidents Dwight Eisenhower and Harry Truman became Honorary Co-Chairmen of NEED, and Time, Inc. President James A. Linen became NEED's President. The NEED Board of Directors read like a "Who's Who" of American commerce and industry. NEED made clear its intention to raise as much money as it could in a short time, give it away, and go out of business. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) was the principal recipient of NEED's estimated \$10 million distribution, but a portion – key to this story – went to the fledgling ANERA in 1968.

As the summer of 1967 wore on, two major players worked increasingly closely in the refugee relief effort, each representing a broadly different constituency:

attorney James ("Jim") Sams of the Arab Emergency Relief Committee (for the Arab-Americans) and AFME Executive Vice President Orin Parker (for the NGOs). Both men recognized the need to coordinate and professionalize the mainly volunteer efforts of the Arab-Americans and of the NGO community. The first milestone was a conference called by AFME and held at the AFME headquarters in Washington, Middle East House, on August 31, making use of the ARRIS mailing list. Jim Sams and Orin Parker were the organizers of this effort, which brought together representatives of four major Middle East relief organizations and some 20 representatives of regional groups from all parts of the United States, who pledged themselves to the concept of a national organization to focus and strengthen the efforts of the constituent groups. Jim Sams was appointed Chair of an "Organization Committee," and there was agreement to convene a broader national conference in Michigan in October to discuss a national organization.

A sub-committee was formed to prepare an initial organization plan and to make arrangements for the conference, which was held in Detroit, Michigan October 21-22. Detroit attorney Karim Ajluni, head of the local Arab Relief Agency, a leading member of the American Ramallah Federation (headquartered in Detroit), and Honorary Consul of Jordan, agreed to oversee conference planning. Invitations to attend the conference were extended to the entire ARRIS mailing

list; invitees were encouraged not only to attend but also to invite others to participate or to provide suggestions for what the national organization should look like. Encouraged by the strong response to the invitation, the sub-committee met on October 20 and finalized a formal proposal to put to the conference as a whole, reflecting the wide input and diverse base of experience of the participants. Jim Sams was appointed Chair of the conference, and Dr. Emmett Holt of AMER was appointed Honorary Chair in light of his efforts on behalf of the organizing effort (sadly, Dr. Holt suffered a stroke during the sub-committee meeting October 20 and did not recover).

Central to the eventual creation of ANERA were two planning concepts:

- 1) defining the character of the national organization as humanitarian and non-political, and
- 2) establishing a new organization rather than expanding an existing one.

On the latter point, the consensus was that a new entity could generate fresh momentum and enthusiasm on the part of all participants. During the following summer there was intense discussion about whether the national organization should pursue a political or non-political track. Some activists felt that because of the primacy of political issues in the Arab-Israeli dispute, it was time to move beyond non-political, humanitarian activities and address policy issues head-on. The majority of participants, however, believed that a political organization would

preclude a role for virtually all of the principal constituent groups, which were non-political in character. Furthermore, a non-political organization could selectively engage political issues within the context of its charter.

The Detroit conference unanimously approved creating a national humanitarian organization that would be tax-exempt, non-political, and based in Washington, D.C. because of the importance of the nation's capital. Behind the planning and strategizing was a determination to demonstrate to the Arab peoples of the Middle East the strong sympathy and concern for their basic human problems and aspirations among the American people of Arab as well as non-Arab origin. Critical to the new organization's success would be its ability to raise sufficient funds both to meet humanitarian needs in the Middle East and to create an administrative structure able to reach out to the constituent groups whose efforts would make its establishment possible. The Detroit conference developed the concept of "Founding Members" for the new entity, each of which would be expected to contribute at least \$10,000 and would be eligible to appoint one Member of the Board of Directors. The planners believed that with the contributions of the Founding Members establishing a sound financial base, support from the broad range of scattered groups and individuals would add significant revenues to the new entity.

The groups present at Detroit who made a tentative commitment to be **Founding Members** were:

American Friends of the Middle East,
Washington, D.C.;

American Middle East Rehabilitation,
New York;

Arab Emergency Relief Committee,
Washington, D.C.;

Arab Refugee Relief Agency,
Michigan;

Islamic Foundation, Southern California;
US OMEN, California; and

United Arab-American Appeal, Massachusetts.

Planning for ANERA now shifted to working with NEED to obtain not only financial assistance but also – if possible – its imprimatur as the permanent, national successor organization to NEED, which had signaled its intention of going out of business as soon as its funds were disbursed. Discussions with NEED were conducted primarily by Orin Parker and Jim Sams, who made a number of trips to New York for the purpose in the fall and winter of 1967-68. In the end, NEED, which had sent an observer to the Detroit conference, decided to remain in corporate existence, but it did something very important: it gave a generous grant that made it possible for ANERA to establish itself on a professional basis.

After a number of preliminary discussions that fall, Orin Parker and Jim Sams held a critical meeting with James Linen of NEED on December 20 in New York.

In a letter to Linen dated January 6, 1968, Jim Sams summarized the main points of the meeting, reviewed the principal arguments for establishing a national organization, made the case that the fledgling ANERA was strongly supported on a national basis, and made the following requests of NEED: a matching grant of \$100,000 (in response to the Founding Members' pledges) and "advice and counsel" to help ANERA attract a strong Board of Directors and duplicate NEED's impressive record of accomplishment. NEED, strongly supportive of ANERA, provided the requested grant, which ANERA matched in full in less than a year.

Jim Sams, who guided ANERA's legal and organizational activity, filed ANERA's incorporation papers on February 21, 1968 and tax-exempt papers shortly thereafter. In a memorandum to the Detroit conference participants, Sams confirmed that the following organizations had made good on their Founding Member pledges of \$10,000 each: American Friends of the Middle East; Arab Relief Agency; Arab Emergency Relief Committee (\$15,000); and U.S. OMEN. These were distinct from similar, personal contributions by Dr. Hadi Salem and the Kamol Hamady and James F. Sams families. Several other groups and individuals also committed themselves to making good on their pledges.

The first meeting of the ANERA Board of Directors took place on May 16, 1968. Present were the Incorporators: Jim Sams, the Rev. Edward Elson (Eisenhower's pastor and Senate Chaplain), and Prof. Harry Howard (distinguished Middle East historian). The following individuals were elected to the **Board** at this time, representing a mix of Arab-American and corporate-NGO backgrounds:

- Karim Ajluni (attorney)
- Hugh Auchincloss (philanthropist)
- Dr. Norman Burns (educator)
- Bertram Cooper (reverend)
- Dr. Henry Fischer (Egyptologist)
- Loy Henderson (ambassador)
- Orin Parker
- Dr. Hadi Salem (surgeon)
- J.B. Sunderland (oil executive)

Soon thereafter, Dr. John Davis, a former Assistant Secretary of Agriculture and Commissioner-General of UNRWA, agreed to serve as ANERA's President and Board Chairman. John Richardson, former AFME Representative in Beirut, agreed to serve as ANERA's Executive Director.

A special meeting of the ANERA Board was held on July 25, at which diplomat The Hon. Evan Wilson and oil executive David Finnie were added to the Board. Dr. Davis reported on discussions with AMER about "close coordination and cooperation," which eventually translated into AMER's becoming an operating division of ANERA in 1970 responsible for ANERA's gifts in kind.

ANERA opened its doors on August 12, 1968 in office space in the Woodward Building at 15th and H streets in northwest Washington DC, where it was to remain until it moved to its current location in 1979.

Dr. Davis stepped down as ANERA President in 1973 and was replaced by John Richardson, who served until 1977. Peter Gubser served as President from 1977-2006, being replaced by Bill Corcoran.

ANERA has remained true to its mandate of serving humanitarian needs of the Palestine refugees and other needy individuals in the Middle East. The greatest change in ANERA's mandate since the founding days has been a shift to strengthening self-help economic development in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip. ANERA's two principal founders, Jim Sams and Orin Parker, symbolized the two streams of ANERA's origins, and ANERA has remained responsive to the Arab-American community role and to the NGO/corporate world, both of which continue to be reflected in the ANERA Board of Directors, supporters, and activities.



Improving Lives in the Middle East

Since 1968

ANERA is a leading provider of development, health, education and employment programs to Palestinian communities and impoverished families throughout the Middle East.

Incorporated in 1968 to help ease the suffering of Palestinian refugees after the Arab-Israeli War of 1967, ANERA is non-political and non-religious and is one of the largest American non-profits working solely in the Middle East for 40 years.

ANERA helps local institutions become more self-sufficient and effective in serving their communities. Every project is planned in consultation with the communities that ultimately benefit — an approach that ensures relevancy and commitment, and secures the long-term viability of the projects.

ANERA's work is made possible through the support of thousands of private donors around the world and grants from numerous public and private institutions.

*For more information about our programs
and how you can help, please contact us at:*

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