Alixa Naff collected a massive body of information on the Arabic-speaking immigrants driven by a conviction that their stories deserved and needed to be roped into a coherent narrative. The hundreds of interviews she conducted over three decades beginning in the 1960s did not investigate every conceivable facet of the lives. Yet, her first-hand accounts and writings have become part of a stock background on early immigration for two generations of scholars. This short article illustrates how the breadth of information Alixa collected, combined with additional untapped archives—some of which can be tracked thanks to dozens of leads imbedded in Alixa’s interviews—will correct the record on major aspects of Arab American life during the first five decades of living in the USA, and may help reshape our understanding of the present.

Armed with a Volkswagen Beetle and awareness of her own place in this country to be rooted in a deeper Arab narrative, she made her way to Michigan in the mid-1970s. Already positioned at the forefront of the scholarship on the Arab immigrants at the time, many of her contacts were members of the Organization of Arab Students and Association of Arab American University Graduates (AAUG). At the time, George Khouri, one of the original founders of the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS), helped her settle into his brother’s house in Detroit. She knew, indeed, participated in the early scholarship on Arab Americans, and understood its genesis to include the need to explain an Arab point of view and a narrative of belonging, in the aftermath of the Arab defeat by Israel in 1967. This goal fell within the perimeters of the AAUG, which came to being as a result of that war. Alixa’s peers were the scholars connected in varying degrees with the AAUG, including Ibrahim Abu Lughod, Michael Suleiman, Elaine Hagopian, Janice Terry, Edward Said, Barbara Aswad, Abdo Elkholly, and Hisham Sharabi. Among the many concerns of these scholars were finding a medium for their scholarship, as they contended with an open cultural hostility in the USA toward Arabs and Arab Americans in the aftermath of the 1967...
Arab-Israeli conflict. In the process of attempting to explain Arab Americans, they created a basic body of scholarship on the early Arab immigrants’ experiences, but they largely left out analysis of their political work and aspirations. Part of Alixa’s importance is that she elected to pursue creating a reservoir of primary information that would serve an embryonic scholarship for years to come, that is, to complete the picture on the formative years of the Arab American saga. The scholarship produced by the above pioneers, as did Alixa’s, paved the way for studies on the Arabic-speaking communities through the different perspectives of gender, ethnicity, family life, and, less so, literature. Alixa’s legacy is unique because she went to pains to create a massive archive, so that she explained, “someone will come along and use it to write the next chapter” on the Syrian immigrants’ long and varied experiences.

Alixa’s firm and uncompromising mentorship became evident in the first substantive conversation I had with her. During the annual meeting of the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) in 1998, she chaired a panel in which I participated. My paper disclosed new information on the political activities of the early Syrian immigrants. The focus of my inquiry was political activities on behalf of Geographic Syria from 1925 to 1927 by immigrant pioneers in Southeast Michigan, in particular, Highland Park, where Alixa and her family lived in the early 1940s. Most of the audience, I recall, took with a grain of salt my conclusions that the early immigrants were in fact politically aware to the point of establishing the New Syria Party (NSP), a formal political organization with chapters across the Americas, and that they actively sought an independent Syria in the face of French and British colonialism. Alixa pressed my hand when we said goodbye and repeated a comment she made in her concluding remarks on the panel: “well, you just have to clean up your paper and make it part of the discourse!” Little did we both realize at the time that my research would have benefited tremendously from Alixa’s existing interviews. Years before we shared the panel at the ADC, Alixa had marked Abbas Abu-Shakra as the Director of the NSP, she had spoken with Farhat Ziadeh, the last surviving member of the Arab National League, a sequel to the NSP, though, far larger and more sophisticated immigrant political organization, and she had already secured the papers of Habib Ibrahim Katibah, one of the most important records on the immigrants’ early political activities.

I was unaware of the location of Katibah’s papers until a more complete finding aid for Alixa’s collection was disclosed by the Archive Center of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History. Unfortunately, I made scant use of them in my book The Making of Arab Americans: From Syrian Nationalism to US Citizenship (University of Texas), which came out in April 2014. Nevertheless, Katibah’s critical papers are indicative of the kind of new information scholars can
expect to find within the massive Faris and Yamna Naff Arab American Collection at the Smithsonian. In fact, a conversation Alixa conducted with Farhat Ziadeh in 1994 provides that she secured these records several years earlier, and more than a decade before a comprehensive finding aid was attached to her collection. In her interview with Ziadeh, part of a series of interviews she conducted in Oregon and Washington State, she indicated that she secured the papers from Katibah’s widow. The political activities of the immigrants were not Alixa’s main focus, yet, she was clearly keen to secure an archive that will further contribute to complete the picture, namely that the immigrants developed mass political organizations earlier than commonly believed.

Like other untapped papers belonging to the pioneering authors, editors, and activists, Katibah’s papers hold the key to excavating the very foundations of ascribed Arab Americaness, especially in terms of giving adequate attention to nationalism and nationhood as critical markers of this identity. More careful examination of the evidence in Naff’s unique and nearly complete collections—in Arabic and English texts—is conducive to new analysis that will enable scholars to rope into the discourse perspectives on their rich social, artistic, and political life for a more complete Arab American narrative. Contrary to existing scholarship, the immigrants were not wracked by sectarianism or defined by narrow primary affiliations around clan, village, religion, or sect. In addition, the immigrants’ attention to the political turmoil did not materialize after World War I (WWI) within these narrow parochial confines as scholars suggest. Collective action by the Syrian pioneers including the majority who came from the Mont Lebanon area cared deeply about the future of their “Syrian mother” and the Lebanon, “her heart.” Katibah’s writings explicate attachment by the immigrants to rising common cultural and political ties since the mid-nineteenth century known as Arab awakening or Nahdah. This attachment propelled the immigrants to advocate for the political independence of Syria within defined borders. This advocacy finally yielded formal political action centered on influencing public opinion, and with it, US policies in the Near East five decades before AAUG embarked on these very goals.

The importance of Habib I. Katibah (1892-1951), a nationalist and a major intellectual, may not be evident in the aggregate scholarship on early immigration, largely because his generation was considered apolitical (due to perceptions that sectarianism retarded any political stance), and lacked feelings of peoplehood. For decades, though, understandably, the view prevailed that due to the “one-sided press coverage, the general U.S. public support of Israeli aggression” during and after the 1967 Arab Israeli war caused the Arab immigrants in the USA to be “shocked,” therefore, resulting in the founding of the AAUG. The AAUG was believed for over 40 years to be the first political organization and the one credited with the “birth to the Arab American identity.”
I first knew about Habib Katibah and a distinguished roster of his friends through the archives of one of his compatriots named Ameen Farah in Flint, MI, and soon discovered that both men worked with Fuad Shatara, Faris Malouf, Peter George, and luminaries in the Pen League (Al-Rabitah al-Qalamiyah) and others on the East Coast to establish national political organizations. My book made use of this new information to challenge this narrative of a quaint apolitical immigration that parallels the American success teleology, which was followed by a much later political explosion. *The Making of Arab Americans* tells us in detail the story of vehement Syrian nationalist sentiments upon immigration in the 1880s, which led to the founding of The Free Syria Society, 1915; the NSP, 1926; the Arab National League, 1936; and the Institute of Arab American Affairs. However, the Naff collection makes it possible to augment this and potential similar research by presenting the most complete biographies of a key individual, Habib Ibrahim Katibah, and perhaps others.

Thanks to the Naff collection at Smithsonian, I was able to include in *The Making of Arab Americans* a succinct biography of Katibah as follows:

Katibah was born in Yabrud in Syria the year *Kawkab Amreeka* was first published in 1892. [Katibah] graduated from [the Protestant Syrian College later] the American University in Beirut in 1912 and from the Harvard School of Theology in 1918. He championed the Palestinian cause at the early signs of Zionist settlement in 1916 and had a great deal to offer the *Syrian World* because he worked as a correspondent for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, the *Detroit News*, and *Al-Ahram* in Cairo. [Katibah] assumed the directorship of the Arab National League in 1936 and worked as the secretary of the Institute of Arab American Affairs from 1945 until his death in 1951; during those years [Katibah’s] political arguments against Zionism appeared frequently in the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Los Angeles Times*.

The document in the Naff archive also provides that Katibah published the monthly magazine *The Syrian World* founded by Salloum Mokarzel for two years beginning in 1933 as a weekly newspaper. During the Second World War, he served as a “script editor for the Arabic desk in the Office of War Information,” wrote the book *New Spirits in Arab Lands*. After the war, he advised the Office of the Syrian Delegation to the United Nations.

Katibah’s papers in Naff’s collection, in fact, teem with letters Katibah exchanged with luminaries in the USA, Egypt, and Europe, for example, Azzam Pasha, Isa Nakhle, Faris El-Khouri, Ahmad Zaki Pasha, Shakib Arslan, and Muhammad Husein Haykal. Each of these correspondences and the historical circumstances surrounding them deserve careful examination, because they provide critical clues as to the contiguity of political work across the waters when the immigrants’ ethos was being shaped in congruence with the remaking of the political map of...
their ancestral homelands. The love of their “Syrian mother” motivated young immigrants—Syrian and Lebanese—to join forces across Asia, Africa, and Europe to form the Free Syria Society in 1915 before the outcome of WWI was known. After that war, anxiety over Syria’s fate under French and British occupation yielded the NSP. During the Interwar period, the urgency following the Palestinian Revolt and general strike in 1935/1936 against British repression galvanized the Syrians (including those who increasingly referred to themselves as Lebanese as World War II (WWII) drew closer), and transformed the Palestinian cause into a core Arab issue on both sides of the Atlantic. As a result, two older collectives, the Palestine National League (a.k.a Palestine Renaissance Society) and NSP, founded in 1923 and 1926, respectively, reemerged as the Arab National League headed by Fuad Shatara, at the time a surgeon living in Brooklyn, NY, aided by Katibah. In the three years following 1936, the league grew into the largest Arab American political organization per capita to this day. Upon the start of WWII, the activists found it exceedingly difficult to maintain their anti-British position, given the reality of the war.9

In 1939, when WWII broke out in Europe, the Arab Syrian immigrants joined Italian, Polish, and Jewish immigrants as they declared unwavering loyalty to their adopted country. At the time, decades of anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant sentiments abated such that the dominant Anglo-Protestant population felt compelled to acknowledge and accept the cultural characteristics of the “new immigrants,” a term used to describe the mostly Eastern European arrivals between 1870s and WWI.

Each of these events shaped the political map of the Arab Near East and contributed to the emergence of Arab American identity. It is no surprise that Naff, the US-born daughter of Lebanese immigrants, is responsible for creating a massive collection comprised of a huge volume of Arabic language records. Alixa Naff created more than a time capsule on the untapped and largely neglected nationalist feelings of the Syrian and Lebanese immigrants; she created a large reservoir of information that will make it possible to challenge dominant paradigms. I regret not having Alixa read my book and take comfort in the fact that it is now part of the record as she directed me to do. Indeed, she provided the tools for young scholars, given the requisite language skills, to pursue new strands of research and continue to “writing the next chapter” in Arab American Studies.

Notes
1. From a telephone conversation with George Khouri at his residence on September 2, 2014.

www.plutojournals.com/asq/
3. Alixa Naff interview with Farhat Ziadeh on November 8, 1994, in Seattle, WA, subseries A5f, Naff Collection. In this interview, Ziadeh said that Rashid Khalidi’s parents, Ismail Khalidy and Salwa Juha, met through their volunteer work for the Institute of Arab American Affairs in New York in 1945. I should note that upon consulting parts of Alixa’s collections at the end of June 2013, just two days before Alixa’s passing, I found the material incredibly dense with untapped manuscript. The series containing Katibah’s papers alone deserves careful assessment beyond constraints of space here. Suffice it to say that the research value of the material is staggeringly high. Therefore, steps should be taken immediately to take better care of the material and to preserve the information by scanning the entire series.


8. The label Lebanese, although integral to ascribed Syrian identity, became more salient following a complex set of circumstances discussed in chapter 5 of my book *The Making of Arab Americans*. For one thing, political work against British hegemony became costly for the immigrants as they felt the pressure of falling in line behind Americans allied against Nazism in the war. In addition, severe immigration restrictions from 1924 to 1965 took their toll as the cadre of activists was not replenished. This is why I believe that excavating the kind of new evidence Alixa secured is critical to connecting the dots for a contiguous Arab American narrative.

9. See Bawardi, *The Making of Arab Americans*, chapters 5 and 6. This complex discussion presents conscious ascription to “Arab American[ness]” just as the decision to disband the league was made for the reasons described in the text.