Outstanding nuclear scientist and leading Palestinian-American Mujid S. Kazimi died suddenly in July 2015. This tribute summarizes his professional career and his remarkable contribution to nuclear science, his involvement with Arab-American organizations, and the personal qualities he brought to a lifelong commitment to Palestine.

The ANNALS of Arab-Americans celebrated as community leaders are filled with the names of individuals who excelled in the fields of political activism, literature, and business. Fewer are mentions of men and women who shone in the sciences such as Mujid S. Kazimi, the preeminent nuclear scientist who died suddenly on a trip to China early in July 2015. Kazimi’s life and career reflect the richness and diversity of talents among Americans with origins in the Arab world. A world-renowned scientist and scholar, Kazimi was not only an educator, mentor, and researcher in the field of nuclear engineering but also a humanist and Palestinian patriot.

Born in Jerusalem in 1947, Kazimi was less than a year old when his family was forced into exile, first to Jordan then later to Kuwait, where he completed his elementary education. He graduated high school with distinction from Birzeit College where he was recognized as a “model student for excellence in the sciences.” He went on to get a bachelor of science in nuclear engineering from the University of Alexandria in Egypt. The product of what he called a mixed Arab educational system, he was well-prepared for graduate work at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where he obtained his PhD in nuclear engineering in 1973. “I was fascinated in high school by the fact that one can extract so much energy from such a small amount of mass,” Kazimi recalled. “I wanted to be part of that industry, to develop the use of these small atoms in a peaceful way.”

After working briefly at Westinghouse Electric Corporation and Brookhaven National Laboratory, in 1976 Kazimi joined the Department of Nuclear Science and Engineering (NSE) at MIT, which he headed from 1989–97, and later held a joint appointment at the Department of Mechanical Engineering. During his illustrious career at MIT, Kazimi held many internationally prominent positions, including chair of the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO); director of the Center for Advanced Nuclear Energy Systems (CANES); and chair of the Kuwait–MIT Center for Natural Resources and the Environment (CNRE).
Kazimi was an expert in the design and analysis of nuclear power plants and the nuclear fuel cycle. His numerous technological contributions promise to enhance both the safety and the economics of nuclear power plants. Among his most important contributions was the development of annular fuel with internal and external cooling, offering the potential for dramatic reductions in the fuel-operating temperature. His research generated fundamental insights into the range of options for fuel-recycling technologies, notably that the abundance of natural uranium would enable the sustainable development of nuclear energy along economically competitive and safe paths. In the letter announcing Kazimi’s untimely passing, NSE chair Richard Lester described him as “one of the world’s great nuclear engineers.”

Kazimi served on a large number of professional boards and committees, including the National Research Council, the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, and the Nuclear Energy Advisory Committee of the U.S. Department of Energy, whose subcommittee on nuclear reactor technology he chaired. In recognition of his scientific contributions, he was made a member of the National Academy of Engineering, the highest level of achievement in the field. He was a fellow of the American Nuclear Society, the International Nuclear Energy Academy, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. In 2011, he received the Arab TAKREEM Award for Scientific and Technological Achievement. He was also a member of the board at Jerusalem’s Al-Quds University and the International Advisory Board on Nuclear Energy in the United Arab Emirates. Furthermore, he was in charge of the Kuwait–MIT Center, which he turned into a hub for research collaboration and knowledge transfer between MIT and Kuwait’s leading research institutions. It is a testament to the impact that Kazimi had in his field that the International Topical Meeting on Nuclear Reactor Thermal Hydraulics (NURETH), upon hearing of his passing, dedicated NURETH-16 to him and added a special session in his memory celebrating his contributions to making nuclear power safer, more reliable, and available to all.

Alongside his exceptional educational and professional achievements, Kazimi maintained an unshakeable humanism and pride in his Palestinian roots. A former MIT student of his, who became president of the Arab Student Organization forty-four years after Kazimi had occupied the position, wrote in his commemoration: “Professor Mujid Kazimi is and always will be one of my favorite professors of all time . . . I’ll never forget that first meeting when I walked into his office and saw a large portrait of [al-]Aqsa [Mosque] covering a pretty good portion of the wall . . . His attachment to the Arab and Palestinian identities while leading one of the most successful nuclear engineering programs in the world was simply inspiring. The story of a man born in Jerusalem during such difficult times and making it this far will always be a symbol that represents what it means to be Palestinian and what it means to be Arab.”

Kazimi recognized early on the value of teamwork and he understood that organized community structures were the best way to effectively channel his efforts for change. As a young MIT student, together with his Arab classmates, he defended the Palestinians against what he felt was the deluge of misinformation permeating the U.S. media following the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war. He soon joined the Association of Arab-American University Graduates (AAUG), where he twice served as president (1980 and 1987), and later the Trans Arab Research Institute (TARI). He was as determined to counter the widely prevalent and negative stereotypes of Arabs in the United States as he was generous in offering whatever help he could to alleviate the suffering of the
Palestinian people and improve their prospects. Reflecting on the dire situation of the city of his birth, Kazimi recently described his experience of Jerusalem as follows: “Once a year I attend the board meeting [of Al-Quds University] in Jerusalem. Going back [. . .] is always an emotional experience. The Separation Wall comes right [up] to the border of the university. It’s really very painful to think of how these walls have separated the Palestinians and restricted their movement. It’s a real manifestation of them being in a cage and not being able to move out of it.”6 Yet, he never allowed himself to be visibly angry or bitter in spite of all the adversity to which he and the Palestinians have been and continue to be subjected. His approach was always positive, constructive, tolerant, and humanistic.

Besides his commitment to the question of Palestine, Kazimi’s greatest passion was to encourage education, especially in the sciences, among younger Arab generations. He believed that development and research were the only way to realize the human potential needed for the stabilization of Arab societies. While his vision embraced justice and equality for all of the diverse peoples of the Middle East, Kazimi saw his work in the field of nuclear engineering as serving humanity at large, well removed from narrow interests or chauvinistic nationalist ambitions.

Despite his numerous accomplishments, Kazimi did not brag about himself or his achievements. He was humble, gentle, patient, and never confrontational or flashy. Anything he said was well thought-out and measured, and always accompanied by a kind and gracious smile. While wisdom is an attribute that we expect to acquire with age, Kazimi exhibited that gift very young.

Mujid Kazimi’s legacy is that of a Palestinian, an Arab, an American, and a citizen of the world who nurtured and served his different identities with passion and grace.

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ENDNOTES
1 Condolence notice, Al-quds (Jerusalem), 8 July 2015, p. 1. Facsimile provided by author.