

**“Mitch Daniels’ Syrian Roots,” Arab Indianapolis, October 13, 2020,
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By Edward E. Curtis IV

“I’m sure, as a good Syrian, he ran a very honest numbers racket.”

–Mitch Daniels, May 4, 2011, joking about his grandfather

Many Hoosiers know about Mitch Daniels, Jr.’s career—from his service as Sen. Richard Lugar’s chief of staff and the director of President George W. Bush’s Office of Management and Budget to his executive position at Eli Lilly and Company, his leadership of Purdue University, and most importantly, his two terms as the state’s governor.

But most Hoosiers, it’s probably fair to say, are not aware that 49th Governor of Indiana, Mitchell Elias Daniels, Jr., is an American of Syrian descent. Not to mention his grandfather’s success as a bookmaker.

Though self-identifying Arab Americans overwhelmingly reject Donald Trump—only a quarter of them voted for him in 2016—Arabic-speaking immigrants and their heirs have often supported Republicans. Some of the most prominent Arab American politicians have been Republican, including U.S. Senator James Abdnor, U.S. Senator and later Secretary of Energy Spencer Abraham, Governor and White House Chief of Staff John Sununu, and U.S. Representative and Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood.

Like most of these politicians, Mitch Daniels Jr. traces his Arab roots to immigrants who arrived in the United States in the early twentieth century. His grandfather, Elias Daniels, immigrated to the United States from Qalatiyah, Syria, on June 15, 1905.

Qalatiyah is a small, historically Christian village built on rocky, but fertile hills about 1,500 feet in elevation. Thirty miles east of the Mediterranean coast, the town has a temperate climate, averaging 50 degrees Fahrenheit in the winter and about 80 degrees in the summer. Its most spectacular attraction is located five miles south, the Krak des Chevaliers. A crusader castle dating from the twelfth century, the impressive ruin is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Elias Daniels’ destination in America was less bucolic. He settled in Monessen, Pennsylvania, arriving just as this small town close to Pittsburgh became a major site of U.S. steel production. Eventually opening a pool hall on Donner Avenue across the street from several factories, including Pittsburgh Steel, National Tin Plate, and Page Woven Wire Fence Company, Daniels chose an advantageous spot. He was not only the merchant who figured out that he could supplement his income by giving factory workers a chance to play the numbers. In Monessen, Elias Daniels was also part of an Arabic-speaking community of Christians large enough to establish and maintain their own Orthodox church.

In 1921, the successful, handsome, and smartly-dressed Elias Daniels returned to the old country to find a bride. Mitch Daniels' grandmother, Afife, was around nineteen years of age when she wed the 36-year-old. They settled down in Monessen, and in 1923, Afife gave birth to Mitchell Daniels, Sr. She died just a few years later, and Elias brought up his two boys, Mitchell and Russell, on his own. Mitchell, Sr. later attended Allegheny College, served in World War II, and then married Dorothy Wilkes in 1948.

Mitchell Daniels, Jr. was born the year after his parents were married. The family moved to Atlanta and Bristol, Tennessee, but in the late 1950s, they came to Indianapolis. The man who would become governor was largely educated in Washington Township schools, including Delaware Trails Elementary, Westlane Middle School, and North Central High School, where he served as student body president. He was already obsessed with politics when he won "Outstanding Citizen" at the annual meeting of Hoosiers' Boy State.

The Daniels' first home was, as Daniels put it, "in the middle of an all-Jewish neighborhood" around 73rd Street and Spring Mill Road, where the Jewish Community Center and several synagogues are located today. Growing up there had a profound influence on Mitch Daniels. In a 2009 speech, the state's governor said that it was "one of the best things that could ever have happened to me. I made some lifelong friends there; all of my buddies, my whole paper route, everybody on the school bus were Jewish guys and girls." He felt a kinship with the Jewish community. He matriculated at Princeton University, he remembered, "on the heels of the Six Day War," when Israel defeated Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt, and occupied the Golan Heights, the West Bank, and the Sinai Peninsula. "Everybody was thrilled with what Israel had accomplished on its own behalf," he recalled. "It was like America had survived or successfully defended itself."

This was a remarkable statement coming from an Arab American. While most in the community mourned the loss of life and land, and another setback to the movement for Palestinian self-determination, Mitch Daniels was celebrating. This was not the only time that his views would differ from the majority of Arab Americans. He has been critical of the movement for Palestinian freedom even when it has adopted non-violent strategies for liberation. Though he was happy to accept the Najeeb Halaby Award for Public Service given by the Arab American Institute, Daniels has never been a strong advocate for Arab American issues and he has not been active in Arab American community affairs.

His life and career are useful reminders of the diversity of Arab Indianapolis. There is no one way of being Arab—the Arab American heritage runs in multiple political directions.

Whether one finds his legacy to be good, bad, or ugly, Mitch Daniels has had an undeniably significant impact on Indianapolis and the state as a whole. As he pointed out himself in his speech to the Arab American Institute, it all started with his Syrian grandparents, the people who made it possible for Mitch Daniels Sr. and Mitch Daniels Jr. to live a life of opportunity.

Thanks to Arab Indianapolis student researcher Ronnie Kawak for tracing the history of the Daniels family.