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1 Attachment and Identity: The Palestinian Community of Detroit

Although Arab Americans constitute relatively new communities in the United States, a fair amount of literature on their history and development has been generated. Interest in recording the social, economic, and political experiences of these immigrants has grown in tandem with the expansion of their numbers and their visibility on the American scene. Since the late 1960s, the upsurge in the literature has reflected a growing sense of ethnic identity among the members of these communities (e.g., the Muslims in America) and a closer link to their countries of origin.[1] It also has been a response to western attitudes toward Islam and U.S. official policy about the homelands of these communities.[2] Another area of scholarly interest that has produced prolific writing is Arab and Muslim women. This field of study sheds light on the social and cultural dynamism within these societies in the Middle East and the diaspora. These many sources have informed the historical background of the Arab-American experience provided in this chapter.

Although the earliest Arab immigrant communities congregated initially in the northeastern states close to their ports of entry (i.e., New York and Boston), they gradually filtered to areas of economic pull such as Detroit, Los Angeles, and Houston. Arab migration has been primarily to and from urban centers, although it has attracted many rural Arabs. The earliest waves of immigration to the United States occurred at the close of the nineteenth century, predominantly from Syria and Lebanon but with a small number from Palestine. The preponderance of these immigrants were Christian, although Muslims also immigrated at this time.[3] The ratio of Christian to Muslim immigration for the period until the mid-twentieth century has been estimated at 90 to 10 percent. Some writers claim that this ratio has drastically changed since 1948, following the expulsion of Palestinian Arabs from their homeland and the influx of Asian Muslims to the United States. Since 1948, Palestinians have been trickling in to join the other, larger Arab immigrant communities, and proportionately many more Muslims came with those waves of migration. Although there are no reliable statistics on the current

number of Arab Americans or Palestinians, estimates by observers and experts put the total of Arabic-speaking communities at approximately three million, with the Palestinians averaging 12 to 15 percent of that number.[4]

Like other Arab immigrants, Palestinians came in direct response to economic and political "push factors" in their home country. However, in the Palestinian case, these factors were punctuated by dramatic civilian dislocations and flight. The first of these waves in 1948 was followed by another in 1967, when the whole of Palestine fell under Israeli military control. The next wave of migration occurred in 1970, after the Palestinian-Jordanian debacle and its aftermath of strained relations. Emigration again increased in 1982 in response to the deteriorating conditions of Palestinian life in Lebanon after the Israeli occupation, the expulsion of the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the Sabra and Shatila massacres.[5] The final link in this chain of misfortunes was the Gulf War and the resulting expulsion of Palestinians from Kuwait and most of the Gulf states. Since 1948, immigration to the United States has attracted Palestinians suffering from the economic and societal upheavals brought about by contraction of local options for refuge.

Until the 1960s, Arab immigration to the United States was motivated by economic factors and limited by legal restrictions. Thereafter, immigration was sought for various other reasons by Arabs, including Palestinians. Although economics remained a significant attraction, education, technical opportunities, and a more liberal political atmosphere became important reasons for people to immigrate.[6] At a time when the older communities had almost become acclimatized to the U.S. social and political scene, a more youthful generation of Arab immigrants who were socialized and politicized in the Arab world of the 1950s and 1960s joined their ranks. Among the new waves of immigrants were students seeking technical and professional training and families looking for better opportunities and a more liberal atmosphere. These newcomers brought energy and zeal into the established Arab-American communities and reinvigorated the ethnic features of that community with political and social orientations that reflected the changes the Arab world had experienced since World War II.

A major issue that caught the imagination and emotions of all was the Palestine War of 1948 and the dispersal of the Palestinian people. It was the first event that directly touched most Arab Americans and involved them in activities that went beyond the charity to their families and villages back home. After 1967 these events came to their sitting rooms through media coverage, and their lives were affected by the recognition of American pro-Israeli policy and a vocal anti-Arab public expression.

Palestinians were prominently represented among the new waves of Arab additions to the ethnic communities of the United States. By the late 1960s, Palestinians came in families and as individuals, as legal immigrants to join family members, and as students, many of whom ultimately settled in the country. They came from all social strata, from rural areas seeking economic opportunities and a refuge, and from middle-class families seeking education and professional opportunities. Among them were the highly qualified professionals and intellectuals, as well as those with minimal formal education.

Detroit was the destination of many because it offered the largest concentration of ethnic Arabs, providing family and friends and a familiar way of life. Already-settled Arab and Palestinian communities provided primary group support to help initiate new

immigrants into the American system. Whether Muslims or Christians, these primary channels supplied newcomers from the same families, from among friends, or from the same village with the facilities to settle, find work, and adjust.[7]

The Detroit auto industry and allied economic opportunities had attracted Arab immigrants since early in the twentieth century. A community had grown there, becoming a primary group that attracted other immigrants. Christian and Muslim Palestinians have lived and worked in Detroit since the early 1930s. However, their numbers had grown significantly only after 1948, and by the 1960s, their community had swollen to include all social strata and a large number of politicized and educated newcomers.[8] Although it is impossible to gauge the exact number of Palestinians living in the Detroit metropolitan area, research in the early 1980s has estimated their number to be 12.5 percent of the total Arab-American population of 200,000.[9] This number seems to have grown because of protracted Israeli policies in the West Bank and the results of the Gulf War. This approach explains the suggested number of 25,000 to 30,000 Palestinians living in Detroit. Observers also suggest that the ratio of Muslims to Christians for this group of residents is nearly equal.

All sects of this community initially settled within the boundaries of Detroit, and a pattern of differentiated settlement among Christians and Muslims gradually developed. Like all immigrant communities, the features of Palestinian immigration followed the pattern of family chain and primary group attraction. The most common form of immigration was through the sponsorship of family members among whom they set roots at first. The socioeconomic background of the immigrants dictated the areas of settlement and their later mobility. Muslims initially congregated in Highland Park and the south end of Dearborn, and with improved economic conditions, they moved northward into Dearborn and on to the closest western and southern suburbs. The Christians settled initially in Detroit and then moved to the western suburbs of Westland, Livonia, and Farmington Hills, often going by way of Dearborn in their climb economically. Although Palestinian presence in Detroit today is minimal, except for few families at the borders of Dearborn or the few in the wealthiest residential pockets (e.g., Grosse Pointe) and in some left-over retail stores, many Palestinians, especially Christians, started their immigrant lives there. Nevertheless, there are Palestinians of both sects scattered in most parts of metropolitan Detroit, especially in the wealthier suburbs to the east and north.

Like other Arab immigrant communities, Palestinian settlement patterns were modeled on the life they had left behind: homogeneous communities grouped by family, religion, sect, and village. They also reproduced, in as far as possible, the lifestyle they had been accustomed to in terms of social contacts and linkages, celebrations of joy and sorrow, and leadership "za'ama" alliances. In the United States, wealth and financial success replaced lineage and family names as the criteria of social status and leadership. Education and professionalism as means of economic advancement and respectability became goals among the second generation.

Relationships among the early immigrants were based on sectarian, economic, and village affiliations, not on political association. This approach was challenged, especially among the middle class, by the changed political atmosphere in the city from the 1970s through the early 1990s. The waves of immigrants since the late 1960s

influenced the local Palestinian communities with new ideologies and new political concepts. The students and immigrants of the 1960s and 1970s brought radical political views bonding their nationalist feelings into their ethnic identities while at the same time expecting to function within the U.S. democratic system. The centrality of the Palestinian problem in the Arab political discourse was reflected in the political scene locally, providing Palestinians of all strata with an atmosphere that touched their deepest commitment. When political developments after 1990 put their ideologies and the whole nationalist movement on hold, Palestinians in a more fundamental fashion than other Arab Americans faced questions about their social and political identity and their relationship to America.

Research Design and Data

The data on and conclusions about the profile of the Detroit Palestinian community, particularly its social and political identification today, are drawn from my research on a sample of Palestinians, representative of the whole community, who have been residing in Detroit for a minimum of fifteen years. These findings are based primarily on formal, open-ended life history interviews that were confirmed and verified by interview comparisons and documented records, as well as my observation and participation in community affairs and conduct.

This study sought to define the community's perception of itself through the words and lives of its members, to hear "their truth" as Ronald Fraser calls it, combining factual and subjective elements in this assessment.[10] Based on the conviction that the past, in all its nuances and flavors, colors and defines the present human experience, these life histories give meaning to the current conflicts and dilemmas of the community when viewed within the spectrum of its past. In addition to finding the present through the past, oral history is an excellent medium to translate the personal into the public and the political.

The Palestinian community of Detroit is a composite community, with cleavages along economic, social, and religious divides, which were taken into consideration in the choice of respondents. Fifty interviews were administered in Arabic, English, or a combination of both languages. Respondents from Ramallah and the Jerusalem district made up the largest group in the samples of Christian and Muslim participants. The Ramallah Christian community is the largest single ethnic group among the Palestinians, with an estimated number of 5,000. Among the Muslims, the Beit Hanina and Bireh community are next in size, but their numbers have dwindled through outward migration, mainly to Ohio, in the last decade. Attention was given to sample selection to ensure a fair representation of all socioeconomic milieus, of women of all strata and sects, and of some active second-generation members to provide insight and analysis of their parents' experience and its effect on their lives. The first priority was to select elderly, clear-minded respondents whose lives spanned the longest period of the Palestinian experience. This group was represented by 13 interviews of persons older than 70 years of age and a similar number who were 60 years or younger and who had a clear, youthful memory of the period before 1948.[11]

By using oral interviews to study the Palestinian community of Detroit, a wide range of possible research topics opened up for future investigation. Although the life history interviews collected for this study provide many research topics, only some of the information was used for this essay; I focused on the major theme of Palestinian community identity and the challenges of today.

Analysis: Method and Results

The most difficult task in the analysis of the oral interviews was interpreting the inner intent of the narration and understanding its complexities. Interpretation becomes the mediator, the bridge, between the academic, theoretical concepts about society and social change and the experiences, recollections, and passions of the individuals interviewed. By viewing the whole matrix of society in an integrated form, the individual experience makes sense on the level of its broad association with the ethnic community in terms of ideology and political beliefs.

Although the retelling of life histories added significant dimensions to the Palestinian story and made sense of that experience, the interview was an event in itself, imparting other aspects of the life being told. A few interviews included more than one respondent, and these gave a more vivid picture of intercommunal relationships, the persistence of traditional values and behaviors, the respect for age, and conformity to the traditional norms. Subtle rivalries, competitions, and differences of opinion added spice to the meetings, suggesting deeper differences and serious malaise within the established social group.

Soon after starting the interviews, it became clear that the Palestinian community as a whole was in a state of crisis, characterized by paralysis and inertia of all political activities. Narrow social, sectarian, and village identification was pervasive. Social and ethnic introversions among the Palestinians were clear indications of the community's frozen political stance and disarray. In this situation the Palestinians found themselves the most vulnerable and the worst hit. They witnessed retractions in the political platforms they had supported. They felt betrayed, with even fewer options for a homeland.

In these interviews, which recounted life histories from birth through adulthood, the experience of betrayal had started early. This was expressed in the words of many of the interviewees:

> I became aware of injustice early on, when as a child of eight I encountered an Israeli soldier who mistreated my best friend because she was Muslim. This awareness was endorsed when I experienced the wrenching sorrow of a cousin's death, burnt by Israeli soldiers, and also when my father was beaten up in our house in front of us, his kids, for having opened the front door during an imposed curfew.

Another participant put it clearly: "All Palestinians feel betrayed by the international powers and by Arab leaders." Yet another person saw the situation in a historical depth that reflected her personal experience:

> There was nothing to enjoy! We grew up in an atmosphere of misery: this one died, the other killed or arrested. It was continuous—first the British, then the Jews mistreated the people.

> There were no human rights; no one cared about what happened [to the people]. To whom should one complain? This Palestinian catastrophe still goes on.

Even though the respondents came from varied socioeconomic and religious backgrounds, all those who experienced the dramatic events of 1948 gave similar impressions and related deep, trenchant memories. The sense of loss, dislocation, fear, panic, misery, and betrayal were remarkably similar and continued to color the interviews in varying intensity. These early experiences had influenced the later lives of all respondents. Even for those who learned about these events from their parents, 1948 stood as a landmark in their lives.

The memories of the period before 1948 and of the event itself released a flood of enlightening information. Men and women from villages and towns who recalled that period had clearly relived it often during the intervening years. Names of victims, descriptions of incidents, and personal contributions, reactions, and analyses were vivid and cathartic. The dispersal of 1948 and the communal misery and degradation that accompanied it seem to be the basis for development of a pervasive ethnonational identity among disparate people. Subsequent history and a legacy of hardship and injustice were also relayed in continuum that strongly suggests the psychological basis for the development of a Palestinian ethos, characterized by adamant attachment to ethnicity despite all odds. The personal memory, which had become that of the group, has had climactic influence on the path their lives took and their quality of life. It is an experience etched in their memory and persona, and whether consciously or otherwise, it affected all future dealings, as was made clear in their accounts. Their words stand witness to the intensity of those events:

> When an old man [Abu Musa] was shot while sitting in a corner of the street, our whole neighborhood panicked and sought refuge in another quarter.

> We scrambled, afraid and uncertain, trying to take valuables with us, but finally, barely made it with our lives.

> Even though a child then, I still remember the dead bodies in the streets of Jaffa on our way out.

> Snipers were all around us, but the men begged them [the attacking Jewish force] to let them bury the dead woman properly.

> The many tales I know of the 1948 flight will make you cry; death, burial, humiliation, and loss. So many people lost loved ones as well as their homes.

The Social Dimension

Like other Arab-American communities, attachment to cultural ethnicity is a defining feature of the Palestinian group. However, Palestinians have promoted this definition to an entrenched nationality, an overpowering commitment that is continuously fed by political events and remains at the back of their consciousness. They have created a badge of differentiation. It is reminiscent of early ethnic group behavior in the United States, particularly of communities that had come from embattled environments and