

Who am I in the United States?

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– Rania Masri.

When I first moved to Lebanon early last year, one of my students assumed that since I am a Lebanese, and since I am a voting U.S. citizen, then clearly I must have voted for George Bush. No.

What caused a significant portion of Arab Americans to vote for George Bush in his first presidential term, and what caused a lesser portion to vote for him again in his second term, boils down to their perceptions of themselves and their contextualization of the struggle. {Note: let me make it blaringly clear from the start: there are only minor differences between the Democratic and Republican parties in the United States. The main difference is that the Republican party is more open in its positions against civil rights, immigrant rights, and the country's imperialistic, militaristic foreign policy.}

This panel is focused on the struggle against US Imperialism from within the United States. And identity is critically relevant to the struggle – to how one organizes, identifies problems, and builds solidarity. The way we see ourselves deeply influences the way we then choose to organize politically, the way we determine what 'our' issue is and what is a separate issue to our struggle. Our perceived identity influences with whom we stand and against whom we stand. Just as the way we identify ourselves in Lebanon deeply influences whom we see as 'the self' and whom we see as 'the other,' the same situation is true in the United States, and particularly for the Arabs.

So, how do Arabs in the U.S. view themselves? How do others perceive them? How do Arab-Americans view others? And the key question is: how do all these perceptions and chosen identities influence political organization?

First: a bit of a background from a 2000 poll conducted by the Arab American Institute (AAI):

- More than half (56%) of the more than 3 million Arab-Americans are of Lebanese origin. Fourteen percent are from Syria. Eleven percent from Egypt. Nine percent from Palestine. Four percent from Jordan. Two percent from Iraq. And the remaining 4% are from other Arab countries.
- Economically: 30% percent earn more than \$75,000 a year (second only to the Jewish community, and higher than the average American). The small percentage (22%) that report earning under \$25,000 is also one of the lowest of all the ethnic groups surveyed. In other words, Arab-Americans are one of the richest ethnic groups in the U.S..
- Educationally: Approximately half of Arab-Americans have a college education or better, which is a much higher portion than the general American public.

Given these demographics, how then do Arab Americans view themselves? Does the Arab American view himself as "white", as part of the mainstream, dominant power structure in the United States?

There was an ongoing debate from 1914 to 1933 in the U.S. courts as to whether Arabs were 'white,' and thus whether they were able to receive U.S. citizenships (which was denied to non-whites until 1944).¹ The U.S. federal courts finally decided that yes, Arabs are white. Even Arabs from North Africa – black Egyptians, for example – are classified as white. In the 1990s, Arab American organizations lobbied to position themselves out of the 'white' classification, to have a separate 'Arab American' classification in the U.S. census because, thanks to the gains of the civil rights movement and affirmative action programs, it had become advantageous to be officially classified as a minority.

¹ Samhan, Helen. H. (1998). Not quite white: Race classification and the Arab American experience. *Arab American Institute*, Washington, DC.

But do they organize outside that category? In other words, do Arab American organizations recognize the similarities between themselves as a minority group and other minority groups?

Unfortunately, despite numerous significant similarities in oppression between Arab Americans and other minority groups, particularly African Americans, Arab-American organizations continue to organize in isolation.

This question of organizing tactics is quite important – especially since the discrimination continues to increase.

On June 14th, U.S. Federal Judge John Gleeson ruled that the government can detain non-citizens indefinitely without explanation so long as that end of that detention is “reasonably foreseeable.”² He ruled that the government has wide latitude under immigration law to detain non-citizens on the basis of religion, race or national origin, and to hold them indefinitely without explanation, for any unspecified reason, after an immigration judge had ordered them removed from the country.

What does this mean? It means that someone can be picked up and detained and just because they are Lebanese or Palestinian or Muslim, or, tomorrow, because they are Mexican or Chinese, they can be held for as long as the government sees fit, with no charges, and no opportunity to go to court to fight the detention.

This is the first time a federal judge has addressed the issue of discrimination in the treatment of hundreds of Muslim immigrants who were swept up in the weeks after the 2001 terror attacks and held for months before they were cleared of links to terrorism and deported

So, what is the response from the Arab-American communities? Have Arab-American organizations recognized the similarities between themselves as a minority group and that of other minority groups? Or do they see themselves as exceptions to the otherwise beautiful system of justice and fairness? The organizational tactic of Arab-American organizations has been to examine each situation in isolation, as if they were – and remain – the only ones that have suffered racism at the hands of U.S. institutions. This superlative victim mentality.

In addition to missing opportunities for solidarity, there is something more alarming that is unfortunately pervasive in Arab-American communities: racism. Not as victims of racism, but as perpetrators of racism. Racism against Mexicans. Racism against Indians. Racism against African-Americans. Racism against all whom could be considered as “the other” and, specifically, against all whom are ‘non-white’ (except for the poorer rednecks, who are also seen as being inferior). There are many reasons for racism committed by communities against other communities in the United States – and the essence is a sense of economic insecurity and social ignorance.

Since I am though speaking in Lebanon, it becomes pertinent to point out that racism committed by such Arabs is not at all uncommon. We need only look around us here to see racism committed against all whom we view as ‘the other’, all whom we could relegate to a position ‘beneath us.’ And, yet, all the while, we complain of racism committed against us.

Just as domestic U.S. racism against Arab Americans is similar to racism against other communities and thus organizing against one form of racism should be conducted in solidarity with organizing other all other forms of racism, foreign policy issues that impact Arabs outside the United States cannot be separated from domestic policy issues.

Let’s take the example of the current U.S. occupation of Iraq.

- The war on Iraq is tied to the growing militarization in U.S. schools – in the sense that the militarization of U.S. schools aids in maintaining the flow of youngsters into the U.S. military. The

² Bernstein, Nina. (2006). ‘Judge supports broad powers of detention.’ New York Times. June 15, 2006.

U.S. military openly targets students, particularly poorer Latino and African-American, as young as 14, to join the U.S. military. In addition, for the first time, the Pentagon has gone beyond recruiting poor communities to join the military; now, the Pentagon is actively recruiting a certain ethnic community (Latinos) to join the military.³ Consequently, it is not surprising to find the U.S. military disproportionately comprised of low-income and minority communities who join the military because no other job or educational opportunities are available.

- The push to privatize Iraqi natural resources cannot be separated from the push to privatize natural resources by the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank. What is happening to Iraq's economy – under the force of the U.S. military – is a dream for the WTO: this almost complete sale of national resources, elimination of tariffs, lowest corporate tax, etc
- Halliburton, the most prominent of the U.S. corporations that were given contracts out of U.S. taxpayer moneys to “rebuild” Iraq and the most prominent one to have failed, Halliburton, again, was given contracts to “rebuild” New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Another theft of U.S. taxpayer money at the expense of the people most in need (Iraqis or New Orleanians) with the express purpose of gain for the corporations.

So, how should Arab Americans organize? Alone? By narrowly defined identity politics? Or be seeing and leveraging the intricacies and inter-relationships, by standing with other communities, linking hands and working together?

Currently, Arab-American organizations – from the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, to the Arab American Institute to the newly formed American Task Force for Palestine – look at issues in complete isolation.

This was exemplified by the ADC. In response to President Bush's declaration of the so-called ‘War on Terror’ (which, in actuality, is a war of terror), and specifically his declaration of war on Afghanistan in 2001, the ADC National Office under the leadership of Dr. Ziad Assali issued two public statements of support. Thus, the ADC's position was that it was acceptable to bomb a country in violation of international law, acceptable to criminalize an entire population, acceptable to embrace the decontextualization promoted by the media and the U.S. government – so long as the victims were not Arabs. As then ADC Texas Chapter President Sylvia Shehadeh wrote in her letter of resignation from the ADC, “If we are truly anti discrimination we cannot align ourselves with racist policies and double standards.”⁴ (Ironically, the ADC national office issued their statements of support at the same time that ADC Chapters across the country were protesting against the war – which is indicative of another kind of separation of issues: Arab-American organizations call for their voice to be heard by the U.S. government while refusing to implement democratic reform within their own organizations.)

{National Arab and Muslim organizations that supported the Bush war against Afghanistan did so out of fear of otherwise appearing unpatriotic in the eyes of the general American public. After doing so, they quickly won the personal support of Bush in publicly condemning domestic acts of racism against Arabs and Muslims, which was effective in reducing the random hate crimes committed against Arabs and Muslims in the U.S., but ineffective in reducing the institutional targeting against them.}

This form of identity based politics could also lead Arab Americans organizations to work with all who knock on their door. For example: in the work for Palestinian rights, many a time racist, anti-Semitic leaders, such as David Duke, present their support. Should one embrace those individuals who claim to support Palestinian rights, yet are openly both racist and anti-Jewish/anti-Semitic? This question is not

³ Gumbel, Andrew. (2003) ‘Pentagon targets Latinos and Mexicans to man the front lines in war on terror.’ The Independent (UK). September 10, 2003.

⁴ Shihadeh, Sylvia. (2001). ‘My resignation as chapter president.’ Distributed email. October 14, 2001.

only pertinent in the U.S. but also relevant in Lebanon, since it is all too often that one sees the Nazi swastika displayed proudly in the streets in Lebanon. How can we claim to support liberation and freedom and support a genocide committed against others? How can we condemn the double standards of the U.S. government and then commit double standards of our own?

Fortunately, there is a growing movement of Arab-Americans that are linking hands, building solidarity, reading and understanding history, seeing how others have struggled and learning from them, rejecting the superlative victim-mentality, and embracing struggle not simply as an action but as a means towards positive and real change. A growing number of Arab-Americans now condemn racism against all individuals, and not just racism against members of their own narrowly-defined community, and they recognize the interdependencies of the three vices of which Dr. Martin Luther King spoke – militarism, materialism, and racism – and thus they work to combat them all and work in solidarity with other organizations on those issues.

And, fortunately, there are many others who also stand with Arab-Americans. In a national conference of Black Workers for Justice in North Carolina, a conference in which I was the only non-black attendant, there were three large signs on the wall:

Yes to Reparations from slavery

No to the racist Death Penalty

No to Israeli Apartheid

That is simply one example among many.

As Black feminist author/activist Barbara Smith says: “In political struggles there wouldn’t be any ‘your’ and ‘my’ issues, if we saw each form of oppression as integrally linked to the others.” It is this understanding of solidarity that is essential to the struggle. And it has flourished in the past ten years in particular.

Let’s examine a few simple examples:

- Divestment against the Apartheid State of Israel.

Specifically in the past ten years, economic divestment against Israel has gained momentum in the United States (and in Europe, as well). The following organizations are among many that have called for divestment from Israel: the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of U.S. (with 2.5 million members), United Methodists in New England and Virginia, National Lawyers Guild, Green Party USA, Institute for Southern Studies, student organizations in more than a dozen universities across the United States, local labor unions, and of course, organizations strictly working on Palestine. (By the way, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) has also recently called for divestment.)

Most importantly, the campaign for divestment has pushed the issue into the mainstream media, focusing the struggle on the public relations front instead of the economic front.

Another public relations success story is the play ‘My Name is Rachel Corrie.’ This play, based on the writings of Rachel Corrie, a young American who was killed by an Israeli bulldozer in occupied Gaza, was ‘postponed’ when it was due to be performed in New York City. Now, it is set to open on October 15, 2006.

- Iraq: from war to sanctions to war to occupation

There was relative silence in the United States in the first few years of the sanctions against the people of Iraq. It wasn’t until 1995, with the publication of a UN report detailing the magnitude of the suffering of the innocents, that a few organizations – none of which included the national Arab American organizations – and a handful of individuals began to organize effectively against the sanctions. Within a few years, a

coalition of organizations had formed to call for the lifting of the sanctions, and had aided in pushing the impact of the sanctions into the mainstream media.

The steady building of the anti-war movement during that time resulted in the largest, national protest in U.S. history against a war before the official start of the war. The February 15, 2003 protests, in which approximately 1 million people in the U.S. unequivocally expressed their opposition to the planned invasion of Iraq, was monumental in U.S. history: people protested against a war before the war began. It was also the largest organized protest in human history, since millions protested worldwide under the same banner. Now, polls in the U.S. reveal that the majority of Americans are opposed to the continuation of the occupation. Traditional peace organizations and vocal military veteran organizations (and some retired Generals too) are calling for a return of the U.S. troops.

These are pockets of examples of resistance and struggle. Is it enough to be considered a ‘movement’? Is there actually a movement against imperialism in the United States?

Not yet, no, but if links continue to be made between foreign and domestic issues, if ties continue to be forged between different communities, if connections continue to be made between the privatization of public services and the growing militarization and how this growing militarization in the U.S. is impacting people both in and out of the U.S., and, of significant importance, if tactics are constructed to win and not simply to protest, then there exists a strong potential for real change.

We must remember: The United States has a rich, beautiful history of struggle against oppression – and not only a history of power-hungry men (and some women) committing mass murder for economic profit. There are struggles of women and men who committed themselves to work for justice – to work for the 8-hour work day, the abolition of slavery, the woman’s right to vote, and the ongoing struggle for civil rights.

As U.S. historian Howard Zinn wrote, “...not to believe in the possibility of dramatic change is to forget that things have changed, not enough, of course, but enough to show what is possible. We have been surprised before in history. We can be surprised again. Indeed, we can do the surprising.”⁵

It starts, I believe, with having impractical dreams. It is only dreams that are viewed as unrealistic that are worth the energy. It continues with recognizing that despair and hopelessness are the strongest obstacles to change.

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⁵ Zinn, Howard. (2002). You can’t be neutral on a moving train: a personal history of our times. Beacon Press.