

The American Experience: Palestinians in the U.S.

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With between 150,000 and 250,000 members, the Palestinian community in the United States accounts for only approximately 10 percent of the two million-strong Arab-American community (numbers that also equal something less than 4 percent of the American Jewish community).

No reliable immigration or census figures exist for Palestinian Americans. Because the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service has only rarely recognized "Palestinian" as a nationality, meaningful immigration statistics are lacking. In the 1980 census, the first in which respondents had an opportunity to list their ancestry, only 21,288 individuals listed Palestinian.¹ The *Palestinian Statistical Abstract for 1983* lists 108,045 Palestinians as living in the U.S.,² but educated guesses by those active in Arab-American organizations seem to fall in the 200,000–400,000 range. The latter figure is probably high, but a range centering on the 200,000 figure seems reasonable. Whatever the exact number, it is quite small compared with other ethnic minorities.

If Palestinian Americans are difficult to pinpoint numerically, they are anything but politically indistinct. A survey of the Palestinian community in the U.S. indicates that, while first-generation Palestinian immigrants tend to make a rapid adjustment to American society, they remain, to an unusual degree among immigrant communities, highly conscious of and

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deeply involved in the politics of their native land. Even more unusual, the American-born second generation of Palestinians also exhibits a high and growing degree of political consciousness and ethnic pride.

This political consciousness tends to affect the degree of political acculturation in this country. America often demands more of its immigrants than it does of its native-born citizens. Unlike native-born Americans, immigrants must eschew criticism of any aspect of the American system or risk being thought ungrateful, and they must submerge interest in foreign causes or risk being regarded as of questionable loyalty. Although many immigrants have achieved this, for a great many Palestinians, submerging their political identity in order to become "American" in this sense has been impossible.

To a greater extent than is true even with the strictly defined refugee communities in this country—who flee their countries, not voluntarily, but to escape political oppression—large numbers of Palestinians tend to be here not by political choice but simply because there is nowhere else to go. For these Palestinians, becoming American is not a choice made enthusiastically but a passive act, taken because there is no other or no better alternative. Other refugees seem in general not to harbor a lingering attachment to their homelands to the extent Palestinians do—no doubt because in Vietnam, Cuba, the Soviet Union, and other countries from which large numbers of refugees have fled to the U.S., foreign occupation and alienation of land are not issues as they are for Palestinians. Because there is Palestinian land but no homeland, because that land is under foreign occupation, and because Palestinians have refused to accede to that occupation without some political compensation, there is for a great many Palestinians a sense of incompleteness in the adoption of any other homeland, a sense of something still to come that perpetuates the vision of a foreign homeland and thereby differentiates them from other immigrant Americans.

"Being Palestinian changes your whole life," explains Norma Sayage, a San Francisco real estate agent born in the U.S. of Palestinian parents who fled Jaffa in 1948.

It means that your whole life is circled around this cause. It is circled around gaining an identity. It's circled around becoming a person to everybody else. It changes what you want to study, what your daily schedule is. You wake up in the morning and you think, "What can I do today?" Being Palestinian is first and foremost with most Palestinians.³

The following preliminary study of Palestinian-American attitudes toward being American is based on interviews with seventy-two Palestin-

ians in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Houston, Albuquerque, and Washington, D.C. conducted between October 1987 and November 1988. The interview subjects were chosen at random, largely through referrals from other interviewees. Subjects include resident aliens as well as American citizens, in a ratio of slightly less than one to three. Most of the seventy-two interviewees are immigrants to the U.S.; only ten were born and raised in the U.S. or came here at a very early age. Most are also from the West Bank or Gaza; only twenty-five are from areas of Palestine taken by Israel in 1948. These include twenty who fled or whose families fled in 1948 and five who remained in Israel and retain Israeli citizenship. Of the ten who grew up in the U.S., nine are from West Bank families. Locating women willing to offer their views has been difficult; only fifteen of the total sample are women, all but three of whom are from the West Bank. Eighteen of the seventy-two are Christian. Ages in the sample range from fifteen to sixty-eight.

Assimilation

Assimilation is an internal, very individual process, and it is virtually impossible to make generalizations about Palestinian-American adjustment to American society. There is no correlation between Palestinian nationalism and the degree of assimilation. The best Palestinian nationalists are not by any means the least American; nor are the most assimilated, or the completely American second generation, necessarily lacking an acute sense of being Palestinian. Failure to speak Arabic in the home, the ability to speak unaccented English, marriage to a non-Arab, socializing with non-Arabs are all signs of assimilation, but they need not also indicate the loss of a Palestinian identity.

Alienation

The degree of Palestinian adaptation to American society covers the spectrum from total alienation to total embrace. Alienation is rare, but it is still possible to live in this country without ever becoming a part of it. Cultural alienation is more often the case with women, who, because of Arab cultural strictures, are often—perhaps usually—prevented from integrating in American society. Based on a study of Muslim Palestinian women in Chicago, Louise Cainkar has concluded that because women are the principal protectors and transmitters of Palestinian culture, they are often deliberately kept apart from the American mainstream. “Many Palestinian

men and women fear that the entire familial foundation of the society will collapse if women focus their energies elsewhere than the family.”⁴

Alienation is also often true of the elderly, who might come to the U.S. accompanying grown children who immigrate. These elderly immigrants most often live with their children, never learn English, do not work, depend on family for transportation, and socialize only with family or other Palestinians. “I think for the elderly people, it is very hard to get acquainted with American society,” says Nahil Abid, a young San Francisco grocer from the West Bank town of Dayr Dibwan, who was himself born in the U.S. but grew up in Dayr Dibwan and still identifies himself as primarily a Palestinian. “We are very close, the Palestinians. But when you come here, you are isolated. It’s different here. Everybody is not too close to each other.”⁵

Many Palestinians are harshly critical of American mores. Qassem Khalil, a physician in Los Angeles who arrived in 1986 from medical school in Cairo, says he can never be wholly American because he cannot accept many American mores. “I can’t be pure,” he says. “To consider yourself an American, you should accept a lot of traditions. I can’t accept a lot of them, so I can’t be an American.” A Muslim and unmarried, Khalil is opposed to the prevalence of alcohol, sexual freedom, and divorce in American society. “I don’t like to raise my kids here and have my daughter have a boyfriend. No way. This is your dignity. That’s the most major problem for American Palestinians, to have kids in this country.”⁶

Ibrahim M., another Los Angeles physician, has even less affinity for American culture and society. He is here from a West Bank town, still carrying an Israeli identity card or *hawiyah*, and will stay for as long as is necessary to make his fortune and return home. He has an American passport, but it is a convenience rather than a statement of allegiance. Asked what it means to him to be an American, Ibrahim asks in turn, “What do you mean by this question?” and when the question is rephrased, he replies simply that it is good to be an American because with a U.S. passport “you don’t feel that you are a foreigner.”

Ibrahim socializes almost exclusively with other Palestinians, largely those from his hometown, and controls his children’s friendships. He sends the children back to the West Bank for schooling during what he calls the dangerous age in the U.S., from twelve to sixteen, and his oldest son, who spent the last two years of high school here, has no American friends because Ibrahim believes “this is what is going to change his mentality to do whatever he wants and do against his father.”⁷ Such restrictions placed on

Muslim girls are not uncommon in this country, but so controlling a boy's friendships is rare.

"100 Percent American"

The alienation evident in these examples is not the norm, but few Palestinians, even of the second generation, can escape—or indeed want to escape—the duality of their identity as both Americans and Palestinians. Many Palestinian Americans eat hamburgers, join Kiwanis and Rotary clubs, vote for Ronald Reagan, serve in the army, and root for a local baseball team, but they still, as Norma Sayage puts it, "wake up in the morning and think, 'What can I do today?'" Unquestioning U.S. support for Israel still makes them mad; the intifadah still fills them with pride as a symbol of their own will to survive as a people. Being 100 percent American does not prevent also being, to some extent, Palestinian.

Naim Assed is a Palestinian who identifies himself as both an American and a Palestinian, but as an American first. He came to this country as a seven-year-old from Bayt Hanina on the West Bank and grew up unable to separate being a Palestinian from being an American. At the age of fourteen he married a girl from Bayt Hanina and brought her here. His father retired to their hometown after himself growing up in the U.S., and the younger Assed hopes some day to retire to Bayt Hanina as well. At the same time, Assed, who is known to his American friends and business colleagues as Norman, is active in business and in local politics in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where he owns a jewelry store, and may be described as the consummate extroverted American politician. He is on a first-name basis with the Albuquerque mayor, as well as with several other officials in local Democratic politics.

Much of his involvement in politics is directed at promoting the Palestinian cause. Assed is a member of the executive committee of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) and was a delegate for Jesse Jackson at the 1988 Democratic convention, one of eight Palestinian-American delegates.⁸ He was urged to run for the position of local county Democratic party chairman, but refused because "I was involved in this one issue, and I think it would be unfair to be chairman and represent everybody." Assed is convinced that working within the American political system is one of the best ways of advancing the Palestinian cause. "I know it's hard," he acknowledges, "like a drop in a big ocean right now, but honestly, it can be done. I believe in the system."⁹

A man like Assed cannot really distinguish where being Palestinian leaves off and being American begins, and he is representative of large numbers of Palestinian Americans who are completely at ease with their dual identity and who regard the two aspects of that identity as mutually supportive.

Hazem Monsour is another Palestinian like this. His father was an American citizen who began coming to the U.S. in the 1920s from his native West Bank village of Dayr Dibwan and alternated working here for a few years with returning to Dayr Dibwan for a few years. When the younger Monsour was born, his father registered him at the U.S. consulate in Jerusalem as an American citizen. Monsour has lived in the U.S. since 1956, when he arrived as a teenager. At the time, he and his family called themselves Syrians rather than Palestinians, a late but not unusual holdover from the pre-World War I period when all immigrants from Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine were called Syrian.

Monsour, like Naim Assed, owns a jewelry store in Albuquerque and is active in the community. He serves as a deputy on the local reserve sheriff's force. After more than thirty years here, Monsour, who goes by the name Mike among his American friends, feels like an American. But he still has family in Dayr Dibwan, is married to a woman from Dayr Dibwan, has sent each of his children back to the West Bank for schooling, and travels around the U.S. speaking on behalf of the Palestinian cause for the ADC.

When Monsour returned to Dayr Dibwan in April 1984 for a visit to his mother, he was arrested by the Israelis, imprisoned for three weeks, and tortured. No charges were ever brought, and he was released apparently only because of the intervention of his congressman and senator.¹⁰ Monsour's reaction to the ordeal provides a striking example of the duality that most Palestinians feel about their American versus their Palestinian identity. Monsour approached his trip to the West Bank, his first in over a decade, as an American, with an American mentality. "I forgot that I was born there," he explains,

and for a moment when I went back, I thought of the American due process of law. I never in my life thought that they will do what they did to me, on the ground that I was innocent; I never done a doggone thing other than shoot my mouth here and there and articulate my thought as an American citizen, just using the First Amendment and my rights as an American.

But he reacted as a Palestinian. "I felt the nationalism more so than at any other time in my life," he says. "I think I would be lying if I told you that I did not get involved emotionally to the point where I felt like I'm

more of a Palestinian than an American when I was in prison.”¹¹ That renewed Palestinian consciousness has not left him, but he again thinks of himself as an American first. “This is my home, this is my country. I am an American by choice,” he says now. Here, he can both be an American and a Palestinian.¹²

Despite the complaints of some conservative Palestinians that it is difficult or impossible to raise children according to traditional standards in America, many parents do give their children a fairly strict upbringing without diluting their Americanness. Naim Assed had a Muslim upbringing in Dearborn, Michigan. Omar Kader, former executive director of the ADC, grew up in a Muslim household in Utah in the 1940s and 1950s. Kader recalls once in high school being accompanied home by a male friend and, because he had a sister at home, asking the friend to wait outside. When the friend came in anyway, saw the sister, and commented that he had not known Kader had a sister, Kader responded, “It’s none of your business that I have a sister.” He recounts the story now with some bemusement but recalls that at the time his reaction was automatic, the ingrained response of a Muslim man protecting female family members.

Kader is also, however, thoroughly American, and when his father took him back at age eighteen to the family home in Shu’fat on the West Bank and arranged a marriage with his first cousin, Kader backed out. His father was trying to “regenerate” the family, he says, after four older brothers had scattered in the states, but “I couldn’t marry her. I couldn’t even let him read the engagement ceremony.” Kader credits his upbringing, though, and the values instilled by his traditional parents for helping him succeed when he returned to the U.S. alone and with only \$20 in his pocket. It was not a matter of pulling himself up by his bootstraps, he says; “I inherited a wonderful tradition of Utah Palestinian.”¹³

Maintaining a traditional household is possible even in the 1980s. Nawal Hamad, an Arlington, Virginia bank vice president, has given her five children a Muslim upbringing. None of the three girls has ever been allowed to date, go to parties, or wear short skirts or sleeveless dresses. Two of the girls are now married to men, whom she had a large hand in selecting, from Hamad’s hometown of al-Birah. The boys, over whom Hamad cannot exercise as close control, are not allowed to bring girls into the house. “We were different from everybody,” says Fadwa Hasan, the youngest daughter, matter-of-factly, and even now that she is married and working, she encounters people who “can’t believe I was born and raised here and I really follow my religion.” The older son, Nader, now nineteen, says he had a “rebellious period” five or six years ago when he chafed under

the restrictions. But the family is obviously quite close and affectionate; none of the children seems to be resentful, and all feel free to discuss their upbringing in front of their mother, even to tease her about her strict enforcement of rules. None gives the impression of being alienated; each comes across as at once completely American—as much so as any American of non-Muslim, non-Arab background—and completely Palestinian.¹⁴

In the Middle

There is a vast middle ground of Palestinians between the alienated and the fully adjusted, who are reasonably comfortable in the U.S. but regard it as a kind of temporary stop on the way to a full Palestinian identity. Within this middle area, the range of commitment to the U.S. is great; the symbolism of an American passport varies widely, as do the degree of social adjustment and the perception of ethnic and political discrimination faced here. One encounters, for instance, Palestinians who feel comfortable socializing only with other Palestinians but who regard themselves as socially well-adapted to the U.S. or, on the other hand, Palestinians who socialize easily with non-Arabs, even sometimes count no Arabs among their close friends, but who refuse to take out American citizenship because they cannot make a full commitment to the U.S. Some can separate their policy differences with the government from other aspects of their Americanness; others cannot. Some are sensitive to political discrimination, to being automatically associated, for instance, with terrorism simply because they are Palestinians; others can shrug it off as of little consequence to their integration into American society.

Not a few Palestinians openly identify themselves as Palestinian first. Rafiq T. is a grocer in San Francisco who came to this country from Nablus in 1969 to study business administration, intending to return after obtaining a degree to help run his family's business. Israeli officials allowed his *hawiyyah* to expire while he was here studying, however, and he has repeatedly been refused permission even to visit. He and his wife thus consider themselves American by necessity, not by choice. "But that is not to say that we do not participate," he notes. "Just by being here, we mix, we pay taxes, we vote, we speak the language, we are taking part in the social culture—in social aspects that do not negate the fact that we are Palestinians first."¹⁵

Others handle similar situations differently. Samir Ashrawi, a Houston chemist, also lost his *hawiyyah* while a student at the University of Texas. He is an American citizen but, unlike Rafiq, he is acutely sensitive to

charges of dual loyalty and bristles when asked whether he feels more American or more Palestinian. "Palestinians here have both gained and given," he points out. "Whatever they have taken in terms of opportunity, in terms of education, I venture to say they are very productive citizens."¹⁶

Some Palestinians reconcile this duality by not fully committing themselves to the U.S. Abdur-Rahim Jaouni, a Berkeley geochemist, has been here since 1972 but does not intend to become a citizen. He also, however, scoffs at the notion of, for instance, socializing only with Palestinians and says he would not necessarily return to live in an independent Palestinian state.¹⁷ Samira F., a San Francisco librarian, lived in this country for over thirty years on a green card after her family fled Jerusalem in 1948. She did not become an American citizen until 1986, in part because she wanted to be able to vote for Jesse Jackson in 1988, but in large measure because she began to fear the Reagan administration. "I felt someday they're going to round people up and put them in concentration camps, so maybe having citizenship is better than not having citizenship." At the same time, she has become comfortable enough here, largely because her children are American-born and wholly adapted, that she would probably not return to live if an independent Palestinian state were established.¹⁸

Najat Arafat Khelil, a nuclear physicist in the Washington, D.C. area originally from Nablus, has not become a citizen, but considers it vital for Palestinians to work within the American system for the Palestinian cause. She has given up her own work in the field of nuclear physics and spends all her time as chair of two Arab/Palestinian women's organizations. Despite not being a citizen, she worked hard for Jesse Jackson's campaign last year and is a national board member of the Rainbow Coalition. "I try to kind of soften the fact that I'm here," she says, "to use my presence by doing something for the cause. Otherwise, there's no wisdom in me being here. Otherwise, it would be a double exile."

Khelil expresses the sentiments of a great many Palestinians in the U.S. who can adjust to American society, but in the absence of a Palestinian state cannot make a full political commitment to the United States. She feels so strongly about the Palestinian cause, she says,

that I feel I don't want to identify in any other way. But maybe if I was a full-blooded Jordanian, I might not feel this way, because I would have it [a state and an identity] and take it for granted. But when I don't have it, it's something missing in my life. I feel I cannot identify with any other part of the world until I get my full identity first as a Palestinian. Then I would say, "Okay,

I'm an American." Because the other identity would be there, clear, settled within me, and I'm satisfied with it.¹⁹

Khelil's belief in the American system, despite an inability to commit to America fully, is fairly typical of the vast middle ground of Palestinians who are neither wholly alienated nor fully adapted to American society. Despite their frustration with the specifics of U.S. Middle East policy, all but the most decidedly alienated express appreciation for American freedoms, particularly the right to speak out against an official policy, and indicate a belief that individual participation in the system, whether through voting or writing letters to congressmen or working in Arab-American organizations, can have an impact, however slight. They recognize the benefits of using the system to try to change the system.

An unusually large number of Palestinians vote in American elections. Of the naturalized citizens who responded to a recent poll of Palestinian Americans, fully 58 percent said they vote²⁰; only 52–53 percent of the general American population of voting age have exercised that right in recent presidential elections. "I feel every little bit helps," Najat Arafat Kehlil says. "Anyone who says it's not going to help is just giving himself an excuse for not doing anything. Just like the saying in Arabic that says the drop of water eventually will put a hole in the rock. And it will."²¹

Discrimination

A surprising number of Palestinian Americans say they have never directly encountered ethnic discrimination, and most seem not to regard it as a very large problem. Many do describe, however, a sense of being made to feel foreign, often from subtle, unspoken barriers placed by native-born Americans. Mohammad Busailah, a retired Reynolds Tobacco executive in Los Angeles who has been in the U.S. since 1957, feels this. "I don't fit 100 percent with this society," he laments.

When I came here, I came to be an American. But [they say], "No, you are Arab." No, I'm not, I'm an American. I'm a veteran, I have the right to vote, I served in juries, but yet I'm not accepted by the society. I want to assimilate, but I can't. I don't like to see it that way. When you are an American, you should be an American.²²

"I would like to be able to wear my ethnicity on my sleeve," says the Houston chemist, Samir Ashrawi, taking a slightly different tack, "and I would like to have the freedom to fail, as well as the freedom to excel." He would like, in other words, to be able to be both a Palestinian and an

American, expected to achieve no more or no less than any other American. But American society cannot tolerate such nuances. "You get put into that position where, if you excel—'Oh, those damn foreigners, they study too hard'—and if you fail—'Well, they're dumb anyway.' "

Many experience these barriers as political prejudice—a sense of political enmity and a feeling that they must compete with Israel for America's affections—which is every bit as painful as ethnic prejudice, and generally much more common. "Your word is suspect," says Ashrawi.

It is labeled. You feel that even some of the people born Anglo-Saxon American who are your friends, when it comes to who you are—and they like you as a person, they really do—but because of all they hear from their government, from all they hear in the papers, they have this one barrier. I've had it said to me, "We like you, but we don't like your people." My reaction to that is, what am I without my people? What I'm looking for is not just personal acceptance, because my person is to a great extent determined by where I came from.

Ashrawi feels that the dual loyalty issue is part of this ever-present need to compete. "I don't think we have a loyalty problem," he asserts. "It's thrust upon us as a litmus test." The loyalty question is thrown up to Palestinians by the American tendency to judge them only in relation to Israel. "It's not an American litmus test; it's not a question of whether we know the Constitution or can recite the Pledge of Allegiance with comfort. I'm sure we could all do that. It's a foreign policy test."²³

This political non-acceptance affects Palestinians differently—some are less sensitive to it, most do not let it affect their daily lives—but it seems to be there to some degree for everyone. It can often create a kind of painful internal paradox. Hasan B., for instance, who has been in this country for thirty years, explains that he feels he cannot fit in here as much as he would like, but at the same time, he has come to appreciate American freedoms to such an extent that he also does not fit in in the Arab world. "When I go over there," he says, "I cannot stay because I know I'm losing my freedom. Maximum I can stay there is two, three weeks, then I have to come back." But when he returns here, he finds himself again confronted with American barriers and he wants to be back in the Arab world, where being a Palestinian is not so much of a problem. "So I'm tortured," he concludes.²⁴

The Political Issue

Rarely in the U.S. does attachment to a foreign or parental birthplace translate into political nationalism. But this is decidedly not the case for

Palestinians. For the very reason that there is no sovereign Palestinian state, Palestinian Americans tend to be acutely conscious of the Palestinian problem in all its aspects, and it is virtually impossible to be a Palestinian in America without also being political about it.

Political organizers in the U.S. complain about the degree of participation among Palestinians here. Najat Arafat Khelil, the Washington, D.C. activist, often has difficulty generating active participation in women's organizations because women usually are not active unless their husbands or fathers are active. She frequently encounters women who will not even fill out a membership application until they have shown it to their husbands.²⁵

But a distinction must be made between political activism and political consciousness. Most Palestinian Americans, like most Americans in general, are not politically active; the vast majority do not attend local ADC functions or participate in demonstrations or even write letters to their congressmen. At the same time, it is rare to find a Palestinian who is ignorant of the origins of the Palestinian problem or unaware of the political issues involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Hisham D., a Los Angeles liquor store owner, is typical. Although too busy with his business and too cautious about his security to take active part in Arab-American politics, he can cite the dates, circumstances, and outcomes of every Arab-Israeli war and every Palestinian massacre over the last forty years.

Hisham and his wife live their Palestinianness, but in the privacy of the family. They take their three young daughters to Arabic classes at a nearby mosque and talk about sending them to the West Bank for schooling "just to make them feel how does it feel to be a Palestinian." Hisham's wife wants to have at least two more children to help preserve the Palestinian people. "If I wasn't Palestinian," she says, "I probably would be happy with two children. Now I think I want to have more because I think maybe when my children grow up, they will have five kids and we will never disappear."²⁶ This kind of non-active, but acute individual political consciousness is pervasive in the Palestinian community in the U.S.

Palestinian Americans tend to be more active in church or mosque groups and social organizations, particularly town associations, than in explicitly political organizations, but it is difficult to draw the line between the social and the political or to say with any certainty that a social gathering is not by its very occurrence a political statement. Researchers who have studied Palestinian diaspora communities in the Arab world have concluded that the family networks and village ties that held pre-1948 Palestinian society together have continued to function in the diaspora and that indeed these networks, along with a wide array of popular organizations

formed after 1948 specifically to bring the diaspora together, have accounted for the Palestinians' political survival. "Without the family and other basic social relationships," one researcher concludes, "Palestinian society would have been totally fragmented and almost nonexistent after 1948."²⁷ Survival has also required, according to another researcher, "a new framework capable of mobilizing a once unified, now scattered people to reassert their identity and national rights," and this has taken the form of a variety of sociopolitical organizations of students, women, laborers, teachers, and so on.²⁸

Family and village networks and sociopolitical institutions also operate in the U.S. and serve to forge a common political identity. The gradual politicization of the American Federation of Ramallah, Palestine which has 20,000–25,000 members in the U.S., illustrates the growing political consciousness of the Palestinian community as a whole.²⁹ According to George Salem, who grew up in the Ramallah community in Jacksonville, Florida, and served as Solicitor of Labor in the Reagan administration, in the 1950s and early 1960s the community did not have a broad Palestinian identity. "It was more of a village consciousness," he says. "We knew we were from Ramallah; we didn't really know whether it was Jordan or Palestine or what."³⁰ The major focus, according to Susan Ziadeh of the Arab-American Institute, daughter of noted Islamic scholar and Ramallah Farhat Ziadeh, was originally on Ramallahans in the U.S. rather than on the Palestinian problem as a whole.³¹

The awareness of being Palestinian rather than Ramallah and of the Palestinian issue as something broader than the Ramallah community in America did not come until the mid-1960s with the formation of the PLO and the Israeli occupation. Nonetheless, the close ties among the Ramallah community on a social level, and the formation of the Ramallah federation in 1958, served to sustain a distinct ethnic identity among Ramallahans scattered throughout the U.S. that later formed the basis for a political identity. The community has tended from the beginning to be somewhat insular. George Salem grew up with thirteen Ramallah families within a three-block radius of his house. He recalls that his parents tried, unsuccessfully, to discourage him from running for student council president in high school because it indicated he was "becoming too much of an American." The Ramallah federation was formed largely so that young people could meet other Ramallahans and "continue the lineage," and there are *dabkah* troupes and youth clubs within the federation to bring young people together.³² A majority of young Ramallahans still marries within the community.

There is still some argument over how explicitly political such organizations should be. Some of the old guard of the Ramallah federation, who, according to George Salem, tended to resist politicization in the 1950s precisely because the situation at home was so political,³³ still insist on the organization's primarily social cast. But politics have intervened inevitably. The word "Palestine" was added to the federation's name in the 1970s—a clear political statement; Samir Totah, a Berkeley pharmacist, was selected several years ago to serve on the Palestine National Council because he was president of the federation; and last year the federation later elected two other members, Salameh Zanayed from Chicago and Hanna Ajluni from Detroit, to serve two-year terms on the PNC beginning with its next session.³⁴

"The nature of being Palestinian means you are political," says Fuad Mogannam, a leader of the Ramallah community in San Francisco. If a Palestinian denies being political, he says, "nobody's going to allow it. The fact that you are makes you political."³⁵ Any organization that specifically draws Palestinians together for whatever purpose, even if nominally social, can no longer be thought of as merely a family or village affair.

The Second Generation

The conventional wisdom about the American-born children of immigrants has always held that they reject their parents' ethnicity in their effort to be wholly American. However, this generally tends not to be true with Palestinian young people. There are obvious exceptions: some young people cannot deal with the political stigma that often accompanies being a Palestinian in this country; some push their Palestinian consciousness into the background in the press of trying to succeed in business and integrate in society; and some simply cannot handle the burden of balancing both an American and a Palestinian identity. The majority of second-generation Palestinian Americans generally are able, however, to handle their dual identities comfortably. This is so for two principal reasons—the increasing ethnic consciousness in American society as a result of growing ethnic diversity throughout the country, and the heightened visibility of the Palestinian struggle as a political issue.

The very tendency in America to categorize by ethnic background that Mohammad Busailah, the retired tobacco executive, complained kept him from truly integrating into American society has also tended to ease the burden of ethnicity for American-born Palestinians. Nader Hasan, the nineteen-year-old son of the Arlington banker Nawal Hamad, says that

among his friends “everybody’s looking to where their heritage is.” Roots have become important to young people now and, according to Hasan, “it’s sort of prestigious” to be able to speak a language other than English.³⁶ Others confirm this tendency. “This country is more truly pluralist than it used to be,” Muhammad Hallaj, a widely known commentator and editor of *Palestine Perspectives*, believes:

American society now accepts more than before the idea that there’s nothing wrong with people holding on to the memories and the heritage that they brought with them to this country. So you don’t have that compulsion with [second]-generation Americans to prove that they’re American by shedding their parents’ identity. It’s why my children don’t have that problem. They’re not trying to prove anything to anybody.³⁷

To a surprising degree, according to the testimony of both immigrant parents and American-born children, balancing two identities has not been a burden for the American-born.³⁸ Most parents seem to make an effort not to force feed Palestinian culture to their children but to allow them to make their own choices. This is particularly true with those who are married to Americans of non-Arab ancestry (just under one-third of the married interviewees in this sample have non-Arab spouses), but even where both parents are Palestinian, there seems to be an awareness that the children are growing up in a non-Palestinian culture and must adjust to it even if they maintain a Palestinian consciousness.

“I was raised to be in the middle,” says Hanan T., the sixteen-year-old San Francisco-born daughter of parents from Nablus and Bethlehem, “between those who totally reject the fact that they’re Palestinian and those who are so totally involved that they don’t fit in here.” Reflecting her parents’ sentiments, Hanan considers herself a Palestinian nationalist and identifies as a Palestinian first, but she is also totally an American. Her best friends at school are non-Arab, she takes part in extracurricular activities and, when asked if she would like to live in Palestine in an independent state, she is surprised because she has never thought about it.³⁹

Susan Ziadeh of the Arab-American Institute believes that for Palestinian Americans the “sense of ethnicity is so important that their need to pass it on to their children is probably a little bit more heightened than with other peoples.” But it is equally important, Ziadeh believes, not to force it on the children. Her parents, both from Ramallah,

didn’t impose things on us, they just taught us to enjoy those aspects of our culture that were important. The identity came to grow on us because we liked Arabic music, we liked Arabic food, we liked dressing up in Arabic costumes when there was something at school.

The children were also encouraged to participate with other non-Arab Americans in various youth activities, in which "you interact with young people who are purely American, in a purely American setting, with American objectives." It is foolish, Ziadeh believes, to "raise a child totally alienated from his own environment, because eventually he has to interact with that environment."⁴⁰

Nawal Hamad's experience with her five children gives a striking picture of how, at least superficially, differences in upbringing can produce differences in outlook. Hamad was divorced and forced to go to work when her youngest child, Nael, was three. With the other children old enough to be in school, Nael, now sixteen, was the only one placed in nursery school. As a result, he likes peanut butter and jelly and drinks milk, while the other children have never become accustomed to either. The other children understand Arabic, but to Nael "it's noise." In addition, because Hamad was busy with multiple jobs, she never had as much chance to familiarize Nael with his Palestinian heritage. The other children, she says, "had a feeling of being Palestinian" because they had stayed at home with her before they started school.

Ironically, the Israelis succeeded in raising Nael's Palestinian consciousness. In July 1987, Hamad took four of the five children to al-Birah, but Israeli officials refused the family entry, held them at Ben-Gurion airport for twelve hours, and without explanation or compensation returned them to the U.S. Nael has been acutely aware of being a Palestinian ever since. The others were also reminded that no Palestinian can lose that identity altogether. "When I'd say I'm an American," Nael's brother Nader says, "I used to think big." But, despite being born and raised here, in Israel because "my name is different, I have a different background, they spit on my passport."⁴¹

The intifadah has also had a marked consciousness-raising effect among Palestinian youngsters in this country. At the height of television coverage of the uprising, countless parents found teenaged children who usually never watched anything but MTV wandering in during news broadcasts to observe their West Bank-Gaza peers fighting Israeli soldiers. Fuad Moganam, who has been in San Francisco for over forty years, believes that because of the prominence of the Palestinian issue in the news, both before and since the intifadah, his five children, now grown, are "more Palestinian than I am."⁴² Israeli Palestinian poet and author Fouzi El-Asmar keeps a picture in his Washington office of his ten-year-old American-born daughter holding several stones during a visit last year to an aunt in Israel. "I want her to feel that she's American," he says.⁴³ And she does, but the picture

recording her solidarity with young West Bank stone-throwers shows her to be very much a Palestinian as well.

Ghassan Bishara, Washington correspondent for the Jerusalem newspaper *al-Fajr*, finds that the Palestinians' diminished use of terrorism has made it easier for Palestinian-American youngsters to identify with their Palestinian heritage. Now, he says, for the past few years and particularly since the intifadah, Palestinians are more often portrayed in the American press as guerrillas rather than terrorists, not desirous of throwing Israelis into the sea but merely of having a state of their own, and young Americans can identify with that goal. The effect has been obvious on Bishara's own twelve-year-old daughter. "There isn't that reason for my daughter or for other Palestinian daughters to shy away from the fact that they are Palestinians. My daughter doesn't mind it at all. She brags about it."⁴⁴

Conclusion

Whatever the changing trends, Palestinians still often face ethnic prejudice and political stereotyping; they have been the object—although never the perpetrators—of terrorist attacks, most notably in the assassination of Los Angeles ADC official Alex Odeh in 1985; and many have been singled out for investigation by the FBI or other government agencies for no better reason than that they are Palestinian. The 1987 arrest in Los Angeles of seven Palestinian resident aliens and the Kenyan wife of one of them, who came to be known as the L.A. Eight, on charges of belonging to a subversive organization undoubtedly raised doubts in the mind of every Palestinian American about the safety and constitutional rights of Palestinians in this country.

Palestinians have reacted to these incidents, however, with considerable aplomb. Able to recognize that government harassment when it occurs is an abuse rather than the norm, able still to appreciate the American system despite severe disagreement with American policies, and able to focus on favorable changes in the American attitude rather than dwell on examples of discrimination, Palestinian Americans generally have a remarkably healthy attitude. Discrimination can always be found by those who look for it, and Palestinians seem not to look for it. In any case, when they do encounter it, they seem to deal with it without paranoia.

At the same time, the difficulties the U.S. has posed for Palestinians have served to reinforce their sense of being Palestinian. Adults and children, immigrants and the American-born are all acutely conscious of and take immense pride in their heritage. This is as much the result of

official American non-acceptance of Palestinians as a people as it is the result of positive Palestinian accomplishments like the intifadah.



1. *Census of Population: Supplementary Report: Ancestry of the Population by State: 1980* (Washington: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1983), 21.
2. *Palestinian Statistical Abstract for 1983* (Damascus: Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 1984), cited in Laurie A. Brand, *Palestinians in the Arab World: Institution Building and the Search for State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 9.
3. Interview with Norma Sayage in Daly City, CA, 21 April 1988.
4. Louise Cainkar, "Palestinian Women in the United States: Coping with Tradition, Change, and Alienation," Ph.D. Dissertation (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1988), 136.
5. Interview with Nahil Abid in Daly City, CA, 21 April 1988.
6. Interview with Qassem Khalil in Los Angeles, CA, 8 June 1988.
7. Interview with Ibrahim M. in Baldwin Park, CA, 12 December 1987.
8. One Palestinian American delegate attended the 1988 Republican convention. Information from Susan Ziadeh, Arab-American Institute, Washington, DC, in phone conversation, 29 July 1988.
9. Interview with Naim Assed in Albuquerque, NM, 9 August 1988.
10. For a detailed account of Monsour's imprisonment, see John P. Egan, "An American Testimony from an Israeli Prison: The Case of Mike Monsour," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 14, no. 1 (Fall 1984): 118-25.
11. In an interview immediately following his release, Monsour called himself "a Palestinian first and foremost." See *Ibid.*, 124.
12. Interview with Hazem Monsour in Albuquerque, NM, 22 October 1987.
13. Interview with Omar Kader in Alexandria, VA, 25 October 1988.
14. Interview with Nawal Hamad, Fadwa Hasan, Nader Hasan, and Nael Hasan in Fairfax, VA, 22 October 1988.
15. Interview with Rafiq T. in San Francisco, CA, 17 April 1988.
16. Interview with Samir Ashrawi in Houston, TX, 22 February 1988.
17. Interview with Abdur-Rahim Jaouni in Berkeley, CA, 15 March 1988.
18. Interview with Samira F. in Palo Alto, CA, 20 April 1988.
19. Interview with Najat Arafat Khelil in Potomac, MD, 17 October 1988.
20. Survey conducted by Pat El-Nazer, Kennesaw College, Atlanta, Georgia, cited in Fouad Moughrabi, "Palestinian-American Opinion: Envidable Unanimity," *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* 7, no. 10 (February 1989): 19.
21. Khelil interview.
22. Interview with Mohammad Busailah in Glendale, CA, 9 June 1988.
23. Ashrawi interview.
24. Interview with Hasan B. in Los Angeles, CA, 10 June 1988.
25. Khelil interview.
26. Interview with Hisham and Laila D. in Walnut, CA, 14 December 1987.
27. Shafeeq N. Ghabra, *Palestinians in Kuwait: The Family and the Politics of Survival* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987), 169.
28. Brand, *Palestinians in the Arab World*, 221.
29. The American Federation of Ramallah, Palestine is the largest of many organizations in the U.S. that represent Palestinian, particularly West Bank, towns. There are organizations for the West Bank towns of Dair Dibwan, Bayt Hanina, Bir Zayt,

and others. Qaluniya, among other villages destroyed in 1948, has a worldwide village network, of which the American component, based primarily in Chicago, is a small part. Villagers and descendants from Saris, also destroyed in 1948, meet annually in Amman; and so on.

30. Telephone interview with George Salem, 29 October 1988.
31. Interview with Susan Ziadeh in Washington, D.C., 19 October 1988.
32. Salem interview.
33. *Ibid.*
34. Interviews with Salameh Zanayed in Chicago, IL, 13 February 1989, and Hanna Ajluni in Detroit, MI, 23 March 1989.
35. Interview with Fuad Mogannam in San Francisco, CA, 15 April 1988.
36. Hamad-Hasan interview.
37. Interview with Muhammad Hallaj in Fairfax, VA, 21 October 1988.
38. Louise Cainkar's research among Palestinian women in Chicago shows this not to be the case for American-born second-generation women in that city. Muslim Palestinian girls born in this country and raised in Chicago, Cainkar shows, "face many challenges mediating the American culture they identify with and the Palestinian culture to which their compliance is expected. By adulthood, they find themselves marginal members of both American and Palestinian societies." Their enforced isolation from American society as a result of their traditional upbringing keeps them outside the American mainstream, while at the same time members of the immigrant community see them as "culturally deficient" (Cainkar, *Palestinian Women*, 168-9). Cainkar's finding is so much at odds with the impressions gained from other cities for this study that it must be concluded that the difference in second-generation Chicago women arises primarily because the Chicago Palestinian community is markedly different from those in other American cities in its socio-economic level, its educational level, its tendency to cluster in Palestinian neighborhoods, and therefore its general level of integration in American society—all phenomena confirmed in conversation with Palestinians. There is also, of course, as shown by Cainkar, a clear difference in the way Palestinian men and women are raised in this country that affects their respective levels of adaptation, but this difference too would appear to be accentuated in Chicago.
39. Interview with Hanan T. in San Francisco, CA, 17 April 1988.
40. Ziadeh interview.
41. Hamad-Hasan interview.
42. Mogannam interview.
43. Interview with Fouzi El-Asmar in Washington, DC, 20 October 1988.
44. Interview with Ghassan Bishara in Washington, DC, 26 October 1988.