

The Forgotten “-ism:”
An Arab American Women’s Perspective on
Zionism, Racism and Sexism

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Forward: About Racial Discrimination Amongst Feminists

During the month of July 1985, I was in Nairobi, Kenya attending the International UN Women's Conference. I was getting ready to climb the steps up the platform and give my speech when a woman came up to me and whispered in my ear "Please do not bring up Palestine in your speech, this is a women's conference not a political conference." The woman was Betty Friedan, one of the leading American feminists in the sixties of the last century.

Of course in my speech, I did not heed what she had said to me since I believe that women's issues cannot be dealt with in isolation from politics. The emancipation of women in the Arab region is closely linked to the regimes under which we live, regimes which are supported by the USA in most cases, and the struggle between Israel and Palestine has an important impact on the political situation. Besides, how can we speak of liberation for Palestinian women without speaking of their right to have a land on which to live? How can we speak about Arab women's rights in Palestine and Israel without opposing the racial discrimination exercised against them by the Israeli regime?

Betty Friedan and other Jewish feminists were angry with me because I insisted on bringing up the system of apartheid forced upon Arab women and men in Palestine by Israel, and yet the same Betty Friedan and the same Jewish feminists had no hesitation in speaking about South African apartheid at the same conference. Nevertheless, there were other Jewish women in the conference who refused to adopt these double racial standards and who stood up for the rights of both Palestinian and South African women.

On another occasion, I was attending an international women's conference in the city of Toronto, Canada. This was five years later in 1990 during the month of June. During my talk, I mentioned that veiling of women had arisen before Islam, that women had been forced to wear the veil first in Judaism and then in Christianity. Some of the Jewish women in the conference were angry with what I said. One of them named Alice Shalvi, who was a leading figure in what was called The Israeli Women's Network, protested and said: "I must protest there is no conception of the veil in Judaism." An article by Gwynne Dyer in the Toronto Star issue of 3 July 1990 attributed such furious protests to the strong tendency in the West to scapegoat Islam for practices that are just as much a part of Jewish and Christian heritage.

In the Old Testament, uncovering a woman's head is considered a disgrace and that is why the priest had to uncover the suspected adulteress in her trial by ordeal (numbers 5:16-18). Famous ancient Rabbis said, "It is not like the daughters of Israel to walk out with heads uncovered" and "Cursed be the man who lets the hair of his wife be seen."

During the nineteenth century in Europe, some Jewish women found it more convenient to replace their traditional veil with a wig as another form of hair covering. In the New Testament, St. Paul said "If a woman does not cover her head she should have her hair cut off." Catholic nuns have been covering their heads for hundreds of years.

Despite these historical facts, the racism still prevalent in Western societies continues to link veiling of women with Islam alone. This is an integral part of the anti-Arab policies followed by Western ruling circles. It is one of the many arguments used

to depict the Arabs and Islam as being the only religion which oppresses women and to justify pro-Israeli policies in the eyes of the public.

Israel is a fundamentalist state built on the biblical argument that the Jews are the chosen people of Jehovah (God) and that Palestine is their promised chosen land where they were led by Moses three thousand years ago. Religious fundamentalism is the same whether Jewish, Christian or Islamic and they are all racist in nature since they consider people who belong to a certain religion as superior and so justify discrimination against others.

The Zionist fundamentalist state of Israel backed by the USA has built up an arsenal of modern weapons including hundreds of atomic bombs, and uses Phantom F-16 planes provided by the U.S. to attack unarmed civilian populations, to destroy homes, occupy the land of Palestinians and kill women and children. When the Palestinians fight back with stones, they are called terrorists. When in desperation a small number of them throw bombs or plant dynamite, the organized massive state terrorism of Israel is concealed by the media mobilized to depict the Palestinians as being fanatical aggressors. For in the world of today double standards prevail, and the powerful are able to conceal the truth, that Zionist Israel is a racist state, and that racism breeds racism in others wherever it goes.

Nawal El Saadawi
Cairo
16 May 2001

Preface:
How This Paper Was Inspired and Written

Four months had passed since the beginning of the Al-Aqsa Intifada; board members of the San Francisco chapter of the Arab Women's Solidarity Association gathered for an event planning meeting in early 2001, and the strain of the previous months was apparent amongst us. As Arab women activists, we had been calling for Palestinians' right to self-determination, resisting the censorship of Arab voices on multiple fronts: in the media, in public lectures, in our classrooms, in our workplaces, and among our friends and colleagues. Upon comparing notes and experiences, we found that each of us had been harassed, intimidated, and sabotaged by supporters of Zionism trying to silence our resistance. We realized that while we had been feeling alienated and unsupported in our daily claims for Arab human, social, political and national rights and human dignity, we were not alone—the voices of Arab American women activists are regularly policed and silenced.

Noting that virtually no analysis providing an Arab women's perspective on the impact of Zionist racism existed, we discussed the importance of coming together to support one another and break the silence. We agreed that as long as we do not name our oppressor, we would remain isolated and invisible among peoples' struggles for social justice locally and globally. We further decided that since our oppression took the form of exclusion and invisibility, we would write a paper to distribute to activists and academics worldwide as to how Zionist racism affects our lives in the United States. We agreed that it would be a group and a grassroots effort, a weaving together of our collective ideas and experiences.

We formed a survey/interview team and conducted research among thirty Arab American women activists across the U.S. on their experiences of "racism and discrimination." These women are from various national, religious and generational backgrounds. Their history of activism links them together with U.S. feminist and other progressive political movements. Another team interviewed ten diverse non-Arab Bay Area activists on the issue of Zionist racism in various spheres of U.S. society, including the media, education, religious institutions, labor, and progressive politics. Additional research materials came from the Internet and the libraries of local universities and local activists' homes.

After organizing the collected experiences and literature, analyzing the data, searching for patterns and making observations, we began the writing process. In addition to endless pages of transcribed interview material, we had dozens of articles and nearly a hundred books on Zionism written from every perspective—including leaders of the Zionist movement, right wing Israelis, Israeli feminists, radical Israeli historians, revolutionary Palestinian nationalists, and Arab American intellectuals. We had two writing teams and an editorial team. We completed the paper in two months after every member of the committee read the paper and contributed their revisions.

This paper has two primary parts. In Part One, we provide an historical background to the Zionist project in the Arab world and the U.S. In Part Two, we explore the ways that "racial formation" among Arab-American women contributes to their position as the "most invisible of the invisibles" (Kadi 1994) within progressive

circles. In conclusion, we highlight Arab-American women's resistance and their contributions to transnational, radical feminist critique.

This paper is a historical first in its unique articulation of some of the forces that shape Arab Women's existence and struggles in the United States. We are indebted to the Women of Color Resource Center for including a study of Zionism in their delegation materials for the United Nations Third World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, and for having the courage to be consistent in their critique of colonialism and racism.

I. Introduction

As the nations of the world prepare to address the root causes and manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, double standards fill the halls of the United Nations. The United States and Canada threaten to boycott or to send low-level delegations to the United Nations Third World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, and several states refuse to publicly condemn the global impact of Zionism, as an ideology, and the regional impact of its materialization, the State of Israel. We call on the international community to recognize and condemn the systematic and institutionalized discrimination and exclusion inherent to the state of Israel.

Based on archival, historical, and anthropological field research, this paper demonstrates that Zionism is a form of racism not only in Palestine, but internationally.¹ As a political project, Zionism sought to establish itself as a colonial implant on Arab land. To ensure its continuity despite its racist, exclusionary nature, Zionism has fashioned itself through a propaganda system that is marked in gendered terms and appeals to moral sensibilities.

By naming Zionism the “Forgotten ‘-ism,’” we call for consistency in the representation of struggles against imperialist or colonialist narratives among U.S. progressives. As a call for inclusion, our work demands that social justice and human rights activists critique all cases of ethnic supremacy and settler-colonial aggression, be they in South Africa, Central America, Indonesia, the United States, or Palestine.

Our women of color feminist sisters from the U.S. and the global south crafted tools for breaking the silence and claiming our rights on our own terms. Building on their analysis that links the oppression of U.S. women of color and the oppression of women from the global south, our analysis of Zionist oppression brings an Arab/Arab-American women’s perspective to the development of a radical, transnational, anti-racist, feminist critique. In the spirit of breaking the silence, this paper highlights the lives of Arab-American women, who have been referred to as “the most invisible of the invisibles,” (Kadi 1994) as one site for a comprehensive examination of Zionism and racism.

II. Historical Background

A. Zionism and Colonialism

Zionism was born through the writings of Theodore Herzl, in Germany in the late 1880’s. As outlined by Herzl, Zionism was a secular political project that defined “the Jews” as a people, a nation and a race, rather than a religious group. In the context of the fervent European anti-Jewish discrimination of the time, Herzl argued for the need to create an independent Jewish state for “the Jewish people” who, he argued, could never possibly assimilate in the countries they inhabited (Beit-Hallahmi 1993; Garaudy 1983; Segev 1986). Although multiple locations were suggested, the Zionist movement proposed Palestine as the site for a Jewish state, in a strategic move that would allow them to use the religious history of Palestine to justify their purely political goal of

¹ For more information on Zionism and racism, see the International Organization for the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination (1977). For more information on the global dimensions of Zionism see Chomsky (1983); Beit-Hallahmi (1987); and Green (1988).

colonization (Garaudy 1983). The racist nature of the Zionist movement originates in its idea of an exclusive Jewish state for Jewish people only, exclusive of the indigenous inhabitants of Palestine. Moreover, at every point of its genesis, the Zionist movement was informed and reinforced by nineteenth century European colonialism and its white supremacist ideology.

In the context of rampant British colonization throughout the “third world” at the time, Britain recognized the potential of the Zionist project in Palestine to further its own economic and political goals. Britain assisted the Zionists in exporting 610,000 Jews from various parts of the world to Palestine to make way for the eventual establishment of Israel on indigenous Palestinian land. In 1917, the Balfour Declaration of Britain legitimized the establishment of “a national homeland for Jews in Palestine” (Laquer and Rubin 1984). The genocide of World War II created a new impetus for immigration; in 1947, further mass immigration projects ensued. After they were refused entry to countries such as Britain and the United States, Jews from all over the world were sent to settle a land where they had no prior territorial affiliation--Palestine. When the Zionists ultimately occupied Palestine by force, in 1948, they took over nearly three fourths of Palestine and uprooted over 750,000 native Palestinians from their homes. In 1967, Israel took over the remainder of Palestine, uprooting even more native Palestinians.

While Palestine fits the standards of colonization, it is also a special case because its colonizer, Israel, is a Jewish-only nation-state imposed on Arab Palestinian land.² Israel was not constructed to colonize the natives per se, but to remove them entirely from their land and to construct Israeli Jews as the authentic people of the land.

Since its inception over a century ago, Zionist ideology and practice has sought to ethnically cleanse and “purify” Palestine and the surrounding Arab states of its indigenous inhabitants. Several historical state documents illustrate the centrality of ethnic cleansing to the Zionist project. In Herzl’s diaries, for example, he writes, “We shall try to spirit the penniless population across the border by procuring employment for it in the transit countries, while denying it any employment in our own country... expropriation and the removal of the poor must be carried out discreetly and circumspectly” (Swirski 1993: 285). Though the contemporary Zionist consensus argues that Israel is not a colonial state, Herzl, in fact, argued to the contrary: “To go further than any colonialist has gone in Africa...where involuntary expropriation of land will temporarily alienate civilized opinion. By the time the reshaping of world opinion in our favor has been completed, we shall be firmly established in our country, no longer fearing the influx of foreigners, and receiving our visitors with aristocratic benevolence (Hertzberg 1997).”

The Zionist project was a by-product of nineteenth century European colonization, and Britain, specifically, furthered its own early twentieth century political goals in the Middle East through colonial Zionism and the establishment of Israel. By the

² "The state to be created must be Jewish. But not in the same way as the Congo was Belgian or Algeria was French. The Jewish state must be composed primarily, and, ideally, exclusively, of Jews (since they had no metropolis). Thus it was not a question of 'exploiting' the manpower, resources, and markets of another human community, as the colonial powers had done, but rather of finding a 'legitimate' way to exclude the Palestinian community from its own territory" (Bajoit 1977: 136).

second half of the twentieth century, however, primary financial and military support for the Zionist project was transferred from the hands of Britain to the hands of the U.S. government. Since the 1967 completion of the Zionist takeover of Palestine, no country has received more U.S. foreign aid than Israel.

There is more to the Zionist project than consolidating Israel as a Jewish-only state; it was not the cause of fighting anti-Jewish oppression that inspired the forces of Western imperialism to ally with the Zionist project of Israel (Segev 1993). The U.S., like Britain, has supported Israel as a means to maintain Israel's position as a Western ally within the Arab region (O'Brien 1986: 154). By exploiting the economic and political resources of the Arab world, Israel has become a conduit of globalization, militarization and imperialism.³

Britain and the U.S. have provided Israel with the military machinery, strategy and funding necessary to illegally move over four million Jews to Palestine, uprooting Palestinians from their native homeland (Swirski 1993). Since the inception of the Zionist state, thousands of Palestinians have been killed and five million Palestinians have been displaced from their homes (Abu-Sitta 1998; Morris 1987); towards the end of furthering their own political goals of dominance in the region, Britain and the U.S. have collaborated in dispossessing Palestinians.⁴

Central to the Zionist vision is territorial expansion into neighboring states, such as Jordan, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. This vision of expansion has already been illustrated by the thirty-year Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon. Though this occupation has formally ended, its long-term impact continues in ongoing military and economic aggression. U.S. foreign policy is most powerfully used against those countries that refuse to recognize Israel, such as Iraq, Syria, Iran and Sudan. Each of these countries suffer from the collective punishment of U.S.-imposed sanctions while, based on their anti-Zionist position, they are also marked as state sponsors of terrorism. It is the convergence of U.S. national interests with Israel's position in the center of the Arab region that accounts for the success of the Zionist movement in the U.S.

B. Zionism in the U.S.

Though Israel consistently defies international law and hundreds of United Nations human rights resolutions in its occupation of Palestine, the U.S. government continues to funnel six billion tax dollars per year to the state of Israel. In nearly every

³ Guy Bajoit, writing about the link between Zionism and imperialism, states, "Thus an unusual colonial movement, Zionism, led to the creation of an imperialist state...[which] is both imperialist and dependent, in that it performs an imperialist function on behalf of the powers on which it depends...it is a typically military subimperialism, exercised by war" (1977:139).

⁴ The gender component of Zionist colonization can be explained by the feminist critique that war, displacement and poverty impact women disproportionately. Living under Israeli occupation, Palestinian women have suffered from an intensified lack of access to basic human resources, including education, health, and employment. As Palestinian families are increasingly divided, the stress on women within families increases. When Palestinian men are imprisoned, killed, or working away from home, Palestinian women emerge as the primary heads of households. These shifts in gender roles have led to increased social, cultural and economic responsibilities placed on women (Hammami 1998; Hammami and Johnson 1999; Johnson 1998).

sector of U.S. politics, this contradiction remains unchallenged. Contributing to this profound silence are the strategies of the Zionist movement. In the U.S., Zionism is highly influential in the shaping of public opinion (Findley 1985; O'Brien 1986). Many self-identified Zionists, including Jews and non Jews, belong to the organized body referred to as the World Zionist Organization. Other Zionist organizations in the United States include American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the American Jewish Congress, Anti-Defamation League (ADL), the Jewish Community Relations Council, Hillel, and the Jewish Student Committee. Whether it is in labor, education, media or politics, the Zionist movement's strategy is to maintain a unified pro-Israel position, silencing criticism of Israeli policy and demonizing its critics. Since it would be ludicrous to market Israel's history of displacing indigenous people from their land, the most prevalent myth that Zionists propagate is that criticisms of Israel and/or Zionism are anti-Semitic (O'Brien 1986: 97).

We focus specifically on the ADL as an example of institutionalized Zionism because it is one of the most powerful pressure groups in the United States. As Noam Chomsky puts it, "The ADL's primary commitment [is] to use any technique however dishonest and disgraceful in order to defame and silence and destroy anybody who dares to criticize the holy state (Israel)" (Marshall 1993).

Prior to the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, particularly during the height of their political uprising in the late eighties and early nineties, Palestinians were increasingly successful in articulating to the U.S. public a persuasive case with respect to their struggle for human rights. To combat the increasing sympathetic portrayal of the Palestinian liberation struggle, major pro-Israeli, anti-Palestinian organizations established espionage rings and published books and kits to help their members discredit Palestinian justice struggles and revive the deteriorating public image of Israel (Rashmawi 1992). The San Francisco spy scandal that broke out in the early 1990's (Marshall 1993; Isaacs 2000), just as the Oslo agreements were being orchestrated, revealed that the ADL was engaged in spying on the Arab-American community, as well as numerous peace and anti-apartheid activists and organizations. The ADL operation used paid informers, police officers, student recruits, and a full-time staff to meet its goal of discrediting Palestinian and other liberation struggles. Revelation of the spy ring ultimately exposed the ADL as one of many examples where devoutly anti-Palestinian sentiment and covert Israeli intelligence activity are hidden behind a seemingly benign civil rights organization (Rashmawi 1992).⁵

According to the ADL, any criticism of Israel is racism towards Jews. The ADL further contends that the interests of the United States are so identical to those of Israel that any disagreement with the Israeli government and its policies are a betrayal of the United States. The ADL hits the American public hard and repeatedly with such

⁵ During the 1940's, a sign of the ADL's early interest in information gathering and suppression of opinion was its active participation in the witch hunt of that time by providing information to the U.S. Civil Service Commission on thousands of Americans whom the ADL considered unpatriotic. Such information was later used by the infamous House Un-American Activities Committee and the FBI. The Middle East Labor Bulletin, in its Spring 1993 issue, states that, of the 487,033 cards on individuals found in the Commission's New York office alone, six to seven thousand were compiled in cooperation with the ADL.

suppositions, combined with the idea that Arabs in general and Palestinians in particular are vulgar terrorists who are really a menace to society (Rashmawi 1992). The organization lumps together everyone from the Nazis to peace organizations as enemies of both the U.S. and Israel, deserving to be spied upon and mercilessly investigated. The ADL and its affiliate organizations, such as Hillel and AIPAC, have utilized highly unsavory means, including intimidation, scare tactics, the infiltration of organizations, the violation of civil rights and sabotage to achieve their goals (Marshall 1993; Rashmawi 1992).

This systematic attempt to silence and exclude Arabs and Arab Americans from the political process is one example of what Helen Samhan refers to as *political racism*. According to Samhan, anti-Arab attitudes and behaviors have their roots “not in the traditional motives of structurally excluding a group perceived as inferior, but in politics” (Samhan 1987:11). While Zionism is a politically organized racial project that directly and systematically targets Arabs and Arab Americans,⁶ the terrain of Zionism is much broader than the practices of particular organizations. In the U.S. context, Zionism has become “common sense”—“a way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world”⁷ that goes completely unquestioned and unchallenged.

III. Racial Formation

As is the case with every colonizing movement throughout the world, including those in the Americas, Africa, and Asia, inherent to Zionism is the racist myth that the “natives” are a backward, violent people who are not “civilized.” The dual goals underpinning the racist mythology are to 1) construct a homogenous society, not in national origin, but in its exclusion of the indigenous people, while 2) acquiring the cultural facets necessary to project an organic rooting.

It is this racist myth that has justified colonization of Palestine and silenced resistance against Israeli occupation. As the racist colonialist logic of Zionism goes, as long as Israel is to be seen as “civilized,” Arabs must be seen as “uncivilized.”

The racialization of Arab people within the U.S. is directly linked to the process by which the U.S. has become the Zionist project’s number one ally (Naber 2000; Suleiman and Abu-Laban 1989).⁸ Propaganda distinguishes between “Arab terrorists”

⁶ Hatem Hussein writes that “By 1970, the Arab-Americans and Arabs in the United States were faced with a comprehensive campaign of investigation and surveillance carried out by a number of government agencies, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Justice Department, and the Immigration Department. This campaign of ‘spying, wiretapping, and burglaries’ was instituted on orders from the White House in an attempt to uncover the activities of so-called saboteurs. Leonard Garment, White House adviser for Jewish affairs, was ordered to contact Jewish intelligence to assist in this campaign of surveillance... Since 1968, Zionist and pro-Israeli Jewish organizations in the United States have been pressing Congress and the White House for action against Arabs and Arab-Americans critical of Israel” (1974:216).

⁷ Here, we borrow from Omi and Winant’s (1994) analysis of the processes by which racist notions become “common sense.”

⁸ It was after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war when the U.S. solidified its alliance with Israel. It was also after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war when systematic, racist images of Arabs emerged within the U.S. media. Edward Said writes, “During and after the June War few things could

and “peaceful Israeli victims” as a strategy for justifying Zionist colonization. Like every colonizing project, Zionist racism has a gendered component that targets indigenous women. Myths about Arab women are central to the colonialist dichotomy between “backward Arabs” and “Israeli citizens.” Zionist propaganda, for example, portrays Arab women as the most oppressed women in the world. These links between race and gender not only legitimate the idea that Palestine is in need of Westernization/colonization, but they also impact Arab and Arab-American women’s everyday lives. Experiences of Zionist racism vary among our research participants. Those who are active in the U.S. feminist movement agree that Zionist racism reinforces the myth that Arab and Arab-American women are extremely oppressed and therefore need to be saved and/or spoken for by their Western feminist “sisters.” Those who speak about Palestinian rights agree that they are excluded, silenced, censored, and/or erased from nearly every progressive political sphere by the systematic, institutionalized attempts to exclude and de-legitimize all critiques of Israel.

As a significant partner of U.S. imperialism on a global scale, Israel has been an executor of discrimination and racism internationally. For years, Israel has shared its military expertise with other abusive, undemocratic regimes across the globe, and Israeli intelligence training has been central to the development of oppressive regimes throughout much of the global south, including South Africa, Uganda, Argentina, El Salvador, Guatemala, Chile, and Indonesia.⁹ Central to the Zionist Israeli global activities is a powerful form of censorship that seeks to silence resistance and social justice movements worldwide. In the U.S., organized Zionist forces enforce censorship in nearly every sphere of society, including the media, work and labor, public policy, political arenas, and religious and educational institutions.¹⁰ The proliferation of Zionist ideology impacts persons from every racial and ethnic community in the United States, particularly those who are perceived to be potential allies to the Palestinian struggle for national liberation and self-determination.¹¹ Yet, critiques of Zionism remain virtually

have been more depressing than the way in which the Arabs were portrayed. . . The symbolism repeated the simple pattern of a Cooper novel-- was not the June War the conflict between the white European bravely facing the amoral wilderness in the person of savage natives bent on destruction? As an intelligible unit in the mind, the Arab has been reduced to pure antagonism to Israel" (Said 1970: 6).

⁹ Other countries where Israel cooperated and aided oppressive regimes: East Timor, Columbia, Honduras, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Algeria, and Tunisia (The Muslim Student Association of UCLA 2000; Shahak 1997)

¹⁰ For information on Zionism and labor, see the Middle East Labor Bulletin; on Zionism and religious institutions in the U.S., see Nijim (1982); on Zionism and politics, see McKinney (2001); on Zionism and the media see Said (1981).

¹¹ African-American politics are a central site where Zionists interfere to sabotage the possibilities for Arab-Americans to build solidarity with potential allies. In a speech written by Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney, [D-GA] and addressed to an American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee banquet on May 26, 2001, McKinney, referring to a memorandum from the Counter Intelligence Program stated, "the purpose of the memorandum was to fashion a strategy at the highest levels of the U.S. government that would preserve white superiority and white privilege in the United States and in Africa." McKinney then quoted from the memorandum which read, "In the above context we must envisage the

excluded from progressive social justice debates and movements. As long as progressive movements continue to omit a social justice stance on this issue, Zionism will remain the “Forgotten ‘-ism,”” an unquestioned, unchallenged rationalization for colonialism, imperialism, racism and sexism.

We set out to investigate the experiences of Arab-American women within the U.S. feminist movement and U.S. progressive politics, in addressing U.S. foreign policy in the Arab World. We found that our research participants shared common experiences of marginalization and exclusion within both spheres. In this paper, we situate our analysis of these women’s experiences in the context of Arab-Americans’ relationship to the U.S. state and its foreign policy. Our central argument is that the “racial formation” (Omi and Winant 1994) of Arab-American women emerges vis-à-vis the Zionist project¹² and that four key patterns underwrite this process. These patterns can be summarized in the words of our research participants:

A. “All of the images that I see of myself everywhere tell me that Arab women are subhuman, lower on the evolutionary scale compared to other women in the world. All of this imagery serves to justify Israel’s continued violence against Arab people.”
Salam, Palestinian American¹³

B. “Our issues are ignored and excluded wherever we go, even among human rights activists, feminists, people of color and progressives.”
Nadia, Lebanese American

C. “We are viewed as anti-Semitic and that’s what silences our voices of resistance against Israeli occupation. Every time we speak about Zionism as a political project, we are silenced. We are trying to fight Israeli state power and our words are twisted around as if we were making statements about Jewish people.”
Suha, Palestinian American

D. “We are even isolated from other people of color when it comes to our issues because the Zionists got to them first.”
Emily, Jordanian American

A. The Demonization of Arab American Women

The demonization of Arab women within Western academic and cultural traditions has deep historical roots (Kahf 1999; Said 1978) and is often blamed on Islam. Kahf writes that, ever since the eighteenth century, central to Western discourse on Islam is the idea that “Islam is innately and immutably oppressive to women, that the veil and segregation epitomized that oppression, and that these customs were the fundamental reasons for the general and comprehensive backwardness of Islamic societies.” (Ahmed

possibility, however remote, that black Americans interested in African Affairs may refocus their attention on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Taking into account the African descent of American blacks, it is reasonable to anticipate that their sympathies would lie with the Arabs who are closer to them in spirit and, in some cases, related to them by blood. Black involvement in lobbying to support the Arabs may lead to serious dissension between American blacks and Jews.”

¹² We use Omi and Winant’s definition that “racial formation” is “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (1994: 55).

¹³ All of the names in this paper have been changed for purposes of confidentiality.

1992: 152, cited in Kahf 1999: 1). In different historical periods, this image has been refashioned depending on historical circumstances.¹⁴ We explore three images that shape our research participants everyday confrontations with racism to depict the ways that race and gender intersect in the demonization of Arab women. They are the images of the “inadequate Palestinian mother,”¹⁵ the “super-oppressed Arab woman,” and the “nameless veiled woman.” These images often overlap within our research participants narratives.

Tala, an Arab-American scholar and activists explains:

Negative images of Arab women are linked to Zionism, even though Zionism has done it to the whole Arab community. The media has portrayed Palestinian women as either victims of sexist Arab men or murderous mothers who bring up terrorists, as if their pride and joy is to have their kid killed. The mere thought that the image is actually credible to people...it just shows how powerful Zionism has portrayed the Palestinian culture as backwards and the Palestinian woman as non-human—as if Palestinian women have no problem bringing up kids that die!

This image of the “inadequate Palestinian mother” is one example of how women become targets of the Zionist consensus. To justify colonization, Zionist propaganda—reinforced by U.S. foreign policy and the U.S. news media—exaggerates and often focuses on the victimization or violence of Arab women, in order to racialize Arabs as backwards, violent and uncivilized.

The most powerful image that nearly all of our research participants have been confronted with is that of the “super-oppressed” Arab woman. For example Iman remembers that when she introduced herself as an Arab to a college peer, her peer remarked, “And your father let you go to college?”

Sawsan adds:

Within feminist circles, as soon as people find out that I am Arab, they bring up the issue of Arab women and how badly they are treated. It is very frustrating to me, since I have been maltreated by American and

¹⁴ In the contemporary U.S., racist fascinations with Arab women’s oppression have become a normalized component of U.S. popular culture. These images serve to uphold, rationalize, justify, or explain U.S. foreign policy/U.S. imperialism in the Arab world (Naber 2000). Mainstream filmmakers, artists, and writers in the U.S. rely on sensationalized images of oppressed Arab women to gain notoriety. Hollywood films regularly produce films about a highly sexist Arab culture that targets both Arab and Western women. News media, such as the New York Times, regularly sensationalizes Arab women’s issues, highlighting cliterodectomy,

¹⁵ This image emerged in the context of the Intifada that began in October 2000 as part of the Zionist project’s strategy for justifying and explaining the Israeli state’s brutal aggression against Palestinian civilians.

European co-workers! I find myself in a place where I have to defend Arab women and the Arab world and the entire Middle East all the time.

In Zein's words:

Racist stereotypes about us force me to deny what I am not—i.e., a terrorist or a victim—before I can even begin to assert what I am—an Arab-American. So I find myself constantly defending myself and constantly explaining myself to make people understand that what they think about us isn't true.

Nehad says, "I was studying in a café in Berkeley. A woman sitting next to me asked me what I was reading. I said, 'a book about Arab immigration to the U.S.' She said, 'Are you from that part of the world?' I said, 'Yes.' She said, 'You sure are lucky to be here. They treat women really bad over there, don't they?' I said, 'The U.S. has its positive sides, but it also has its negative sides for Arabs who live here.' She said, 'Like what?' I said, 'Like as we speak the U.S. government is funding Israel to murder and maim our children by the thousands.' She said, 'That's not the U.S.' fault and you know what I think? I think you should go back home if you don't like it here.'"

Confronted with the "super-oppressed Arab woman" image, our research participants are marginalized at the cost of justifying their very existence as Arab/Arab-American women.

Hala, a Muslim woman activist, depicts the ways that people see her through the image of "the nameless veiled woman." She describes her encounters with U.S. feminists by stating that, "Even within progressive feminist groups, I am accused of not being feminist enough because I wear a veil."

While we were conducting interviews on college campuses, one student told us a story about a student who approached the Muslim students' table on campus. Her first question to them regarding Islam was about the veil. She said, "I thought that the reason women wear the veil is to cover up the bruises they have on their face from when their husbands beat them."

Within mainstream U.S. media, the "nameless veiled woman" is either crying and screaming or passively accepting her oppression. These images mark Arab and Muslim women as either "out of control" or "having no control"—there is no space in between for them to assert their identities or power as agents of social change. Yet as our research participants explain, the demonization of Arab women does not only obstruct the ways that they are perceived, but it obstructs Arab-American women's activism by adding to their agenda the additional task of challenging myths and breaking stereotypes.

Within contemporary U.S. popular culture, the images of the "inadequate Palestinian mother," "the super-oppressed Arab woman," and the "nameless veiled woman" are used to justify U.S.-led imperialism in the Arab world along with its number one ally, the Zionist state of Israel. In the context of Israeli exclusionary culture, the narrative that coincides with these images is that Israel is the civilized anomaly amidst a sea of violent Arabs with their pathological sexism and their culturally-sanctioned misogyny. In addition to impacting the ways that Arabs are perceived through Western

eyes, this narrative is one component of a larger Zionist narrative that serves to sanction Israel's collective massacre of Palestinians.

For example, the gendered, colonialist narratives that assume that "Arabs are backward" while "Israelis are civilized" are reinforced within U.S. popular culture and provide justification for the economic de-stabilization of the Palestinian economy, including the war of starvation, the alarming rates of poverty and unemployment, and the estimated five million Palestinian refugees living in poverty and exile. In the context of Israeli racist consensus, where Arab women are often the targets of these colonizing narratives, Palestinian people have been consigned to a racially inferior state by which their natural wealth, water, and cheap labor are utilized for the welfare of Israel.

B. Ignored and Excluded

In addition to demonizing Arab people, the Zionist movement creates confusion about the Israeli occupation of Palestine, making the issue entirely incomprehensible to the mainstream Western public. This is a strategy for subverting a social justice critique of Israel. The first way the Zionist project generates confusion is by conflating the categories "Arab," "Middle Easterner," and "Muslim" as if there are no differences among them. This conflation can be seen in the U.S. news media, TV shows, and Hollywood films about the Arab world.

The second way the Zionist project generates confusion is by generating myths that cloud any attempt to understand Arab people and their struggles. These myths manifest in nearly every sphere of U.S. society and include the ideas that: 1) "All Arabs are Muslim" and "All Muslims are Arab;" 2) "The categories "Arab" and "Jew" are mutually exclusive" (in other words, Arab Jews do not exist); 3) "Arabs and Jews have been fighting one another for centuries;" and 4) "It's a religious war."

The third way the Zionist project creates confusion is by portraying the issue of Palestine as "highly political," and therefore too sensitive, too loaded, and untouchable in the world of daily social justice critique, debate, and movement building. Attributing the struggle to untouchable factors such as religion is central to Zionist mythology. By obscuring racism, discrimination, and occupation, this strategy renders the entire "Middle East" an incomprehensible, homogenous mass and leads to the exclusion of the issue of justice for Palestinians and Arabs from political debates. Furthermore, the modern, European colonialist nature of Israel is erased.

All of our research participants agree that a lack of credible information about Arab peoples and their struggles contributes to Arab-American women's invisibility within progressive and feminist circles in the U.S. This lack of credible information leads to ongoing experiences where our research participants find themselves misrepresented, misperceived, and misunderstood. Amira is a professor and a writer. She explains:

I wish I had 48 hours a day to deal with the ignorance. As a direct consequence of Zionism, it's become my responsibility, my duty, to make Palestine visible. Now, instead of advancing my scholarly future, I am explaining about Palestine.

Bisan recalls:

I was working in a human rights organization on the issue of Palestine when at a meeting, even when my colleague was trying to support me, she said, 'Bisan should attend the UN conference on racism. It would be important for Bisan to go because of her work on Pakistan.'

Bisan's experience exemplifies the ways that nearly all of our research participants must constantly face a lack of information, ignorance and confusion regarding both the issues and the geographic regions of the Arab world.

Suha provides additional examples of the systematic process through which Arab-American women activists are rendered invisible and voiceless:

As a participant in many national and international meetings addressing human rights, the Arab woman's perspective is consistently left out. We're either excluded entirely, or minimized by being blended into other categories. In the United Nations meetings I attend, the category 'Arab' is often mixed into the category 'Asian' or 'African.' There is hardly anything out there for us that allows us to specifically deal with Arab issues, and this leads to a lack in Arab women's representation at these meetings. Arab women are rarely represented in decision making on national and international levels, especially in the area of human rights advocacy. So the remedies that are created in these settings are not relevant to the needs of Arab communities. And if you're not at the table, how can you create solutions relevant to your community? That's the problem with invisibility. It's much deeper than just not being at the table. It's about how not being included impacts our communities in policy making.

An additional way that the Zionist project contributes to the marginalization of Arab-American women within social justice movement building and debate is by constructing the issue of Palestine as a highly charged, highly political loaded issue. In the words of Farah:

Hanan Ashrawi once noted that when she identifies herself as a Palestinian, it is as though she is automatically perceived by others to be making a political statement, rather than conveying a simple fact about herself. Perhaps the single most pervasive and insidious effect of Zionism on my daily life is that it automatically places me in a contentious relationship with those around me as soon as I voluntarily link myself to my Palestinian origins. The Zionist influence on the U.S. media, educational system, political institutions, and national psyche has made it nearly impossible for me to view my Arab-ness and my Palestinian-ness apart from the macro political debates that inform the Arab-Zionist conflict as it is seen through Western eyes. As a result, I find myself on the defensive, having to explain myself, before I am able to properly situate myself within the surroundings into which I have been thrust.

Farah's experience speaks to the debilitating effects of Zionist propaganda, which often marks the Arab-American woman as "contentious," and never fully allowed to claim her space within progressive movements for social justice and political change.

As Latifeh explains, such political marginalization because of Zionist myths also materially impacts Arab-American women's employment opportunities:

I face immense hostility, but I knew it would happen, so I'm not shocked. It affects my career and my livelihood negatively. I am a professor who is adjunct. I have only worked in programs but never been hired in a department. I was told by the chair of my program that the departments won't hire me because they say, "not with her politics." That's why I am constantly adjunct. I have never been hired in a tenure-track position.

C. The Anti-Semitic Charge: A Silencing Strategy

Equating Zionism to Judaism plays a large part in antagonizing potential allies before Arab-American women activists are given a chance to present who they are. One example of this deliberate conflation is that the Oxford English dictionary defines anti-Semitism as opposition to the state of Israel. The success of the Zionist movement has led many Westerners to carry default sympathy for Jewish people regardless of the conflict in which they are embroiled, especially in the case of Palestine, where the Jewish state is the victimizer and not the victim. As a result, Jewish colonial aims in occupied Palestine are rarely judged by the same measures as other colonialist aims on a global scale. Not only does the Zionist project use the experience of the Holocaust to legitimate the creation of an exclusionary state at the expense of the displaced indigenous Arab population,¹⁶ it also attempts to foreclose the possibility of other peoples—whether in Rwanda, former Yugoslavia, Turkey, Afghanistan, or Palestine—from calling attention to genocidal practices which in many ways mirror the atrocities that took place in World War II, even if not on the same scale. The constant effort on the part of Zionists to isolate the suffering of the Jewish people as the only "authentic" suffering and to render inappropriate any rightful recognition of non-Jewish genocide serves to paint a picture of Palestinian terror, intransigence, irrational extremism, and a penchant for violence on the one hand, and Jewish suffering, besiegement, generosity, self-defense and victimization on the other. Within this asymmetric and historically inaccurate model, support for Palestinians is often thought to be aggressive, unsympathetic and anti-Semitic.

Laila explains:

It's difficult in the classroom, in a dinner time conversation, or even in a well-thought out presentation, to critique Israel and its colonialist existence given that it is perceived to be a haven for persecuted Jewish people surrounded by a sea of vicious misogynistic, anti-democratic Muslim Arab states. Before I open my mouth, I feel that I have to re-fashion Americans' historical and political unconditional sympathetic sensibilities for Jews so that I can properly make my case—a case which stands quite apart from the Holocaust since Israel's creation was

¹⁴ For a study of the "Holocaust Industry," see Finkelstein (2000).

principally a colonial project in predominantly Arab-Islamic land for the benefit of white Europeans.

Naila further adds:

In my university, there are blinders that equate anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism. People assume that because I'm Palestinian, I am anti-Semitic and racist. Why not accuse me of anti-Zionism? The failure to distinguish a political stance from a racist stance makes it very easy to say someone is a racist or an anti-Semite if they talk about justice for Palestinians. If I'm going to try and get a job and I am criticizing the Israeli state and Zionism, the hiring committee thinks, 'We're not going to hire someone who's racist.' This is part of the Zionist discourse that presents Arabs and Palestinians as always anti-Semitic. How can we, as Semites, be anti-Semitic?¹⁷[...]. We're trying to get rid of an outside occupier. Blacks were not against whites as a people, they wanted freedom. But when Palestinians want to fight for their freedom, they have to fight the charge of racism.

Naila's experience illustrates that even before she can express herself, the Arab American woman is positioned by Zionist myths as a racist and an anti-Semite solely based on her identity as an Arab.

D. Isolated from Allies because Zionists Got to Them First

Compounding the previous three dynamics that contribute to Arab American women's invisibility is the Zionist project's deliberate attempt to sabotage coalition building between Arab Americans and other communities of color. As Dina puts it, "My audience is always...afraid of allying with me because they think they will be perceived as unsympathetic to what happened to the Jews at the hands of the Nazis."

This strategy not only impacts relationships between communities, it also impacts every community's access to resources.

Soraya explains:

Since Zionists have a long history in progressive circles in the U.S. even though their stance on Palestine contradicts their stance on other political issues, they play a role in the funding of non-governmental organizations. Many activists fear publicly supporting Palestine because a precedent has already been set that you will lose your funding or you will not be funded at all if you support Palestinian liberation.

The following story succinctly captures a common challenge that most of our research participants address. Here, Sara's experience illustrates how the Zionist narrative shifts the discourses of oppression, so that Arab voices are systematically

¹⁷According to Webster's Encyclopedic, unabridged dictionary, the term Semitic is a biblical term including any of the descendents of Shem, the oldest son of Noah. This includes Akkadians, Canaanites, Phoenicians, Hebrews, and Arabs.

excluded, while Zionist voices that uphold and reinforce colonialism and racism remain unchallenged even in the most radical feminist circles:

In this country, progressive circles are Zionist circles. That's why I'm extremely alienated. Feminist circles are completely alienating. You might be able to say Palestinians are victims, but you can't say they're victims of Jews. There's just no room. When I say Jews, I'm aware that I'm saying it. Israel claims to be a Jewish state, the Home for all Jews. You can't name Jews as your oppressor, but it's the Jewish state. So it's a thin line.

I contributed an essay to a book that is the follow up to the groundbreaking anthology by radical women of color published over twenty years ago. One of the two co-editors established an e-mail list for the contributors. This was not 'middle class white feminism.' This was an anthology of radical women of color. On the list, one of the other Arab contributors brought up the Palestinian issue and the atmosphere on the list suddenly turned extremely ugly as a Jewish contributor accused the Arab contributor of being racist and anti-Semitic. The hostility escalated, as every pro-Palestinian voice was met with a barrage of accusations by the Jewish contributors (who identified themselves as such), accusations ranging from our being blind to the continuing oppression of Jews, and to having zero-tolerance for any Jewish voices.

Despite extremely articulate arguments by the Arab contributors, the supposed 'radical women of color' on the list failed to comprehend that the Palestinian denunciation of the Zionist policy of occupation did not stem from anti-Semitism. The anti-Arab rhetoric was virulent, vile and kept coming, unprovoked. I contacted the editor, urging her to put an end to it, but she repeatedly told me she couldn't see how this discussion had turned racist. I explained to her that it was obvious that there was zero-degree tolerance of Arab voices, but the editor refused to address the matter.

As the entire book project was threatened by this issue, the editor finally shut down the e-mail list, making it impossible for contributors to post messages. The dynamics of silencing were fascinating: every time a pro-Arab message was posted, we were reminded that the list was not a political forum but was a place to communicate about the book project. Yet every time an anti-Arab message was posted, it was followed by a half dozen messages supporting whatever ugly accusations had been made. In one message, the pro-Arab contributors were accused of being so racist that they were said to be in league with the KKK. This is what finally made the contributors who had been silent then realize that the woman who was criticizing us was really out of touch.

The Arab voices were silenced again and again and we were not given chances to respond and our complaint was not addressed by the editor. The book is now coming out without a mention of how politics played out among the contributors and a panel is planned at a major

conference later this year which does not feature any of the silenced voices, and where it is unlikely that the editor, who still refuses to address the issue, is going to bring it up. That was my experience among ‘radical women of color.’

IV. Conclusion

Though we have explored the ways that Arab-American women are racialized, Arab Women are not passive victims of the Zionist project, as many of our research participants proclaimed throughout our research. In exploring the ways that our research participants resist Zionist oppression, we found that, while varied, three common themes shape their resistance. First, they agree on expanding the scope of “oppression” by demanding the integration of a critique of Zionism within progressive critiques of racism, class exploitation, and sexism. Second, they prioritize making Arab American women’s voices audible within multi-racial movements for social justice. Third, they insist on linking Arab and Arab American struggles to the struggles against all forms of oppression based on race, sex, gender, and sexuality.

Within their families and their communities, Arab-American women activists have engaged in the struggle for self-determination as heads of households, workers, writers, activists, teachers, and community organizers. They have developed feminist critiques for challenging sexism within their communities, nations and the neo-colonial societies that seek to racialize them; as well as understanding the impact of multiple forms of oppression on women’s lives. Some of our research participants, for example, actively participate in the struggle against neighborhood gentrification in the U.S. as they link it to women’s oppression, and the struggle against the displacement of Palestinians. Others link Israel’s criminalization of Palestinians to the struggle against the criminalization of people of color and the poor, in the U.S., and the accompanying growth of the prison industrial complex. Others participate in multi-racial coalitions around issues of increased militarization in the U.S. and internationally. The issue of indigenous peoples’ rights, whether in Palestine, Guatemala, the Philippines, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, or the U.S. similarly linked many of our research participants to one another as well as to various indigenous peoples’ struggles.

Like our research participants, we view multi-racial coalitions as essential components of social change, yet we cannot participate within movements that are inconsistent in their critiques of colonialism and racism. By insisting on the global and refusing to give up the local, we are asserting our voices as agents of social change and igniting a radical, transnational feminist movement fighting for global, national and social justice.

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