

The Forgotten "-ism"

An Arab American Women's Perspective
on Zionism, Racism, and Sexism

Nadine Naber, Eman Desouky, and Lina Baroudi

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Preface

Four months had passed since the beginning of the Al-Aqsa Intifada (the second Palestinian uprising) when board members of the San Francisco chapter of the Arab Women’s Solidarity Association gathered for an event-planning meeting in early 2001. The strain of the previous months was apparent amongst us. As Arab women activists, we had been calling for Palestinians’ right to self-determination, and 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. Each of us had been harassed, intimidated, and sabotaged by supporters of Zionism who have been committed to silencing our resistance.¹ We realized that while on many occasions, each of us felt unsupported in our daily claims for Arab rights and human dignity, we were not alone. The policing and silencing of Arab and Arab American women activists was an all too common experience, shared by Arab and Arab American women activists throughout the United States, particularly those who are critical of Israeli state violence, racism, and sexism, and the US state’s unconditional support of Israel.

We agreed that very few analyses providing perspectives on Zionism and racism by Arab women living in the US existed, and we came together to break the silence. Building on the history of Arab women activists in the United States, such as members of the Union of Palestinian Women’s Associations in North America, who have been exposing links between Zionism, racism, and sexism for decades, we agreed that we must continue naming our oppressors. Otherwise, we would remain isolated and invisible among contemporary peoples’ struggles for social justice locally and globally. We decided to write a paper to distribute to activists and academics worldwide as to how Zionist racism and sexism affect our lives in the United States. We agreed that it would be a collective, grassroots effort, a weaving together of our collective ideas and experiences. In continuity with women of color efforts to produce collective thinking, research, and analysis, we formed a team of researchers and an advisory committee, including Dena Al Adeeb, Lillian Boctor, Renda Dabit, Noura Erakat, Sema Dudum, Nada Elia, Heba Nimr, and Fadwa Rashid. Researchers conducted interviews among thirty Arab American women activists across the United States on their experiences of “racism and discrimination.” These women are from various national, religious, social, professional, and generational backgrounds. Their history of activism links them together with US feminist and other progressive political movements.

We also interviewed ten diverse non-Arab Bay Area activists on the issue of Zionist racism in various spheres of US society, including the media, education, religious institutions, labor, and progressive politics. Additional research took place in libraries, universities, and within 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 parts. In part one, we provide an historical background to the Zionist project in the Arab world and the United States. In part two, we explore the ways that Zionism contributes to the interconnected structures of racism and sexism and to the positioning of Arab and Arab American women as the "most invisible of the invisibles" within progressive US politics.² Our argument is not that all Arab women have always been excluded from all progressive politics in the United States as a consequence of Zionist racism and sexism. It is that most progressive political spaces in the United States (that claim to be critical of colonialism, racism, and sexism) allow Zionism (a colonialist, racist, and sexist project) and the consequent exclusion of Arab voices, to go unquestioned. While we acknowledge Arab and Arab American women's histories of participation within progressive US politics (including Arab women who are critical of Zionism), the purpose of this paper is to illustrate that Zionism is alive and well, even in some of the most self-proclaimed radical or progressive political spaces in the United States. It also illustrates that Zionism, an inherently racist ideology, also reinforces anti-Arab racism and sexism in the United States. Thus, an understanding of Zionism is central to understanding racism directed against Arab and Arab American women. In conclusion, we will address Arab and Arab American women activists' contributions to transnational, radical women of color politics.³

Introduction

This paper was originally written for the United Nations World Conference against Racism in Durban, South Africa, in August 2001. Our research sheds light on how efforts to quell critiques of Zionism and Israel contribute to the silencing and *racialized* exclusion of the voices of Arab and Arab American women activists who are critical of Israel. Ironically, we distributed this paper as the US government was complaining about proposed language in the conference declaration equating Zionism with racism. Even though the word "Zionism" was removed from the official conference documents, a few days into the conference, the United States and Israel pulled their official delegations out in protest of anti-Zionist activists who refused to be intimidated. In the aftermath of the attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, the Bush administration has utilized the repressive climate to help justify its increased support of Israel as necessary towards

the fight against "terrorism." The colonization of Afghanistan and Iraq and the threats against Syria and Iran at the time of this writing are carried out with careful input from, and collaboration with, Israeli officials. The United States has modeled its propaganda war after Israel's campaign of ideological warfare against the Palestinian people through a program of hyper-militarized patriotism. Moreover, dominant Israeli state discourses have celebrated soldiers who provide "security" through a policy that brutally murders Palestinians, while the Bush administration celebrates New York City policemen who receive their training in Israel. Meanwhile, the Bush administration has provided Israel with the rhetoric of the "war on terrorism" to support its intensified ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people. Israel's growing apartheid wall is but one example of how the US and Israel have used the "war on terror" to legitimize the ongoing colonization of Palestine.

In the aftermath of 9/11, Arab women activists and their allies have witnessed the Ford Foundation back down on its promise to fund the organization Incite! Women of Color against Violence because Incite! published a statement in solidarity with Palestinians. We have also seen vehement citywide threats against the thirty-year-old advocacy organization San Francisco Women Against Rape (SFWAR), including threats to defund the organization (the city actually pulled their funding), after they integrated a critique of Zionism into their analysis of racism and sexism.

We define Zionism as a settler-colonial political movement that seeks to ethnically cleanse historical Palestine of the indigenous population and populate it as a Jewish-only state. While other Zionist narratives exist, this paper refers specifically to the dominant form of Zionism that shapes the world Zionist movement and governs official Zionist policy. Among the claims that underlie hegemonic Zionism is that Jews have the right to possess all of the land between the Nile and the Euphrates rivers, thus threatening the stability of the entire region—beyond the borders of Palestine. (We have already seen the decades-long Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon, Syria's Golan Heights, Egypt's Sinai Desert, and current plans to annex the Jordan valley.)

This Zionist narrative is given credibility through the biblical notion that the Jewish people are entitled to the land because it was given to them by God. The Zionist movement has not only supported the creation of the state of Israel on Palestinian land, but has supported the creation of a Jewish-only state in that historically diverse land. Within this paradigm, Zionism constructs Jews as a race (or distinct ethnic group) and the state of Israel as a Jewish-only state, with non-Jews considered a "demographic threat." This exclusionary logic has produced the conditions for torture, home demolitions, restriction of movement, unemployment, poverty, apartheid, and ethnic cleansing in Palestine. Any state that officially and legally privileges members of one "race" or "ethnicity" over another, and establishes national identity on the basis of race or ethnicity, is inherently racist.⁴ Therefore, Israel is a racist state that is founded upon a racist ideology that protects and preserves the rights of Jews only. That racist ideology is Zionism.⁵

A dominant trend in US progressive politics is to avoid building solidarity with Arab activists and our allies who are critical of Zionism or Israel, out of fear of being targeted by Zionist organizations (which could entail risks such as

losing funding or being targeted by smear campaigns). By naming Zionism the "Forgotten '-ism,'" we call on progressive activists to be more consistent in their alliances with struggles against imperialism, colonialism, and racism. 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.

Historical Background: Zionism and Colonialism

Zionism was born through the writings of Theodore Herzl in Germany in the late 1880s. As outlined by Herzl, Zionism was to be a secular political project that defined "the Jews" as a people, a nation, and a race, rather than as 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.⁶ 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 political goal of colonization.⁷ At every point of its genesis, the Zionist movement was informed and reinforced by nineteenth-century European colonialism and its white supremacist ideology.

Britain recognized the potential of the Zionist project in Palestine to further its own colonial economic and political goals. During the first part of the twentieth century, 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."⁸ 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. It is important to point out that, although Judaism as a religion did originate in Palestine, not all Jews today are the descendents of the original Semitic people. Indeed, Judaism was a successful proselytizing religion in Europe until the fifteenth century, and many of today's Jews are ethnically European. In 1948, the Zionists occupied Palestine by force through massacre and war, destroying more than four hundred villages, taking over nearly three-fourths of Palestine and uprooting more than 750,000 native Palestinians from their homes. In 1967, Israel continued uprooting Palestinians and took over the remainder of Palestine.

Palestine is a unique colonial situation because its colonizer, Israel, is a Jewish-only nation-state imposed on Arab Palestinian land.⁹ 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. 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."¹⁰ 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."¹¹ In short, Zionism was constructed as a colonial project to ethnically cleanse the indigenous population and assert European Jewish hegemony.

Britain furthered its own early twentieth century colonial political goals in the Middle East through Zionism and the establishment of Israel. By the 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 US government. Since the 1967 completion of the Zionist takeover of Palestine, no country has received more US foreign aid than Israel.

Britain and the United States 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.¹² Since the inception of the Zionist state, thousands of Palestinians have been killed and five million Palestinians have been displaced from their homes.¹³ In pursuit of their own geopolitical goals of dominance in the region, Britain and the United States have collaborated in dispossessing Palestinians. While the Zionist narrative of history argues that the creation of the state of Israel was necessary to the cause of fighting anti-Jewish oppression,¹⁴ the forces of Western imperialism allied with the Zionist project of Israel as a means to maintain Israel's position as a Western ally within the Arab region.¹⁵ Israel has become a conduit of globalization, militarization, and imperialism.¹⁶ The United States has supported Israel as a Western ally in the center of the Arab region as part of its commitment to maintaining its geopolitical power, including access to oil, in this region. The Zionist movement is currently dependent on unconditional US government support, whether Democrat or Republican.

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 apartheid South Africa, Uganda, Argentina, El Salvador, Guatemala, Chile, and Indonesia.¹⁷ Israel has aligned itself politically with other racist, colonial projects such as Apartheid South Africa, and has, through organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), waged campaigns to silence antiracist and anticolonialist social justice movements.

Several scholars and activists, such as Nada Elia, Elham Bayour, Penny Johnson, Rema Hammami, and Eileen Kuttub, have argued that violence against Palestinian women permeates the Zionist project. Living under Israeli colonization, Palestinian women have experienced the denial of basic human resources, including education, health, and employment; violence, including sexual assault and violence against pregnant women at checkpoints; gendered forms of torture against women prisoners; intensified forms of masculinity among Palestinian men within families as a response to the emasculation of Palestinian men by the Israeli state;

and intensified material and psychological pressure and responsibilities as a consequence of the loss of their men and children who have been jailed or killed by the Israeli military or forced to live and work away from home due to poverty induced by Israeli colonization.

Historical Background: Zionism in the United States

Israel defies international law and hundreds of United Nations human rights resolutions in its occupation of Palestine, yet the US government continues to funnel over five billion tax dollars per year to the state of Israel. In nearly every sector of US politics, this contradiction remains unchallenged. In the United States, Zionism is highly influential in the shaping of public opinion.¹⁸ Many self-identified Zionists, both 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, the 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 and to silence any and all criticism of Israeli policy while demonizing its critics. A central myth promoted by the Zionist movement is that criticism of Israel or Zionism is anti-Semitic.

As Noam Chomsky puts it, the ADL sets out "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)."¹⁹ One example of a context in which Zionists practiced such tactics took place during one period in the history of the Palestine liberation movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when 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.²⁰ The San Francisco spy scandal that broke out in the early 1990s,²¹ 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. The ADL was exposed as one of many examples where devoutly anti-Palestinian sentiment and covert Israeli intelligence activity are hidden behind a seemingly benign civil rights organization.²²

According to the ADL, "anti-Zionism is anti-Semitism, period."²³ The ADL further contends that the interests of the United States, including its interest in targeting so-called "Arab terrorists" or peace activists, are so identical to those of Israel that any disagreement with the Israeli government and its policies is a betrayal of the United States. The ADL and its affiliate organizations, such as Hillel and AIPAC, have utilized intimidation, scare tactics, the infiltration of organizations, the violation of civil rights and sabotage to achieve their goals.²⁴ In the United States, 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.²⁵ In the aftermath of September 11, alongside the "war on

terror" and increased government repression, college campuses have increasingly become sites for the proliferation of such tactics. 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*. While Zionism is a politically organized racial project that directly and systematically targets Arabs and Arab Americans²⁶ and their allies, through a network of organizations with shared objectives, the terrain of Zionism extends much broader than the practices of particular organizations. In the US context, Zionism has become hegemonic, or common sense—"a way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world"²⁷ that goes completely unquestioned and unchallenged.

Zionism, Racism, and Sexism

Consistent with racist colonial invasions throughout the world, including the Americas, Africa, and Asia, Zionism justifies colonization by promoting the racist myth that the natives are a backward, violent people who are not civilized, and that native women are extremely oppressed by "native culture" and require Western liberation. The dual goals underpinning this racist mythology are to construct a homogenous colonial society, not in national origin, but in its exclusion of the indigenous people, while manufacturing the cultural and historical facets necessary to project an organic rooting to the land. As the United States has become the Israeli state's number one ally,²⁸ racist, sexist Zionist narratives about Arab women and men have shaped anti-Arab racism in the US. Such contemporary propaganda shapes Zionist narratives that produce the distinction between "Arab terrorists" and "peaceful Israeli victims" in order to justify the colonization of Palestine. These Zionist discourses portray Palestinian women as both agents of violence and terror and victims of misogynist, excessively patriarchal, violent Arab men.

Like Zionist ideology, the Bush administration deployed myths about Arab and Muslim women such as these in justifying the US wars on Afghanistan and Iraq, justifying war and murder through the rhetoric of "saving the women." Zionist myths that distinguish between "backwards Arabs" and "modern, civilized Israelis," "oppressed Arab women" and "liberated Israeli women," "homophobic Arab society" and "queer-friendly Israeli societies" serve to legitimate the idea that Palestine is in need of Westernization/colonization. They also reinforce colonialist, racist approaches to feminism and queer politics that assume that allying with Arab women and queers entails supporting the invasion of their homelands. 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.²⁹ Yet, 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. Our research indicated that Arab and Arab American women who are active in the US feminist movement tend to agree that Zionism is a forgotten -ism that contributes to anti-Arab racism in the United States and the colonialist racist view that Arab and Arab-American women are the most oppressed women in the world, who need to be saved and/or spoken for by their Western or white feminist

"sisters." Those who speak up about Palestinian rights agreed that they are often excluded, silenced, censored, and/or erased from progressive politics by the systematic, institutionalized attempts to exclude and delegitimize critiques of Israel.

Part Two: The Demonization of Arab American Women

We situate our analysis of Arab American women's engagements with Zionism in the context of the ways that US-led imperialism in Arab homelands, including support of Israel, takes on local form within the everyday lives of Arab American women and men. We argue that the "racial formation" of Arab American women emerges in the context of an ongoing relationship between US racism and the Zionist project in the United States.³⁰ We use the term "racial formation" to refer to the process by which US imperial and colonial interests in the Arab world shape the processes by which the US state and media mark "Arabs" as different and inferior to Americans. Representing Arabs as uncivilized and backwards and Arab women as the most oppressed women in the world justifies war, murder, and domination. Zionism contributes to the racial formation of Arab Americans because it promotes similar racist ideas about Arab women and men, and promotes the exclusion and censorship of Arab American political critique.

The demonization of Arab women within Western academic and cultural traditions has deep historical roots,³¹ and is often blamed on Islam. Kahf writes that, ever since the eighteenth century, Western discourse on Islam has been shaped by 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."³² In different historical moments within European and US colonization of the Arab world, this image has been refashioned and has taken on different forms. Contemporary US state and media discourses conflate the categories Arab and Muslim even though not all Arabs are Muslim and not all Muslims are Arab.

Our research participants' narratives illustrate that three key images have contributed to racist portrayals of Arab and Muslim women in the United States. They are the images of the "inadequate Palestinian mother,"³³ the "super-oppressed Arab woman," and the "nameless veiled woman." Salam, a young Palestinian American woman, summarizes her engagements with this problem as follows: "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...[t]his imagery serves to justify Israel's continued violence against Arab people."³⁴

The Inadequate Palestinian Mother

Tala, an Arab American scholar and activist, she 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 powerfully

Zionism has portrayed the Palestinian culture as backwards and the Palestinian woman as nonhuman—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 project. To justify colonization, Zionist propaganda represents Arab women as either violent agents of terror (who are brainwashed by Arab men or Islam) or victims of Arab men and Arab culture. Representations of women are essential to the racialization of Arabs as backwards, violent, and uncivilized.

The Super-Oppressed Arab Woman

The most powerful image that nearly all of our research participants have been referred to 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?" Sawzan, a senior Arab American college student 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 European coworkers! 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 the words of Zein, who refers to herself as a feminist activist:

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, a graduate student and activist, 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 US." 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 US 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 US government is funding Israel to murder and maim our children by the thousands." She said, "That's not the US fault and you know what I think? I think you should go back home if you don't like it here."

Confronted with the image of the “super-oppressed Arab woman,” our research participants explained that they tended to be marginalized, and needed to justify their existences as Arab and Arab American women. Hala, a Muslim woman activist, depicts how people see her through the image of “the nameless veiled woman.” She says 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 about a student who approached the Muslim students’ table on campus. Her first question to them 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.”

The Nameless Veiled Woman

Within mainstream US 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 US popular culture, the images of the “inadequate Palestinian mother,” “the super-oppressed Arab woman,” and the “nameless veiled woman” entail a consolidation of Zionist and US racist discourses on Arab women. They also contribute to dominant US and Israeli narratives that Israel is the civilized anomaly amidst a sea of violent Arabs with their pathological sexism and their culturally-sanctioned misogyny.

The Consolidation of Zionism and Racism: Censoring Arab American Women’s Critiques

In addition to demonizing Arab American women and men, our research also illustrates that the consolidation of Zionism and racism also contributes to the censorship of Arab American women activists’ critiques. These patterns can be summarized in the words of our research participants:

- 1) “Our issues are ignored and excluded wherever we go, even among human rights activists, feminists, people of color, and progressives.”—*Nadia, Lebanese American*
- 2) “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.”—*Suba, Palestinian American*
- 3) “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*

The Zionist movement and its allies within the United States create confusion about the Israeli occupation of Palestine. This strategy renders the issue entirely incomprehensible and subverts social justice critiques of Israel by producing responses among progressive activists such as, "The Palestine/Israel conflict is just too confusing," or "It's so complicated, I'm just not going to get involved." One of the ways by which the Zionist project propagating confusion is by generating myths that cloud any attempt to understand Arab people and their struggles. These myths manifest in nearly every sphere of US society and include the ideas that: "All Arabs are Muslim" and "All Muslims are Arab;" the categories Arab and Jew are mutually exclusive (in other words, Arab Jews do not exist); Arabs and Jews have been fighting one another for centuries; and it's a religious war. These myths are consistently repeated in the US news media, TV shows, and Hollywood films.

Attributing the colonization of Palestine to an abstract religious conflict that is completely separated from politics and material realities is central to Zionist mythology. The argument that "it is a religious war" obscures racism, discrimination, and colonization, 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. In particular, it erases the modern history of Israel as a colonial settler state formed in the context of European colonization/expansion.

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 United States. 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 forty-eight 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, an NGO activist 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 be 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 are forced to contend with or position themselves in response to 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.

The Zionist project also strategically confuses the issue by portraying the Palestinian struggle as "exceptionally too political," and therefore too sensitive, too loaded, and untouchable in the world of daily social justice critique, debate, and movement-building. 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 US 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.

The Anti-Semitic Charge: A Silencing Strategy

Equating Zionism to Judaism plays a large part in antagonizing Arab American women activists' potential allies. One example of this deliberate conflation is that

the Oxford English Dictionary defines anti-Semitism as opposition to the state of Israel. While anti-Semitism is real and continues to exist, the Zionist movement has produced a default sympathy for Jewish people in the United States 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,³⁵ 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, a law student and activist, 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 refashion 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 principally a colonial project in predominantly Arab-Islamic land for the benefit of white Europeans.

Naila, a university professor and activist 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? 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.³⁶

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.

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 is part of a broader Zionist strategy in the United States that strategically uses the discourse of "civil rights" to promote Zionism among US people of color (Blacks and Latino/as in particular), while promoting extremely right-wing, white supremacist viewpoints in relationship to the Arab world in general and Palestine in particular. For example, the websites of Zionist organizations such as AIPAC simultaneously promote alliances with Latinos and Blacks in support of civil rights in the United States, while promoting solidarity with right-wing politicians such as Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney when it comes to their policies in Palestine. This strategy not only impacts relationships between communities, it also impacts every community's access to resources in that individuals, organizations, or communities of color who oppose Zionism risk defunding or slander. Soraya explains:

Since Zionists have a long history in progressive circles in the US 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 excluded, while Zionist voices that uphold and reinforce colonialism and racism remain unchallenged even in the most radical feminist circles. Sara, a university professor and activist, says:

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 the 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 coeditors established an e-mail list for the contributors. This was not "middle-class white feminism." This was supposed to be 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 until 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 a chance 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."³⁷

Conclusion: Censored, but not Silenced

In exploring the ways that our research participants resist Zionism, racism, and sexism, 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 multiracial movements for social justice, particularly in terms of highlighting the ways that US-led imperialism in the lands the United States is invading impacts the experiences of peoples from those lands living in the United States. 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. We have developed feminist critiques for challenging sexism within our communities, nations, and the neocolonial societies that seek to oppress us based on masculinist, racialized terms; as well as understanding the impact of multiple forms of oppression on our lives. Some of our research participants, for example, actively participate in the struggle against neighborhood gentrification in their communities, while simultaneously making the link to gender oppression and the uprooting and displacement of Palestinians. Others are active in strengthening alliances between Arab and Arab American communities and our anti-Zionist Jewish allies. Others link Israel's criminalization of Palestinians to the struggle against the criminalization of people of color and the poor in the United States, and the consequent growth of the prison-industrial complex. Others participate in multiracial coalitions around issues of increased militarization in the United States and internationally. As evident in the stories of our research participants, we are consistently highlighting the issue of indigenous peoples' rights, whether in Palestine, Mexico, the Philippines, Hawai'i, or the United States, engaging in coalition building with various indigenous people struggles throughout the world.

As politicized, progressive Arab American feminist activists and organizers, we view multiracial coalitions as essential foundations in the struggle for social change, yet we cannot fully participate within movements that are inconsistent in their critiques of colonialism and racism. By insisting on consistency among progressive activists in general and our women of color allies in particular, we are asserting our voices in transnational women of color movements and racial justice struggles. We refuse to be silenced by the powerful attempts on the part of the US administration and supporters of Zionism to quell our critiques and erase our narratives, and call on all our allies to join us in this movement. We are affirming the histories of those who have paved the way before us in the struggle for self-determination. And we invite our allies to learn our histories as we learn theirs, together demanding an end to all forms of oppression.