

in the United States to promote mutual understanding, cooperation, and respect. And, in 2005 a Church wide Strategy for Engagement in Israel and Palestine was adopted by the ELCA Church Council, leading to the Peace Not Walls campaign. Since its formation, Peace Not Walls has continued to work for justice and peace in Palestine/Israel and the Middle East through accompaniment, advocacy and awareness-raising. The ELCA has a strong relationship with its companion church, the ELCJHL, and Peace Not Walls connects ELCA members to our companions and promotes dignity, respect for human rights, healing and reconciliation. With our Palestinian Lutheran companions, they also accompany Palestinians and Israelis, Jews, Christians and Muslims working together for peace with justice. Together, our churches are members of the Lutheran World Federation, a global communion with a vital Jerusalem-area program that has been running projects related to health, education and humanitarian aid in the occupied Palestinian Territories for more than sixty-five years.

The ELCA is committed to becoming a more ethnically diverse church, and continues to be a listening and caring presence in Arab and Middle Eastern communities. By building new relationships and maintaining existing strong ones with passionate and prayerful people, the ELCA partners with community leaders, doing God's work of restoring and reconciling, in the name of Jesus Christ, throughout the world.

# 15

## **Arab-American Activism for Palestine**

*Mazin Qumsiyeh*

### **Abstract**

There are some twenty million Arabs living in North and South America. The history, demographics and activism of this pivotal community varies by country but there is increased social and political activism at the grassroots level. Arab-Americans are highly educated (45% with university education compared to 27% of the general population), economically successful (e.g. mean income 15-20% higher than average U.S. income), and are notable in states like New York, California and Michigan. Compared to other immigrants from troubled regions (e.g. Vietnamese or Cambodians), Arab-Americans quickly rose to the challenges of emigration and have had a significant impact in the U.S. They have made considerable contributions to entertainment (e.g. Danny Thomas, Casey Kassem, Tony Shalhoub, Paula Abdul), to science and medicine (Michael DeBakey,



Elias Zarhouni, Farouk Al-Baz), in Politics (Donna Shelala, Nick Rahhal, John Sununu), in business (Najeeb Halaby, Jacques Nassar), and to education/literature (Khalil Gibran, Jack Shaheen, Edward Said). In Latin America, they have even become presidents and high level ministers. Due to several factors, individuals excelled while collective organization lagged behind Jewish and Zionist groups. Yet this has been changing over the past three to four decades as collective activism matures and is strengthened, especially with regards to the foremost case for Arab-Americans: the U.S. government's unjust support for apartheid and racist Israeli policies. I review here some of the challenges and successes faced by our community via examples and looking at trends for the future. The growth of the successes of the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS movement) is a good example. I emphasize group activism including the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, PRRC, the Wheels of Justice bus tour, and student groups at various universities. The impacts of key junctures in our activism are also highlighted including the 1987 uprising, the Gulf War of 1991, the Oslo Accords, and the events of September 11, 2001. I conclude that despite the challenges, much more can be done and will be done in the future to coordinate and enhance activities, especially by a new young generation of Arab-Americans.

## **Introduction**

Arab immigrants contribute to Palestine directly and through their success in their adopted/host communities around the world. The founding of the PLO for example and its leading factions was by Palestinian activists in the diaspora. Many also contributed to other movements such as Arab Nationalism and to various Islamic movements. Yet little has been written about these communities compared to Jewish communities in different countries (thousands of books).

In particular there is a shortage of literature on political activities outside of Palestine by Arabs.

The successes of the Palestinian resistance (civil and military) have included wresting international recognition and support for our national rights, preserving heritage and culture, providing social and other services, and much more. While the majority of the resistance naturally and organically occurred in Palestine, the growth of international solidarity has been largely fueled by Arabs living abroad. In this brief I will focus on activism among Arab Americans especially Falastinyeen Al Shatat (Palestinians in Exile). The word American here will refer to both North America and South America. However, I will use more examples from North America (Canada and the U.S.) because a) much of the animosity to Palestinian human rights occurs there (thanks to Israel's/Zionist lobbies) and b) my own personal experience having lived for twenty-nine years in North America.

In this brief paper, I will speak of the nature of Arab-American communities (in Canada and the USA with some coverage of Latin America) especially with regards to their relationship to the primary issue of concern to most Arabs in the world: the struggle with Zionist colonialism in Palestine. Much more work is needed. It is my hope that this brief article will stimulate further discussion and research in those areas.

## **1. Characteristics of Arab communities in the Americas**

There are roughly twenty million Arabs in North and South America, the majority (12 million) of whom live in Latin America



(see Zabel, 2006). According to the Canadian Arab Institute (founded in 2011), there are 750,000 Canadians of Arab origin (CAI 2014). The Arab population of Canada lives mostly in Quebec and Ontario: 42 % live in Ontario, 42 % live in Quebec and the remaining 8 % live in the four western provinces (CAF, 1999).

A great deal of research has been done but much more remains to characterize these communities on a number of levels (Orfaea, 2006; Kayyali, 2006, Ameri and Arida, 2012). I want here to simply give a short description focused primarily on the issue of Palestine. The first large scale Arab migration to the Americas occurred during the difficult last decades of the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries. It was driven first and foremost by economic factors but perhaps also by an increase in transmission of information as a result the Industrial Revolution. Most of this migration happened on steam ships. There were many Syrian and Lebanese immigrants, for instance, who perished on the Titanic in 1912. Upon settling in the Americas, Arabs tended to work as low level employees, small merchants, and less commonly as entrepreneurs. There is a large Arab-American community in Detroit, because many today had grandparents who went to work in the (then) booming automobile industry in Michigan. These industrious workers did not have an easy life (though they were grateful that it was better than the conditions in their home countries). They worked hard so that their children had greater opportunities. Education was emphasized and the second generation of immigrants indeed acquired better jobs-becoming doctors, engineers, company managers, etc.

Even today, it should be noted that most new immigrants in the Americas (now largely focused on the U.S.) are also involved with small businesses like owning gas stations and small markets. The second group of immigrants are those who were educated in their host countries and then decided to stay. Among those are large

numbers of university faculty and technical experts in companies focusing on pharmaceuticals and in various industrial firms.

Like other immigrants in new countries, Arabs in the Americas tended to stay away from politics and indeed from any controversial subjects. They merely wanted to blend in while keeping what they cherished most: family and clan ties. This desire usually dissipates with second and third generation immigrants many of whom become involved and more comfortable, even to the point of criticizing government policies.

In late 1967 Palestinians helped found the first nonsectarian pan-Arab organization in America: the Association of Arab-American University Graduates (AAUG). Other organizations followed including the National Association of Arab Americans (NAAA, founded 1972), the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC founded in 1980), the Arab American Institute (AAI, founded in 1985), and the Council of American Islamic Relations (1994). Some groups focused on social work and maintaining support for their ancestral towns and villages (societies of expatriates from Ramallah, Bethlehem, Al Bireh, Taybeh, Deir Dibwan, etc). These organizations and many more focused on social work, maintaining their cultural heritage, and on the media, lobbying, and education. The same occurred in Canada after the initial arrival of Arabs in the late nineteenth century. For example, the Canadian Arab Federation was established in 1967 (<http://www.caf.ca/>).

Each Arab community tried to adapt as best as possible to the peculiarities of its host country. Compared to difficulties of diaspora in other countries, the economic situation of Arabs in North and South America improved significantly. The first major wave of migration that occurred some 100 years ago has reached the fourth generation today. There is perhaps even a stronger interest among newer



generations. Through the growth of the internet, connections have been reestablished sometimes followed by visits to ancestral villages. Philanthropy has actually increased from this current group of immigrants from what their parents and grandparents gave according to private conversations with mayors in the Bethlehem Governorate).

The smallest group of diaspora Palestinians are those Palestinians who left after the initial establishment of Zionist colonies but before the ethnic cleansing of 1947-1950. The first Zionist colonies in Palestine occurred in the 1880s. They remained small and insignificant until the British ruled Palestine and opened the gates for Jewish immigration beginning in 1919. Between 1880 and 1920, thousands of Arabs left from across the Eastern Mediterranean and migrated to North and South America. Most were Lebanese and Syrians but perhaps 10-20% originated in Palestine. Their reasons for moving were complex and involved a desire for better political and religious freedom to fill a big labor shortage in the rapidly urbanizing Americas, and for adventure. My own family had over twenty members leave in the early 1900s and their numbers, in Chile and Argentina now are in the hundreds. Members of the "Cumsille" (as they transcribed their family name in Spanish) family, like other families who migrated, became prominent leaders and business people in their host countries. In one election in El Salvador, the two main contenders (representing the Left and the Right) were both descendants of immigrants from Bethlehem. Elias Antonio Saca represented the Alianza Republicana Nacionalista and Shafik Jorge Handal represented Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (Saca won). It is difficult to estimate their numbers. But if that migration was similar to others as a percent of the local population (roughly 2% for the Eastern Mediterranean) it is safe to assume (with projected population growth and some intermarriage) that the number of Palestinians in the diaspora who trace their ancestry to Palestine could perhaps be as low as 400,000 and as high as 800,000 with nearly half of those in Chile alone.

The second and third waves of Arabs moving to the Americas were also linked to British and French activities in Bilad Al-Sham after the division of the area into spheres of influence following WWI. For example, many Syrians left during the 1920 disturbances in the struggle for Syrian independence from the French occupation and many Palestinians left during the 1936-1939 uprising against British rule (some were also "deported"). Of course the largest ethnic cleansing after-WWII happened in Palestine both before and after the establishment of the State of Israel. In those years (1947-1951, the Nakba wave) and immediately after some found ways to settle in the Americas and many flourished. These include for example, the family of the late Edward Said (see his book *Out of Place*, 2000). The children of some pioneers in Palestinian activism also felt "out of place" but proceeded to shine in their own ways (i.e., see Najla Said's 2013 memoir). Of all North and South American countries, the U.S. was the least hospitable after the passage of the Johnson-Reed Act limiting immigration in 1924, until its repeal in 1965. After 1965, there a wave of immigrants from many Arab countries arrived in the U.S. Beginning in the 1960s people moved to the U.S. for economic, social, political or other reasons. Further liberalization of immigration laws subsequently opened doors in the U.S. especially for students seeking higher education who then ended up staying for various reasons. All these waves did well in countries such as Canada and the U.S.

## 2. Direct activism

While this review does not focus on Latin America, it should be noted that Israel's support for dictatorships in the 1970s and 1980s in countries in Latin America and training of repressive junta militias did much to mobilize both Arabs and non-Arabs in South America



(see Qumsiyeh, 2007). The wave of immigrants (many of whom were refugees) who went to North America after 1948 immediately started to speak out and do everything they could to support people “back home” after the Nakba. Their numbers were few and there was almost total opposition by Zionists in countries like the U.S. and Canada. As more people migrated and the shocking events of 1967 unfolded, activism in Western countries gathered steam (Saikaly, 1999). Palestinians in diaspora have participated fully in their adopted societies from running for school boards to running for high office. They have also been great community organizers in many fields ranging from the environment, to labor rights, to human rights, to foreign affairs. And we have become better at tapping the Internet Revolution; thousands have participated in and continue to be involved in chat rooms, have created pages on Facebook and Myspace and joined List serves that now network millions of Palestinians with tens of millions of non-Palestinians. The advent of the internet has resulted in a significant increase in interconnectedness and activism in the last few years. Websites like <http://www.arabamerica.com> and [palestineremembered.com](http://palestineremembered.com) and social media such as Facebook and LinkedIn and Google have allowed for a greater exchange of ideas, especially among the younger generation in the last twenty years.

While economically successful, Arabs in the Americas have had challenges in terms of language and religion and culture. The diaspora, by definition, creates conflict with what humans are used to: namely that where one lives also provides one’s national identity. In the early periods of immigration Arab-Americans tended to focus inwardly and tried to promote sectarian or other affiliations dear to them (McCarus, 1994). For example, with a majority of Christians in America being Catholic or Protestant, Arab Christians were largely Greek Orthodox and had to contend with derision and attempts to advance and proselytize them. They responded by building churches

and donating money to strengthen their communities: the same for Arab Muslims. This organizational and cultural structure did not predispose Palestinians to much political activism for Palestine even if their plight of their fellow Arabs in Palestine always remained in the hearts of those immigrants.

Arabs may live in the U.S. or Canada but try to remain loyal to Arab causes even as they assimilate with their new culture and language. This creates certain tensions and conflicts with competing pressures. On the one hand, being connected to Arab causes, including Palestine, may decrease chances for assimilation that leads to more access to political and societal structures that empowers an immigrant to actually change things. How one navigates such difficulties while staying true to one’s self and one’s passions is always difficult. Past experiences/interests and current realities can meld in positive ways for many immigrants. Saikally’s study (1999) of the Detroit community, for example, shows that Palestinians in diaspora have attitudes shaped by their past. For those who experienced the 1948 Nakba, “the sense of loss, dislocation, fear, panic, misery, and betrayal were remarkably similar and continued to color the interviews in varying intensity.” Like other communities, Arabs in Detroit experienced significant hardships after September 2001 and the so-called war on terror (see Hpwel and Shryock, 2004).

The issues become compounded with overt or not so overt discrimination against Arabs in other countries (fueled by racism, media propaganda, and related factors). Dilemmas and pressures can make diaspora Palestinians polarized (some try hard to adapt, going as far as changing their names: Mohammad becomes Mo and Sami become Sam, etc.) and/or more nationalistic, internally, than those who remain at home (but more nationalist does not mean they are able to do nation building).



Even if politically uninvolved, many Palestinians have faced persecution for their activism and have provided test cases for the extent of democracy in those countries they resided in (e.g. the cases of Mazen Al-Najjar and Sami Al-Arian). Arabs in the Americas feel connected to Palestine and know its history (see Said, 1992; Qumsiyeh, 2004, 2012, 2015).

Hundreds of others have suffered at one level or another (by being insulted, defamed, fired from their jobs, denied grants, etc.) Despite these challenges, Palestinians in the diaspora have not only maintained their culture and reclaimed their identity (Aoude 2001) but also contributed to their host countries in the Americas and to Palestine directly through their successes in their adopted/host communities. A few examples of how they helped are:

- Demonstrations and vigils: these usually take place in reaction to events on the ground (e.g. the Gaza onslaught of 2014) although there are a few exceptions between 2000 and 2003 thousands mobilized in demonstrations for the right of return.
- Media work: Thousands of Palestinians in diaspora regularly write opinion pieces, are interviewed in the media, while stories, write documentaries, use blogs and other forms of internet social outreach. There are now a number of Palestinian-led media advocacy groups in Western and other countries and who coordinate their activities with media professionals and activists inside Palestine.
- Political work: Some leaders with Palestinian ancestry are notable in their adopted countries: examples include John Sununu (President George Herbert Bush's Chief of Staff) and Antonio Saca (President of El Salvador). Many have established lobby groups and political advocacy for the Palestinian cause.

- Art and entertainment: From hip hop to sculpture to film making, Palestinian artists have found a significant niche. In these arts, themes of exile and return are prominent. Examples include poet Suheir Hammad, cartoonist Carlos Latuff, and visual artists such as Emily Jacir and Mai Masri.
- Economics: Palestinians have excelled in business ranging from simple restaurants and grocery stores to becoming CEOs of major corporations. Some have achieved considerable wealth. Many philanthropists were critical to funding projects such as hospitals and universities in Palestine. Other professionals who did well in their fields were also able to help back home. There are villages and towns in Palestine where over half the donations coming from abroad are from North and South America.
- The fields of knowledge and other professions: Palestinian academics are among the most renowned in their disciplines. Examples include Edward Said, Hisham Sharabi, Naseer Aruri, Saad Chedid, and Rashid Khalidi, among hundreds of others. Their intellectual contribution has been monumental.
- Community involvement: Palestinians in diaspora have participated fully in their adopted societies; from running for school boards to running for high office. They have also done great community organization in many fields ranging from environmental issues to labor rights to human rights to foreign affairs.
- Student movements on campuses remain strong. When I first went to the U.S. in 1979, I received a warm welcome from the Arab Student Association at the University of Connecticut. Similar groups were active in most major universities. In the 1960s and 1970s the General Union of Palestinian Students was the main engine of the youth movement. Many chapters are still active but new forms of activism have also emerged, including



hundreds of Palestinian solidarity groups at universities around the world (see also the emergent Palestinian Youth Network <http://www.pal-youth.org/> ).

Arab-Americans (especially Palestinians) were leaders in establishing groups that defended Arab and Islamic causes with a central focus on Palestine. Examples include the Council of American Islamic Relations, the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, Committee de Solidariedade a Luta do Povo Palestino (Brazil), Canada Palestine Association, Palestinian American Congress, Association of Youth from Chile for Palestine, Democratic Association for Palestine in Chile, among hundreds of others.

Activists have focused more recently on boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS), a movement that has generated significant media and other interest especially with frenzied Zionist attacks equating BDS with anti-Semitism. But the movement is withstanding the test of time and is growing rapidly.

### **3. Challenges and prospects**

Arabs have strong familial, clan, village, and regional affiliations (sometimes even stronger than their national affiliation). In diaspora, these traditional groupings tend to be reflected although in some cases weakened or displaced by economic or other considerations. This mirroring is evident in the fact that Palestinian refugee camps were initially organized along family, clan, or village lines. This is seen in the formation of societies abroad for certain Palestinian communities (Ramallah, Bethlehem, Al Bireh, Taybeh, etc.) The biggest online portal for Palestinians (PalestineRemembered.com) is largely organized along villages and towns. It brings members of these

towns who may be dispersed in several countries together for virtual communication, sharing pictures, videos, news etc. This structure has both positive and some negative consequences. The strength of family, clan, and tribal affiliation has allowed many Arabs, including Palestinians in the diaspora in the Americas, to maintain connections to the Arab world and to the key issues that concern all Arabs such as Palestine. Learning Arabic for example, in Sunday schools and at home from parents (in many cases from one of the parents), ensures a cultural linguistic bond. As parents watch news or read of events in the Arab world thus enhanced their connectedness.

It is not just traditional family, clan, and village affiliations who are mirrored in diaspora but political and other societal structures too. The degree and intensity of associations (and disagreements/differences) vary by location. For example, my own observations in traveling and giving talks in Palestinian communities show that the degree of intermarriage between different village/town backgrounds and even between Palestinians and non-Palestinians varies significantly by location. Similarly the strength of political divisions (e.g. between supporters of Fatah, Hamas, PFLP, DFLP, PPP etc.) both in Palestine and outside varies depending on particulars of the community. When divisions are strong, it is harder to coordinate efforts for Palestine such as boycott, divestment and sanctions. But I have noticed that the newer generation is less encumbered by narrow ideologies or narrow allegiances to the clan/village and more practical in its approach to activism.

Many activists face persecution for their activism and have provided test cases for the extent of democracy in those countries in which they reside in (e.g. Mazen Al-Najjar and Sami Al-Arian). Hundreds of others have suffered at some level or another (withstanding insults, defamation, losing their jobs, being denied grants, etc.) The Canadian Arab Federation and the short-lived



Canadian Islamic Congress (1994-2014) were attacked heavily for taking positions at variance with the leading Zionist positions of the Canadian government. The ongoing principled position of CAF in support of Palestinian human rights ensured that the government of Canada ceased its financial support (which it gives to other minority advocacy groups including those that support the genocidal policies of Israel).

Other limitations of activism in diaspora include fragmentation along clan, village, sectarian, religious, and political lines. The newer generation is less encumbered by these issues. Avoiding defeatism, excessive criticism of others, the need for more humility, and greater teamwork are all also potential growth areas. As the late Professor Edward Said stated: *“Isn’t it time we caught up with our own status and made certain that our representatives here and elsewhere realize, as a first step, that they are fighting for a just and noble cause, and that they have nothing to apologize for or anything to be embarrassed about? On the contrary, they should be proud of what their people have done and proud also to represent them”* (Edward Said 2003).

#### 4. Conclusion

The above listed examples of activism are just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Much activism goes unreported and unrecognized. Many of the non-Palestinian supporters of Palestine give credit to their meetings with Arabs abroad who “opened our eyes.” While Ben Gurion claimed “the old will die and the young will forget,” what we see is the strengthening of youth connectedness over time. Dr. Salman Abu Sitta captured that sense of optimism in saying that Al-Nakba can be praised:

*“because, from the ashes, the Palestinians have risen like the proverbial phoenix. They realised that with no home, no military power and no powerful friends they would have to depend on that greatest of gifts, the human spirit. Immediately following Al-Nakba I saw boys walking up and down the only asphalt road near their refugee camp studying their books. With no rooms to go back to, no light and no space in which to study they would sit at night under a lamp post on the same road, its dark macadam acting as a blackboard, using a soft stone as chalk, solving algebra problems for next day’s classes.”*

Arabs in diaspora have the same strengths and weaknesses, but may have more opportunities for self-empowerment and political change, than those who remain in their countries. Palestinians in particular have had thriving diaspora communities including in the Americas (not by choice but in reaction to forced ethnic cleansing by Zionists). Diaspora creates challenges. Issues of identity arise because in addition to the usual layers of identity (ethnically Palestinian, culturally Arab, religiously Muslim or Christian), diaspora Palestinians have to contend with integration into host societies that is exceedingly different from Palestine (or for that matter Jordan). Added to this is a (sense of responsibility to the homeland which carries various obligations not merely to family and friends living in difficult situations in refugee camps and/or in the siege and apartheid system imposed on Palestinians back home. Yet, Palestinians continue, with a renewed spirit not unlike a phoenix rising from the ashes, as an organism whose healthy body parts helps the rest of its tired and ailing body. When Palestinians in the West Bank under economic hardship themselves raise money for Gaza or Gazan activists mobilize for Palestinian refugees stranded on the borders between Syria and Iraq, it portends a bright future.



Our collective political situation is difficult but these and thousands of other signs are encouraging. This year (2015) is a monumental one because it will be the first time in decades that the number of Palestinians in Palestine will have grown to a point where despite all previous colonial migration, indigenous Palestinians outnumber Jewish Israelis (even when one includes the roughly 400,000 Russian non-Jews who settled in Israel as Jews for economic reasons). With 6.2 million Palestinian natives in Palestine and an almost equivalent number outside, demographics will shape future potential political modalities. Time will tell how Arabs in the Americas and elsewhere enhance their activism and expand the joint struggle. The extent of unity, joint action, and mutual support are questions of survival and destiny for our people. Judging from the history of persistence and advancement, despite difficult odds, we Palestinians will come out well (with the support of those who defend human rights around the world). Arabs in the diaspora will continue to be integral to this revival and self-liberation.

# 16

## **The Collective National Identity of Palestinian Christian Immigrants in the USA**

*Hadeel Fawadleh*

### **Introduction**

Like many other nations, the Palestinian people have sought to crystallize an identity that introduces and distinguishes themselves from others. This is a key aspect of the process of self-building and security, and achieving unity and integration among political groups and different social and religious sectors, wherever they exist. The coercive and exclusionary policies experienced by immigrants and refugees in diaspora countries, the role of the Palestinian revolution and its forces, and the emerging new political status post the Oslo Accords, combined with Palestinian divisions, have all influenced the rise, fall, weakening, and strengthening of Palestinian identity.



### 13: Constructing Palestinianness Through Action

1. They are careful to always refer to themselves as "Adalah-NY," because there is another organization named Adalah which works for the rights of Palestinian citizens of Israel.
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5. For more on this topic, see my work on discursive misrecognition: REGAN WILLS, E. 2014. "Polemics, Political Racism, and Misrecognition: Naming and Analyzing Prejudice Against Arab-Americans." *Constellations* vol 21 iss 1 (2014): 50-66.

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