

Diversity and Community

Palestinian Women in Toronto

BY CELIA E. ROTHENBERG

Cet article examine en premier lieu la diversité des identités en terme d'antécédents et de statuts socio-économiques des Palestiniennes établies à Toronto et en second lieu, l'expérience de quelques Palestiniennes islamistes qui ont choisi de participer à une communauté modelée sur des principes de valeurs partagées plutôt que sur un sentiment nationaliste.

This article examines issues of identity for Palestinian women in Toronto in two respects. First, I highlight the diversity of identities (in terms of backgrounds and socio-economic statuses) of Palestinians in Toronto, arguing that women in the community are well aware of these distinctions. This diversity highlights the dangers for scholars of treating Palestinians, or any other immigrant group, as having a homogeneous identity. Second, I discuss how some Palestinian women are currently choosing and shaping the community in which they participate—a community based on notions of shared Muslim identity and personal preference, rather than one based solely on nationalist identification. Framing this discussion is a brief overview of the history of the Palestinian diaspora, of which Palestinians in Toronto are now a significant part. This article is drawn from my postdoctoral research with the Palestinian community in Toronto (1998-99).¹

The Palestinian diaspora

The recent history of the Palestinian West Bank is one of foreign rule, forced dispersal, and immigration. Ottoman rule in Palestine, consoli-

These immigrants are part of what has been described as the “differentiated cohort” of Muslim arrivals in Canada which began in 1968 and continues to the present day.

dated in the early 1800s, lasted until 1917. The British Mandate in Palestine stretched from 1917 to 1948. The establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 did not originally include the West Bank or the Gaza Strip, which remained under Jordanian rule until 1967, when Israelis occupied the areas (now referred to as the Occupied Territories). Israelis have slowly withdrawn from parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip since 1995, a movement begun after the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority in 1993.

Many Palestinians from within the area occupied by Israel in 1948 fled to other parts of the Arab world, including the nearby West Bank and Gaza Strip, as well as to Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt. Many more fled to these and other parts of the Arab world because of the Israeli occupation of the Occupied Territories in 1967, while others since then have simply emigrated to these countries for work and educational opportu-

nities, hoping to find a better life outside the West Bank.

Palestinians have sought out new opportunities not only in the Arab world, but also in significant numbers in Canada, the United States, and other Western countries, particularly after 1967 (S. Abu-Laban 1989). These immigrants are part of what has been described as the “differentiated cohort” of Muslim arrivals in Canada which began in 1968 and continues to the present day (S. Abu-Laban 1989: 54). Sharon Abu-Laban argues that this cohort is distinguishable from earlier waves of Muslim immigrants because of their greater exposure to the strengthening of Islamic identity by many Arab governments, accompanied by

a rejection of Westernization, secularism, and the importation of “foreign ideas” into Muslim societies; this group of immigrants may thus be more confident, able “to differentiate” [him/herself] from the larger society and maintain past ethnoreligious identities. (1989: 54)

This cohort is further characterized by its diversity: immigrants come not only from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and Egypt, but also from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Turkey, Iran, Eastern Europe, East Africa, the Caribbean, and beyond (B. Abu-Laban: 77). This wave of immigrants has had easy access to a variety of mosques and Islamic institutions established by earlier waves of immigrants.

By 1970 a total of 875 Palestinian immigrants were recorded as living

in Canada, and in 1980 the number for the same group was 1,215 (these figures, however, included only immigrants, and no Palestinians born in Canada).² According to data from the 1996 Canadian Census there were 7,200 people who identified their ethnic origins as solely Palestinian (2,870 of these are in the Greater Toronto Area or GTA) and an additional 4,245 who reported "Palestinian" as one source amongst others of their ethnic origins (1,620 in the GTA) for a total of 11,445 Palestinians in Canada. Within this group, there was, in 1996, a total Palestinian immigrant population of 8,085 (2,915 are in the GTA.).

Of the 3,330 Palestinians (including single and multiple ethnic origin Palestinians) living in the GTA, 850 (approximately 26 per cent) have a Bachelor's degree or higher level of education, 220 (six per cent) attained a university certificate or diploma, 275 (eight per cent) attended university but did not receive a degree, certificate, or diploma, and 475 (14 per cent) attained a non-university certificate or diploma.³

Palestine House serves as a community centre for Palestinians in Mississauga, although it is not used exclusively by the Palestinian community. While the Palestinian community in Toronto is geographically diverse, the suburb of Mississauga may be the area most heavily populated by Palestinians at the present time.⁴

The most common sources of employment for Palestinians in the GTA are retail trade industries, business service industries, wholesale trade industries, and health and social service industries. The average income for Palestinian (single and multiple ethnic origins) males who worked full time in 1995 was \$23,090 and for women who worked full time it was \$15,415.

In comparison, for Arabs of single and multiple ethnic origins as a group the average income for men in 1989 was \$24,172 and for women \$12,086 (Synnott and Howes 144).

Community diversity

The above statistics are, in some ways, misleading, as they disguise the tremendous diversity—social and economic—amongst many Palestinians in Toronto. Palestinians in Toronto include Christians and Muslims, those who have come from the

While Palestinians clearly share many characteristics—including a sense of solidarity and loyalty to Palestine—they, too, are aware of the variation within their own community.

Gulf States (after many years of residing there), those who arrived directly from Israel and the Occupied Territories, and new arrivals alongside those who have lived in Canada for more than 30 years. This diversity makes it difficult to speak of single, homogenous group of "Palestinians." While Palestinians clearly share many characteristics—including in particular a sense of solidarity and loyalty to Palestine—they, too, are aware of the variation within their own community.

I conducted a series of interviews among Palestinian women who immigrated to Toronto. These interviews explored the history and present of these women's lives, including their reasons for emigrating, changes in their family lives compared to what their lives may have been like had they not come to Canada, and more. For example, Aliyah and Halah came to Toronto from villages in the West Bank. Aliyah arrived in Canada in 1972 when she was 15 years old,

the new bride of a man who had returned to her village to marry. After nine years in Toronto they divorced, and Aliyah later remarried a Pakistani Muslim. Halah arrived in Canada almost five years ago; she is now 25. She also came to Canada as a new bride to a man who had returned to her village to choose a bride after he had been in Toronto for a few years. Halah wears a full-length overcoat and headscarf; Aliyah does not. Aliyah arrived in Canada with only a grade-school education; Halah studied science for three years at a university in Jerusalem.

Leila and Jamila both came to Toronto from Kuwait following the Gulf War. Their husbands claimed to be business immigrants in order to obtain landed immigrant status for their families.⁵ Leila lived in Kuwait for 27 years. She obtained a university degree there and worked both before and after her marriage. She does not wear a headscarf but considers herself a religious Muslim. Jamila was born and grew up in Kuwait, the daughter of Palestinian refugees from inside Israel. She too earned a university degree, but felt that she should not work after marriage, but rather should devote herself to her husband and children. Jamila wears a headscarf and a long, over-coat style of dress whenever she is in public.

The experiences of these four women reflect some of the diversity at work within the wider Palestinian community.⁶ Aliyah has, at times, with both her first and second husbands (and particularly while divorced,) experienced poverty and desperation. Leila and her husband currently own a large, beautiful home and two cars. The differences amongst these women's lives are not entirely due to individual idiosyncrasies or circumstances. Rather, these women's lives provide illustrations of how larger socio-economic processes play themselves out within the Palestinian community. For example, Palestinian women who lived in the Gulf typically had more oppor-

tunities to earn higher incomes and achieve higher levels of education than those who lived in the West Bank or Israel before coming to Toronto. Many Gulf Palestinians had travelled in Europe and/or North America before arriving in Canada; typically, travel opportunities are far more limited for those living in the West Bank or Gaza Strip. Thus many women who have come to Toronto from the Gulf States feel reluctant to socialize “too much” at Palestine House, alluding to the class differences they feel with many Palestinians who have come directly from the West Bank or Gaza Strip. The differences between these two groups are, at times, keenly felt by community members.

There are other differences as well, including differing political viewpoints and religious identities (Christian and Muslim, as well as variation within each of these subgroups). It is, therefore, important to specify which group of Palestinians one is discussing in analyses of Palestinian women’s lives. Recognizing this diversity is important for policy makers as well as analysts of culture; generalizations, so often used to differentiate Us from Them may thus be broken down. This may allow for the development of greater cross-cultural understanding and empathy.

A diverse community

In order to create a sense of community in their new homeland, many Palestinian Muslim women—whatever their background—turn to a community even more extraordinarily diverse than the Palestinian one in Toronto: the wider Muslim community. Many women find that this large and varied community provides them with an opportunity to meet other women with whom they feel they can share friendship and understanding. Like many Muslims in North America, Palestinians have been quickly made aware of anti-Muslim sentiment.⁷ As part of the

differentiated cohort of Muslim arrivals in North America, they have further become part of a multinational Islamic community which takes pride in its religious beliefs and practices and is spread throughout the city (see S. Abu-Laban 22). Many Palestinian women believe that all Muslims, in this neutral-at-best and

Many Palestinian women hope that involvement in the wider Muslim community will assist their children in finding appropriate friends and, eventually, marriage partners.

hostile-at-worst setting, thus share important aspects of daily life, no matter their cross-cultural differences in practice and observance. As Haddad and Smith argue about Muslims in America, “To be Muslim is to belong to a kind of universal family, to share in a unity that depends on mutual cooperation” (21).

Soon after arriving, women are openly encouraged by leaders within the Muslim community to attend mosque prayer services and become involved in Muslim community life. Many women take classes to learn through formal channels about Islamic thought, including in particular how to read the Qu’ran and understand the Hadith, the sayings of the Prophet Muhammed.

One can also argue that widespread support for the Palestinian cause amongst many Muslims may further put many Palestinian women at ease in multinational Islamic organizations. As Palestinians, many of my interviewees feel targeted by particu-

larly anti-Palestinian sentiments, including ideas that all Palestinians are terrorists who blow up Israeli busses and make peace in the Middle East impossible. By entering into organizations for Muslims of all nationalities, they thus find themselves as part of an empowering, international movement which has sympathies for their specific nationalist cause.

Thus many new Palestinian immigrants to Toronto look to the wider Muslim, rather than exclusively Palestinian, community for support and friendship, albeit with some consternation. In Toronto, the Palestinian community’s geographic dispersion contributes to their search for a niche within the broader Muslim community framework: most women do not claim to feel an affinity primarily for other Palestinians from whom they are geographically separated in the city. Many women try attending a number of different Muslim organizations’ classes and social events around the city to see which they like best.

Many Palestinian women hope that involvement in the wider Muslim community will assist their children in finding appropriate friends and, eventually, marriage partners. In Toronto, women know that they and their children are constantly exposed to or aware of the possibilities of practices such as pre-marital sex, drug abuse, and a “godless” existence. Many women feel that the correct development of their children’s moral growth will be dependent upon their adherence to Islam. Wearing *hijab*, refusing to eat pork, learning to read, write, and speak Arabic, and fasting during Ramadan are a few of the Islamic practices which many (although not all) women feel are central. In essence, Islam should provide both themselves and their children with a moral compass in a dangerous world of temptations.

Conclusion

By exploring differences believed

to exist within the Palestinian community itself, and stemming from the widely varied backgrounds of this group, this study supports the rejection of a homogeneous characterization of any particular immigrant group. As Winland argues:

Given the highly problematic nature of a conventional fiction which holds that ethnic groups share a commonality of origins, cultures, political interests and statuses, it is important to specify the dimensions, contexts and idioms that constitute particular diaspora groups. (568)

Looking closely at the variation present within the Palestinian community allows us to learn more about this group and how its members may be both drawn together and pushed apart from one another.

The importance of religious identity for many Palestinian Muslim women in Toronto allows them to enter into a multinational Islamic community and find others with whom they may choose to become friends. Azmi, writing about Muslims in Toronto, argues,

If justification is needed to deal with a Muslim community as just that and not as several separate national, linguistic, racial, or ethnic communities, then one need only to look at the normative teachings of Islam, which emphasize the primacy of the bond of religious faith. (Azmi 153; see also Husaini)

Importantly, this statement does not mean all Muslims are the same, as shown in the Palestinian case. Rather, uniting around shared religious beliefs may allow women the opportunity to meet individuals from within this diverse group and decide for themselves on individuals with whom they have much in common.

Celia E. Rothenberg is currently a Researcher at the Centre for the Study of

Religion at the University of Toronto.

¹Research with the Palestinian community was supported by the Rockefeller Fellowship in the Humanities and the Centre for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto. ²In comparison, in 1970, 25,000 Palestinians were counted in the United States; by 1975 the number reached 28,000 (Brand).

³This data was compiled by Statistics Canada to create a "Target Group Profile" for Palestinians living in Canada.

⁴I am indebted to Mr. Rashad Falah, director of Palestine House, for helping me in the initial phases of this research.

⁵Categories of business immigrants include investors, entrepreneurs, and those who are self-employed. Immigration Canada defines investors as those who "have successfully operated, controlled, or directed a business and must have a net worth, accumulated by their own endeavors, of at least CAD \$500,000. They must also have made a minimum investment in an approved fund or business since the date of their application." Entrepreneurs "intend and have the ability to establish, purchase, or invest substantially in a business or commercial venture in Canada that will contribute significantly to the economy and create jobs." Self-employed immigrants "must establish or purchase a business in Canada that will keep them employed and contribute significantly to Canada's economy or cultural or artistic life." For additional details, see <http://cicnet.ci.gc.ca/english/immigr/guide-be.html#categories>.

⁶I explore the lives of these women and others more fully in my papers (currently under review by journals) "Near and Far: Palestinian in the West Bank, Jordan, and Toronto" and "The Ties that Bind: Gulf Palestinians in Toronto."

⁷See the Media Study by the Canadian Islamic Congress at www.cicnow.com for recent examples of anti-Muslim sentiment in Canada's leading newspapers.

References

- Abu-Laban, B. "The Canadian Muslim Community: The Need for a New Survival Strategy." *The Muslim Community in North America*. Eds. Earle H. Waugh, B. Abu-Laban and B. Qureshi. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1983.
- Abu-Laban, Sharon. "Family and Religion Among Muslim Immigrants and Their Descendants." *Muslim Families in North America*. Eds. E. Waugh, S. M. Abu-Laban, and R. B. Qureshi. Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1991.
- Abu-Laban, Sharon. "The Coexistence of Cohorts: Identity and Adaptation among Arab-American Muslims." *Arab-Americans: Continuity and Change*. Eds. B. Abu-Laban and M. Suleiman. Belmont: Association of Arab-American Graduates, 1989.
- Azmi, Shaheen. "Canadian Social Service Provision and the Muslim Community in Metropolitan Toronto." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 17 (1) (1997): 153-166.
- Brand, Laurie. *Palestinians in the Arab World: Institution Building and the Search for a State*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.
- Haddad, Yvonne Yazbeck and Jane Idelman Smith. *Muslim Communities in North America*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1994.
- Husaini, Zohra. *Muslims in the Canadian Mosaic*. Edmonton: Muslim Research Foundation, 1990.
- Synnott, Anthony and David Howes. "Canada's Visible Minorities: Identity and Representation." *Re-situating Identities: The Politics of Race, Ethnicity, and Culture*. Eds. V. Amit-Talai and C. Knowles. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1996.
- Winland, Daphne. "'Our Home and Native Land?'" Canadian Ethnic Scholarship and the Challenge of Transnationalism." *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 35 (4) (1998): 555-577.