PALESTINIAN CULTURAL EXPERIENCES IN THE UNITED STATES

A thesis submitted
to Kent State University in partial
fulfillment of the requirement for the
degree of Master of Arts

by
Ghassan B. Rafeedie

August 2014
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ........................................................................................................ iv

INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 1

HISTORY OF PALESTINE ................................................................................................... 7
  Prior to 1948 ..................................................................................................................... 10
  Nakba, 1947-Present ...................................................................................................... 12
  Occupation, 1967 ........................................................................................................... 14
  The First Intifada and the Peace Process ....................................................................... 16
  The Second Intifada ....................................................................................................... 19

THEIR STORIES .................................................................................................................. 24
  James ............................................................................................................................... 25
  Ghassan .......................................................................................................................... 28
  Yousef ............................................................................................................................ 33
  Mahmoud ....................................................................................................................... 36
  Maureen ......................................................................................................................... 39

ANALYSIS ............................................................................................................................ 43
  Why is Discrimination Different for Palestinians? ......................................................... 55
  Mahmoud ....................................................................................................................... 58
  Ghassan .......................................................................................................................... 59
  Yousef ............................................................................................................................ 60
  James and Maureen ...................................................................................................... 62
  Moving Forward ............................................................................................................ 67

CONCLUSION ...................................................................................................................... 70

REFERENCES ...................................................................................................................... 72
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank my thesis committee for all the time and effort put into making this study what it is. This study benefited greatly from the debates, insight, and a “no bullshit” policy which was instituted early and often! My concerns and questions were addressed at all hours of the day and night and it helped me a great deal.

I must also thank my wife Paula for her unending support throughout this entire process. I am not sure how I would have managed the stress of teaching, taking classes, and writing this thesis without her. The amount of appreciation I have for her ability to support me while we planned a wedding in California cannot be fully expressed.

I owe a debt of gratitude to all of the information of this study as well. They were under no obligation to discuss issues as serious as discrimination and their stories made this study what it is. While I cannot name them all, they know who they are and I hope they know their time and energy spent on this project is very much appreciated.

Finally, I owe a thank you to all of my friends and family for their incredible support. I love you all.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Palestinians in the United States are largely a group stuck between two worlds and my goal as a Palestinian anthropologist in the U.S. is to tell the story of the Palestinian struggle as accurately as possible. On one hand, there is a connection to historic Palestine that has been cut (typically by forces outside of their control) and on the other is the place they currently call home. Some identify as Americans or Palestinian-Americans, but most in this study identify as Palestinians who happen to live in America. But what exactly is a Palestinian? To outsiders stuck in the idea that identity is attached to being a part of a nation-state, that may seem like a difficult question to answer.

It would be absurd for all Palestinians to identify through the concept of a nation-state, as the primary experience Palestinians have had with many nation-states is through the occupation of their nation which they feel has stripped them of their rights. Palestinians identify through the land of historic Palestine; that is, Palestine from before the creation of Israel as a state in 1948. This land is known in the U.S. as being Israel in one place, the West Bank in another direction, and Gaza in a third. There is a connection to that land through family history, and Palestinian identity is created through this connection. The concept of identity must be discussed carefully. With that in mind, I have chosen to identify all informants based on the identities they have given to themselves.

Writing about Palestine from a Palestinian perspective requires a more political tone than some unfamiliar with the topic may be used to. From birth, Palestinians are represented as a demographic threat by the state of Israel (Said 1978). Israeli society struggles with balancing a Jewish state and having a democracy for all its citizens. Israelis say that Palestinians in Israel...
already live in a democracy and point to the fact that Palestinians have access to the essentials of leading a comfortable life, like education and representation in the Israeli parliament. Palestinians typically counter with accusations of apartheid, pointing to situations such as the fact that Palestinians arrested in the West Bank are tried in military courts with conviction rates above 95%, while Jews arrested in the West Bank are tried in far more lenient civilian courts (White 2009).

If Israel grants full equality to Palestinians – like for example the right of return for all those who fled or were kicked out during the war of 1948 – then the state will lose some of its Jewish character for which it was created. However, if Israel ignores basic rights for Palestinians, then it is no longer a true democracy for all of its citizens. Israel has no constitution to grant Palestinians rights, so basic rights of Palestinians are in a constant state of fluctuation (CIA World Factbook 2012). This makes life unpredictable for Palestinians and is a major reason why many leave Palestine in search of new opportunities. In the U.S., equal rights are enshrined in the constitution and granted to all citizens and many non-citizens. Legality and enforcement of these laws are very different, but the enshrinement of those laws into the legal system makes the U.S. a very attractive place for Palestinians. The U.S. promises the freedom to express oneself politically and culturally, which is very different from the experiences informants in this study have described in Palestine.

The political nature of the mere existence of Palestine is so strong in Israel that many Palestinians have taken to using the phrase “existence is resistance.” In other words, being able to survive in Palestine or Israel is in and of itself a significant accomplishment against what Palestinians see as the attempted destruction of Palestinian culture by Israel. Thus, if I were to avoid the political discussions when describing Palestinian life, or if I toned it down too much, I
would be stepping uncomfortably far from how Palestinians prefer to tell their own story. The political discussion surrounding equality for Palestinians is also useful in that it gives the reader a good sense of why Palestinians came to the U.S. in the first place. Freedoms automatically granted to Americans (and many immigrants) under the U.S. constitution are attractive to Palestinians who have to fight for those same basic rights within their homeland.

Israel plays a large role in Palestinian identity due to Zionist aggression against Palestinians during the creation of Israel, which led to hundreds of thousands of Palestinians fleeing Palestine. The Zionist founders of Israel openly discussed the expulsion of most of the inhabitants of Palestine based on race and religion through Plan Dalet, resulting in over 700,000 Palestinian refugees (Pappe 2007). Executing Plan Dalet included the use of weapons designed to scare Palestinians into fleeing their villages, with one example being a redesigning of mortars by Zionist forces to make them sound so loud that civilians would assume the war had approached their village when in reality it had not (Khalidi 1988). Through the creation of Israel and later the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, Palestinians became scattered around the world, with many coming to America. What they shared was their connection to the land and their desire to return. This process of dividing Palestinians continues to this day through expansion of Israeli settlements, the sizes of which have increased significantly under the cover of the U.S. sponsored peace process.

History is important to this discussion of Palestinian experiences in the U.S. because it tells us how Palestinians got to where they are today, both physically and psychologically. What made Palestinians come to the U.S. instead of staying in the Middle East? Why would Palestinians be in the U.S. if they see themselves as being Palestinian instead of American?
These are important questions that can only be answered by properly addressing both the history of Palestine and the current situation with Israel.

Once the history and current situation in Palestine are explained, one can then read the stories of the participants themselves to see how their particular situations fit into the broader context. After all of those stories are told I analyze how those stories compare with each other and what those comparisons tell us about American culture. To many people, particularly Palestinians who have lived a similar experience, much of this will be obvious. But, to some extent that is the point. After all, the purpose is to tell the story of Palestinians.

This study uses an emic perspective. Many anthropologists seek to get to the emic perspective by studying a society and learning to think and act as its members do, but too few begin there. This study’s goal is to explain the Palestinian perspective and the discrimination they face to outsiders. To do this, I have chosen a small number of participants (including writing about my own experiences) who I think are representative of Palestinian society in the U.S. This includes 5 people; two born in Palestine, two born in the U.S., and one American who has lived in Palestine and continues to work as a journalist covering issues related to Palestine.

My own experiences are included because I fit in both Palestinian and American society. The American is Maureen Murphy, a journalist and artist living in Chicago. I chose her because her behavior shows how Americans respond to an “average” American who fits well into American society while being accepted by many Palestinians. I compare her story to the Palestinians who fit with varying degrees of imperfection into American society.

Some may object that discrimination happens to just about everyone in some form or another. Anyone coming into America is walking into a hierarchical society, so of course they are going to see discrimination. In that way, some may say that this study contributes nothing
new. However, the experiences of Palestinians are unique in a number of ways, including the fact that some Palestinians I have spoken with have said that they faced discrimination only when Americans find out they have a connection to Palestine, rather than through any behavioral clues. Confusion as to who Palestinians are makes discrimination different from what, say, Mexicans would face in this country. Also, it is important to note that if discrimination against Palestinians is very much the same as discrimination against other groups, then it is still worthy of study as it would reconfirm Americans’ unwillingness to accept what they see as “foreigners” as their own. In other words, while America may be a “melting pot,” the ingredients do not seem to be coming together very well. This study does speak to American culture in this way, but its primary purpose is to tell the story of Palestinians; it only speaks to American culture as a way to describe the context in which Palestinians are living.

These stories are how Palestinians view their experiences in the U.S. There was no time to interview those who discriminated against Palestinians, so we will never know their intentions. That should not take away from the validity of the claims of discrimination, however. It merely limits how we can study the situation. Would the informants in this study have dealt with the same discrimination if they were organizing around a different political situation? I feel that the stories here will show that Palestinians trying to express themselves culturally or politically have a much harder time than say college democrats, republicans, or third-party candidates do. After all, these groups likely do not face the same level of scrutiny both from school administrators and students as Palestinians in this study do. The purpose of pointing that out is not to take away from the problems those groups face (they all deserve safe spaces to express themselves). Rather, it is to point out that there is clearly more to the discrimination against Palestinians than the friction that comes with political opposition.
Finally, the structure of this study and the manner in which these stories were collected are worth noting. This study is anthropological, meaning it was put together by collecting the stories of the informants by understanding their perspectives and presenting that information to the reader in a coherent manner. Since this is not a scientific study, the reader will not find statistics on discrimination or an analysis of data about discrimination. Rather, these stories were put together to assist the reader in understanding how discrimination happens, why it exists, and where it comes from. In my judgment, they accurately portray Palestinian experiences in the United States.
CHAPTER 2

HISTORY OF PALESTINE

History is a powerful tool. Those who understand it can place modern problems within a context so that everything makes more sense, while those who do not understand it are doomed to live without learning the lessons it can teach us. It is also a tool that can be used to justify one’s perspective on any situation, which is of particular importance when dealing with a political issue as complex as the Palestine/Israel conflict. If one wants to understand the life of Palestinians, one must understand history from the perspective of Palestinians. This thesis attempts to do just that. History is also important in that it explains how and why large numbers of Palestinians came to the United States. Official statistics leave much to be desired by way of counting Palestinian immigration, but history can fill the void quite nicely.

The central contradiction throughout the history of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict is that of the opposing purposes of Zionism and universal equality. Zionism is the political philosophy which holds that a certain portion—and that portion changes depending on which Zionist you ask—of the land that is now Israel and/or Palestine (and all of Jordan in some instances) belongs to Israelis as a Jewish state. A Jewish state is typically defined as a state with both a large majority Jewish population and specific rights given exclusively to Jews. Many Zionists say there would be some acceptable number of non-Jews in such a state, but that percentage of the population would have to be controlled. This difference in treatment feeds directly into inequality. A key example of a right specifically given to Jews in Israel is the right of return. Palestinians who either fled from their homes or were expelled from Palestine during the creation of Israel have not been granted the right of return by Israel. However, Jews—even if they have
no historical connection to Israel other than to say that Jews have lived in that region of the world for thousands of years—are granted right of “return” by way of instant citizenship under Israeli law (White 2009).

One of the common myths about the creation of Israel was that Palestine was a “land without a people for a people without a land.” This myth was used to justify many of the Israeli behaviors against Palestinians, saying it is Palestinians who do not have a connection to the land, and therefore do not deserve the right to return. Rejection of return plays heavily into the modern conflict and the issues around discrimination against Palestinians in the United States. If the right of return existed, many Palestinians would not need to come to the U.S. Since that is not the case and the expectation of Palestinians is to return, Palestinians will focus on Palestinian culture rather than on assimilating into American society. The added political dimension of the myth surrounding “a land without a people” works to harden Palestinian identity, for better or worse.

Understanding for example the ethnic cleansing of Palestine by Zionist forces that took place during the creation of Israel (which was an attempt to make the “land without a people” myth at least a partial reality) provides a context for understanding why many Palestinians are currently in the United States. While some will argue with calling it an ethnic cleansing (though since this study tells the Palestinian story that should not even matter), even many Israeli historians admit that an ethnic cleansing took place so I do not find it necessary to debate (Pappe 2007). Knowing the historical context for other events in recent Palestinian history—such as the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967—gives us a better understanding of the circumstances and environment around which Palestinians came to America. In some ways, history is better than statistics for telling the story of Palestinian immigration, as the statistics are typically unverifiable and unreliable.
Though there are no reliable census data about Palestinians immigrating to the United States prior to 2005 (Said 1995), history does give us a sense of what those numbers would have looked like. Complications in the classification of immigrants to the United States present problems with the numbers which are available. For example, some Palestinians were considered Turkish before 1918, since the Ottoman Empire occupied Palestine until then. Currently, Palestinians (and large numbers of people from other groups) have trouble fitting into the U.S. government-issued Asian/African/Caucasian categories (Tatum 2002). Looking at the history of Palestine can give us in many ways the best look at what brought Palestinians to the United States. The question becomes one of historical distance. How far back do we need to go to understand Palestinians of today?

In order to get a proper perspective on the current situation in Palestine, one must look at the beginning of the modern conflict: the ethnic cleansing of Palestine by Zionist forces in 1947-1948. It’s important to know that Zionism’s purpose was to create a Jewish state, and therefore Palestinians could not play an important part. Therefore, many were displaced from their homes in what is now Israel. Liberal Zionists argue that the root of the conflict is actually the occupation of 1967 rather than Israel’s creation, but that ignores the actions that created the Palestinian diaspora (and ongoing refugee crisis) in the first place (Beinart 2013). The occupation did not happen in a vacuum and therefore cannot be discussed in a vacuum. It happened as a historical continuation of the ethnic cleansing, which I will discuss in more detail below.

However, we also must consider what life was like prior to the ethnic cleansing in order to show how historical myths used by Israelis created the Palestinian diaspora. To do this in a manner fitting the subject of this study (Palestinians in the United States), it is necessary to give
a very brief history of Palestine prior to 1948, then continue with a more detailed review of the events since that time. This will set up the modern situation in the U.S.

Prior to 1948

Prior to the ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1947-1948 (which will soon be discussed in more detail), rural Palestinians lived a life based on pastoralism and agriculture with cities being the center of trade. The majority of Palestinians in the 1800s lived in the mountainous rural areas and typically only went to the cities to trade goods (McCarthy 1990). The Ottoman Empire—which controlled Palestine at the time—was more hands-off than the modern Israeli occupiers, meaning the foreign influence of the Ottomans was not felt in the same way Israel’s presence is felt today. A peculiar situation developed where even though Palestine was under foreign occupation, foreign visitors were actually rare for most Palestinians (Pappe 2006). The significance of this situation is that Palestinians were trading and working locally and were largely isolated from the globalization that would come to them with the creation of Israel and the introduction of European ways of life. Such a vastly different reality was soon approaching Palestine, and Palestinians were largely left alone to deal with the major wholesale changes occurring in their society.

At the beginning of the 20th century, European Zionists were not just bringing immigrants into Palestine in order to change the demographics of the area; they were also bringing a global capitalism (read: imperialism) which clashed with Palestinian society. The capitalistic system being formed ignored the desires of Palestinians, and created a clash between the indigenous Palestinians who at the time were seeking employment in the cities and the new Jewish working class (Kanafani 1972). Issues of discrimination and low wages created problems for the urban
Palestinian. Meanwhile, rural Palestinians were seeing agricultural land diminish to make room for more profitable industries. As the Palestinian working class became disillusioned with the new system, it became clear that something had to give. It was in this context that the uprising of 1936 began. It spread quickly because of the amount of new foreign interest in Palestine.

During the 1936 uprising, Arab leaders in countries surrounding Palestine had played “two conflicting roles,” where on one hand they supported Palestinian claims in order to achieve broad support among their own citizens, while at the same time working behind the scenes to “undermine the Palestinian mass movement” so a revolutionary spirit would not spill over into their country (Kanafani 1972). By supporting Palestinians in public and refusing to offer support behind the scenes, Arab leaders were able to balance doing what was popular with what would keep them in power. This attitude toward Palestinians by the Arab leaders would continue for years, which was a factor in why so many Palestinians eventually decided to come to the United States instead of staying nearby in other Arab countries. Leaving a neighboring country for a nation with a very different culture and language was not an easy choice, but it made the most sense in many situations at the time.

For many Palestinians, the lead-up to the creation of Israel was a time of confusion. Zionists were convincing Jews from all over the world to move to Palestine in order to create a Jewish nation. Meanwhile promises from the Western powers gave the Palestinians hope that they would be supported in creating an independent Palestinian state on all of historic Palestine. The British Mandate (which administered and controlled Palestine at the time) brought seemingly nation-creating institutions, such as the Palestinian currency, the Palestinian Pound. The reality on the ground from Zionists was telling one story while the Western powers were giving promises that seemed to be telling another. As a result, many Palestinians were given the
erroneous impression that they would be able to return even after having already been forced violently from their homes (more on that below).

Nakba, 1947-Present

The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine was not a byproduct of a war or voluntary exodus of Palestinians from what would eventually become Israel. It was a coordinated effort by various Zionist militias, and has continued to this day through the Israeli military. Israel’s military was, itself, a product of those same militias. David Ben-Gurion, who would later become Israel’s first prime minister, wrote in 1937 “We must expel the Arabs and take their places” (Masalha 1992). Note Ben-Gurion’s refusal to use the word Palestinian and his admission that the land was not in fact devoid of inhabitants. Palestinians refer to the ethnic cleansing as the nakba, which translates into English as ‘catastrophe.’ The nakba plays a large role in decision making of both the Palestinians at the time (who were forcibly evicted from their land) and Palestinians of today.

Largely this is due to the fact that the laws which legalized the nakba in Israeli society still play a major role today. Israel has never written a constitution guaranteeing the rights of all its citizens, and Palestinians must live with laws which are based on religion and ethnicity rather than being based on equal treatment as we see in the United States (White 2011). Due to the “special relationship” between Israel and the United States, U.S. citizenship gives Americans (some of whom are Palestinian) more rights in Palestine than Palestinian citizens living in Palestine have. This leaves many Palestinians stuck between feeling connected to their homeland and attaining the most equal treatment possible. This plays a significant role in discrimination against Palestinians in the United States, because by living in the U.S. Palestinians can actually
gain more rights in Palestine than by staying in the West Bank or Gaza. Therefore many Palestinians live in the U.S. but prefer to live in Palestine, created friction in the U.S.

Though the *nakba* is an ongoing issue for Palestinians (especially considering the number of Palestinian homes still being demolished on a regular basis), the ethnic cleansing of 1947-1948 is given more attention from a historical and political vantage point than the ethnic cleansing of today. After all, it was the impetus for the creation of Israel as a Jewish state. For this study, it is important to know that the decisions by subsequent Israeli governments perpetuated the exodus from Palestine, though at a lower rate than occurred in 1947-1948.

Until the occupation of 1967, Palestinians who were ethnically cleansed from their land typically believed they would be able to go back home almost immediately. Many Palestinians were confused because they trusted their Jewish neighbors. This confusion is understandable, considering that Zionism (a political philosophy) and Judaism (a religion) can be very different things. Why would Palestinians not trust the neighbors, with whom they had always lived? This trust was so deep that many refused to take their belongings with them when they left their homes, thinking the war would end in a matter of days or weeks, and they would return to their normal lives. Ramzy Baroud (2010) tells the story of how family members argued over whether or not they should take their “good” blankets with them when fleeing the war of Israel’s creation. His father argued successfully that the family’s good blankets would get ruined in the trip away from the war zone and should be left behind so they would be in good shape when the family returned shortly thereafter. The occupation was the permanent situation that ensured return would always be dependent on Israel.
Occupation, 1967

The occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967 changed the reality on the ground for Palestinians, as Israel was at that point legally responsible for all Palestinians in the occupied territories. The occupation was formative in that it signaled the beginning of a long-term problem, which convinced many Palestinians to seek long-term answers to the issues of where to live and raise a family. No longer could Palestinians expect that a solution to the problems they faced was getting closer.

The occupation formally began with the conclusion of a war between Israel and many of its neighbors known as the Six Day War. It is significant for a great number of reasons, but three stand out for the purposes of this work. First, it marked a significant change in how Palestinians could lead their lives, as Israel was now taking administrative control over Palestine. Israeli control meant a new set of laws drawn up by a foreign power. That was particularly important for refugees who were denied the right to return. The second point is that many Palestinians felt so threatened by a constant Israeli authority watching over their daily lives that they fled to other countries. Some ended up in the United States, as the Israeli policy in the 1960s was to try to pay Palestinians to leave, and, when that failed, to force them out of Palestine and Israel (Segev 2008). After all, if they were going to live under an imperialist regime, going to the United States would at least provide Palestinians some freedoms that the occupation could not. Finally, taking land by way of war is, to this day, being used as the central theme in most arguments for a two-state solution. Typically, the lines being drawn for the two-state solution are done based on the Six Day War. Therefore, the occupation of Palestine has become one of the central political themes for modern discourse on Palestine, and resistance to the occupation has become a central theme in shaping American views about Palestinians and a final resolution to the conflict.
When Israel formally took control over Palestine with the occupation, groups began to respond in a variety of ways. Travel restrictions and a lack of any effective central governing body for Palestinians created a situation where groups chose their own paths of fighting the occupation. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) came up with a variety of strategies involving guerilla warfare. One such strategy was to hijack planes, keep civilians unharmed, negotiate for the freedom of Palestine through the international media, trade civilians for Palestinian prisoners of war, and destroy the plane. The idea was to prove that Palestinians do exist. After all, Israel would have a hard time placing blame if Palestinians do not exist. The goal was to do so without harming anyone and having Palestinians tell their own story (Irving 2012). Needless to say, these tactics did not play well with the international community. The PFLP (and others such as the Palestine Liberation Organization) ended up branded as a terrorist organization and fled to Lebanon.

In the eyes of many Palestinians, then, it became clear that escaping Palestine could very well be a reasonable strategy in the fight to free Palestine from the Israeli occupation. Organizing globally while headquartered in other countries was possible without the crippling restrictions that came with the occupation. It was not only organizations such as the PLO and PFLP that fled; a number of Palestinians who could afford it did as well. This led to many Palestinians in the United States getting into a comfort zone while waiting for some resolution, which looked to be more improbable with each year. By the late 1970s, Palestinians were becoming a large enough group to warrant inclusion in the 1980 U.S. Census, though the Census struggled with the figures as the number of Palestinians fluctuated wildly from 1980 to 1990 (Koval 2006). In 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon in an attempt to break the back of the resistance-in-exile and forced Palestinians to regroup once again. Once again, Palestinians struggled to find a way home.
As the PLO and PFLP were reorganizing in the aftermath of the invasion of Lebanon that left them in shambles, Palestinians were getting restless. The idea of depending on a political party or force to make gains (particularly those with a nationalist focus) was becoming less and less rational. This led to two outcomes, both of which would change the course of Palestinian history in Palestine and the United States. The first major outcome of this was the first *intifada*, or uprising. This was a mass uprising against the occupation by a large portion of Palestinians and was defined by mass protests, boycotts, and civil disobedience.

The second major outcome of the invasion of Lebanon was the creation of religiously-based resistance movements to replace the nationalistic ones. Religious groups were seen as less of a threat to Israel, due in large part to their anti-leftist (specifically anti-Marxist) views (Irving 2012). Support from the United States, which was caught up in the Cold War with the Soviet Union, was immediate. This meant that religious movements such as Hamas were not under the same kind of pressure from Israel as other groups, and therefore were given space to thrive. Hamas took advantage of this by creating many social welfare programs, thus gaining popularity and status among Palestinians. The consequences of this development would largely be felt only years later when Israel began to label political Islam as one of the largest threats to their existence (Times of Israel 2013).

**The First *Intifada* and the Peace Process**

Occupation is about control, and a population that was willing to stand up and organize against the system in large numbers could not be tolerated by the Israelis or elite Palestinians seeking to maintain the status quo in society. The Palestinian elite met with Israel in a series of meetings behind closed doors to formalize a power structure that would undermine Palestinian frustration with the occupation (Abunimah 2007). A plan was developed to ensure that the
Palestinians would stop their coordinated anti-occupation actions and join Israel in a more easily controlled situation. The concept of making peace by way of a negotiated settlement began with Israel bringing Yasser Arafat, the head of the resistance organization the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), out of hiding, and creating the Palestinian Authority. Arafat was a central figure in Palestinian politics and resistance to the *nakba*. He was forced to escape to Lebanon, and later to Tunisia during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. He had been allowed back to Palestine under the condition that he would coordinate the Palestinian side of the so-called peace process (Abunimah 2007).

The Oslo Accords, which were the backbone of the peace process, were a series of agreements between Yasser Arafat’s PLO and Israel, and were supposed to lay the foundation for a two state solution. These agreements included security coordination, creation of formal borders, agreements on legal authority, and much more (Abunimah 2007). In order to administer the Palestinian side of these agreements, the Palestinian Authority was created (Said 2001).

Creating a governmental body and agreeing on a governmental structure created a great deal of optimism among Palestinians around the world. For once, it seemed like Palestinians were going to be able to have a formal legal structure to organize their society while having some way to hold Israel accountable for any violations of the sovereignty of the new Palestinian state. After all, this process was largely created by the United States, a world power fully capable of punishing those countries that broke their promises. The issue with the Oslo Accords was in the details. Palestinians (outside of a select group of the elite) were largely left out of the negotiation process, and were left to guess as to what the agreements included (Makdisi 2008). When the details became public, the mood in Palestine quickly went from optimism to pessimistic. The Palestinian Authority had agreed to give up land and economic resources to be
controlled by Israel in exchange for promises of a potential state sometime in the future. For Palestinians in the United States, the agreement’s failure meant the solution to the Palestinian/Israeli crisis would have to be built from scratch again, leaving them with little hope of returning to a free Palestine.

The success of the Oslo Accords from the Israeli perspective was incredible. It effectively ended the first *intifada* while changing very little on the ground for working class Palestinians. Palestinian land was further divided up by way of granting Israel the right to administer much of the West Bank, giving the Palestinian Authority control over another portion, and shared administration for the remaining land (Said 2001). Negotiations made international headlines and worked to benefit the political careers of all of the heads of state involved, be they Israeli, Palestinian, or American. However, on the ground, Israeli settlements in the West Bank had been constantly expanding.

Even by Israeli standards, settlements in the West Bank and Jerusalem had seen incredible growth during the peace process negotiations (which still continue). When Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (2011) spoke to the US Congress, he reported that there were 650,000 settlers, while official Israeli figures accounted for a figure of slightly more than 500,000 settlers (Hareuveni 2010). We may never know the accurate figures of Israeli settlers as Israel does not allow foreign agencies to complete a census. However, even using the lower official figures we know that the settlement populations have more than doubled during the so-called peace process (Hareuveni 2010). The difference between the political claims of Oslo being the road to peace and a final resolution and the facts on the ground led to even more frustration and pessimism among Palestinians. This frustration would build significantly through the end of the 1990s.
The problem with the peace process was not just that it was unsuccessful and led to even more settlements and violations of Palestinian sovereignty. It also gave Palestinians a false sense of hope for a few years, with some leaving the United States to live in Palestine permanently. Such is the case with Sam Bahour, a Palestinian born and raised in Ohio who went back to Palestine to live permanently. He assumed the peace process would bring about a free Palestine, and has since become disillusioned by the peace process and frustrated by continuing to raise his family under Israeli occupation (Makdisi 2008).

Once again, Palestinians were left hopeless and wondering what the next step in their bid for a free society would be. The outbreak of the second intifada meant yet tighter restrictions on Palestinian life and even more Palestinians sought freedom in places like the U.S.

The Second Intifada

The Second Intifada, defined by Palestinian resistance against the occupation, began in 2000. The media used the images from armed resistance methods to connect terrorism to Palestinian culture, rather than situating it in relation to the violence of the occupation. Instead of focusing on the various ways Palestinians have attempted to break free from the violence of the occupation, they focused on the violence itself. This was an especially powerful message after the 9/11 attacks. The most powerful use of this was in discussing a number of suicide bombings by Palestinians against Israeli civilians. These attacks were despicable, and were mostly rejected by Palestinian society, a fact left out by the mainstream media’s coverage in the U.S.

In fact, even many resistance fighters argued that it is a shameful tactic that should not have been used (Irving 2012). Rather than showing this in context, many mass media outlets in the U.S. discussed suicide bombing as if Palestinian culture was reinforcing and supporting these
kinds of attacks. Palestinians in the United States had to deal with that stigma very directly. Blaming Palestinian culture, as opposed to certain Palestinian groups (read: outliers) without showing that Israel had in fact been doing even more harm to civilians than the suicide bombings made Palestinians seem hell bent on slaughtering Israelis. Palestinians were killed at more than 8 times the rate of Israelis (B’Tselem 2009). But it was Palestinians who had to deal with the stigma of being murderers of civilians. Why? Part of that has to do with American cultural projections onto other societies, and a tendency to support whichever society is more economically and politically “advanced” (i.e., operating according to the American capitalist model). Typically, that means the indigenous societies are looked down upon, while foreign occupiers are seen as liberators. This has been significant in defining the American perspective on Palestine, and it will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter.

More recently, the Palestinian experience has been defined by the failure of accomplishing a two-state solution. While the Obama administration pushes Israel and the Palestinian Authority toward a negotiated two-state solution, the facts on the ground show that the two-state solution is dead. With 1.6 million Palestinians living in Israel and over 650,000 Israeli settlers living in the West Bank, it is becoming difficult to think of Palestine and Israel as anything but one society (Netanyahu 2011). These figures are out of a total population of 11.7 million people in both Palestine (the West Bank and Gaza) and Israel, and they account for almost 20% of the total population of both places (CIA World Factbook 2012). To implement a solution with multiple states, this would mean a massive population transfer that would be based on race and religion rather than bringing about equality for all. Furthermore, Israel controls much of the daily life in Palestine by way of checkpoints, border security and the current blockade of Gaza. Add to this that Palestinians in the West Bank can be arrested and imprisoned in Israel for
violation of Israeli laws (which they had no say in creating since West Bank Palestinians are forbidden from voting in Israeli elections) and it becomes even more clear why Palestinians view the conflict as if Palestine/Israel is already a single state (Makdisi 2008).

Many Palestinians even refer to what is commonly called Israel as “The ’48 lands,” a reference to the fact that up until 1948, the land was unified, rather than being divided based on race or religion. In other words, Palestinians have refused the two-state dichotomy since it began, showing that the two-state solution was doomed from the beginning. A one-state reality is becoming harder to ignore with each failure of the now 21 year negotiation process. In the eyes of some observers, the question is not if the one-state solution will be implemented, but rather when it will be formally adopted and agreed upon (Abunimah 2007).

The importance of the one-state dynamic for this study is that since Palestinians began living under direct foreign control with the occupation of June 1967, it does not require much creativity to see why so many would want to come to the U.S. After all, why wouldn’t some Palestinians want to leave a land occupied by a foreign power which gives them very few rights and move to a similar nation that will promise more rights to them without a constant and overt military presence? For some it is a matter of safety; for others it is a matter of economic opportunity. But for all Palestinians, the realities of the occupation make the U.S. a very attractive option. The situation would be different if the Palestinian Authority (PA) was resisting the occupation in a meaningful way, but the facts point to even more of a reason Palestinians are living under a single Israeli state. The new “unity government” will likely only have an impact when it changes the behavior of the PA and Hamas. Unfortunately, that has yet to happen.

Palestinian frustration with the PA response to the occupation is another reason so many choose to leave for the U.S. The PA spends a massive portion of its total budget actually
assisting Israeli incursions into the West Bank rather than stopping them or settlement
construction. While Mahmoud Abbas cajoled international donors by saying security matters
were coordinated with Israeli consent on a daily basis, an analysis of the PA budget in 2013
showed that allocations for security totaled 35%, triple the budgets of the Ministries of
Education, Health, and Social Affairs combined (Ramahi 2013). The majority of Palestinians
have not had much of a chance to be actively involved in the decisions that impact them the
most, leaving many frustrated and seeking opportunities elsewhere, including the U.S.

Salam Fayyad, the former Prime Minister of the PA was a perfect example of the sort of
corruption that drove Palestinians to seek opportunities elsewhere. During the elections of 2006,
the victory by Hamas led to the appointment of Ismail Haniyeh as Prime Minister of Palestine
(Waked 2006). He was replaced by Fayyad during fighting between Hamas and Fatah, and was
appointed by President of the PA, Mahmoud Abbas (Amnesty International 2008). There was no
election of Fayyad, nor was there an appointment by the group who had won the parliamentary
elections. Fayyad’s authority actually derived from his appointment by members of the losing
party in the election. This move was in fact supported by the Israeli government rather than
through approval of the Palestinian people (Lunat 2010). Fayyad ascended to power with
applause from Americans like Thomas Friedman and the George W. Bush administration, but
not from Palestinians whom he claimed to represent (Abunimah 2007). This is a democracy
where only the wealthy members of the PA were given a choice. Fayyad’s replacement was
appointed in the exact same manner in 2013 and has largely continued Fayyad’s policies.

Since there is no government built to look out for the best interest of Palestinians or to
protect them from the occupation, many seek opportunities in other countries. This comes with
freedoms offered by the U.S., but it also comes with discrimination. The purpose of this is not to
make a judgment about whether it is better for Palestinians to stay in their homeland or seek opportunities elsewhere. I find that to be unhelpful. Rather, my goal is to tell the stories of those Palestinians who chose to come to the U.S. Telling the stories of Palestinians in the U.S. is my way of documenting that experience and a perspective which many do not have a chance to hear. Americans and Palestinians alike would benefit from a better understanding of what Palestinians in the U.S. are going through.
CHAPTER 3

THEIR STORIES

This chapter contains the stories of four Palestinians and one non-Palestinian living in the United States. The Palestinians in this study were chosen to show a range of behavior, from those who seek to assimilate into American society to those who refuse to do so. The non-Palestinian is a woman named Maureen Murphy, who has a history of pro-Palestine work and political activism. Her story is included to show how pro-Palestinian behavior in public is perceived (albeit on a very small scale) when it comes from a non-Palestinian compared with similar behavior from a Palestinian. I decided to include her real name since everything she told me in our interview can already be found publicly. What this chapter does not include is an analysis of the actions of the interviewees and the implications of those actions. I have saved that for the next chapter. The purpose here is to tell the stories as they were told to me.

I begin with the Palestinians, and I tell their stories in the order of identity; from one who feels entirely American to those who identify exclusively as Palestinians. I conclude with Maureen’s story because to understand her story and its significance to this study, I must first tell the story of Palestinians. The first story features a Palestinian who feels entirely American, even though he is still identified by other Palestinians as being Palestinian. From there, I progress through stories of those who show behavior identified with being Palestinian, as opposed to behavior that allows one to assimilate into American society. Such behaviors include speaking with an Arabic accent and how a person chooses to dress. Owing to the small number of participants, my findings cannot be regarded as definitive. However, they suggest what a study of Palestinians would look like if done more systematically with a larger group
“James” is a pseudonym, but it is important to know that his real name is one that sounds more American than Palestinian. This plays a significant role in James’s story: he identifies as much more American than Palestinian, and it has an impact on the story of his experience in the U.S. His name and behavior do not give away his Palestinian roots. His story is one of a typical American life in a small town in the Midwest. James blends in very well with his small-town American surroundings though he has sometimes felt discriminated against for being Palestinian.

James’s story begins with his parents and where they were raised. While his father is an American—whose family has been in America long enough that James cannot say how many generations ago his family came here—his mother is Palestinian. She was born in the United States but lived in Palestine for a number of years as a child. He does not remember how many years, but he knows it was enough for her to identify with Palestinian life closely. Her family, and her slight accent makes it easy to identify her as “foreign” without knowing much about her personal life. At the very least, it would likely trigger questions about her identity and place of birth. James has some Palestinian traits owing to the traditional Palestinian culture with which his mother raised him. His connection to Palestinian life is close enough that it is reasonable to think that if he were to go to Palestine he could adapt reasonably well. He would be able to adapt more easily than the average American.

James owns a small business that he says is quite dependent on blending in with the small community. His easygoing personality and sense of humor give the impression that he would fit into almost any community, but his love of the small town lifestyle helps him fit in even better. Nothing makes his face light up more than asking about the last animal he tracked into the woods.
behind his neighborhood or the last time he went on a bear hunting trip. I interviewed him in the restaurant he owns, and it is obvious his customers share his passions. He feels that his ability to blend in well with other Americans is something that serves him well in business and makes living in his community much easier. While we joked about how having a Palestinian name might hurt his ability to buy hunting rifles, he thinks that if he had a Palestinian name (or put a Palestinian name on his business), his restaurant would see a significant decrease in sales. This comes from his childhood experiences of dealing with discrimination at school and his expectation that the community would see him as an outsider, even though he has lived there his entire life.

James tells the story of being the only Palestinian student at his school. His mother did not blend in well with the other parents, and students were able to immediately label James’s mother (and by extension James himself) as being “non-American.” This created tension at school for him and his siblings, because they were labeled as being an “other” and not fitting in properly to the small town culture, and to a larger extent American culture. While James feels that this was unfair, he does acknowledge that in some ways he was different from the children in his school. After all, the vast majority of children did not have parents who had lived in a foreign country, let alone having family that still lives there today. He says his experiences made him different from the average child, and the children at school made sure to emphasize that from time to time.

On the surface, James blends in very well with his surroundings. He was born in the United States. He is a native English speaker and does not speak or read Arabic, but he does understand some Arabic words and phrases. For the most part, he does not feel that his physical features stand out in his neighborhood, though on a few occasions he has been told he looks
Palestinian. He is bald by choice and has a very fair complexion, so dark hair and a dark complexion would not give him away as being “different.” He dresses like a typical member of the community and does not wear traditional Palestinian clothing under any circumstances.

He does not pay attention to Palestinian politics (be it in Palestine or with the Palestinian community in the United States) and is not involved in Palestinian activism or advocacy in any way. When asked to describe his identity, he stated that he feels “100% American, living the American dream!” He added “I definitely work like an Arabic person,” which is a reference to the long hours logged by Palestinian family members who also owned small businesses in the U.S. The only times James remembers being discriminated against are when he was trying to date girls in his community. The fathers or brothers of the girls would get very protective instantly because they knew from the community that he was Palestinian, though that may have been their way of differentiating him because they do not see him as white.

He states that when he goes to an exclusively Palestinian function, he feels as if he does not fit in very well. On two occasions when he was with non-Palestinians, he says two people have been able to tell he is Palestinian because of “the shape of [his] eyes.” He describes the ability to tell Palestinians from anyone else based on an observation about their eyes as “odd.” That does not happen enough to make any kind of distinguishable pattern, and he never has received that kind of attention at work. Though there is no real way to tell what happened or why those two people could tell he is Palestinian on those occasions, however, it does emphasize that some people will go out of their way to see him as different. In essence, while he fits in very well with his surroundings, he does not quite fit in perfectly.

James has never been to Palestine, though he would like to go with his wife one day. He feels that there is some connection between himself and Palestine, but he does not feel that this
connection is a major part of his life. His experience with discrimination for being Palestinian is, therefore, limited because his exposure to Palestinian life and identity are limited. However, since he does not shy away from his Palestinian family, he has experienced some minor incidents of discrimination. For example, in school sometimes students would point out that he is different from everyone else because some family members identify as Palestinian. He also feels that if he were to embrace his Palestinian family or Palestinian culture more, he would face significant discrimination in his community. He feels that there is a stigma associated with being different, and being Palestinian is certainly cause for making one feel different as there are very few Palestinians within his community.

Ghassan

As someone born in America to parents who emigrated from Palestine, and who tries to live by Palestinian cultural rules, my experiences with Palestinian identity and discrimination have always been a balancing act. I was constantly switching between traditional Palestinian culture at home and American culture at school. In some ways this has led to acceptance from both societies and in other ways it has led to discrimination. Here I will focus on the discrimination I have faced as a Palestinian in the United States.

While I feel as though I can fit quite well into both American society and Palestinian society, I feel more Palestinian than American. On the surface it may seem that I fit in perfectly to American society, but attempting to fit in with a purely American crowd has always led to more problems than doing the same with a Palestinian crowd. There are a number of factors at play. When it comes to language, I am clearly more American than Palestinian. English is my native language and my Arabic conversational. This is not a problem in Palestine as most Palestinians speak English. I dress mostly like a regular American, but I do include Palestinian
traditional clothing (like the headdress, or *kuffiyeh*) on a regular basis. The major difference in terms of comfort with either society is in my beliefs, particularly political beliefs. I am often rejected as a radical in the US because I believe that the Democrats and Republicans are both right-wing iterations of very slightly different beliefs. In Palestine, entire movements have been based around the idea that neither party is progressive enough to fight for Palestinian equality (for example, BDS). The discrimination began at a very young age for me, but it was not until I started working that I began to understand the impact it had on me.

My first job was at a local restaurant as a teenager. In general, I got along well with co-workers. However, the atmosphere was such that racism could not be challenged. One bartender called me “CJ,” short for “camel jockey.” When I challenged him on this in front of other employees and the owner, nothing was done. The environment was toxic and I quit after a few months, thinking this establishment was the problem. I would get another job at another restaurant nearby, only to see the problem was much more widespread.

At this new restaurant, the discrimination was everywhere, it was openly discussed, and games were created over who could be the most crude and racist person in the place. Some employees called me “street rat,” a reference to the movie, “Aladdin,” where the main character (an Arab) is a criminal and his love interest lives in a harem since her father will not let her leave the house. If I challenged the racism of other employees, they would attempt to match my frustration with songs from the movie. For example, in one song the main character sings about how he shouldn’t be called a street rat. I heard that song frequently.

A few days after September 11th, 2001, I moved into a dorm at The Ohio State University with a Pakistani roommate. The dorms were filled with a lot of childish antics, and racism was at the root of those antics. My roommate and I lived in what was dubbed “the terrorist room.” A
few of the students made life as difficult as possible, including showing up to pro-Palestinian political events to counter what I said. I even found out (by accident when I walked into a dorm mate’s room while he was discussing plans with a friend) that it was a coordinated plan to shut out Palestinian voices. Life outside of the dorms was not much easier, as events for Committee for Justice in Palestine at the time had virtually no budget and community support was minimal due to pressure from anti-Palestinian groups. I left Ohio State excited to be leaving another toxic atmosphere.

As a financial advisor, my experiences changed with the presence of a co-worker who had emigrated from Ghana. He was interested in the Palestinian struggle and made it a point to speak positively about it and ask important questions about the Palestinian experience. My boss told me that my Palestinian activism was a good thing but only if I could make money on it. He suggested that I get active in order to meet potential customers and sell them financial tools. This made me uncomfortable. How could I express frustration with companies profiting from the occupation while I myself was trying to profit from the activism against such behavior? I quit and took another job in the financial industry. At my next job, the anti-Palestinian sentiment was out in the open.

My next position was at a phone center assisting customers who called in to get help in planning their retirement, and it did not include me having individual clients. I was told that advocating for the Palestinian cause was forbidden and I was threatened with termination if I spoke at public rallies or wrote articles about Palestine. I was informed it would be inappropriate for a representative of the company to speak on that topic because it would be assumed that the company held the same opinion. I argued to no avail that the company’s owner was a Republican, but that it did not restrict Democrats or Green Party members from speaking. The
environment was so racist that when one manager told me he did not live in Cincinnati (where I lived at the time) because there were too many “colored people” in positions of authority, the human resources department argued that it was a harmless statement. Others asked about terrorism constantly and people frequently started conversations with me with such comments.

After starting graduate school, my attitude about expressing my Palestinian identity changed drastically. Rather than being in an environment where one had to ask permission to express oneself, I had a chance to be more pro-active and demand that the Kent State community pay more attention to the Palestinian perspective. With this, I expected a much harsher response than in the corporate world. After all, now I was politically active with events on campus, speaking engagements in the classroom and out, and meeting regularly with other student groups to work toward creating safe spaces for discussion of issues facing Palestinians. While I did notice a change in discrimination, I was surprised to learn that the discrimination had taken on a more institutionalized—and anonymous—role.

As a graduate student, I was a co-founder of the Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) group at Kent State. The purpose of the group was to demand equality for Palestinians by way of educating the Kent community about Israeli crimes and American complicity in those crimes. This included: writing articles for the student newspaper, doing radio and TV interviews, organizing demonstrations against Israeli aggression, and speaking engagements where students and community members could interact with Palestinians to understand the situation more completely. In response to my articles for the newspaper, hateful comments appeared on the message boards, and only a months-long argument with the newspaper staff could get them taken down. These were all posted anonymously. When SJP organized events, our flyers were defaced with anti-Palestinian propaganda or just taken down entirely.
Even discussing Palestinians within this master’s thesis was a difficult task. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Kent State rejected my idea of speaking with Palestinian children in Hebron about the problems they face getting to school. I was informed that talking to children about war is dangerous. As a Palestinian, that seems absurd because war is all we have ever known. My questions were largely ignored. How could occupied people avoid speaking about war, even if we wanted to? Is the danger in identifying a child who spoke to another Palestinian about the occupation greater than that of silence? And how does the IRB know what is best for Palestinians? Not a single Palestinian of the dozens I told about this agreed with the IRB’s decision. But it was not just the IRB causing problems, students did as well.

When educating students about the Palestinian issue on campus, SJP faced an incredible amount of discrimination. Our flyers were defaced prior to one event, and the next year our flyers for a series of events were torn down. In an article for the student newspaper about racism in Kent, one commenter wrote “There is and never will be any place known as Palestine, except for my toilet.” After another event, comments were left stating “Palestinians are a miserable and pathetic people” while another told Palestinians that they could solve their problems if they “quit having 10 kids per family.” The comments only came down from the website when all comments came down as a part of a redesign of the comment system after I complained. When I met with editors of the student newspaper (and their faculty advisor), I was told that the comments were not actually considered racism. They said even if it was considered racism, that sort of discussion is “good for the community.”
Yousef

“Yousef” was born in a suburb of East Jerusalem and immigrated to the United States. Being born in Jerusalem meant he had the politics of the conflict between Palestine and Israel literally at his doorstep. Jerusalem is claimed as the capital of Israel, though it is internationally recognized as occupied Palestinian territory (UN General Assembly Resolution 43/176 [1988]). Yousef had come to the U.S. a few times as a child while his parents went to school here and he moved to the U.S. to go to college. After completing his undergraduate degree, he went back to Palestine, and ended up coming back to the U.S. to obtain a master’s degree at a different school.

Yousef’s lifestyle is very much in line with many other Palestinians his age. He is in his mid-twenties, very concerned about obtaining a graduate degree that can help him get a job, and has a sarcastic sense of humor. When it comes to his graduate degree, he spends most of his time working in the geology lab and trying to finish his studies more quickly than is expected of students in his position. When he has free time he is either making political jokes at the expense of people who disagree with his politics, playing basketball, or yelling at himself for enjoying both smoking and playing basketball.

Yousef’s life experience, linguistic ability, dress, and political awareness all make him stand out from most Americans and help him fit in well with other Palestinians. He feels far more comfortable in Palestine and among Palestinians than he does in America, which is why he intends, on completing his studies, to move back to Palestine. His comfort level with Arabic is apparent, and he typically prefers Arabic to English when given the opportunity to choose. He also stands out from most Americans in that he frequently will wear either traditional Palestinian clothes (such as a kuffiyeh) or shirts that put his political beliefs or his Palestinian identity out in the open. In other words, one can differentiate Yousef from other Americans far more easily than
one can with Palestinians like James or me. Also, Yousef refuses to assimilate into American society.

There are two kinds of reactions he says he notices when people realize he is Palestinian. First, there is confusion. Yousef says this is “probably” more frequent than discrimination, and he describes it as someone merely trying to understand what exactly a Palestinian is. In other words, it is done out of a desire to understand Palestinians and is harmless. The discrimination he described to me began with his undergraduate experience, which is when he came to the U.S. to live. He describes his school as “very liberal and progressive,” but when it came to Palestine there were issues. In pro-Palestinian activist circles, this is known as being a PEP, or Progressive Except for Palestine. A Palestinian professor once told him to “be careful” and warned that there would be consequences around organizing on behalf of Palestinians, even on a progressive campus. Yousef stated that organizing around say gay rights would have meant he would not have received “half as much trouble” as he did with regards to Palestine.

The discrimination came from many directions. Yousef said it was so difficult to get the school to accept even a basic constitution for the group he founded that getting it officially formed seemed like a significant accomplishment by itself. He felt that the underlying assumption with all the questions surrounding the group’s creation was that Palestinians are too disorganized to have a rational conversation on campus. This plays into at least two stereotypes about Palestinians. First is that Palestinians are disorganized. The other is that Palestinians are unjustifiably angry and cannot keep their emotions in check. This was very similar to what the Palestinian professor warned about, though Yousef was annoyed that the professor would warn him about organizing instead of working to change the culture at the school. He blamed both the
professor and the school’s environment for placing obstacles in front of organizing efforts instead of helping organize effectively.

The students were easier to deal with, according to Yousef. Part of that is because his group was mostly formed as an educational endeavor. The purpose was to teach about Palestine, and Yousef and his friends spent their formative months and years focusing on various aspects of Palestinian life, like music and food. That ended up being a foundation for more openly political work in the years following, but by educating about Palestine first, Yousef’s organization was able to frame the debate in later years. Students with what he calls a “connection to Israel”—which may or may not even be real because it included students who have no family connection in Israel and who had never lived there—resorted to bullying tactics and the false accusation that he was anti-Semitic. That seemed absurd to Yousef because he worked very closely with Jewish community members, but that did not stop people from believing it.

As a graduate student in a different school from his undergrad (and in a different state), Yousef faced similar cases of discrimination. He co-founded another pro-Palestine student organization and dealt with open discrimination, this time going well beyond those “with a connection” to Israel. One student at his new school asked him during a public forum why Palestinians would spend money on rockets instead of food. From the framing of it to the underlying assumption that Palestinians could hate Israelis more than they appreciate food, there is little function to a question like that. If Palestinians avoided food, they would die and the discussion would not exist. Another asked why Palestinians were not doing more to have community discussions about their problems, possibly forgetting that she was asking him this at a community discussion put on by Palestinians.
I asked Yousef what he thinks it would take to stop the discrimination against him. He began by saying that ending discrimination is impossible for him, and joked by blaming his facial hair for his failure to assimilate into American society. In seriousness, he sees the dehumanization of Palestinians (and all people of color) as one of the major obstacles to assimilating into American society. To him, once you are identified as a person of color, attitudes among the majority of Americans change.

Yousef states that he cannot accept many American customs and points to the imperial history of Thanksgiving as one. He sees observing Palestinian cultural rules as being in most ways antithetical to observing American cultural rules. Palestinian cultural rules have been built in the context of being oppressed and occupied, and they cannot be combined with American rules. He admits however that in some ways living in the U.S. forces him to change certain parts of his personality, at least to a small degree. Without assimilating in some ways, he believes it would be nearly impossible to make a living here. This is also one of the reasons why he does not want to stay here. To stay in the U.S. and attempt to succeed means continued assimilation, and it would take him farther away from the culture in which he feels most comfortable. In other words, Yousef feels as though he has to choose between Palestine and the U.S. There is no way to live comfortably in both.

Mahmoud

Though the vast majority of Palestinians in Gaza are refugees from either what is now known as Israel or the West Bank, “Mahmoud’s” family is originally from Gaza. He came to the U.S. to seek an education and continues to live and work here. His optimism has shaped his perspective and comes through particularly strongly when he discusses the symbiotic balance
that he believes should be a dominant topic of conversation when discussing life for Palestinians in the U.S. While he plans to stay in the U.S. for the foreseeable future, Mahmoud does not see himself as American. He refers to himself as “only Palestinian” and has no desire to assimilate into American society. However, this is not because he feels that there is a clash between being Palestinian and living in America. He believes the opposite to be true.

Mahmoud’s views on American culture and Palestinian identity are such that he does not see a clash between being Palestinian and living in America, but he does see a clash between being American and being Palestinian. Not seeing a clash between being Palestinian and living in America is likely a very common view among Palestinians, considering how many restrictions are placed on travel for Palestinians within the West Bank and Gaza. Specifically, Palestinians from Gaza have restrictions placed on them by both Israel and Egypt, making travel even more difficult than for Palestinians in the West Bank (White 2009). Since America is a collection of people of various backgrounds, he argues that he can be himself (read: Palestinian) and not worry about how he has to fit into American culture. He argues that his appreciation of the diversity in America and his respect for the values of others should be enough to help him fit in properly. However, that feeling of respect is not always mutual. Mahmoud says that there are different dynamics at play based on where he is, and that he been treated differently at work and in school. While in school, he felt the discrimination was much more prominent.

Mahmoud gave me an example from one of his college classes, which shows how this discrimination worked. At the beginning of the semester, in one class a professor asked everyone to introduce him or herself, including where they are from. When it was Mahmoud’s turn, he stated that he is from Gaza, Palestine. According to Mahmoud, the demeanor of the professor changed when he found out Mahmoud is a Palestinian, and that negative demeanor would largely
define their relationship. Mahmoud claims that the professor was unfairly harsh towards him and would spend extra amounts of time trying to prove him wrong or embarrass him. Other times he says the professor would just ignore his participation in class entirely. He also insisted on pointing out that this behavior was not just at the hands of one professor. He claims that this happened in a number of his classes. While he never gave a precise number of incidents, he did describe a common pattern of behavior by professors in these classes; Mahmoud participates in the class, the professor finds out he is Palestinian, and the mood changes instantly to one of hostility.

Mahmoud feels that there is a clash between being American and being Palestinian, though he could not quite explain why that is and does not see any reason for a clash between the two. He believes that there should not be a clash between cultures “as long as you keep all of the good values and norms from where you belong.” In other words, Mahmoud believes that as he stays true to his own identity there should be no clash with being in America. Mahmoud’s outlook is very much an optimistic one, and he always tries to look at everything in the best terms possible. As for his working life, Mahmoud says that while he has worked in corporate America, he has not felt discrimination the way he did at school. He would not elaborate on this point, simply stating that it does not happen at work. Considering how open he was about discussing discrimination at school, I take him at his word. Mahmoud also explained that there is a lot of confusion around who Palestinians are, but did not see that as discrimination. He gave a story very similar to Yousef’s, saying that there is a lot of confusion about the difference between Palestine and Israel.

Mahmoud speaks Arabic fluently and does so in public regularly (he says about once a week), but has said that has not caused him any problems. The same can be said for his accented
English. He also dresses in traditional Palestinian clothing when he goes to multicultural events, but says that has not caused him any problems. In other words, the only aspects of being Palestinian that have caused discrimination have been after he specifically identified himself as Palestinian.

Maureen

Maureen Murphy (her real name) lives in Chicago and makes a living as a journalist and editor. She could not make a living as an artist because as she says, studying the fine arts gives one an appreciation for art museums but does not give one the income necessary to go into those museums and appreciate the art in person. Her creative talents come through in her writing, whether it is about civil rights, issues in Palestine, or both. She is currently the managing editor of the Electronic Intifada, a Palestinian news website that dubs itself “Palestine’s weapon of mass instruction.” While she describes her life as if it were an ordinary white American lifestyle, I have come to see it as anything but ordinary.

Maureen is very much connected to Palestine in a number of ways but is not Palestinian. Her connection to Palestine began when she decided to work for a Palestinian human rights group in the West Bank city of Ramallah. Al-Haq (an Arabic word meaning “truth”) documents human rights violations by both the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority and works to improve conditions for Palestinians by trying to get all parties to obey international treaties and international law. Her goal at the time was to live and work in Ramallah permanently while coming back to visit family frequently.

It is important to discuss her issues with the Israeli authorities first, because their refusal to allow her to work is the reason she ended up moving back to the U.S. instead of pursuing her
goal of living in Palestine. Palestinians do not control their borders. All access to the West Bank goes through Israel and access to Gaza goes through either Israel or Egypt. It is also important to note that non-Jews are only given temporary visas for a maximum of 3 months at a time, while Jews can stay as long as they want and are granted instant citizenship upon request (White 2009). After the 3 month period is complete, non-Jews must leave and come back (typically done by crossing into Jordan and attempting to cross back into Palestine). After over a year of working in Palestine and traveling back and forth between countries in order to get another 3 month visa, the Israelis rejected Maureen’s attempt to come back to Palestine after visiting family in the U.S. With this rejection, she was told she would never be allowed back into Palestine.

Israel accused her of terrorism, but never elaborated with details of the accusations made against her. Maureen says this accusation was false and was made to stop her from doing pro-Palestinian work: a claim supported by the fact that if she were taking part in terrorist activities against the Israelis, they would have arrested her. She claims the issue was that she was working for a group that was exposing Israeli human rights violations. Her desire to stay in Palestine was so strong that even after she was barred from entering, she managed to get back into the country for what would be her last time. She says this was because she requested entry from Jordan to the West Bank on a Jewish holiday where the border patrol seemed to ignore typical procedures. She was allowed in on a one month visa, which would end up being her last month in Palestine.

This gives appropriate context to Maureen’s life in the U.S.: It was not her intention to be here, and she had begun to set up her life in Palestine among Palestinians. In an attempt to blend into Palestinian society, she began studying Arabic while learning about Palestinian history and politics. She only stopped attempting to go back to Palestine when she ran out of money. Maureen could not afford the plane tickets back and forth (along with the associated risk of not
being allowed entry by Israel), nor could she afford to hire a lawyer to take up her case against the Israeli authorities for rejecting her based on a false premise.

She wanted to stay connected to Palestinian society and dedicated herself to journalism, reporting on events in Palestine and Palestinian solidarity activism and civil rights issues in the U.S and Palestine. Her political work is not limited to the written word. She has taken part in and organized a number of demonstrations over issues in Palestine. As a journalist, Maureen has covered a large variety of events in Palestine and with Palestinian activists in the U.S. In fact, she was subpoenaed for a Grand Jury investigation, which she feels is due to her involvement in Palestine activism. No charges have been filed and the investigation has yet to produce any specific accusations. However, Maureen feels that her involvement in the case is an attempt to silence the pro-Palestine activist community, especially since many of the others subpoenaed for the same case are Palestinian activists. She refused to assist the government in its case and feels the reason the mainstream media has not picked up on the case is that it only exists to publish the government’s narrative. Since the government has seemingly been unable to build a credible case against her, the media does not have much of a government story to tell.

Her behavior won her a social justice award in her community. After giving a speech, she was shown a complaint e-mail which referred to her as a front for Hamas and referred to Palestinians as donkey-riding terrorists. Out of the entirety of her human rights work in Palestine, her activism around Palestinian issues, and journalism covering Palestine and civil rights issues, this was the only incident of her facing anything that she describes as discrimination. Even then, it was not something directed at her; it was sent via e-mail to the person who coordinated the event.
While Maureen’s work keeps her connected to Palestine, she keeps her appearances in a way that is disconnected from Palestine. She says “I don’t wear my politics on my sleeve.” She behaves in many ways like Palestinians and has a fairly strong connection to Palestine, but because of her looks does not suffer discrimination. She states this is “the benefit of white privilege,” because while “there is some social cost” to being a radical it has nowhere near the cost that it would for people who “happen to look Palestinian or Arab or Muslim.” She also states that she gets the impression that she is not discriminated against because when she is demonstrating people view her as distinctively different from Palestinians or Muslims. This shields her from any discrimination or commentary that would be commonly associated with Palestinians doing the same things as her.

Maureen takes her analysis a step further by discussing the difference between discrimination from the U.S. government (in the form of FBI intimidation) and individual Americans. She says that Americans pay attention to things like how a person looks, whereas the US Government basis its intimidation efforts on those who oppose the Palestinian Authority and the US-sponsored Oslo Accords. Since she opposes the Oslo Accords, she faces intimidation by the U.S. government. Since she is white, the same behavior that would cause Americans to discriminate against Palestinians is forgiven.
CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

An analysis of the Palestinian experience in the United States requires a definition of what a Palestinian is, and of the culture that allows the discrimination to happen. First, I will discuss who Palestinians are, and afterward I will discuss American culture. Palestinians have been spread out—some willingly, but many against their will—all around the world, thereby diversifying the Palestinian experience. However, that does not limit our ability to define who the Palestinians are or what makes a person a Palestinian. Since Palestinians are spread out so far and their experiences vary greatly, part of what defines a Palestinian must be historical. For example, a family connection to Palestine is a prerequisite for defining oneself as Palestinian. In fact, many Palestinians will ask two questions of someone whom they recognize as potentially Palestinian; “What family are you from?” and “What village are you from?”

These questions—though they can have some flexibility, particularly when one has family members from multiple cities—connect a person to Palestine both through family history and through the land itself. The city that you will typically hear is the last city the family lived in voluntarily. So refugees who were forcibly evicted from Jaffa in the ethnic cleansing of 1948 and ended up in Ramallah in the West Bank will tell you they are from Jaffa. Therefore, I feel it is appropriate to use these connections when considering Palestine as the basis for defining someone as Palestinian. If one defines oneself as Palestinian, but has no connection to the land, that would create something of an identity issue. Most Palestinians will reject someone’s Palestinian identity if they cannot make any connections to Palestinian land or people inside what is called Israel (commonly referred to by Palestinians as “the 1948 state”) and Palestine.
Since so many Palestinians came to the U.S. because of the Six Day War in 1967 and the occupation that followed, looking at the attitude of Americans toward Palestinians at that time is important. This was the beginning of the Palestinian experience in America for a majority of Palestinian families in the U.S. today. Though exact statistics on Palestinians coming to America may not exist, I think it is fair to infer that to be the case. Connecting the dots between those views of Palestinians and those expressed by the subjects in this thesis will give us an idea about the development of American views on Palestinians. During and after the Six Day War the mainstream American media rarely criticized Israel, even going so far as to stop pro-Palestinian voices from expressing concern in the editorial pages (Abu-Lughod 1970).

The mainstream media have changed very little since then with respect to Palestinians. However, the ability of Palestinians to express themselves outside of the mainstream media has changed significantly. Palestinians have found their voices through student media on college campuses and by starting a number of news sites and blogs on their own. This has led to serious debates on media outlets outside of the mainstream (such as Democracy Now!). While that affects how Americans will likely view Palestinians in the future (since these forms of media in general cater to a younger audience), this is limited in scope and does not seem to have a major impact on how the media as a whole portray Palestinians today.

Today, the mainstream media still offer a predominantly Zionist narrative, though that sometimes takes the shape of “liberal” Zionism rather than the right-wing version that is dominant in Israel today (Blumenthal 2013). Liberal Zionists—while agreeing with their more right-wing counterparts that Palestinians should not be allowed to live with equal rights among Israeli Jews within the same state—argue that once the occupation of Palestine ends, so will the problems between Palestine and Israel (Beinart 2012). Liberal Zionists portray themselves as
being fair to Palestinians by conceding that the occupation must end. However, this stance ignores discrimination against Palestinians within Israel and the right of refugees to return to their homes. In other words it ignores the concerns of the majority of Palestinians in the world, who are refugees. Additionally, there are over 1.6 million Palestinians in Israel (Central Bureau of Statistics 2013). Nonetheless, liberal Zionist support of the two-state solution still dominates the discourse in the media. This coverage plays a large role in how Americans view Palestinians, but it is not the only obstacle Palestinians face.

The issues surrounding Palestinians in American society arise not just from the mainstream media’s laziness and the government’s favoritism toward Israel, but also from the academic world. Though Palestinian activists are gaining ground in free speech rights and the ability to tell the Palestinian story on college campuses, it would be naïve to say that the academic world is not for the most part fighting against Palestinian discourse. As an example, consider every school in the U.S. whose student senates passed divestment resolutions against companies profiting from Palestinian suffering in the past few years and the subsequent refusal to divest based on the approved resolutions. Since complicity with Israel is profitable, schools have thus far refused to change course. Corporate America—particularly in the world of war profiteering—has done the same.

War profiteering depends on Israel for massive profits, and most of the media refuse to challenge corporate America. This is mostly because the mainstream media and corporate America are one and the same. Regular Americans do not look deeply into Israeli aggression and war profiteering, so some would say this does not impact American viewpoints on Palestinians and Israelis. However, this negligence is exactly my point. Since Americans do not spend the time to look into these issues, the media are able to frame the debate in this country as being
anything but corporate profiteering at the expense of Palestinian human rights. The call for BDS against Israel emphasizes the Palestinian perspective that the issue is largely about war profiteering at the expense of human rights (Barghouti 2011), but the media have largely ignored that focus in favor of looking at the conflict as one born of religious fighting. The culture of framing the conflict as being religious permeates much of the mass media. One example that originated with CNN but made its way throughout much of the mainstream media is particularly troubling.

In 2007, CNN ran a story claiming that Hamas had created a TV show with a Mickey Mouse look alike who taught kids to behave violently in the name of militant Islam, saying he was “cheering for Islamic supremacy” (CNN 2007). Others in the mainstream media picked up on the story, including Glenn Beck and Keith Olbermann. All commented on the dangers of Hamas and political Islam, but the story turned out to be false. After verifying facts with reporters in Palestine, it turned out the episode was about teaching children to drink milk and express their feelings about war (Wallace 2007). Rather than issue an on-air apology and giving a detailed explanation about the poor translation, news outlets continued with the same tone of discussion but without showing the video itself (Wallace 2007). Stories such as this serve to reinforce stereotypes about Palestinians being violent, and distract from what Palestinians view as the real issues. Rather than discussing the siege of Gaza or the reality of life on the ground, the media focused on trying to make a connection between Islam and violence.

Palestinians (as we have seen in Yousef’s story) are constantly told they need to “face reality” and deal with the problems they have in a different way, yet Palestinians are the ones facing the reality that Americans tell them they should “face” when they speak out publicly. If anyone knows about the reality of life under occupation and potential solutions, it is Palestinians.
themselves! But why should they have to explain themselves to America when Israel is rarely, if ever, forced to do the same? Why isn’t America asking Israelis to “face reality” and live without the billions of dollars in foreign aid, billions funding weapons systems, and beneficial vetoes at the United Nations (which shield Israel from punishment for its crimes) given to their state each year? The answer is capitalism. Israel not only provides weapons contractors in the U.S. with a major customer (thus helping the U.S. economy), Israel also tests many of those weapons systems on Palestinians under occupation. One report found that Israeli weapons companies “will often boast of… extensive ‘testing’ of their weaponry in ‘real life’ situations” against Palestinians (War on Want 2013). America does not give Israel money for nothing. It expects—and gets—a significant return for American corporations. This connects Israel to the one of the basic concepts of modern American society: profit.

These various vehicles of support for Israel, which are incompatible with support for equality for Palestinians, have roots within the very basics of what American culture really is. One question that must be answered at this point is: what is American culture? American culture can be defined in many different ways. The diversity and number of Americans throws the idea of defining one American culture off track. America has over 316 million people from various regions of the world who study a number of religions and have different experiences based on ethnicity (United States Census Bureau 2013). If we define American culture as being built along racial, ethnic, or religious lines we are excluding vast numbers of Americans who helped establish what it really means to be an American.

Clifford Geertz’s definition of symbols and culture is commonly used in the anthropological community and is particularly useful here. A symbol is a “vehicle for a conception” (Geertz 1977). He calls culture "a historically transmitted pattern of meanings
embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (Geertz 1977). We can use this definition, but then we end up asking another question: what are the symbols and ideas that are particularly salient within a society? In America, the answer is capitalism.

Capitalism functions as a symbol because it is a vehicle for how Americans see the world. Capitalism shapes how corporate America, the U.S. government, and the media view the conflict between Palestine and Israel (and other conflicts) and which side is more deserving of support. Since this serves as a basis for much of the discussion about Palestine in American society, it has a significant impact on how Palestinians are viewed in the U.S.

E.B. Tylor’s definition of culture is commonly used and served as a key definition in the creation of cultural anthropology as a discipline. Though it may not be used as frequently as it once was in analyzing society, it still has value in understanding how we came to define culture in the U.S. He states: “Culture… taken in its broad, ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom; and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor 1873). But what customs do Americans follow most universally? What are the beliefs and habits? In the U.S., all of those things revolve around capitalism. Capitalism is one of the most universally accepted symbols within American society. There are those who seek an end to capitalism in America, but capitalism is a more dominant theme in American society than any ethnicity, race, religion, or political belief. Even the idea of American culture itself has been commodified (Perusek 2010).

Modern capitalism was explicitly designed to pick out favorites within a society and reward them financially, and the conflict between Palestine and Israel is no different (Greenwald
2011). Those raised within the capitalist environment in the U.S. have been taught that “only the strong survive.” The concept of individualism emphasizes the capitalist atmosphere and has played a role in how American media depicts Israelis as similar to them while Palestinians are cast as different. Palestinians are looked at as being an angry group while Israelis are commonly seen as individuals fighting for Western principles like democracy (Abu-Lughod 1970). The theme of individualism is used against Palestinians because it is emphasized in this country as an ideal characteristic of capitalism and the “American spirit.” Palestinians are commonly not seen as individuals in the same way Israelis are because Palestine is seen as “underdeveloped” and not worthy of comparison to Western society (Said 1995).

Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) is an organization which has compared coverage in the U.S. media on a variety of topics. When comparing the coverage by various media outlets of Israeli settlement activity, FAIR found a pattern of Palestinians being mostly described as an angry mob while Israelis were interviewed as individuals. This pattern included quoting individual Israelis, often in a family setting, while either describing Palestinians as being filled with “hate” if they even interviewed Palestinians at all (Hollar 2009). The use of individualism goes beyond just the mainstream media, and has become a part of political rhetoric as well.

In America today, the two dominant political parties use the theme of individualism constantly. The standard arguments that become the laws of the U.S. are largely framed by how much of a role an individual is allowed to have in society and when the government should step in. Alternatives to individualism or capitalism such as anarchist collectives, Marxism, or any third party ideology or party (many of which refuse to accept the individualism/government dichotomy), are rarely even debated rationally. Even necessities such as healthcare are sold
through marketplaces rather than through a guarantee that all citizens deserve to be taken care of because they are valued members of society.

Republicans label themselves as the purists of the capitalist system. They believe in free markets, tax breaks for almost any reason, and smaller government (typically, so that corporations can pick up where the government left off). The Democrats label themselves in terms of Western liberalism in that they claim that their version of capitalism is far different from that of Republicans because it is supposed to help others instead of just making oneself wealthy. This is a false dichotomy created by the Democrats, but it works. The difference can be seen in the attitudes of the two parties. Republicans admit that they know only some will benefit from capitalism and others will not (“only the strong survive”), while Democrats argue that they can manage to make capitalism work for everyone (Greenwald 2011). This makes the political discourse in this country one of who is the best capitalist, rather than if capitalism is the right system to use in the first place. This obsession with arguing over who is the best capitalist can go a long way in explaining why there is a broad consensus in Congress in favor of Israeli policy, and therefore against Palestinians.

Israel is an imperialist nation designed to steal resources of other countries financed partially by land expansion. It is therefore more closely aligned to both dominant American political parties than are Palestinians, who largely have backgrounds in pastoralism and small-scale agriculture. American culture being essentially a capitalist culture explains why American elites tend to support Israel. There is no Palestinian military industrial complex that Americans can sell billions of dollars of weapons to. The Israelis and Americans seem to be trying to create that with the Palestinian Authority, but it has yet to work out. There is no high-tech sector of
Palestinian life from which American companies (such as Intel and Hewlett-Packard, both of which operate in Israeli settlements) can profit.

The traditional Palestinian way of making a living is small-scale agriculture and pastoralism (though populations of those who live this way of life are shrinking because of the conflict), not large-scale industry which Israeli culture emphasizes. In fact, many Palestinians do not even keep track of time, much to the chagrin of many American and European tourists. I included myself in this category until my visit in 2012, when I was determined to get to the bottom of this phenomenon. Many Palestinians told me that keeping exact track of time is a product of Western (read: capitalist) ideas like “productivity” and that it is not useful to people living on the products of their land and animals.

This is one of many reasons why it is tougher for capitalists to profit from Palestinians than Israelis, and gives a good example of how different the typical Palestinian outlook on life is to the typical American one. In other words, Palestinians do not live like Americans, and that leads some Americans to default to supporting Israel. When in doubt, Americans seem to support those whom they see as being both more profitable for American businesses and similar to themselves. If and when either the profitability of Israeli society or similarities between Israel and the U.S. change, so will the relationship between the two nations. For now, Israel is seen by the U.S. government and corporate America as an asset, and alternatives to that close capitalist relationship (such as support for Palestine) are seen as a negative.

One example of Americans emphasizing alternatives to capitalism as a negative is seen when many Americans scream “communist” or “socialist” at anyone with whom they disagree. Calling President Barack Obama a communist is common among Americans who disagree with him. Why? Any careful observer sees that Obama is nothing close to a communist. Since
communism (a collective approach to organizing a society) is seen as the antithesis of capitalism, many Americans use that as an insult. In my experience, discussing boycotts and divestment of American companies profiting from the occupation of Palestine produces the same negative response from many Americans, though this has not been studied extensively. However, it should as this plays a role in how Palestinians are seen, and treated, by Americans. While there are Americans who do not fit the mold of being anti-communist, their voices are mostly ignored.

The impact of this on American discrimination against Palestinians is that the Palestinians play the role of the “other.” The confused belief that all Palestinians (or Arabs in general) are Muslim is an excellent example here. Yousef’s joke about his facial hair making it tough for him to assimilate played to this stereotype as well; in particular, one that assumes all Muslim men have large beards. A majority Christian population which is “other-izing” Palestinians must look at them as being as different as possible, hence the Muslim/terrorist label that is typically placed on even the Christian Palestinians.

For Palestinians, the issue is that Americans run into something they don’t understand: what exactly is Palestine and who are Palestinians? This confusion is what sets Palestinians apart from a number of groups, including other groups in the Arab world, such as Egyptians. This makes for a different set of circumstances for Palestinians than it does for many other groups, who also experience significant discrimination from American society.

The discrimination doesn’t necessarily come about because Palestinians are a different race. Rather, it’s an issue of class, and it seems that Americans view Palestinians as being a different class of people from Westerners. They view themselves as the “civilized” or “developed” world while everyone else is “developing,” as if indigenous communities do not have a long history that is just as developed as the U.S. This explains why Americans usually
default to support for Israel and Great Britain while ignoring the horrible human rights violations of both countries. Israel was largely built by European Jews and, therefore, they are from the same figurative Western cloth. Israeli discrimination against women by way of not allowing them to pray equally at the Western Wall is largely ignored in American discussions of Palestine/Israel, but Muslim or Palestinian mistreatment of women is typically magnified. The media may mention what Israel does to discriminate against women, but it is not emphasized the way Muslim treatment of women is, nor is it used to frame the larger debate of why there is a conflict between Israel and its neighbors.

If we were to conceptualize the discrimination that generally occurs against Palestinians in the U.S., it would look like a funnel. At the top of the funnel, there are stereotypes disparaging all foreigners. At this stage, Americans are looking at Palestinians (and other foreigners) merely as something different; they do not know how to identify Palestinians, but they know something is different about them. This is evident in the stories from Yousef and Mahmoud, who both stated that they feel as if Americans are regularly confused about their identity rather than prejudiced. It is important to note that this confusion does not always lead to discrimination. As Americans get an idea of who Palestinians are (or who they think Palestinians are), they sometimes form stereotypes specifically regarding Palestinians, which brings us to the lower portion of the funnel. Here Americans are narrowing their view from being one of confusion about foreigners to discrimination specifically toward Palestinians.

For example, many who ask about a foreign accent are just interested in where the Palestinian is from and what his/her life story is. However, those who do discriminate while following a similar route, use the conversation to achieve a more sinister end. Typically that would include a focus on how different Palestinians are (“other-izing”) rather than getting to
know them personally. The tone and style of conversation were reported by informants as being the clues that led them to feel that there was a motive beyond just getting to know them, and it felt much the same as those who openly discriminated against them for being Palestinian. In some cases, people seemed to be sincerely curious about Palestinians, while in others the tone used indicated bias against Palestinians. The subjects in this study stated that even though they would have the same conversation with two people, the tone would suggest that they were being judged by one of them, rather than asked about their lives because of a sincere curiosity.

What are the triggers for each of these steps? Accent and dress seem to be triggers for seeing a Palestinian as a foreigner while discussing family history and seeing actions at political events seem to be the main triggers for identifying people as Palestinian. I doubt that more than a tiny percentage of Americans could even tell what Palestinian traditional dress is or what a Palestinian accent sounds like. This is why I say these characteristics are triggers for the top of the funnel; they signal Americans that something is different. Family history and political events seem to verify that someone is Palestinian (largely because of identity politics). I say that they “seem to be” triggers because in order to understand discrimination against Palestinians, one would have to interview Americans who discriminate against Palestinians to understand their mindset. I have not done that, though from the interviews I have done, there does seem to be a pattern. It is possible that these would not be triggers because, even after having a discussion about one’s family history or seeing someone discuss politics at an event, some Americans still have a hard time understanding what Palestinians are. There are more triggers that can be found, but for my study these were the main themes that emerged from multiple participants. I would expect there to be a number of “false positive” triggers labeling many as Palestinians when they are not, such as facial hair.
Why is Discrimination Different for Palestinians?

Discrimination is different for Palestinians than for other groups because of a few key factors. First, a majority of Palestinians are refugees. This has an impact on discrimination because many Palestinians who have come to the US or have gone to other countries have been forced out multiple times. The ethnic cleansing associated with the creation of Israel in 1948, the occupation in 1967, the invasion of neighboring Lebanon in 1982, the current war in Syria; all of these have led to situations where Palestinians were made to leave places they considered relatively safe before war uprooted them again.

Palestinians are not understood or recognized in the same way other groups in the U.S. are. A Mexican probably rarely (if ever) hears that “Mexico doesn’t exist” in the same way that Palestinians are told that Palestine does not exist. For Palestinians, this leads down a path where Americans have to learn about us before they can discriminate against us! Also, Palestinians make up one of the largest populations of refugees in the world and are escaping an occupation that has lasted multiple generations. The expectations associated with the right of return to Palestine make assimilation less desirable to many Palestinians. These differences and similarities in treatment say more about American culture than they do about Palestinians. But the differences do exist and they do impact Palestinians, so they are worth mentioning.

A common argument among Zionists is that Palestinians are just Jordanians who are using a fictional history to try to drive Jews out of their homes. Their argument is that Palestine never existed as a state before 1948 and therefore Palestine is a fictional entity used for sinister purposes. This is a fallacious argument as Palestinians can say the exact same thing about Israel prior to 1948! Proof of the denial of Palestinian existence is in the commonly used phrase to describe Palestinians in Israel as “Israeli Arabs.” This label ignores their Palestinian identity.
entirely and blends them into the society that was built on top of their native villages. Palestinians deal with arguments about their very existence, something that most other groups do not have to deal with.

Furthermore, the occupation itself leads to a different situation than other minorities deal with in this country. While many populations came to the U.S. for economic opportunity or freedom from an oppressive government, no other population came from a context like the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza (with the possible exception of Tibetans). While Eastern Europeans during the Soviet Era dealt with occupation, they came to the U.S. in a context of support from the U.S. After all, they were escaping communism. Other groups have a chance to go back to their homelands, but choose to stay in the US for a variety of reasons. Palestinians on the other hand, do not have that luxury. Israeli laws determine which Palestinians are allowed to go to their country and for how long, typically only 3 months at a time, and in effect are treated like tourists rather than indigenous people (White 2009).

As I stated earlier, American culture discriminates based on the values of capitalism and whether an individual is perceived as different from the American standard. On both counts Palestinians are the same as many other groups; seemingly unable to function smoothly within a capitalist structure and most certainly different. The focus on capitalism as a standard for giving support to a group explains a vast array of problems indigenous groups have with U.S. policy around the world. However, this does not mean that Palestinians are treated in exactly the same manner as other groups. It only means the basis of discrimination is the same. Also, the need to assimilate in order to live a fulfilling life is different for Palestinians than for other groups.

There isn’t as much pressure to assimilate into American society as one might expect. Americans seem to expect assimilation (or at least an attempt), but Palestinians see it differently.
Palestinians frequently compare the situation in Palestine to that of apartheid South Africa. With South Africa, a solution to the problem of apartheid arose quickly and to some extent unexpectedly. Many saw the fall of apartheid coming thanks to the success of boycotts, divestments, and sanctions against the apartheid regime, but nobody could predict exactly when that would be. This is much the same for Palestinians. Since many of us see a return to Palestine as the ultimate goal—and a goal that could very well be achieved unexpectedly as it was in South Africa—the pressure to assimilate into American society is not the same as it would be for other ethnic groups.

For many Palestinians, land and even homes are already in place to accept them (at least to some extent). In the West Bank, the ability to absorb large numbers of tourists each summer has created a situation where many Palestinians could be absorbed quickly. Cultural rules surrounding family life make the return to Palestine an easier transition than many Americans might think. For example, my grandparents on both sides designed their homes in a way that makes it easy to build additions in order to accommodate multiple future generations. Many other Palestinians do the same. Combine that with an economy designed for tourists (many of whom are actually Palestinians) and the return to Palestine is not only realistic, but much of the ground work is already in place.

This is especially true for two reasons. First, since the Palestinian economy is dependent on tourists it is more than capable of taking in large numbers of people (ICC Palestine 2013). Furthermore, large numbers of those tourists are Palestinians in the U.S. who only have the right under Israeli law to visit for three months at a time. If and when a final resolution comes to fruition, large portions of Palestinian society would be ready for the influx of diaspora Palestinians. After all, the economy is already designed for a portion of them to show up, even if
for just a short portion of the year. This gives Palestinians in the U.S. reason to be optimistic. The prospect of returning to Palestine reduces the need to assimilate into American society.

Mahmoud

Mahmoud said he felt discriminated against while in school but not in corporate America, which fits well into the definition of America having a capitalist culture. If you’re doing your job properly and members of the company can see clearly that they are profiting from you, there is less reason to expect a disruption. However, when he was outside of that arena and in school, the discrimination was clear. This is because in school, there is an atmosphere of questioning and critique, and those who may not fit the American mold can be critiqued and harassed on a regular basis and forced to fit into the culture of the academic world. This would also explain why there are more political and racial debates on school campuses than there are on corporate campuses. Some may look beyond the profit motive (particularly for religious reasons), but for the most part corporate America follows the money. After all, the focus of corporations is purely to profit, and the only reason they would solve a dilemma is to profit from it. When students step out into corporate America, the focus becomes money rather than ideas.

It is also interesting that Mahmoud, who passionately projects his optimism about virtually everything in his life, still has a number of examples of discrimination. How is it that someone who expresses his respect toward others and feels that there should not be a clash between cultures feels discriminated against? If he acted rude and condescending toward American ways of life, then discrimination would be more understandable (though still not justified). But that is not the case with him. He respects others but often does not get that respect in return. One would think people who create an atmosphere of respect around themselves and
others should not be facing discrimination, especially if one looks at American culture as being one of acceptance of those who believe in freedom and diversity.

However, the norm in American culture is one of capitalism and of questioning anyone who may even seem to stray from mainstream capitalist discourse. This is even the case when that person agrees on the validity of the same capitalist structures as a basis of mainstream America. Mahmoud, while he is working in a corporate environment, seems to need to prove he can behave within a capitalist environment in order to fit in properly. When working in corporate America, his differences are not important. When he is outside of this environment, his differences are questioned openly.

Ghassan

My own experiences showed discrimination in both the corporate environment and in school. The discrimination in school was more focused and organized than the corporate world, and discrimination at my second corporate job was worse than at my first job. Why? I attribute this to the fact that in my first job, I had individual clients whereas in my second job I worked with a group and could take calls from—and therefore assist—anyone. In other words, at my first job I could quit and take my clients with me but at my second no clients would leave because of anything I did. This gave the company less incentive to care about ending the discrimination. If you follow the money, the discrimination makes sense. When there was less of a chance for money to be lost on me leaving, the discrimination was worse.

However, that does not explain why the discrimination was so bad at the restaurants I worked at. The discrimination in restaurants can be explained by the fact that everything must get done immediately: everyone is rushed nearly the entire time. Therefore, if the managers were to take time to try to work out a problem with discrimination or racism, they would anger
customers and lose money. The easier route taken is typically to fire those responsible for any disruption. Management cannot fire everyone, so when a lot of people got involved in the discrimination against me it was completely ignored. Though the discrimination and culture are somewhat different in the different places I have worked, the main issue of following money instead of dealing with discrimination was the same.

Yousef

Yousef was told by another Palestinian to avoid politics in order to make life easier (as was I), but avoiding politics does not seem to keep Palestinians from being discriminated against. This was the case with James as well. He avoided politics but still faced discrimination. In other words, Palestinians will be discriminated against whether they get political or not, so they should probably stop telling each other to be careful so often with regard to politics. Yousef connected this with the political movements of other marginalized groups, saying that nobody would ever give that warning (at least not on his campus) to gay rights activists or other groups. This is an excellent observation because it shows that while Palestinians share much in common with other marginalized groups, they still do have a unique experience.

Yousef also stated that the discrimination on campus came from many directions. School administrators treated him unfairly with regards to starting the group, professors tried to silence him to some extent, and students who had what Yousef saw as a false connection to Israel were openly hostile. This was the case for his undergraduate experience and his experience in graduate school, and speaks a lot to how much work truly needs to be done in the academic world in order for Palestinians to have a safe space. He mentioned that the groups he founded were for educational purposes. Though he feels they did have a good impact in terms of education for much of the campus, why then would there be discrimination for someone trying to educate
others? I think the answer lies in the fact that while academic America has come a long way in recent years in the discussion of Palestinian ideas, it is still in place to assist the capitalist culture of the U.S.

It seems that whenever Palestinians attempt to organize or educate in a public space, they are accused of being “too political.” If everything a Palestinian says or does in public is political, then any negativity toward politics will also be negativity aimed at Palestinians, creating an additional burden Palestinians have to face when working in public spaces. This seems to be the case with Yousef and other informants and is another reason why discrimination and behavior are not very closely linked (a topic which I will discuss in detail later). How can Palestinians in the academic world avoid public spaces? After all, the academic world is largely a public space.

Yousef ended by talking about how Palestinian life and American life cannot overlap. In many ways, one must choose between being an American and being Palestinian. Considering that Palestine has a history of pastoralism and small scale agriculture—and considering American support for the Israeli occupation of Palestine—this should come as no surprise. Any society that steps up to act as the global police, applies words like “terrorism” almost exclusively to people of color, and tries to undermine movements for human rights is no society Palestinians are going to assimilate well into. There are plenty of Americans who feel that America is a “melting pot” society, open to the poor and oppressed around the world. The reality is that stories like Yousef's teach us that the real American culture is that of capitalism and corporate profits, not of melting pots. After all, the “American dream” is property ownership, not solving human rights problems and bringing people together.
James and Maureen

James had to deal with discrimination for being Palestinian even though he says he fits into American society as well as anyone (he feels “100% American”). Why, then, did he get discriminated against while Maureen—who is closely connected to Palestine—could not even come up with one instance of her being discriminated against apart from someone complaining about her to an organization? My guess is that for starters, being Palestinian causes a certain amount of discrimination in this country regardless of how Palestinians behave. Palestinians are identified with a country labeled by the government as terrorist and labeled by corporate America as only profitable thanks to Israel. Palestinians must deal with consequences of those stereotypes, regardless of their behavior.

If behavior were the main factor that dictated who gets discriminated against, Maureen would have been the one dealing with discrimination rather than James. She is the one who has been politically active both in Palestine and in the U.S., telling the Palestinian story. She spoke briefly about discrimination by the U.S. government, but said regular citizens in the U.S. have never directly confronted her even though she has been public with both her written work and with the demonstrations she has actively planned and been a part of. This flies in the face of the advice that Palestinians should “behave” and not get involved in politics in order to avoid being discriminated against because Americans seem to worry more about who you are rather than what you are doing.

Furthermore, this suggests that the media could have more of an impact on how Palestinians are viewed than Palestinian behavior itself. After all, something is causing Americans to treat Palestinians differently which cannot be attributed entirely toward Palestinian behavior. As early as the 1967, American media associated Palestinians with being a large, angry
mob while Israelis were shown as individuals, which plays into the stereotype that the wild
Palestinians must be tamed (Abu-Lughod 1970). This association plays well into the American
concept of individuality and provides a good explanation as to why Americans see Palestinians
as different from them. Surely there is more to the story, but again that must be studied from the
perspective of trying to understand Americans rather than trying to understand Palestinians in the
U.S.

James also noted in the interview that if he were to use a Palestinian name in the title of
his business rather than an American one, he would lose a lot of business. While we did not get
into whether that would be the case with any other foreign name, it does speak to how
Palestinians must deal with the consequences of their existence before they can ever deal with
the consequences of their behavior. The experiences of James and Maureen suggest that the
behavior of individual Palestinians does not have a strong connection to the discrimination they
face and that other factors are more powerful.

If the behavior of an individual Palestinian had a strong link to the discrimination he or
she faced, the stories in this study would like have been very different. Maureen has lived her life
very much in line with Palestinians, but has only faced discrimination from the U.S. government
and not from individual U.S. citizens. If she behaved as a Palestinian and could only report one
instance of discrimination, then her behavior would not match up with the level of discrimination
one would expect if behavior and discrimination were closely linked. James was not
discriminated against because of his own behavior. He stated that the discrimination was due to
others rejecting his mother as being different from the rest of the community, thus making him
an outsider. In other words, the actions of all parties involved, except James, played a role in the
discrimination James faced.
In my case, as a Palestinian who feels in some ways stuck between America and Palestine, I was discriminated against significantly. If my behavior was strongly connected to the discrimination I faced, one would expect there to be only a moderate amount of discrimination. After all, I do fit into American culture fairly well. Some say I fit in perfectly. Though I would contest that belief, it says a lot about how others see me as being more American than I see myself. If I behave closely enough to Americans to fit in and if my behavior were very closely tied to the discrimination I faced, my experiences would have been much different. Mahmoud’s story also shows that discrimination and the behavior of individual Palestinians are not always closely linked. Even though he identifies and behaves as a Palestinian only, he only reported facing discrimination on college campuses and not in corporate America. Clearly then, behavior does not tell the whole story and the behavior of an individual Palestinian does not correlate very well with the discrimination they face.

The one person in this study whose behavior matched well with the discrimination he faced was Yousef. He behaved very much in line with Palestinian life, identified as exclusively Palestinian, and faced discrimination everywhere he went. This suggests that there is some link between the way an individual Palestinian behaves and the level of discrimination that person faces, but that link is not very strong. Put another way, one cannot accurately determine the level of discrimination a Palestinian faces solely by studying their behavior. All Palestinians in this study faced discrimination, regardless of whether they identified as being Palestinian or American. Maureen, the non-Palestinian who behaves in many ways like a Palestinian, could only come up with one instance of discrimination. Even then it was not directed at her, it was directed to an organization which gave her an award. Her issues with the U.S. government are
worth a more detailed study because they suggest that the government may be trying to influence Americans by criminalizing Palestinian solidarity.

The campus environment in the U.S. warrants a longer discussion, as it was a key part of the discrimination against Palestinians in three of the five stories. Palestinians do have a right to go to school in the U.S. (assuming Israel lets them leave Palestine), they do have the right to organize into political groups, and they do have allies in the academic world. All of those factors play into the decision making for why Palestinians come to study in the U.S. However, even though this makes the U.S. a better place to organize than say the Gaza Strip, those facts alone do not make the academic environment a safe space for Palestinians.

Organizing and making arguments for Palestinian rights only matter insofar as they can impact change. In reality, the U.S. academic world is in many ways another hurdle for Palestinians climb. This should come as no surprise as it is hardly realistic for Palestinians to expect freedom will come from the same country that has financed the occupation and so many of the weapons used against innocent Palestinians for so many years (Mearsheimer 2007). Since Palestinians have been scattered around the world, the struggle for their equality must be an international one. Palestinians have little choice but to organize anywhere there is support for Israel, which includes the U.S. While many Americans see pro-Palestinian activity on campus and assume the campus must be a healthy environment for them, Palestinians organize in the U.S. because they have to respond to American support for the destruction of their homeland rather than because it is a healthy environment. The case of the Irvine 11 provides a good example of why the academic environment is not as much of a safe space for Palestinians as some may believe.
In the case of the Irvine 11, Palestinian student activists and their allies at University of California (UC) Irvine decided to protest a speech given by the Israeli Ambassador to the U.S., Michael Oren, in 2010. The protest was designed so that each of the 11 students stood up during his speech, made a very brief statement about Oren’s complicity in war crimes against Palestinians, and walked out immediately after (Blumenthal 2011). The disruption was brief, with some student statements only lasting a few seconds. The students were each arrested by the university police and charged with disrupting Oren’s free speech rights.

The prosecution claimed that the event was shut down prematurely because a planned question and answer session could not commence, though this seems to be false. Oren showed up 30 minutes late to the scheduled hour and thirty minute event and had to leave immediately after speaking because he had arranged to go to a Los Angeles Lakers game and pose for photos with star Kobe Bryant that were posted online in order to showcase Bryant’s support for Israel (Blumenthal 2011). Even the event details on the department’s website never mentioned a question and answer session (University of California Irvine School of Social Sciences 2010). Though the facts of the case show that Oren was responsible for the lack of time for a question and answer session, the students were found guilty and were required to do community service and serve probation (Taxin 2011). The Irvine 11 caused about as much of a disruption as a few people answering phone calls, talking to each other during the speech, or someone trying to sit through a bad cough.

It was a shocking case of criminalization of pro-Palestinian activism on campus, and would serve as the basis for a new strategy of “lawfare” — a term derived from the concept of using the legal system as a method of warfare — against Palestinian activism (Barrows-Friedman 2012). Legal cases have been brought forth by Zionist organizations claiming a
number of schools were not doing enough to stop pro-Palestinian student groups. The Legal Director of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in Northern California has called this strategy “legally unsupportable” and called the investigation into students at UC Santa Cruz and UC Berkeley “disturbing” (Barrows-Friedman 2012). Ultimately, we will have to wait and see whether this lawfare strategy works, but it speaks to the level of pressure Palestinian students and their allies have to face and the environment in which they must overcome those pressures.

All this is not to say that Palestinians on campus have an impossibly difficult time and that everything in America is as bad as it is in Palestine. Many Palestinian students and pro-Palestinian organizations have had success on campus. However, just because Palestinians are succeeding does not mean that they are doing so in a safe space. In fact, to think that campuses are a good place for Palestinians is to ignore what Palestinians in this study have said themselves. All three informants who spoke about the campus environment said it was a place where they had to deal with significant discrimination. The two informants who compared campus and the corporate environment both detailed why the campus environment was in many ways worse than the corporate environment.

Moving Forward

The solution to these issues of discrimination lies within changing the dynamic used to frame the debate about Palestine and Israel in the U.S. Rather than discussing the issue as a matter of conflict in the region between two religious groups and U.S. interests, it should be discussed based on how the conflict affects human rights and equality for all. Changing the way Americans view the conflict between Palestine and Israel can go a long way toward making America a safer place for Palestinians and could help resolve the conflict.
Student groups such as Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), The Palestine Youth Movement (PYM), and others are leading the way in this regard and have viable methods for changing the debate. This is because they work outside of the current system (which includes negotiations between governments and trying to resolve the issue through the U.N.), where the government and the media have been delivering parallel messages. Government bodies have never provided a solution to the most pressing issues facing Palestinians, so they should not be relied upon for any potential solution. Furthermore, student groups and activist groups who focus on education are far more accessible to Americans than the governmental structures used to create the peace process ever have been. It is far easier to discuss these issues with college students and off-campus youth organizers such as PYM than it is to reach one’s Congressperson. This gives Americans more of an opportunity to interact with Palestinians. Also, working towards an end to discrimination against Palestinians should not be left in the hands of governmental bodies.

The track record of governmental failures, such as the partition plan of 1947, refusal to grant equal rights after the occupation of 1967, and the Oslo Accords makes the non-governmental route the more appealing route. Educating Americans about the issues Palestinians face may change the way many Americans look at Palestinians. That is being done all over the U.S., but it will take some time to create change on the ground for Palestinians in the U.S.

One step beyond this analysis would be to do a survey regarding discrimination in a specific community of Palestinians, say Youngstown, OH or Detroit, MI. This would allow researchers to place the conclusions of this report in a broader context. It would give us a way to test the conclusions in this study more scientifically. Using the small numbers I used in this study gives us only an idea of what a scientific study would look like.
Another possibility would be to document specific instances of discrimination with a wide variety of subjects (possibly in various places, rather than in one city as suggested above) in order to analyze which words or phrases are used most frequently to discriminate, and why. Analyzing the power of language can give insight into the psyche of those who discriminate and why they choose specific words or phrases for groups such as Palestinians. In other words, I suggest a study that would parallel this one, but with the focus on Americans. Do they use a different set of words to discriminate against Palestinians than, say, Egyptians? If so, what does that tell us about how Americans view Egyptians and Palestinians?

No matter what Palestinians do, there will always be some level of friction between Palestinian life and American life. After all, by calling themselves Palestinians they are in some way identifying as being different from Americans. That should not lead to discrimination, but it does and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. The question now for Palestinians is not if they will be more respected in the U.S., but rather how to gain such respect and when we will start seeing results. That question depends on both the proven organizing ability of Palestinians in the U.S. (particularly the younger generation) and on whether or not Americans are ready to accept Palestinian human rights as being more important to them than corporate profits. For now, Americans seem to be taking baby steps in the right direction, which is a deserved relief for many Palestinians.

The future for Palestinians in the U.S. looks better than the past, but more work still needs to be done for Palestinians to feel comfortable. The ultimate comfort for Palestinians would be seeing a free Palestine with full equality for all. The likelihood is that Palestinians will still be left behind in the U.S. even if Palestinians do see their dream of equality in Palestine and
Israel come to fruition. Some will likely not be able to move back, so building a safer space in the U.S. is necessary for any viable solution going forward.

Conclusion:

Palestinians have fled or were forced out of Palestine because of ethnic cleansing, occupation, a lack of economic opportunity, and a lack of legitimate government representation. Left with options that were less than desirable, Palestinians scattered around the world with some being attracted to the U.S. Regardless of how the Palestinians in this study behaved when they came to the U.S., they always experienced discrimination in one form or another. Interviewing someone who identifies as a white non-Palestinian American showed that discrimination was almost entirely absent, even though she lives a lifestyle very much in line with Palestinians.

These stories hold a number of important lessons about how Palestinians experience life in the U.S., but they also tell us a lot about American culture. Americans should pay attention to the experiences of Palestinians because these experiences are an interesting example of the difference between what Americans imagine their country to be and what it is. America was designed to be a country that benefits white, male landowners, but laws have since been written to try to treat everyone equally regardless of how they were born, and that is why many Palestinians are so attracted to it. However, these stories show that even Palestinians who are born in the U.S. and fit into American society almost perfectly are still cast as different and face discrimination. These stories can serve as a warning to Americans that even if U.S. citizens and the government have great intentions, the discrimination against Palestinians shows that good intentions alone do not create safe spaces.
The stories Palestinians tell about life in the U.S. present a number of interesting questions for Americans. Some of them are significant because they represent doubts about the core of American values. Why are Palestinians, who fit in so well in the U.S., frequently discriminated against? What does this discrimination say about America? How much of a role do mainstream media outlets play in shaping discrimination? How many of these experiences are unique to Palestinians and how many are a core part of American culture?

These are just a small sample of the types of questions Americans should be asking themselves when they read stories of the Palestinian experience in the U.S. After all, ordinary Americans are a major part of what is shaping these experiences for Palestinians. While the U.S. is a safer space for Palestinians than Israel, that is not saying very much. Comparing the U.S. to a military occupation uses a very low standard, especially since Americans picture their country as the “land of the free.” Americans can change this by creating safer spaces for Palestinians (and everyone else) in this country, which would go a long way making the U.S. a more perfect nation.
REFERENCES

Abu-Lughod, Ibrahim

Abunimah, Ali

Amnesty International

Barhoum, Omar

Baroud, Ramzy
2010 My Father was a Freedom Fighter. London: Pluto Press.

Barrows-Friedman, Nora

Blumenthal, Max

Beinart, Peter

B’Tselem

Central Bureau of Statistics

Central Intelligence Agency
CNN

Geertz, Clifford

Greenwald, Glenn

Hareuveni, Eyal
2010  By Hook and Crook: Israeli Settlement Policy in the West Bank.

Hollar, Julie

ICC Palestine

Irving, Sarah

Khalidi, Walid

Kanafani, Ghassan

Koval, John et al.

Lunat, Ziyaad

Makdisi, Saree
Masalha, Nur

McCarthy, Justin

Mearsheimer, John and Stephen Walt

Netanyahu, Benjamin
2011 Speech to a Joint Meeting of the United States Congress. May 24, 2011.

Pappe, Ilan

Perusek, David, et al.

Ramahi, Sawsan

Said, Edward

Segev, Tom
2008 1967: Israel, the War, and the Year that Transformed the Middle East. New York: Picador.

Tatum, Beverly

Taxin, Amy
Times of Israel
2013   Netanyahu: Islamists Taking us Back to ‘Dark Ages.’

Tylor, E.B.

United States Census Bureau

University of California Irvine School of Social Sciences
2010   U.S. Israel Relations from a Political and Personal Perspective.

Waked, Ali

Wallace, Tom
2007   Mainstream Media Caught in MEMRI Mouse Trap.

War on Want
2013   Killer Drones: UK Complicity in Israel’s Crimes Against the Palestinian People.

White, Ben