



NORTH AFRICA, WEST ASIA: OPINION

## Fighting repression in the Land of the Free: an Arab-American feminist perspective

While the US criticises authoritarianism abroad, it represses its own Black, Arab and other minority citizens through surveillance, militarised policing and incarceration

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The #SheDefends campaign launches during the '16 Days of activism against gender-based violence' | Women Human Rights Defenders Middle East and North Africa (WHRDMENA) coalition

**This article is part of a series for the annual and global 16 Days of activism against gender-based violence published in collaboration with the Women Human Rights Defenders Middle East and North Africa (WHRDMENA) coalition as part of its #SheDefends yearly campaign. The articles reflect on the past, present and future of feminist movements and the meaning of global solidarity.**

For decades, US and European governments, as well as corporate media, have been condemning authoritarian repression and violence against women in the Global South – from Africa, to the Middle East, Asia, the Pacific Islands and Latin America. And tragically, these same voices have too frequently misused grassroots human rights and feminist struggles to push for violent military interventions.

As an Arab-American professor and activist, I have witnessed over 30 years of repression within the US against feminist and queer people of color, and those involved in racial

justice, anti-war, and decolonial social movements. I often wonder, where is the international outcry over repression and misogyny within the United States?

Given the recent escalation of US repression of Black and Palestinian activists, it is more clear than ever that railing against authoritarian repression in the Global South is a far cry from real concern over peoples' freedom. It is especially hypocritical to demand an end to gender violence in the Global South when the US was not only founded upon rape and sexual assault as a tool of enslavement and colonisation, but also continues to rely on sexualised violence to dominate BIPOC communities. Consider the more than 1,200 reports of sexual assault and the controversy over hysterectomies targeting immigrant women in ICE custody; the forced sterilizations of Native and Black women; and police sexual violence.

Sensationalising human rights abuses abroad turns public attention away from such human rights abuses in the US and helps maintain the fiction of the US as a democratic nation state with equal rights and freedom for all.

## Solidarity with Palestine

It is no surprise that many anti-imperialist Black activists and feminists from the Civil Rights era to today have stood in strong solidarity with the Palestinian struggle.

This solidarity was always global in scope, as it was forged in the 1970s context of global anti-imperialist liberation movements and a shared consensus that the Cold War sidetracked liberation movements across the world, and that they were being co-opted by military and corporate elites, finance capital, and efforts to control resources and create a new imperialism.

This internationalist frame conceptualised South Africa and Palestine as key sites of Western neo-imperialism and identified them as locations whose struggles were intrinsically connected to all forms of anti-colonial critique. It was in this context that instances of feminist solidarity such as the alliance between the US-based Union of Palestinian Women's Association (UPWA) and the Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA) emerged.

Continued FBI surveillance and repression of Black, Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim residents expanded such solidarity. A principal example of this is the FBI's 1996-2000 investigation into Chicago-area Muslim Americans called Vulgar Betrayal, which eventually encompassed nearly every FBI field office and impacted the lives of hundreds of citizens or legal permanent residents. Algerian-American Assia Boundaoui, who uncovered this operation, produced the film 'The Feeling of Being Watched,' in which she documents how FBI surveillance trickles down into the everyday lives of Arab-American Muslim youth, families and communities in the form of paranoia, distrust, fragmentation, and the destruction of community relations and philanthropy.

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In 2008, the Bush administration attorney general, Michael Mukasey, authorised a new kind of investigation called an "assessment," which required no factual basis for

suspecting wrongdoing before allowing agents to employ intrusive investigative techniques like surveillance and database searches. In 2009, a memo from the Atlanta FBI revealed that fears of a “Black Separatist” terrorism threat justified an “assessment” of the growing Black population in Georgia.

## The blame game

This meshes with the reality of law enforcement today focusing on Black-led activism rather than white extremists carrying out violence. In 2017, the American Civil Liberties Union noted community fears that the category of a Black terrorism threat was “created to justify surveillance of, and other government action against, Black people, including Black activists”. Such fears are, of course, well founded.

The events of the summer of 2014 especially helped consolidate the increased solidarity between Palestinian and Black social movements in the US. Protesters in Ferguson, Missouri, faced the military-grade weapons of four city and state police departments – tear gas, smoke bombs, stun grenades and tanks – while Gazans were confronting Israel’s heavy artillery shelling, massive use of flechettes, mortars, and half-ton to one-ton missiles.

Activists forged solidarity around several points of unity, including how the canisters fired in both Gaza and Ferguson were US-made, as well as how the St Louis County Police Department, which killed Michael Brown and initially placed Ferguson on siege, had trained with the Israeli military. Following Ferguson, the FBI used sophisticated surveillance aircraft technologies to police BLM protests after the killing of Freddie Gray in 2018 and has continued to do so.

Today, these alliances continue to grow, especially through a conjoined struggle committed to resisting the US government’s application of the ‘counter-terrorism’ framework to smear, police, and surveil both Palestinian and US-based Black resistance movements. For example, local joint terrorism taskforces ‘visit’ activists from the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL), blaming them for “inciting violence”.

In 2019, the US publicly disclosed its concept of “racially motivated violent extremism”. Under the guise of stopping white supremacist violence, this terminology enables the



ongoing repression of Black-led resistance movements against police violence. Today, more and more coalitions are arising in response to the US's scapegoating of Black and Arab communities as 'threatening' to the state.

## Opposing Zionist movements

Black-Palestinian solidarity has also emerged against Zionist movements that have worked to reinforce the repression of Black and Palestinian movements. Groups such as the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) have spied on Palestinian, civil rights and anti-apartheid activists. The ADL has also attacked the Palestine-related efforts of M4BL and sought to block activists from using the language of apartheid in their critiques of Israeli settler-colonialism. The organisation also contributed to commentator and university professor Marc Lamont Hill losing his job at CNN over his support for Palestinians and Jews holding equal rights in one secular state between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

### **The Biden administration has so far failed to reject Israel's labeling of six Palestinian civil society organisations as 'terrorist' groups**

Left-leaning BIPOC feminist and queer movements that have committed to solidarity with Palestinian liberation have been key targets of repression. I will never forget when, in 2004, the Ford Foundation rescinded a \$100,000 grant awarded to INCITE! Women and Gender Non-Conforming People against Violence, after our organisation published a statement supporting Palestinian liberation.

The US and Zionist repression of activists in the US extends globally, to places the US is invading and/or dominating. Today, the effects of the US's alliance with Israeli repression against Palestinians is reaching deep into Palestinian civil society, as is the work of groups like the Jerusalem-based NGO Monitor, which have been promoting attacks on Palestinian civil society groups for many years.

The Biden administration has so far failed to reject Israel's labeling of six Palestinian civil society organisations as 'terrorist' groups. State Department spokesperson Ned Price has

been entirely weak in response. “We’ll be engaging our Israelis partners for more information regarding the basis for these designations” is obviously meaningless at a time when Israel is trying to shut down three organisations that are documenting its human rights violations for the International Criminal Court, and another three engaged in vital work in the community.

Israel has also tried to shut down free speech in the US by advocating for laws against the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divest and Sanctions movement (BDS). Gilad Erdan, Israel’s ambassador to the US, earlier this year called on 35 states with anti-BDS laws to sanction Ben & Jerry’s over its decision to stop selling its ice cream in illegal Israeli settlements.

Erdan’s letters to US governors read: “I ask that you consider speaking out against the company’s decision, and taking any other relevant steps, including in relation to your state laws and the commercial dealings between Ben and Jerry’s and your state.” Those that follow his advice are favoring Israel over a US company, free speech and most importantly over equal rights and freedom for Palestinians.

These laws violate First Amendment rights – rights that were always meant to primarily protect white middle-class people (and originally wealthy white landowners) rather than ‘all Americans’. The laws are also devastating Palestinian and Arab students’ lives by compounding the fear and intimidation they face on campus if they campaign for Palestinian rights, intensifying that already imposed by the McCarthy-like targeting of individuals by groups like Canary Mission.

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Limitations on free speech through anti-BDS laws and the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism, alongside efforts to divide Palestinian and Black activists, are intended to create an atmosphere in which supporters of Palestinian liberation are fearful and immobilised. They also support and sustain sexualised racism against Palestinian students, such as the threat of castration received by Ahmad Daraldik at Florida State University and misogynist cyberbullying that paints Palestinian women activists as “whores”.

## A wider web of repression

Repression is an ever-growing concern in the US – far beyond its impact on Black and Arab activism. Consider the surveillance of Indigenous people involved in struggles like Standing Rock or the attempts to ban the teaching of Critical Race Theory. Refuse Fascism

analyses “the very real danger and threat of fascism coming to power in this country”, whether it is led by the Republican Party or whether it is sustained by Democrats, who “will consistently pull to try to work with, conciliate with and collaborate with [Republicans]”.

Yet we have learned from history that measures like these can have the opposite effect, proving to be a galvanising factor.

Addressing these issues now is particularly timely with the recent news that two of the alleged killers of Malcolm X in 1965, both Black Muslim men, who were hastily arrested on shaky evidence and became victims of the very injustices Malcolm X denounced, were deemed innocent. In the aftermath of his assassination, prosecutors, the New York Police Department and the FBI withheld key evidence that probably would have resulted in the acquittal of the two men. The Manhattan district attorney, Cyrus R Vance, has apologised and said they “did not get the justice that they deserved”. Both men spent more than 20 years in the brutal New York prison system, often in solitary confinement. Only Muhammad Aziz is still alive today.

## The role of prison

US-based prison abolitionists have long critiqued the cruel history of wrongful convictions of BIPOC individuals through police torture and frame-ups.

In Chicago alone, there is a backlog of over 500 cases of alleged police torture and frame-ups involving primarily Black and Latinx men who remain incarcerated for life for crimes they did not commit. I work with mothers who have been fighting for their children’s freedom for decades while enduring devastating health and economic challenges. They often remind me of mothers in Egypt, like the beloved Laila Soueif, who has been the focus of many international human rights stories about the authoritarian regime’s frame-up of her son, Alaa Abdulfattah, who helped lead the Egyptian revolution of 2011.

Black feminist abolitionists have insisted upon fighting against the criminalisation and incarceration of BIPOC women, queer and transgender survivors of gender violence such as Marissa Alexander who was sentenced to 20 years in prison for defending her life from an abusive estranged husband. Transgender abolitionists are resisting invasive,

transphobic airport surveillance and the ways police specifically ensnare and criminalise trans people of color.

## History and the FBI

Unfortunately, these realities, rarely heard on the global stage of human rights, are as appalling as the histories that shaped them. The history of the FBI's repression through surveillance began long before its recent investigations of Muslim and Black communities.

J Edgar Hoover, who headed the FBI at the time of Malcolm X's assassination, was no friend of the Civil Rights Movement or Black resistance to rampant white supremacy. This resistance continued the struggle against centuries of enslavement and rebellions. It is this history, however, that people like Republican Governor Glenn Youngkin in Virginia seek to whitewash and prevent children from learning in schools.

**Visions for a radically different future must affirm life, interconnectedness, and the conjoining of all movements for human rights, gender justice, liberation, abolition and decolonisation**

Hoover's FBI had a history of focusing its attention against Black organising to secure rights and justice rather than on white efforts to violently oppress Black people in the US South and elsewhere. It's unsurprising, therefore, that in 1919, as director of the FBI's precursor, the General Intelligence Division, Hoover investigated Marcus Garvey for allegedly associating with radicals. He couldn't pin any violations of federal law on Garvey, but the Justice Department eventually accused him of trumped-up mail fraud charges in 1923.

Mike German notes in The Guardian that "white vigilantes, police and soldiers targeted Black communities with violence [and I would add sexual assault and rape] during this period, which included the Red Summer of 1919, the Tulsa massacre of 1921 and scores of lynchings", yet these violent acts of heterosexist racist terror "did not receive the same focused attention from Hoover's agents". Nonetheless, when the movie 'Mississippi

Burning' came out in 1988, it deceitfully lionised the role of the FBI in advancing the Civil Rights Movement.

If people living in the US aren't getting their history whitewashed then all too often it's being revised to center the victimiser and downplay the real defenders of freedom.

Ever since the FBI's inception, it has treated Black-led activism as a national security threat and suppressed Black social movements. Consider the counter-insurgency programs of the Cold War era that grouped both Black and Arab activists into the same "threat/enemy of the nation" framework.

The FBI's COINTELPRO programme, which attempted to label homegrown resistance movements as under the thumb of Communist influence, relied upon informants, blocked donations, and used fearmongering to repress Black resistance. It intentionally targeted Black *women* activists. Hoover, for instance, directly targeted The Sojourners for Truth and Justice, a Black Leftist feminist group.

This history has profound relevance today in racist and misogynist red-baiting, as with the questioning by Republican Senator John Kennedy of Asian-American Professor Saule Omarova, President Joe Biden's nominee to serve as head of the Office of the Comptroller of Currency. It also extends into the US government's recent targeting of the Movement for Black Lives, founded by three Black women, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Khan-Cullors and Opal Tometi, with its explicit feminist and queer politics. Such targeting inspired the book authored by Khan-Cullors and Asha Bandele, 'When they Call you a Terrorist'.

President Richard Nixon's 1972 Operation Boulder, an offshoot of COINTELPRO developed in alignment with the US's alliance with Israel, targeted Arab immigrants in the US for special investigation with the specific purpose of intimidation, harassment, and the repression of their activism. Surveillance programmes like Countering Violent Extremism and cases like the US's deportation of Palestinian American community organiser and survivor of Israeli sexualized torture Rasmea Odeh, have continued this legacy. While denying Odeh a fair trial, the judge overseeing her case condoned rape culture. He prevented her from discussing a sexual assault experience that was crucial to the case, diminishing her experience of what he called "torture, rape, and all that stuff", while protecting her perpetrators in Israel and supporting their sexist, racist narratives about her.

Hopefully more and more people will learn from the many groups that have developed comprehensive strategies for dismantling US state violence and repression and uplifting alternative ways of living and thriving in relation to the earth and each other. I have taken inspiration from groups like [Palestine Legal](#), the [Arab American Action Network](#), [Arab Resources and Organizer Center](#), the [Justice for Muslims Collective](#), [Refuse Fascism](#), [Survived and Punished](#), [MAMAS](#), [Organized Communities against Deportations](#), and many more.

I am especially inspired by the [Palestinian Feminist Collective's](#) reminder that the repression of activism is a feminist issue; that love must guide liberation; and that visions for a radically different future must affirm life, interconnectedness, and the conjoining of all movements for human rights, gender justice, liberation, abolition and decolonisation.

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