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Justice for Rasmia Odeh

Nadine Naber 06.19.2014

This past winter, I was privileged to participate in several events in Chicago organized by Rasmia Yousef Odeh, associate director of the **Arab American Action Network** and leader of that group's **Arab Women's Committee**. The events brought together anywhere from 60-100 disenfranchised women, all recent immigrants, from nearly every Arabic-speaking country. The attendees were there to learn English, share meals and stories, and discuss personal struggles, in everything from marriage and parenting to navigating the US educational and medical industries and the US immigration system. The women also talked about fending off racism. Together, they developed solutions for their own lives.

One event I attended was a celebration of International Women's Day, at which immigrant women performed a play that Rasmia Odeh had written. The play focused on several generations of women in an extended Arab immigrant family who grappled with gender-related struggles both in the family and in American society with recourse to their loving but often tense connections with one another. The audience was engrossed, laughing and commenting throughout the performance, perhaps because they rarely see

their own life struggles thus affirmed in America. Rarely, in fact, do they see humane, nuanced representations of Arab women's lives at all.

After the play, attendees listened to music and celebrated their own accomplishments. Several women were from countries like Yemen and Iraq and had come to the United States without knowing a word of English. They could now read and write. Odeh asked each of her students to bring something they had written in English to be read out loud. The first woman stood up and read: "I love my teacher."

As the event went on, women spoke over and over about the affection and gratitude they felt toward Rasmia Odeh for touching and transforming their lives and making such a beautiful space possible. I then understood why scores of women were attending each class, workshop or event — even though they were under no obligation to do so and even though many had to walk by themselves through a polar vortex snowstorm (in Chicago, no less) to get there.

I could not help but recall the scenes at the Arab Women's Committee events some months later, in May, at a historic Chicago conference in commemoration of the 1964 Freedom Summer, when **civil rights icon Angela Davis** insisted that every social justice activist in the US embrace solidarity with Palestine and the movement demanding that the US government drop its charges against Rasmia Odeh.

Charges? What charges? Why would the US government want to prosecute this 67-year old Palestinian-American community activist and teacher?

On October 22, 2013, also in Chicago, Department of Homeland Security agents arrested Odeh. She was subsequently indicted on one charge of unlawful procurement of naturalization, and released the same day on a \$15,000 bond. The US government accuses Odeh of failing to answer a question truthfully on her naturalization application ten years ago in 2004. She is **scheduled to stand trial** in a Detroit federal court starting on September 8, 2014. If convicted, she could face up to ten years in prison and fines up to \$250,000. She may also be deported and have her US citizenship revoked after

the potential prison sentence is served. From national call in-days to **student protests**, petitions and **mobilizations to pack the courtroom**, a campaign to support Odeh has gained massive support.

US officials say they are after Odeh for immigration fraud. The Department of Justice alleges that Odeh failed to disclose on her naturalization application that she had served time in Israeli jail — even though her sentence was based on a confession she made in the midst of **45 days of sexual and physical torture while in detention**. In addition, Odeh's 1969 conviction in Israel was determined by a court system that systematically abuses Palestinians' due process rights and **convicts Palestinians at a rate of 99.74 percent**. The Israeli military justice system that is applied to occupied Palestinians, in fact, has itself been found to be in immense violation of international law — from the lack of protections against torture and rape while in custody to the simple fact that virtually no Palestinian walks away free from an Israeli trial. The Israeli state also unlawfully imprisoned and tortured Odeh's family and destroyed her family home soon after her arrest.

Odeh's release from Israeli jail was followed by exile to Jordan and immigration to the US. Living in Michigan and Chicago since 1994, she has worked at the Arab American Action Network since the mid-2000s and led the Arab Women's Committee, one of the most successful empowerment programs for Arab immigrant women living in poverty. For this service, Odeh received the **Mosaic Award for Outstanding Community Service** from the Chicago Cultural Alliance. Thanks to her leadership, the Arab Women's Committee now has a base of nearly 600 Arab immigrant women and does much more than the typical social service program. Women may obtain language training and other services, but they also come to find emotional support, genuine human interaction, artistic and writing activities, political discussion and debate, and a level of solidarity otherwise absent from their lives.

The question remains: Why is Rasmia Odeh being prosecuted, and why now, for an alleged infraction that is a full decade old? Analysts connect her arrest with many previous US government campaigns against Palestinian-American

activists and their supporters. Under the Nixon administration, there was **Operation Boulder**. The **case of the Los Angeles Eight** outlasted three (and almost four) presidents before **it was finally set aside**. Since the September 11, 2001 attacks, there has been increased spying, profiling and infiltration of Arab and Muslim communities and there have been prosecutions for sending charitable aid to Palestinians, as in the case of the **Holy Land Five**.

In all of these cases, as in Odeh's, what the US government considers suspect is connected to what Palestinian-Americans and their supporters are permitted to say about Israel — and to Israel's own systems of militarism, surveillance, repression and incarceration. There may also be a connection between Odeh's indictment and **the 2010 FBI raids targeting 23 anti-war and Palestine solidarity activists in the Midwest**. And Palestine Solidarity Legal Support responded to more than 100 more incidents in 2013 alone. These incidents involve not only extra government scrutiny but also all sorts of intimidation and bullying. The Odeh indictment may also be related to the US government's Controlled Application Review and Resolution Program, which delays and denies naturalization applications of members of Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim and South Asian communities, solely on the basis of religion, ethnicity and/or national origin.

But again, why Rasmia Odeh, and why now? Why now, when so many Arab immigrant women in Chicago are celebrating their personal successes in America partly due to Odeh's remarkable leadership? Why now, when the Palestinian struggle, typified by the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement, is growing faster than ever before in Chicago and across the US?

We may never really know why, but this much is clear: The federal government is using immigration infractions as a political tool to target Rasmia Odeh with criminal charges. The circumstances of her case are especially aggravating: 1) Israel tortures and sexually assaults Palestinians like Odeh as a means of facilitating the colonization of Palestinian land; 2) the US is complicit going back decades in Israeli war crimes and violations of

international law; and 3) the US is now excavating the naturalization papers of a 67-year old survivor of sexual torture in order to brand her as a criminal.

These circumstances are why the streets of Detroit will be filled and the courtroom packed on September 8. From now until then, the collective voice of those whose lives Rasmea has touched, and the growing number of others who support her, will continue to demand: Drop the charges now!

For more information on this case and how to support Rasmea Odeh, see [here](#) and [here](#).

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