Organizing After the Odeh Verdict

BY

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Rasmea Odeh is a dedicated community leader and Palestinian-American activist. No wonder the US government went after her.

On November 4, 2014, the US Department of Justice put Palestinian-American Rasmea Odeh on trial for allegedly lying on her naturalization application ten years earlier, when she did not indicate that the Israeli state arrested, convicted, and imprisoned her in 1969. On October 27, foreshadowing the injustices to come, Judge Gershwin Drain ruled that Odeh could not speak of her imprisonment in Israel.

What Odeh could not say was the following: an Israeli military sweep had picked up her and five hundred other Palestinians in 1969. The Israelis sexually tortured her for forty-five days, pushing her into a confession about two bombings that killed two people and injured many more. She had testified about the torture at the United Nations upon her release in 1979. She had been denied a fair trial. And she withdrew her confession shortly after she made it.

And as he condoned the culture of rape, Judge Drain prevented her from discussing her sexual assault, diminished her experience of what he called "torture, rape, and all that stuff," and ensured that the perpetrators would remain protected. He continued to allow the prosecutor to mention that she was convicted of a bombing that killed people, and the prosecutor repeated this over fifty times throughout the trial.

Before the trial even began, the set-up was clear. Under the guise of immigration fraud, the prosecutor would present Odeh as a Palestinian bomber to the jury, and just as Israel silenced her forty-years ago,

the US, in silencing her once again, would deny her a defense.

To disguise themselves as defenders of the law, truth, and public safety, Odeh would have to be painted as an untrustworthy and violent criminal. And so Odeh's physical and sexual torture and her post-traumatic stress disorder were barred from court, even while one hundred Israeli documents used to convict Odeh in 1969 became once again key to the prosecution.

With her defense gutted, on November 10, Odeh was found guilty of "unlawful procurement of citizenship." Shortly after the verdict, Judge Drain decided Odeh should not be released on bond because he stated she has no sufficient ties to her community. The misogynist and heterosexist nature of the ruling was clear, suggesting that a woman has to be married with children to have community.

Belying this insult, an average of thirty elderly women, mothers, and co-workers traveled by bus from Chicago to Michigan overnight to pack the courtroom in support of Odeh that week, and most of Odeh's defense focused on her role as a beloved community leader, friend, and mentor.

A Feminist Politics of the Collective

When Odeh moved to the US in 2004 and settled in Chicago, she developed the Arab Women's Committee (AWC) within the Arab American Action Network (AAAN). When she testified in court, she described how she began this work shortly after arriving in the US:

> I first came to Michigan to take care of my father [who had cancer]. All the time, I went to Chicago to visit family. On one visit, we went to a park and I saw a 6-year-old girl crying. I didn't know her. I tried to speak to her and asked her why you don't play with the other kids. She told me my mom didn't allow me to play with boys. The girl gave me her address, and I went to her house. I knocked and was surprised to find she was from an Arab family, and I asked the mom to let me speak to her.

When she spoke to her, she learned the woman was living in fear of raising her daughter in America and that there were many other Arab immigrant women who shared the same struggle.
Odeh continued: "I asked her if we could invite the women neighbors together and have coffee together one day. I talked with other immigrant women and saw they need my help [with the adjustment to living in the US]."

Through Odeh's interactions with these women, she began envisioning a new future for herself working with Arab immigrant women in Chicago. Odeh tells the story of the six-year-old girl over and over, because she says she is the one who inspired her decision to stay in the US and work with the AWC. She also says that when her father came to the US for cancer treatment, she could not find anyone to help her mother, so she wanted to help the mothers she found around her.

The AWC originated in small in-depth discussions and trainings within the AAAN in Chicago on key issues facing the Arab-American community. It included organizers like Suzanne Adely, Ahlam Jbara, and Samira Ahmad, and immigrant women who were part of AAAN's English classes, citizenship classes, and what was then its anti-violence program. The committee held meetings in the working-class neighborhoods of the southwest side of Chicago, focusing on women's concerns. They lobbied around immigration and public benefit policies and joined rallies in Chicago on Palestine and a range of other struggles.

From the beginning, organizers focused on the struggles of working-class Arab immigrant women. In 2005, Odeh came in as a volunteer with AmeriCorps and helped run the women's committee. "Rasmea is the one who really expanded it, took it off the ground," Adely told me. "She was the right person for the job as she can quickly connect with the community, and she serves as a real role model for them."

To help expand the AWC, Odeh went door-to-door in Arab immigrant neighborhoods. She called Arab names in the phone book, and she barely slept until she had established a base of six hundred women. As she said in her November 6 testimony to the jury:

> My focus was to let women be independent, strong — not dependent on public aid and not staying in the house; to share decisions that affect their lives. I did this while also going to school and working until 5. I visited the women I worked with after work and took classes at night.

As a sixty-year-old woman, Odeh had been taking college classes to make up for the many times the Israeli state denied her an education. For example, when she was twenty and living with her family in the West Bank, they had sent her to college in Beirut. After one trip home, Israel did not allow her to return to Beirut to finish school.

Through her leadership, more and more immigrant women began coming to the AWC for English classes, social services, and life coaching, as well as a sense of safety, confidence, and community. Odeh recognized that English and citizenship classes were fundamental tools for women to be able to navigate society and build a sense of self-value and leadership within their homes and communities.

Her leadership focuses on a politics of the collective, based upon dialogues that build a sense of confidentiality and safety among the women. It also focuses on a practice of genuine care, love, and reciprocity — where Odeh's own history of struggle inspires her to listen and respond to the stories of others. At one workshop I led with her, sixty women from nearly every Arabic-speaking country attended, even though many had to walk by themselves through a polar vortex snowstorm to get there. Some were recently displaced from places devastated by US-led wars such as Palestine and Iraq.

Others had been in Chicago for a few years and were still learning English. The workshop focused on the problems immigrant and refugee women faced, and strategies for solving them. Odeh inspired attendees to share their stories and to develop strategies for improving their lives. Attendees were sharing stories about coping with the aftermath of war and displacement and problems that arose with their spouses upon migration to the US.

They were also discussing the anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia they confronted in their interactions with the US medical industry, their children's schools, their neighbors, and their local playgrounds. Odeh inspired women to turn to one another with matters that often remain undiscussed among immigrant women who live in fear and isolation, and come to the fore only through the phenomenal bonds of trust she established among the group.

As for immigrant and refugee women around the world, the women who participated in the AWC were uprooted from the support networks of their countries of origin. They often talked to each other about the increased patriarchal oppression they faced upon migration, having lost their support base back home and having only their husband or husband's family to relate to after arriving in Chicago.

And as for many immigrant communities in the US, women talked about how their spouses would react to the pressures of assimilation, racism, and Americanization by increasing control over their bodies and their movements.

One woman told AWC members that the immigration-related problems that developed with her husband were compounded by what would happen after he left for work. Her racist, sexist neighbors would shut the door in her face because she wore the *hijab*, and her lack of English skills obstructed her from responding to them or interacting with the broader society. At the AWC, when several women shared similar experiences with anti-Arab/anti-Muslim gendered racism, she felt less isolated and developed tools for communicating with her neighbors.

Odeh's leadership also relies heavily on the arts to discuss matters that are often too difficult to discuss directly. She organizes activities that inspire AWC members to write their own immigration

stories, and she wants to publish these stories as a book. She also writes plays and invites AWC members to write them with her.

One of these plays, performed at an International Women's Day celebration, 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 the US.

After the play, attendees listened to music and celebrated women's newly acquired English skills. Odeh asked each of her students to bring something they had written in to be read out loud. The first woman, from Yemen, stood up and read: "I love my teacher."

The Politics of Women's Spaces

While most discussions about Arab-American feminisms tend to focus on Arab-American women's work with US feminist movements or Arab-American women who struggle for gender justice within Arab-American political organizations, Odeh's work calls attention to forms of feminist organizing taking place in women-only immigrant spaces.

In fact, while struggles for gender justice within Arab-American political movements are at a standstill, Odeh's brilliant organizing has broken new ground. In *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism*, I wrote about the challenges young women activists faced in late 1990s California when seeking to address heterosexism within diasporic Arab liberation movements.

Women activists were made to feel like we could not address sexism in our movement when, as the dominant movement discourse put it, "our people are being killed back home." As an Egyptian woman living in Oakland, California told me at the time, "We didn't even have a language to talk about sexism [in our movement]."

Similar dynamics continue in the Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) movement today, as students I work with struggle over a gendered division of labor based on personality cults, which allows male activists in particular to receive praise and recognition for the tedious, invisible movement labor conducted primarily by women.

Yet over the last eight years, as these more visible gender struggles were growing among Arab-American activists, an intersectional politics of the collective that connects the most intimate struggles of family life with pressing structural realities — poverty, immigration, and war — was materializing within Chicago's AWC.

In this women-only space, members developed tools for challenging sexism in their households while grappling with the ways sexism permeates the very wars that brought them to the US and the racism and poverty that maintain these wars.

Odeh's telling of her own story of sexual assault allowed her to foster a level of trust about gender injustice that many of our own Arab-American movements cannot uphold. Her work calls us to imagine a radical feminist politics where the struggle to end state violence *and* intimate partner violence happens together, where a politics of the collective involves trust-building, fostering self-confidence and inner strength, facing conflict and speaking critically about difficult issues, challenging injustice and hierarchy, and bringing in more and more people in the creation of an ever-larger base.

Her leadership and the AWC show us what becomes possible when organizers work outside of dominant movement models that use gender, class, and educational hierarchies to establish leadership and construct economically and socially disenfranchised folks as the passive or unenlightened base of social movements. Within the AWC, working-class immigrant women define the liberatory potential, intellectual foundation, and creative possibilities of those movements.

A Criminal Court

After living through multiple displacements, torture and imprisonment, Odeh was finally living a full life in Chicago with some sense of autonomy. She was creating, from the ground up, the world she had sought. Her community work explains why the Chicago Cultural Alliance granted her the 2013 Outstanding Community Leader award. It also explains why tens of Arab immigrant women from Chicago traveled by bus overnight to fill the courtroom.

In fact, it was primarily diasporic Palestinians and Arabs who packed the courtroom and joined the massive organizing and mobilizations across the US to free Odeh — perhaps because the Palestinian struggle for liberation reverberates in every aspect of her life story and recent conviction.

We have learned from history that the European and US empires legitimize their violence by constructing the people they dominate as uncivilized savages and muzzling their voices. Indeed, in this case, the Department of Justice ensured that Odeh's supporters would be neither seen nor heard.

A few weeks before the trial began — before the jury was even selected — prosecutors filed a motion characterizing the defense campaign as "hordes" and "mobs," "almost certainly criminal," and involved in "jury tampering." The motion asked Judge Drain for an "anonymous jury" to keep the names of the jurors secret from the defense attorneys and to put in place special security measures to make it seem like Odeh was a threat.

Anonymous juries are not common. They are reserved for cases where there is a potential threat to the jurors — typically mob cases where there is a history of witness coercion or tampering.

In continuity with the US and Israeli strategy that singles out, isolates, and criminalizes individual Palestinians, the prosecutor's motion specifically targeted Odeh's colleague at the AAAN, Palestinian-American Hatem Abudayyeh, stating:

> [He] has orchestrated a concerted effort to influence the criminal proceedings against the defendant, which has resulted, at each proceeding, in a large group outside the courthouse protesting and parading, carrying signs demanding dismissal of charges and 'Justice for Rasmea' and displaying the Palestinian flag.

Consolidating the imbalance of power, Judge Drain determined that the jury would assemble in an off-site location and that US marshals would transport them to the courtroom in a bus with blackened windows. Under the guise of protecting the jurors, the judge basically blocked them from witnessing Odeh's humanity and what was happening outside the courtroom — the women whose lives she has touched and transformed were harmonizing with the love of all of the people who cherish her and the truths that Judge Drain barred from the courtroom.

Outside the courtroom, Detroiters affirmed that protesting outside courthouses is absolutely customary, and that the Detroit federal courthouse is especially known for protests — from the civil rights movement to struggles over gay marriage, to the Detroit bankruptcy ruling, to the recent verdict in Ferguson. Detroiters were also discussing the irony whereby the US government was pumping massive funds into this individual case while just around the corner, the city of Detroit was, without warning, shutting off the water of the city's majority-black population.

As the trial began, US marshalls lined up in the front row of the courtroom. Among them were individuals from Israel — the family of one of the people killed in the bombing for which Odeh was allegedly imprisoned. Whether or not the US invited them and paid their expenses, their presence was strategic.

While Judge Drain repeated that the case was not about her conviction in Israel, these individuals personified the suffering of the Israelis allegedly killed at her hands, and it is the suffering of these and other Israelis upon which Judge Drain allowed the Department of Justice to construct its case.

The court also refused to ask any questions in *voir dire* about Israel and Palestine to determine whether potential jurors could have attitudes that would interfere with their ability to be fair and impartial. Given all of this, the verdict was basically foreordained.

While details of the trial have been addressed elsewhere, one thing was clear: Odeh gave a deeply genuine and convincing testimony. As she says, "If I knew [the naturalization application question] was about Israel, I would have put it . . . It's not a secret that I've been in jail. Even the embassy knows."

Before the Fetishization

BDS and SJPs are currently among the most central movements organizing for Palestinian liberation in the US. And as with any movement, their achievements bring to light new challenges. Perhaps foremost among them: why are BDS movements more disconnected from local Palestinian and Arab diasporic communities than the Palestine solidarity movements of previous eras?

Of course, Palestinian and/or Arab diasporic communities are not monolithic enclaves separated entirely from universities or the professional world. But some immigrant and refugee communities are indeed isolated from the BDS movement, SJPs, US social movements more broadly, and the increasingly neoliberal university. The separation from the community brings with it a tendency for the professionalization of activism.

Are there alternatives to such modes of work? How can we push back against increasingly individuated, self-congratulatory ways of organizing? And crucially, does campus activism reverberate back — that is, *away* from the neoliberal university or the insistent lure of careers in the nonprofit industrial complex — toward students' own communities, households, and neighborhoods? What

does community accountability look like between the academic boycott of Israel movement and displaced Palestinians living among us in the US?

Enter Odeh's case. Since her arrest in October 2013, the campaign calling upon the DOJ to drop the charges against Odeh included mobilizations across the US.

Boston, Oakland, Seattle, New York, Chicago, Michigan, Salt Lake City, and Fort Lauderdale are but a few cities where protests supporting Odeh took place. Groups like United States Palestinian Community Network, whose Chicago chapter Odeh helped found, and the Committee to Stop FBI Harassment coordinated the national movement, while SJP chapters — along with various Palestinian and Arab-American organizations — carried the weight locally.

While there remain real issues in expanding to other struggles, the campaign to support Odeh was often popularized across distinct organizing and community-based spaces — from the one hundred feminist professors who wrote a statement supporting Odeh, to local Arab-American organizations such as the Arab Resource and Organizing Center in San Francisco, to SJP chapters across the country.

These new connections brought new forms of mobilizing that focused on building collective power and strength instead of centering individual activists or academic leaders or names. While organizing for Odeh, some SJP students in Chicago built new relations with organizers who were directly connected with Palestinian diaspora communities and the immigrant and refugee women with whom Odeh works.

As SJP organizer Nashiha Alam told me, "When we went to Detroit for the trial, it made us [SJP organizers] aware that Rasmea could be anyone's mother, sister, or daughter. She is connected to us, and she brings the Palestinian community to the solidarity work. I can't say we were connected before Rasmea's case."

What Odeh said to her supporters outside the courthouse after her conviction and before she was taken into custody epitomizes her politics of the collective:

> . . . We are the stronger people
>
> Not the government that is injustice . . .
>
> We will be strong! . . .

> Don't mind about that [my conviction]
>
> Continue to be strong
>
> Continue to support Palestine and to support me
>
> Go back and continue
>
> I don't want you to feel weak . . .
>
> We will be stronger than that

If Odeh's life work challenges us to think beyond individualist organizing models, then how can we apply this to the ways we represent her, support her, and work towards her liberation?

On the one hand, there *is* a need to isolate her case. She is a pillar of the community, and that is exactly why the government is targeting her. But who she is cautions us against fetishizing her — not only in order to challenge gender and social hierarchies and the harmful role of personality cults in progressive politics, but also to challenge the potential of social movements to fetishize Palestinian individuals and communities (in Palestine or the diaspora).

Let us continue to lift Odeh up precisely because she has *never* labored to gain a platform of her own, to stand on a pedestal over others, or to become a celebrity. Instead, she meticulously crafted and protected organizing spaces so that more and more people could come in and gain strength.

Pulling Odeh into the cyclone of fetishization will only do her and her struggle a huge disservice. Continuing her legacy requires growing a politics of the collective as we organize tirelessly for her release and for her appeal, as part and parcel not only of her liberation but also of ours — and Palestine's.

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