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Human Rights, Uncivil Activism, and Palestinianization

Mobilization by Arab, South Asian, and Afghan American youth in response to the War on Terror has been framed through the language of civil rights and enacted in interfaith and cross-racial coalitions, and it has also used the language of human rights, often simultaneously, especially in antiwar and antioccupation campaigns. In this chapter and the next, I explore the ways in which young activists grappled with human rights as a universalizing framework that they hoped would connect the domestic assault on civil rights of Muslim, Arab, South Asian, and Afghan Americans to U.S. overseas interventions and occupation, and to global violence, war, and displacement. In doing so, they acknowledged, implicitly or explicitly, that the discourse of civil rights often failed to link U.S. policies of racial profiling, incarceration, deportation, and surveillance to an ongoing imperial structure of repression, containment, and annihilation, within and beyond the nation. The failure of a liberal model of civil rights to account for structural racism and imperial violence drove many young people to express their dissent against the state through a language of human rights, linking their critique to transnational movements waged against imperial warfare, settler colonialism, and neoliberal globalization.

The contradictions generated by civil rights for post-9/11 activism, as discussed in the previous chapter, and by the regime of human rights, as I will explore here, are constitutive of U.S. imperial technologies that shape and produce Muslim, Arab, Afghan, and South Asian political subjects. The containment of politics through rights claims is not new, certainly, and there is a much longer history of tensions in political subjecthood along the axes of civil and human rights organizing, and their divergences, in response to settler colonialism and racial supremacy (see Rodriguez 2010). For example, Black Power movements in the 1960s and 1970s departed from the domestic agenda of the liberal civil rights movements and internationalized the freedom struggles of African Americans during the era of anticolonial movements in the global South, attempting to take it to the United Nations as a human rights issue, so that the “distinction between ‘civil rights’ and ‘human rights’” became a “coded distinction between Cold War liberalism and internationalism” and anti-imperialism (Daulatzai 2012, 37).

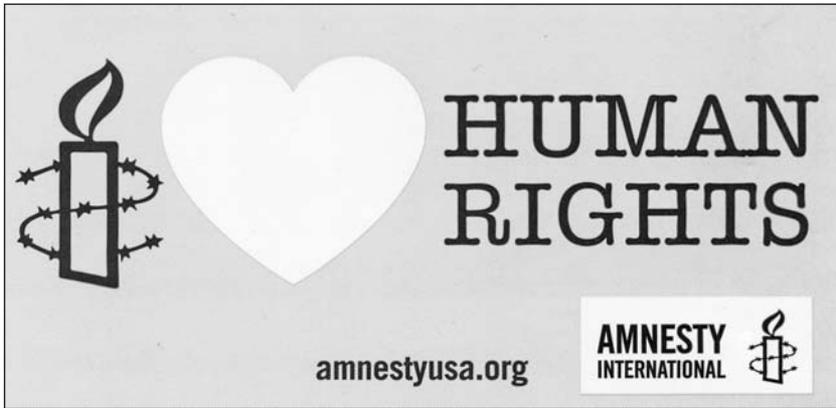


Figure 3.1. Amnesty International bumper sticker

The post-9/11 debate about these two approaches, one focused on domestic civil rights and the other on global human rights, parallels the tensions that emerged in the earlier civil rights, antiwar, and Third Worldist movements: between a domestic “rights-equality framework” and a “nationalist-decolonization” movement (Bruyneel 2007, 128). The decolonization paradigm links the struggles of minorities and indigenous peoples within the U.S. to global questions of imperialism and settler colonialism, and not (just) to national citizenship and inclusion. In today’s decolonization framework, solidarity with other groups within the nation-state is accompanied by solidarity with other populations globally, with other anti-imperial movements, and with those suffering from the wars and occupations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine, as well as the proxy war in Pakistan. This internationalist linkage to overseas wars and occupation is generally framed by Arab, South Asian, and Afghan American youth using a paradigm of human rights and driven by an anticolonial and anti-imperial politics, but tensions emerge between these concerns. As I will discuss, this has necessitated grappling, implicitly or explicitly, with issues of race and racialized exceptions in the human rights framework.

This chapter explores whether the language of human rights has actually enabled an effective critique of imperialism, warfare, and occupation for Arab, South Asian, and Afghan American youth. The youth I spoke to revealed through their experiences of political mobilization on the ground that deploying the vocabulary of human rights, in the case of Iraq, Af-Pak, and, especially, Palestine reveals a tension between an institutionalized regime of human rights activism, tied to the international political order, and

resistance to imperial models of sovereignty in the global War on Terror and in zones of occupation and colonialism. Their encounters with censorship of Palestine solidarity activism, in particular, revealed the “red line” in human rights campaigns and Muslim American political movements. I will discuss the ways in which this encounter with repression of the Palestine question is a site of political pedagogy and an entry into what I call Palestinianization, for Palestinian as well as non-Palestinian Americans. I am interested in the ways in which the engagement with human rights, as in organizing for Palestinian rights, is a “social process of producing norms, knowledge, and compliance,” that shapes political subjectivities and, in some cases, produces political critiques of forms of collective suffering and political justice denied by the institutionalized human rights and humanitarian discourse (Merry 2006, 109; see also Brown 2004).

Human Rights Activism: Solidarity and the Human

Human rights activism, as Wendy Brown (2004) and other critics have observed, has come to represent “*the* progressive international justice project,” a moral-political project that offers “protection against pain, deprivation, or suffering” (453–454). Some Arab, South Asian, and Afghan Americans youth I spoke to turned to human rights as a discourse they hoped could raise the question of violence or discrimination against targets of the U.S.-led War on Terror to the level of global humanity, a paradigm that they used for ethical as well as strategic reasons. South Asian, Arab, and Afghan American youth often encountered or deployed human rights in antiwar organizing, in the context of mobilization against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, drone strikes in Af-Pak, and Israeli wars and military occupation. For youth who are construed as racialized objects of the War on Terror, the critique of imperial violence in the name of bringing human rights to other populations, elsewhere, highlights the paradox of why there are different civil rights and human rights for different (racialized) populations. The exceptionalism of U.S. racial wars and U.S.-backed military occupation and invasion drove many youth to engage with the human rights paradigm to make the case that the U.S. should be held accountable for its violations of international human rights law, given that there are subjects who do not have rights, such as in Palestine or Afghanistan or even here in the U.S., that the imperial state purports to support.

Human rights was invoked by youth in Silicon Valley in two major arenas of mobilization, both grounded in notions of cross-racial, transnational solidarity: pan-Islamic activism and the Palestine solidarity and antiwar

movement. Some were involved in protests organized by the larger antiwar movement, by national progressive-left groups such as ANSWER that are active in the Bay Area, or by South Bay Mobilization in Silicon Valley, but also in events coordinated through mosque communities and local networks focused on “Muslim rights.” Muslim Student Association chapters and other Muslim activist groups have engaged in advocacy for the human rights of Muslims suffering in zones of war and conflict such as Kashmir, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Palestine, with their campaigns overlapping in many instances with those of non-faith-identified antiwar and Palestine solidarity groups. These two strands of antiwar and human rights organizing—issue based and faith based—did not always converge, and while Arab and Muslim American groups (and to a much lesser extent South Asian and Afghan American activists) were involved in antiwar coalitions, there were often distinct, if overlapping, networks of political protest.

Many students I spoke to were involved with both MSA and Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) groups on their campuses, using the notion of human rights in different ways. Marwa, an Egyptian American woman from Fremont, was actively involved in the Islamic Society and the Muslim Student Awareness Network at Stanford, both of which were ethnically and racially mixed and included students from Pakistan, Nigeria, Syria, Egypt, and Kazakhstan. She said, “We’ve done things, like, in Africa, all around the world because there are Muslims everywhere.” Pan-Islamic solidarity anchors mobilization against military interventions and occupation affecting Muslims around the globe. In the Bay Area, Naber (2012) observes, there was a shift to faith-based organizing among Arab Muslim Americans in the 2000s, based on the notion of “global Muslim social justice,” and an increasing “centrality of religion as an organizing framework for Palestine solidarity activism,” evident in mass prayers organized by Muslim Americans in the streets of San Francisco during the second Intifada (147–148). During the Israeli war on Gaza in summer 2014, Imam Zaid Shakir and Hatem Bazian organized a similar mass Friday prayer in downtown San Francisco, followed by a march to the Israeli consulate, sponsored by American Muslims for Palestine.

Some youth straddled activism based on a “transnational, coalitional concept of Islam” and non-faith-based political solidarity (Naber 2012, 148). Marwa, for example, was also involved with the Palestine solidarity movement and in a divestment campaign, launched by the Student Coalition against Israeli Apartheid (SCAI) at Stanford in 2007, becoming a part of a cross-ethnic coalition including Arab Americans, African Americans, and Jewish Americans. She remarked, “It’s a really beautiful thing, and you see all these people that are about human rights and that care about the situation,”

reflecting that, in her view, human rights is a “powerful” framework for wider solidarity, because “when you say it’s a human rights issue, people are more bound to care than when you say it’s a political issue between two countries.” The efficacy of human rights, in Marwa’s view, is that the notion of the human supersedes the national. In the case of Palestine solidarity activism, many youth hoped that invoking human rights would overcome the dominant paradigm of a civilizational or religious “conflict” between Israel and Palestine, considered two equivalent political entities (even though Palestine is rarely acknowledged by Zionist supporters of Israel as a nation); this ahistoric, and presumably “neutral” approach, evades the history of settler colonialism and state violence in Palestine and reduces it to a primordial “conflict,” as discussed in Chapter Two (see Davis 1989; Pappé 2006).

The framework of human rights is often used strategically, to draw attention to the assault on the sovereignty and freedoms of peoples in the context of a globally recognized discourse of rights, in campaigns arguing that Palestinian rights should also be considered human rights. Some youth argued that human rights trumped Muslim rights, such as Aisha, who thought that organizing in solidarity with Palestinians had to transcend pan-Islamic solidarity. Her family was from Gaza, and she reflected on activism in support of Palestine: “I have been thinking about this a lot and I think it needs to be framed as an issue of human rights, a something that affects all of humanity. That is the way we can connect to other people and to different groups.” Many young activists echoed Aisha’s observations and turned to human rights as a potentially universalist framework that they believed would make legible the suffering generated by U.S. imperial violence and U.S.-backed regimes of warfare and occupation to a larger public and help build cross-racial solidarity. Yet in doing so, they also found themselves facing, in varying ways, the limitations of the human rights paradigm in relation to questions of imperialism and sovereignty, in particular racialized zones of displacement and annihilation such as Palestine-Israel.

Interestingly, some Muslim and Arab American youth said that the Israeli war on Lebanon in 2006 was a catalyzing event that shaped their awareness of global politics, even more than the attacks of 9/11. Since they were only in middle school in 2001 but in high school or college during the assault on Lebanon, they were old enough to grapple with issues such as the unconditional U.S. support for Israel as played out in the battle between Hezbollah and Israel. For many youth from Silicon Valley, the Israeli assault on Gaza in winter 2008–2009 was also a turning point in their political involvement in international human rights, antiwar, and Palestine solidarity campaigns, as was true for many youth across the nation (Barows-Friedman 2014, 38). The

concern with human life and human rights in Palestine deeply shaped their cross-racial, transnational solidarity, and anti-imperial politics.

For example, in Silicon Valley and Fremont, there were many large demonstrations in winter 2009 protesting the Israeli massacre in Gaza in which Arab, South Asian, and Afghan American youth were visibly involved. On January 11, 2009, I went to a rally in Santa Clara held on a street corner between the Westfield shopping mall and an upscale outdoor mall, Santana Row, which was attended by a very diverse and multigenerational crowd of Arabs, Afghans, Iranians, and South Asians, as well as white Americans. The previous weekend there had been a rally at the same location, at the corner of Stevens Creek and Winchester Boulevard, during which the protesters, many of whom were youth, had blocked the entrance to Santana Row. They had marched through the manicured streets of the open-air mall and past the elegant designer boutiques and outdoor cafés, to the shock of shoppers strolling by or sipping coffee on the sidewalk. Sabina, a young Indian American from Santa Clara who attended the rally, described it as “very intense. I was at the end of a huge crowd and there were actually police following us. There were bystanders taking pictures and it was interesting going around Santana Row because it was very rich people who have no idea what’s going on around the world. They were probably thinking, ‘Who are these crazy people screaming?’” The rally, staged in a major shopping area, ruptured the bubble of Silicon Valley, and marked the coming of age of a new generation of activists.

At the rally I attended, a young woman in hijab was standing at the intersection, in the middle of the busy street, waving a large Palestinian flag high in the air. Another young woman in hijab, with a kaffiyeh wrapped around her shoulders, was shouting vigorously through a bullhorn: “Free, FREE Palestine! Stop bomb-ing Ga-za!” There were dozens of children, some of them toddlers and even babies in strollers, with their families and many youth standing on the sidewalks. Many protesters were carrying signs protesting the deaths of Palestinian children in Gaza; at least 1,400 Palestinians had been killed in the massacre, and more than 300 of them were estimated to be children.¹ One woman had pushed her little son to stand in the front of the crowd, which seemed to underscore the poignancy of the deaths of hundreds of Gazan children. Some South Asian activists were milling around the crowd and asking protesters to sign petitions calling on the U.S. government to end its financial and military aid to Israel. Many of the people at the rally were community members who did not look like stereotypical Bay Area “activists,” including several middle-aged South Asian and Middle Eastern women dressed in elegant clothes and with coiffed hair and makeup.

It was apparent that this brutal assault on Palestinians, by a state closely allied to and backed by the U.S., that involved the destruction of schools, universities, and refugee shelters (as well as the use of chemical weapons, such as white phosphorus) had compelled many people to come out into the streets who were not part of organized political groups, including women and youth of various ages and backgrounds. When I asked people how they had heard about the rally, a group of South Asian girls in jeans and sweatshirts standing on the sidewalk said they had learned about it through email and Facebook postings. Two students from UC Davis who were at the demonstration, Amira and Azma, said that they had also heard about the protest through Facebook. While the outrage and grief of the crowd was palpable, as was their passionate desire to inject a critique of (U.S.-backed) violence elsewhere into a space of hypercommercialized materialism, I sensed some internal disagreements and ambivalence had cropped up about how to express this critique. One South Asian girl complained to her family about the young Arab American men at the protest who had their faces wrapped in kaffiyehs, concerned that they looked like “terrorists.” She said, “This is supposed to be a peaceful protest. I am going to tell the organizers to ask them to take it off!” Her comment expressed unease with public performances of Arabness that evoked racialized images of the “enemy” in the War on Terror, a concern that solidarity should stop short of looking like the enemy. At a protest of the Israeli strikes in Gaza in San Francisco the previous day, I saw Arab American male teenagers with kaffiyehs covering their faces, as if to defiantly and express their solidarity with those engaged in resistance to Israeli occupation and warfare by performing the iconic and highly charged image of the Palestinian fedayeen (guerilla fighters), one that has historically emblemized Arab and Muslim terrorism in the U.S.

The comment by the young protester in Santa Clara condemning images of kaffiyeh-swathed militant “extremists” is embedded in a political landscape where the performance of “moderate”/good and “angry”/bad Islam has shaped the expressions of public protest for Muslim American youth, as discussed in Chapter One. Azma, a Pakistani American woman from Milpitas whose parents met while living and working in Libya, commented to me after the protest, “I thought that I would feel angry when I went there; obviously, we were protesting because we feel anger, but when I went there, it just made me feel really good about myself and I was really happy that we’re going to do something and we’re all here together. So, people should listen to us.” This is an interesting reflection on the politics of “angry” protest and a reframing of the distancing from “radical” Muslim politics, for Azma both legitimizes feelings of outrage at disproportionate state violence against a besieged

population and links them to her discovery of the positive affect of solidarity through collective action. Solidarity is a structure of political feeling and can be infused with sentiments of anger, frustration, fear, anxiety, happiness, and empathy (Williams 1977). These emotions are variously expressed and translated into or borne out of political actions, producing the affective moral and political registers of proper subjecthood for Muslim, Palestinian, Pakistani, and Afghan American youth.

The political sentiments of solidarity expressed by the young people on the sidewalk in Santa Clara that day were not shared by all their peers, clearly, and did not necessarily resonate with other Muslim American youth. Azma, for example, was frustrated by her attempts to reach out to others through Facebook to oppose the occupation and wars in Palestine:

I think that everyone, regardless of whether they're Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim or not [should be concerned], it's human rights. It really bothers me when I tell people, like I would invite them to a group or something on Facebook, and they just will deny it right away. And I know they denied it right away because I ask them, "Oh, did you look at it [the Facebook group]?" and they'll say, "No, I'm not into that kind of stuff." And it just really bothers me, because how can you not be into a subject that just relates to everyone?

Azma was frustrated that the Palestine question was an ethnically particular, rather than a universal, issue of "human rights" that would cross national and religious boundaries. She was equally upset that social media was a site of denial and evasion, as much as connection and education, for youth who were unconcerned and did not share her outrage. This frustration was echoed by Aisha, who grappled with the absence of interest by others in the dispossession, displacement, and violence experienced by Palestinians. She became aware at an early age of the erasure of Palestine in the U.S. mainstream media due to her own, invisibilized family history. She reflected, "As a child, I was hanging out with my grandpa who was beaten by Israeli soldiers and his leg was injured, his front tooth was broken. . . . I was left wondering why this wasn't on the news, why people weren't talking about it. I felt I was growing up as a second-class citizen; I couldn't engage politically. These issues were real to me, but there was no place in society to talk about it." Aisha's sense of exclusion from citizenship, and from participation in the body politic of the nation, was not just due to the denial of the Palestinian narrative in the U.S. but also the lack of a space to enter politics related to the Palestine question—what Edward Said (2000) famously called the "last taboo" in the U.S. mainstream public sphere.

Other youth argued that defining Arabs as human would challenge U.S. violence in the global War on Terror legitimized by the language of terrorism and counterterrorism, so human rights becomes a language through which to restore humanity. Jenaan recalled conversations she had with people while working at a movie theater in Santa Clara about the revelations of torture of Iraqis at the U.S. military prison in Abu Ghraib:

I was like, “How can they do that to another human being?” And some people were like, “You know what, I don’t care. They’re terrorists, they deserve what they’re getting” . . . I said, “You know what, the majority of the people there aren’t even terrorists. They haven’t been charged with anything, but they’re being treated like animals.” And that kind of shut people up because they didn’t think I would retort!

Jenaan had to confront the view that torture is justified because certain racialized bodies classified as “terrorists” are not (fully) human and do not deserve the protection of due process or rights. Commenting on the torture at Abu Ghraib, Angela Davis (2005) asked, “How do we pose questions about the violence associated with the importation of US-style democracy to Iraq? What kind of democracy treats human beings as refuse?” (50). Populations that are disposable are considered remaindered lives that “deserve” torture within the biopolitics of the counterterrorism regime’s assessment of human lives and the “democratization” of regions that only understand force, according to Orientalist experts on “the Arab mind” whose work has legitimized U.S. military and counterterrorism policies (see Sheehi 2011; Tadiar 2013, 22).

Jenaan also commented that as a woman who wore a hijab, and who engaged feistily in political discussions, she frequently challenged people’s stereotypical assumptions about Muslim women as submissive or voiceless. I met Jenaan at the Eastridge mall in San Jose in the summer of 2008, where we had coffee in the Barnes & Noble bookstore café. Sitting by the window, we could see families walking around outside and many South Asians of various ages, including children and young men in baseball caps, on a weekend outing to the mall. Jenaan, who had graduated from San Jose State and was working in a real estate company in Palo Alto, spoke with passion and sardonic wit. When I asked her what she thought about the war in Iraq, she said with evident frustration:

I . . . think it was a waste of time, energy, and life. . . . they [the U.S. military] took down Saddam Hussein and now it’s still being occupied and people are still getting killed. They keep coming up with stories about how they were

forced to shoot at random people. . . . They're like, "Well, they're getting the terrorists," and 99% of the people there are civilians who are getting killed. They get so happy because they killed a terrorist when they probably went inside and fired at someone defending their own house.

Jenaan argues eloquently against the premises of "regime change" for democracy in Iraq and a racialized worldview in which ordinary Arabs defending their homes are considered terrorists who can be killed, given that counterinsurgency doctrine views the entire population as a site of resistance to invasion. She may be enhancing the estimates of "collateral damage" to dramatize her observation, but it is indeed the case that there have been many killings of civilians by the U.S. military, not to mention rapes of Iraqi girls and women by soldiers. The massacres of Iraqis at Haditha and Fallujah are just two well-publicized incidents of U.S. atrocities, not to mention the 2007 killing of journalists and civilians in Baghdad that came to light through the classified materials given by Chelsea Manning to WikiLeaks; the latter included reports that the U.S. military covered up executions of children and the elderly and a count of approximately sixty-six thousand violent deaths of civilians between 2004 and 2009.² The fact that this violence disappears from plain view, like incidents of mass violence against Palestinians that are often not even called massacres, leads some to focus on a humanist approach.

Other young people I spoke to were also frustrated with the impunity with which the U.S. military had killed civilians in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the name of its relentless War on Terror against Al Qaeda and the Taliban, as I discuss in the next chapter. For many youth, who had familial and cultural ties in the regions where the U.S. was engaged in military occupation as well as covert operations, the fact that some human lives were considered legitimate targets of "extraordinary technologies" of warfare fueled much of their opposition to the "racial wars" of the U.S. (Reddy 2011, 12). Recall the comment of General Tommy Frank, who led the invasion of Iraq, that the U.S. would not do a body count of Iraqi casualties, a deliberate departure from the policy during the Vietnam war. Civilian groups such as Iraq Body Count estimated that over one hundred thousand Iraqi noncombatants had been killed due to the U.S. war beginning in 2003, not to mention the mass deaths of Iraqis during the U.S. economic sanctions of the 1990s—including a staggering estimate of half a million Iraqi children.³ This genocidal violence targeting an entire society (one that had not attacked the U.S., it must be noted) was stunning as much for its scale of devastation as for the impunity of the U.S. military in its occupation and destruction of another, sovereign

nation. As Judith Butler (2009) observes, “grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters”; the differential recognition accorded to the deaths of racially marked bodies is what underlies the politics of “precarity” that shapes the biopolitics of war and the outrage that infuses a politics of solidarity (14). Achille Mbembe (2003) has argued that the management of death, or necropolitics, is apparent in late-colonial policies of determining “who is disposable and who is not” through “the enactment of differential rights to differing categories of people” (26–27), which he frames as a racialized project of Western modernity. Regimes of killing, incarceration, and torture justified by projects of democracy promotion or counterterrorism are intimately and violently linked to the politics of life and death, to the question of which lives can be sacrificed in order to save humanity (Agamben 2005). This logic of disposability underlies the exceptionalisms in human rights organizing that some youth confronted in their solidarity with others, facing occupation, racial exclusion, and also sociocide, in zones of war and colonization.

The Global “Color Line” of Human Rights

The racialized distribution of human rights rests on the racialization of the notion of the human itself, within and beyond the imperial state, for the human who was afforded constitutional rights was “essentially Caucasian, Christian, capitalist, and civil” (Barker 2014, 34); in the settler colony, “Native humanity and human rights are made contingent on the empire’s interests,” according to Joanne Barker, as “some humans are not, or not enough, human to warrant the recognition, rights, and entitlements of the empire” (39, 44). The paradoxical assault on global humanity and human rights in the name of human rights, as critics such as Randall Williams (2010) have argued, rests on a civilizational logic or global “color line”: the institutionalized human rights regime reinscribes an international division of humanity between “the third world individual living within a nation of danger and the first world rescuers residing in a space of safety and enlightened freedom”—a colonialist geography that is deeply racialized and gendered (xv, 28). As Williams (2010,) observes, after World War II, a “liberal model of human rights” emerged as “the privileged discourse for the symbolic articulation of international justice” and framework for responding to violence, increasingly adopted and produced by national and transnational NGOs, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (xv, xvii; see figure 3.1 preceding). In fact, “human rights have increasingly come to define ‘the political’” and provided a dominant “international ethic” for responding to violence since the 1970s and especially after the Cold War through an assemblage of new forms of

imperial intervention, such as “just war, preemptive invasions, humanitarian operations” (Williams 2010, xxiv; see also Fassin and Pandolfi 2010). As Neda Atanowski (2013) succinctly states, “Human rights appear as the only ethical politics in the world today” (17).

However, the enshrining of human rights in international legal instruments and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, during the period of decolonization in the global South, eclipsed the “dialectic between (imperial) violence and (international) law” (Williams 2010, xxiii). There is thus a historical tension between legally institutionalized human rights and anti-imperial politics. Sally Merry (2006) has tracked the emergence of international law in the context of a long history of (European) imperial expansion and situates the legal human rights apparatus in the international order of sovereign nation-states (103–104). This legal regime of human rights obscures colonial violence through a selective focus on nonviolence and evasion of human rights violations within or by Western nation-states and imperial regimes, in the context of what Richard Falk calls “Western liberal internationalism” (cited in Williams 2010, 16). The slippage of other forms of international solidarity and disappearance of Palestine, Iraq, or Af-Pak from the framework of human rights is not surprising, then, for it illuminates the “oppositional relationship” between the institutionalized human rights regime and decolonizing movements in the global South, particularly those that involve armed struggle, from South Africa to Palestine (Williams 2010, xxiii). The United States’ legalization of torture and doctrines of counterterrorism since 9/11 have led to the paradoxical situation, once again, where international human rights law is used to mask the human rights violations of the imperial state or is defied altogether when convenient.

In addition, human rights internationalism” has been “domesticated” by the “discourses of American nationalism and neoliberalism” and has suppressed movements that focus on social and economic rights, as Wendy Hesford (2011, 11, 187) argues. While activists and “Third World social movements” have helped shift human rights frameworks from individually based to collective rights, there persists a “deep division” between the emphasis on civil and political rights (such as free speech and freedom of religion) in the U.S. and other capitalist democracies, and the prioritization of economic and social rights in socialist and developing states (Merry 2006, 105; Bricmont 2007, 83–88). In fact, U.S. neoliberal imperialism has insisted that its version of human rights and economic rights—that is, rights to the free market—must be imposed across the world as the primary route to “freedom,” including for those in the impoverished states of the global South who are barely clinging to life itself (Bricmont 2007, 66; Melamed 2006, 17).



Figure 3.2. T-shirt from 2014 Gaza solidarity events

These critiques, however, do not invalidate the strategic necessity of resorting to human rights in order to speak back to empire, for those who suffer from imperial violence and state terror and deploy human rights as a tool to expose the impunity and hypocrisy of Western regimes. This is, of course, an ongoing debate in many parts of the world, including in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine, where the targets of colonial and settler violence resort to international legal instruments and human rights frameworks, well aware of their exceptionalisms and often with cynicism, precisely because human rights *is*, in fact, the privileged framework for modern politics (Allen 2013). As Hesford (2011) pithily observes, “‘Having’ a right is of most value precisely when one does not ‘have’ (the object of) the right” (37). At the same time, the young activists I spoke to realized that there is a deep contradiction embedded in human rights, especially as invoked in the post-9/11 moment, given the absences and repression they encountered in their international solidarity activism related to Palestine, Afghanistan, Iraq, or Pakistan, yet they continued to grapple with rights claims, often strategically, and attempted to find room for dissent within this paradigm. Their experiences suggest, however, that we need to examine the political implications of the exceptionalism of human

rights as a failed discourse in the post-9/11 era, such as in mobilization in support of Palestinian human rights.

Palestinianization, Palestine Solidarity Activism, and Arab American Politics

Palestine solidarity activism, including the growing Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement in which many youth and college students have been involved in recent years, often relies on human rights discourse, based on the premise that Palestinians do not have the rights that they should and so must assert the right to claim rights (Isin and Ruppert 2015, 180). The Palestine solidarity movement in the U.S. is a transnational human rights movement that extends beyond Arab and Muslim American communities, but it is also a unifying axis for Muslim, Arab, South Asian, and Afghan American politics and a significant crucible for politicization of youth. The cross-racial alliances produced through solidarity with Palestine are not new, given left activism in solidarity with Palestine in the era of Third Worldist politics of the 1960s and 1970s, but the movement declined in the U.S. after the Oslo Peace Accords of 1993, and in the wake of the dissolution of Arab student groups such as the Arab American University Graduates (AAUG), the Organization of Arab Students (OAS), and the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS) (see Naber 2012). The Palestine solidarity movement reemerged in the late 1990s after the second Intifada with new formations such as the Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), founded in 2001, which are multiracial and not based on ethnic/religious identity (see Barrows-Friedman 2014). In the late 2000s, BDS organizing, launched in response to the call for BDS from Palestinian civil society in 2004–2005, was galvanized by the attacks on the humanitarian aid flotilla to Gaza in 2010 and the wars on Gaza in 2008–2009, 2012, and 2014. Indeed, Palestine solidarity activism has increasingly become an important terrain for global justice activism on campuses and among youth, even if it is a highly contentious site of repression and backlash as well.

On the ground, there is an important distinction made between Palestine solidarity activism and *Palestinian* activism—between groups and activists including non-Palestinians in support of Palestinian self-determination and mobilization by Palestinians themselves. New cross-racial alliances, including by younger activists, have increasingly produced a discourse of Palestine solidarity as an issue of racial justice, and not just resistance to military occupation, humanitarian crisis, or displacement. For example, Marwa talked about an African American student who was involved with SCAI, and who had worked for a senator in Washington D.C. and “dealt with the Israel lobby.”

She said, “Basically, he sees the racism that still goes on today, you know, against African Americans. . . . And learning about it and just hearing about it [the Palestine issue], he sees major parallels because he says . . . ‘I *should* [emphatically] be working for this because it’s the same thing.’” The shift to the discourse of racial apartheid and analogies between racial discrimination and segregation by the Israeli state and Jim Crow in the U.S., while heavily contested by supporters of Israel, is an important shift, crystallized dramatically in the Ferguson to Gaza solidarity campaign spurred by police killings of Black males in the U.S and awareness of Israeli collaboration with U.S. police as well as shared experiences of racist state violence. This interracial solidarity has been generated partly by the explicit connections made by the BDS movement to the struggle against South African apartheid, and by the support of major African American left intellectuals such as Robin Kelley, Angela Davis, and Alice Walker (see Davis 1989; Kelley and Williams 2013).⁴

It is important to consider the Palestine solidarity movement as an antiracist movement that crosses boundaries of ethnicity, nationalism, religion, and class, though these various axes of mobilization may be variously highlighted or downplayed depending on the particular group or campaign. While faith-based groups might approach the Palestine issue primarily as an issue of “Muslim rights,” which generates an internationalist but not a universalist rubric, Palestinian solidarity and Palestinian activist groups cross religious boundaries and focus on opposition to militarism, dispossession, and, in some cases, apartheid and colonialism through an approach that transcends rights-talk. As discussed in the previous chapter, a liberal interfaith or cross-cultural approach to Palestine solidarity uses a depoliticized model of “coexistence” that evades political realities through faithwashing. Issues of nationalism, race, and religion are variously negotiated in both faith- and non-faith-based forms of organizing in support of Palestine by youth. A Palestinian community activist from the Bay Area, who had been involved in Palestine organizing in the U.S. since the 1970s, observed that while many Arab Muslim youth increasingly mobilized around their religious identity after 9/11, it seemed that Palestinian Christian youth in the Bay Area became more activated around the Palestinian issue. This is a complex issue, but it is true that the leadership of (secular) Palestinian groups in the Bay Area, including the transnational Palestinian Youth Movement, the campaign to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the Nakba in 2008, and organizing with local Arab American youth, has visibly featured young Palestinian Christians (mainly women).

Less attention, in fact, has been paid to the politicization of Christian Arab American youth, whose experiences are often lost in the post-9/11 discourse

that is heavily invested in the experiences of young Muslim Americans. While the War on Terror compelled some youth to focus on combating Islamophobia and turn to pan-Islamic solidarity, for some Arab Christian youth there was a turn to Arab nationalist politics, in addition to solidarity with Muslim Americans and civil rights activism. Two young women I spoke to, who belonged to the large population of Palestinian Christian families in the Bay Area, reflected on their own trajectories of politicization after 2001. Jenny, who grew up in Morgan Hill, became involved with the Palestine movement and with organizing a recruitment program for Arab American high school youth while at UC Berkeley. She visited Palestine for the first time on her own, because her parents were nervous about traveling through Israeli borders, and commented on her engagement with the Palestine issue with other college students: "I don't know if we'd have done that if 9/11 had not happened." Amalia, a Palestinian American friend of Jenny's who grew up in San Jose, was also involved with both pan-Arab and Palestine solidarity student groups at Berkeley, and remarked, "We definitely wanted to have a voice and presence. We wanted to say, 'We exist, we have a history, you can't erase Palestine!'" The events of 9/11 and the intensification of anti-Arab discourse thus propelled the construction of a defiant Palestinian nationalism. Both Amalia and Jenny also talked about the shift from those in their parents' generation who were hesitant to publicly express an Arab or Palestinian identity—reflected in the non-Arab names they gave their daughters—and wary about the political risks of speaking about Palestine, to their own increasingly vocal and public claiming of Palestinian national identification in their college years.⁵

These intergenerational tensions and transitions are embedded in a longer history of shifts in ethnic and political identification among Arab immigrant communities in the U.S. toward a more public claiming of Arab national identity and mobilization in support of Palestine, especially after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, and despite ongoing repression of Arab nationalism in the U.S. (Pennock 2014). Arab migrants in the first half of the twentieth century were predominantly Christians from what is now Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine; beginning in the 1960s, there was an influx of Muslim migrants as well as Arab migrants politicized by pan-Arab nationalism and Arab socialism (Naff 1985; Orfalea 2006; Malek 2009). The resurgence of Palestinian activism since 2001 has occurred as a new generation of Arab and Palestinian Americans has come of age, including many whose families are part of the old, well-established Palestinian Christian community in the Bay Area. During the second Intifada in Palestine that began in 2000, solidarity groups and SJP chapters were launched on college campuses, and Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim American youth began mobilizing in coalition with others, as the events

of 9/11 precipitated an intensified focus on the Middle East. These two historical events, in Palestine and the U.S., converged to galvanize Palestine activism and the focus on human rights in the last decade of the old millennium.

It is striking that the Palestine issue is, according to many I spoke to, a hub of mobilization for Arabs and Muslims in the U.S. and a focal point for their political identity (Naber 2012, 146). Bashir observed, "It's the single most important issue. And sometimes it's not realized how important it is, especially by certain governments. And again and again people say that if this is resolved, many things will be resolved." As Bashir points out, concern about Palestine underlies much of the opposition and militant resistance to the U.S. among Muslims (and Arabs) within the U.S. as well as globally, who are frustrated and outraged at the consistent U.S. support and funding for the Israeli occupation; this was also a factor in Al Qaeda's rationale for the 9/11 attacks. The issue of justice in Palestine is a political thread that also links older and younger generations of Muslim and Arab Americans. A Pakistani immigrant from Sunnyvale who came to the U.S. in 1967 and was involved with the Pakistani Association of the Bay Area, of which he was once president, as well as local programs for Muslim American youth, observed eloquently, "Palestine is a core issue on which Muslims tend to agree, there is no difference of opinion. It [the problem in Palestine] keeps us frustrated. It's a religious, and a human issue. . . . Palestine is an issue that transcends, whether it's Indian, Arab, Pakistani. . . . It's a great injustice, and [persists] in the twenty-first century. It's unbelievable." The outrage over the devastation and displacement of a predominantly Muslim society, and the Israeli regime's control over access to the third most important site in Islam—the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem—is shared by Muslim Americans across ethnic and national boundaries and makes this a consistently burning issue for global Muslim rights. For this older Pakistani immigrant, Palestine was a "human" issue that produces a consensus among Muslim Americans and has stoked their frustration with the U.S. state, animating a position of dissent. Marwa also commented on the way the Palestine question binds the Arab American community and shapes its political culture:

All Arabs have this love or care about Palestine. They [Palestinians] have the most human rights problems, there's the occupation. Despite all the problems between Arabs and such, they all unify on this one topic, it's something that brings them all together. If you've looked at history, that's one thing they all care about. It's more of a unifying factor to this day; even the way I was raised, I remember going to Palestine protests in San Francisco with my whole family as, like, a normal thing.

Palestine is a core issue that unites Arabs, through pan-Arab nationalism, and Muslims, through pan-Islamic internationalism and concern about the holy sites of Islam, and is a vehicle to engage with political injustice and human rights activism for youth. Mobilization around the Palestine question also has implications for the ways in which Arab and Muslim identity is shaped, internally and in relation to larger publics. It is an issue that keeps Muslim and Arab American communities “frustrated,” critical, and in opposition to U.S. foreign policy and is a key issue in the Middle East that challenges the official narrative about U.S. interventions for “human rights” and “democracy.” As Gregory Orfalea (2006) has suggested, the Palestine movement transformed Arab Americans into a progressive political community with a major political cause that has pitted it against the U.S. state, in particular since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and the consolidation of the U.S. alliance with Israel. It is the Palestine question that has historically prevented Arab Americans from becoming an assimilable and ambiguously racialized immigrant group or model minority, as has been the case, relatively, for Indian Americans and Pakistani Americans, as well as Afghan Americans to some extent, until 9/11 (Salaita 2006a). In fact, political solidarity with the Palestinian national struggle is generally illegible in a U.S. public culture that has racialized Arab Americans as a nonwhite population in conflict with hegemonic U.S. politics.

Well before 9/11, Arab Americans have been targets of repression and surveillance due to their nationalist politics and organized efforts to challenge U.S. support for Israel. The post-1967 period is often described as an “Arab American awakening” with the flourishing of pan-Arab nationalist, anti-imperialist, and left organizing in the U.S. in the 1970s and 1980s, including an Arab American campaign in Detroit calling on the United Auto Workers to divest from Israel after the 1973 Arab-Israeli war—one of the earliest divestment campaigns targeting Israel (Abraham 1983; Haddad 1994, 79; Malek 2009, 69). It is the question of Palestine that stands at the threshold of cultural and political assimilation for Arab, and in many cases, (immigrant) Muslim Americans, historically troubling the entry of these groups into easy identification with U.S. imperial nationalism and white middle-class America. This is an important point that is sometimes overlooked by those who focus exclusively on the events of 9/11 as the impetus for politicization and the context for repression of Arab and Muslim Americans. Linking the post-9/11 backlash to the Palestine question and the long history of anti-Arab racism helps situate what is usually glossed simply as Islamophobia within the deeper structure of repression linked to the U.S. state’s involvement in the Middle East and to Arabophobia.

Although the Israel-Palestine “conflict” (or colonial question) is so central to the War on Terror—and fuels so much of “anti-American” militancy

as well as counterterrorism operations in the U.S. (see Said 2000), decades of misinformation and censorship related to Israel-Palestine, coupled with heavily Orientalist media representations of Arab militancy and Islamic fanaticism, have obscured the political realities and histories of the region. Over and over again, the young people I interviewed said that they realized early on in their lives that their peers simply knew very little about West Asia, including about Israel-Palestine. This also means that the solidarity with the Palestinian struggle in Arab and Muslim American communities animated a pedagogy of political protest for youth as they confronted the embargo on open discussion of Palestine. Marwa reminisced about her early encounters with anti-Palestinianism in school:

When I was in eighth grade, one of the turning points of my life was . . . one of our teachers was . . . talking in class—and this is a private school, you’re not supposed to talk about your political views and stuff like that—he was talking about Palestine and he was saying stuff about Palestine and suicide bombers, which I don’t support, but like he made it sound like Palestinians are crazy and are terrorist. So I was only in eighth grade and I spoke out—because I am crazy—and I was like, “Uhhh, I think you’re wrong!” And then we kind of battled him out in class and then he was like . . . “I’ll give you twenty minutes in class next week to do a presentation.” And I was like, “Okay!” And I started doing the presentations, which really started my activism.

This early experience of being catapulted into political debate and activism due to racist and Orientalist assumptions of Palestinian/Arab irrationality and violence is common among many Arab and Muslim American youth and has persisted over time (Salaita 2006a). Toufic El Rassi addresses his politicization as a young Lebanese American in his witty and poignant autobiographical graphic novel, *Arab in America* (2007), recalling how high school teachers and students used slurs such as “towelheads” and displayed anti-Arab cartoons during the first Gulf War (9–30). Similar experiences of anti-Arab racism targeting youth have been documented in the Bay Area as well, despite its veneer of liberal multiculturalism and progressive pedagogy. The Arab Resource and Organizing Center did a survey of Arab American high school youth in 2009–2010 in the San Francisco Bay Area through their Arab Youth Organizing (AYO) program. They found that nearly half of youth had heard racist remarks in high schools about Arabs and 8% had actually been suspended or punished because they became upset about offensive views expressed about Arabs or Muslims, particularly after the war on Gaza in 2008–2009; several reported incidents of censorship in the classroom, and

76% said that they had not been taught anything about Arab history or culture that year.⁶ Clearly, the engagement of Arab American youth with global politics did not begin after 9/11 but must be situated in the longer history of unconditional U.S. support for the Zionist state, ongoing U.S. interventions in the Middle East, and the cultural racism that has bolstered support for Israel in the U.S. public sphere, including the mainstream media's relentless stereotyping and criminalization of Arabs and Palestinians (Alsultany 2012; Sheehi 2011).

Given this historical context, I argue that we need to consider the process of *Palestinianization*, or politicization around Palestinian identity and struggles, as a site of racialization that is endemic to U.S. national culture due to the alliance between the U.S. and Israel and the suppression of the Palestinian national struggle as a struggle for racial justice. Palestinianization is a process that overlaps with the antiracist and antistate politics of other groups subjected to racial violence, displacement, and genocide by the U.S.; it is not an exceptional site of counterhegemonic race politics, of course, but it is one that has been heavily repressed in the U.S. and also (as a result) has been much less discussed and theorized in U.S. scholarship. Palestinianization is a process that non-Palestinians and non-Arabs also experience, as they challenge U.S. collusion with Israeli settler colonialism and warfare, and subsequently encounter repression and demonization. I draw this concept of Palestinianization from June Jordan's (2007) simple yet profound statement, originally published in 1985, on the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the massacre of Palestinian refugees in Sabra and Shatila camps in 1982: "I was born a Black woman/and now/I am become a Palestinian" (400). This statement suggests something subtly but importantly different from the activist credo "We are all Palestinian"; it evokes an individual transformation and an active process of "becoming" a Palestinian through confronting U.S. and Israeli racism and imperial violence and making the connections among these colonial pasts and presents. Jordan's statement, which I read as a poetic expression of Palestinianization, is also a window into the ways in which becoming "a Palestinian" means staking out a racial politics, and not just a politics based on the rights discourse of Western modernity.⁷

While the representations of Arab/Muslim terrorism that youth such as Marwa encountered in her high school classroom are deeply racialized, and can also lead to Palestinianization, the question of race is seemingly difficult to use as a framework for Palestine activism in the U.S. This is a thorny question that I will explore more in Chapter Five and that is situated in debates about the core nature of the Israeli state and its policies toward Palestinians and Arabs, which are generally not read through the lens of race

in the U.S. (see Lubin 2014; Saliba 2011). The politics of “the Israel-Palestine conflict,” as it is often ambiguously called, is indeed related to the racialization of Arabs and Muslims in the U.S. as well as in Israel-Palestine, as it is to Western colonial modernity and post-civil rights racial liberalism (Feldman 2015). The definition of Palestinians as subjects who are not worthy of civil or even human rights has been consolidated through the permeation of Zionist discourse in U.S. public culture, including in liberal domains, and unwavering U.S. support for the Israeli state. This has created tensions in how a pro-Palestinian politics should be imagined in relation to racial justice models and how alliances with other progressive and antiracist movements should be crafted, for Arab as well as South Asian and Afghan American youth, whether Muslim, non-Muslim, or secular.

Given the embeddedness of the Palestinian liberation movement in pan-Arab nationalism as well as its link to pan-Islamic solidarity, it is an issue that can propel Arab Muslim youth toward greater identification either as Arab or Muslim, or both. Dana, an Iraqi American from San Jose who went to college on the East Coast, observed that students on her campus moved between the Islamic Society, the Society of Arab Students, and the school’s Palestine organization, with South Asians and Arabs being variously more involved in one organization or the other, depending on ethnic and social networks. Distinctions of being “too secular” or “not religious enough” influenced the shifting affiliations of students with these campus organizations and youth subcultures, creating hierarchies of belonging and identity. These tensions among various groups or subcultures did not seem to be as prevalent at San Jose State, according to Salah, perhaps because there was no Arab American student organization, in fact, only a Middle Eastern student club, which he described as “definitely a falafel club, very social,” with “no politics.” There was a Muslim Student Association and a political organization called Students for Change at the time, but it could also be that the absence of a specifically Arab student group was, in fact, due to the much greater interest and investment in organizing with the MSA. Youth from San Jose who went to UC Berkeley also spoke of religious divisions among the Arab American students and tensions between religious and secular approaches to campus organizing, though these categorizations are, of course, complex and fraught.

It is important to acknowledge that the terms “secular” and “secularism” are imbricated with Western projects of Enlightenment modernity and doctrines of liberal democracy (Asad 2003; Mahmood 2006). In the post-9/11 moment, the debates about secularism have tended to center on Islam and Muslims as objects of secularization regimes. This discourse, however, has tended to pit the “Muslim” against the “secular” in often simplistic and trou-

bling ways. It is indeed the case that a certain Western liberal definition of secularity is central to modern notions of citizenship and statehood and has been promoted globally by imperial regimes such as the U.S. in the War on Terror. But it is also the case that the current discourse of secularism enshrines its own paradigm of secularity based on a liberal, Western norm, erasing the genealogy of indigenous secularisms in the global South (Abbas 2014). Critical secularism offers a critique of the project of secularism installed and authorized by the Western nation-state and colonial modernity, and is not predicated on a simple relationship to religious belief alone, but suggests ways of thought that challenge universalisms and offer routes for crossing social boundaries of all kinds (Said 1983; Mufti, 2004). In the post-9/11 moment, Arab, South Asian, and Afghan American youth find themselves wrestling with the fallout of these debates while engaging in mobilization and coalition building on the ground. The rights claims of these movements and alliances, centered variously on civil, immigrant, or human rights, collide with the tensions generated in negotiating what a “secularist” or faith-based political project should look like. These tensions sometimes echo the difficulties of recuperating a notion of nationalism, secularism or feminism that is not complicit with Western, liberal imperial modernity.

In many cases, students I spoke to were simultaneously involved in a range of faith- as well as non-faith-based groups, and a few talked about the contradictions and contestations they had to wrestle with at different moments. Questions arose such as who should and could belong to the group and how political mobilization around issues such as Palestine should be defined—as an issue of global justice, human rights, national self-determination, anti-colonialism, anti-Zionism, and/or oppression of Muslims? Some who were critical of defining Palestine as a “Muslim cause” were also critical of Arab nationalism as a basis for political solidarity. Aisha reflected thoughtfully that after she started taking courses in Middle East studies in college, she began pondering whether pan-Arab nationalism, by “imposing one language,” could become “exclusive”; she said, “It makes you know what brings you closer together and what the real divisions are.” These debates among youth about organizing in support of Palestine are shaped by larger political and historical shifts related to the rise of Islamist movements in the Middle East since the 1980s, the perceived (and real) failures of postcolonial nationalist regimes, and the role of secularist politics (see Kundnani 2014; Naber 2012). These questions are rife in the context of organizing around Palestine, partly in relation to the division in Palestinian nationalist politics symbolized by the power struggle between (the Islamist group) Hamas and (the secular party) Fatah.

Aisha commented on the ways in which these tensions rippled into campus activism for Muslim and Christian Arab American youth:

So what does it mean if Hamas is in power [in Gaza]? . . . Christian Palestinians wanted to be active after 9/11 and you also see these Muslims become active after 9/11 and wanting to tackle the Palestine issue. They were used to being attacked, as Muslims, but for Christian Palestinians it was a new experience. They were [also] viewed as not Palestinian enough.

For Aisha, Palestinian nationalism had to be an inclusive, and also progressive, terrain on which to wage the struggle for Palestinian liberation, one in which the authenticity of Palestinian Christians would not be an issue due to a presumption of their not being Arab/Palestinian enough. Her observation that Palestinian Christians evaded the brunt of Islamophobia and Arabophobia until 9/11 may not be fully borne out by the history of anti-Arab sentiment that targets all Arabs, despite the voluntary or involuntary passing by some as white, as my conversations with Arab Christian youth illustrated. However, Aisha's critique suggests that an internal conflation of Islam with Arabness mirrors the problem that Arab Christians encounter in the larger public. In addition to the assumption that Christian Arabs can not be real Arabs, there is an Islamophobic and Zionist narrative that Arab Christians are inherently oppressed by Arab/Palestinian Muslims, which has become the basis for the alliance between evangelical Christian Americans, such as Pat Robertson and Tim LaHaye, and Zionist groups in the United States. The call by American evangelical dispensationalists for the removal of Palestinians through ethnic cleansing or Jewish colonization in order to facilitate the Jewish redemption of biblical Israel, is trenchantly critiqued by Steven Salaita (2008) in his essay "I Was Called Up to Commit Genocide" (33–50). Salaita challenges the presumption that Palestinian Christian victimhood trumps Zionist oppression, and as a Palestinian Christian American, refuses the call to be a wedge between a Christian America and Muslim Palestine that could legitimize genocidal violence against all Palestinians—Muslim, Christian, or atheist.⁸

However, on the other side of challenging right-wing alliances, the youth I spoke to grappled with how to build progressive alliances and joint struggles with other movements *through* Palestine. Both right-wing and liberal-left-progressive coalitions, it should be noted, invoke the discourse of rights as normative claims-making, whether the right of Christians to settle Jewish populations in Israel in order to attain rapture or the right of indigenous Palestinians to live in Palestine. Solidarity with Palestine must be predicated, if

it is produced in the true sense of solidarity and shared struggle and not just as a strategic alliance, on a reciprocal understanding of, identification with, and active support of other struggles, whether they are focused on liberation from colonialism and occupation or on racial, social, and economic justice. Several youth spoke directly to this issue, with a few eloquently describing not just an intersectionality of struggles but a deeper analysis of modes of oppression that constitute the political order and also possibilities of what Rancière (2010) describes as “forms of political inscription that (ac)count for the unaccounted” (35). The inscription of Palestine as a global, racial justice issue makes visible the unaccounted for and disappeared Palestinian, as well as the political subject who becomes a Palestinian.

Racializing Palestine and Forging Alliances

Palestinianization occurs not only in the context of national and religious formations. Aisha’s entry into Palestine activism as an ongoing, public engagement was through labor organizing in college; she said, “It was a humbling experience: we weren’t the only oppressed people in the world! Our strength is from our involvement in coalitions.” Aisha talked about how she had few Arab American friends while growing up in Fremont and was not engaged with an Arab American political community. When she went to a large public university, she became involved in a student-labor coalition with service workers “to organize around workers’ rights” and she “gained consciousness of these issues through the labor movement and getting involved in interracial organizing beyond Palestine. So I was learning that it was not just Palestinians who are oppressed, this land too was stolen, there’s a history of slavery here. We all share histories of oppression and can come together . . . because of our experience of coming from the global South.” For Aisha, it was labor organizing and progressive/left coalitions that led her to a broader anti-imperial and anticapitalist politics that challenged the exceptionalism of Palestine, linking settler colonialism and racial violence there and here. Worker rights and indigenous rights were thus articulated within a larger framework of human rights that she hoped would transcend racial and national boundaries, and single-issue- or identity-based movements. Aisha also noted that her involvement in this coalition and in direct action during labor protests in Davis provided a training ground in organizing strategies and tactics and offered a political education that she later drew on in her activism related to Palestine: “There was really amazing politics. . . . There were four hundred people blocking Russell Boulevard. These community activists knew how to talk to the police . . . and what to do when you

got arrested. A lot of Palestinians were fired up that day—making that link between local and global oppression.”

The Bay Area has been especially fertile ground for these kinds of political alliances between Palestine solidarity activism and other forms of left organizing, and young Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim American activists I spoke to emphasized the significance of these connections. Lamia, a Palestinian American woman from Burlingame, was involved in organizing the transnational Palestinian Youth Network (now called the Palestinian Youth Movement), which spans the U.S. and Europe, and was a member of the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS) chapter while she was an undergraduate at San Francisco State University. She remarked that it was through her campus activism that she learned about Palestinian history for the first time and about the relation of Palestinian/Arab communities to other groups through a politics of race and indigeneity: “So that’s kind of my experience of GUPS. It’s been an amazing thing that’s happened . . . learning about other people of color and indigenous struggles. So we wouldn’t be prepared to start a Palestinian youth network if I hadn’t been through my GUPS experience. It’s been very critical for me in understanding myself as a person of color and learning how to organize.” Rasha, a young Palestinian American organizer with the youth program (AYO) at AROC in San Francisco, commented that Arab American youth in the Bay Area have a transnational and cross-racial approach to politics, “connecting to issues back home and to ghettos here, making connections to public school education, so they are equipped to do both local and global politics. The GUPS folks relate to underresourced neighborhoods, to the prison-industrial complex, and they are also active on Palestine.” Janaan Attia (2014), writing about Arab American youth organizing in the Bay Area, describes the “growing Arab youth movement” that has been involved in local alliances with other youth of color (although mainly in San Francisco and the East Bay) and in “building the connectedness of oppressions—as in the similarities between the police in Oakland and the Israeli Defense Forces in Palestine” (170). This linkage was highlighted in the protests of the police killing of Oscar Grant in Oakland that occurred during the Israeli massacre in Gaza in winter 2009, and even more dramatically during the protests for Black Lives Matter in 2014–2015 and the Ferguson to Gaza solidarity campaign in response to police violence and militarization in both the U.S. and Israel, during the 2015 war on Gaza. These alliances are part of a national movement of Arab American youth who are inserting themselves into racial justice movements and identifying as “people of color”; for example, Aidi (2014) discusses the campaign in 2010 by young Arab (and Iranian and Turkish) Americans to have the U.S. census classify Middle Eastern and

North African Americans as nonwhite as illustrative of the “racial shift” that is taking place in the new generation of Arab and Muslim Americans, especially since 9/11 (163; see also Saliba 1999).

One of the sites in which the racialization of Palestinians has become visible, and fraught, in the culture wars about gender, sexuality, and Islam is in discussions of gay rights in the U.S. and Palestine. The debate about homosexuality and homophobia in Arab and Muslim societies has provoked controversy as well as cross-racial and transnational alliances challenging the deployment of gay rights against Palestinian human rights. Sabina, the Indian American woman who wrote about “taking back our narrative,” told me about at an event at her community college in Santa Clara, organized by an Israeli faculty member, that featured two Israeli lawyers extolling Israel as a state progressive on gay rights. As Sabina described, “It was demonstrating how just Israel was and how it was a normal democratic state. However, Israel clearly is not a normal democratic state.” Sabina’s incisive critique speaks to the strategy of “pinkwashing” that paints Israel as a queer-friendly nation to bolster the image of a “normal” and just democratic nation-state, not one that is engaged in the longest military occupation in modern history, built on displacement and dispossession, and engaged in racial discrimination against its Palestinian citizens—all processes that harm Palestinian queers.⁹ Campaigns waged by Zionist groups such as the Israel Project and StandWithUs, beginning in 2008–2009, have constructed Israel as a “gay paradise” and tolerant haven for Muslims and Arabs oppressed in their homophobic societies, highlighting what Salaita (2011) describes as a “gay-is-modern-thus-modern-is-Israel syllogism,” in which gay rights are a signifier of civility, modernity, and Western civilization (95–101). This is a striking example of what Puar (2007) has called homonationalism, a product of “queer liberal secularity” that has helped produce a “sexual exceptionalism” in nations such as Israel and also the U.S., for “an exceptional form of national heteronormativity is now joined by an exceptional form of homonormativity” (2, 13). “Sexual freedom,” as Reddy (2011) argues, is “the evidence of civilization and progress” and so can underwrite the “civilizing” and “humanitarian” wars waged by the U.S. and its ally, Israel (17). Sexual rights trump human rights in the “disciplinary liberationist paradigms of gay and lesbian human rights” that draw sensationalist attention to Arab and Muslim homophobia in Iraq, Iran, or Palestine, or incite homonationalism through the photographs of sexualized torture of Arabs in Abu Ghraib, remaking these zones of occupation, warfare, and racial violence into sites that must be liberated by (Western) tolerance and democracy (Puar 2007, 17).

I found that homonationalism, and more precisely *homoimperialism*, has increasingly reshaped the political landscape for Palestine solidarity move-

ments and antiwar activism focused on Iraq or Afghanistan in recent years. In the Bay Area, Muslim American youth and activists I spoke to suggested that queer rights is increasingly the frame through which they are interpellated into liberal/progressive political movements and coalitions in a political landscape that some describe as queercentric—not to underestimate the homophobia that still persists in many forms in the Bay Area. While South Asian, Arab, and Afghan American youth struggle with internal homophobia or sexism within community-based movements, as in all communities and movements, the rise of homonationalist politics has meant that there is a shift to adopting a (liberal) queer-friendly stance that is “good” on “sexual rights” in order to be part of the new, homonormative political order (see Eng 2010). This was brought home to me when a UC undergraduate student, a young Indian Muslim American woman involved with the MSA, asked me for advice on how to organize an interfaith event on queer sexuality. Specifically, she wanted to know if I could suggest an imam who could speak at the event. I was curious as to whether there was a Muslim queer group on campus behind this request, but it turned out that there was none, and this student had been asked to help organize the interfaith queer event by the campus multicultural center. There was going to be a Christian priest, a rabbi, and now all they needed was an imam. I was taken aback, at first, but later realized that this was yet another way in which Muslim American activism is being regulated by the multicultural academy (and in this case also the state, since the event was at a public university), and channeled into interfaith alliances based on queer liberal multiculturalism. So, for example, this particular multicultural center had not hosted any events about Afghanistan or Iraq, let alone Palestine, nor on the racial profiling of Muslim, Middle Eastern, and Arab Americans; at the time it had no Arab American student representative within its multicultural crew. If no imam could be produced for the interfaith event there would be the risk of inciting, yet again, the specter of Muslim homophobia and staging the public failure of Muslim Americans to participate in homonationalist multiculturalism.

There are, of course, Muslim and Arab American queer groups sprouting across the U.S., and the Bay Area has been home to SWANABAQ (Southwest Asian North African Bay Area Queers), but it is important to note the ways in which homonationalism attempts to co-opt what should be queer-led and queer-driven organizing and erases other forms of violence—racial, class-based, or state-sponsored—against queers, thus suppressing a radical queer critique of imperialism and neoliberal multiculturalism (see Stanley et al. 2002). Young activists must reckon with a situation in which a (liberal and juridical) discourse of sexual freedom trumps aspirations to other kinds of free-

dom, and in which a more radical notion of queer freedom as anti-imperial liberation is considered anti-American. Having said that, pinkwashing has also produced alliances between Palestine solidarity and queer activists, in some cases bringing Arab and Muslim American youth into conversation with queer movements, creating solidarities at the intersections of race, sexuality, religion, and nationalism.

While some observers of post-9/11 politics and coalition building emphasize that these cross-racial or cross-movement alliances are particular to a U.S.-born generation of South Asians or Arabs and not as common in older or immigrant generations, I think this generational difference is sometimes overstated. It is true that second- or third-generation Arab and South Asian Americans have greater familiarity with U.S. race politics, but earlier generations of Arab or South Asian immigrant activists also forged cross-racial alliances with other communities in the U.S., which are often not recognized.¹⁰ In fact, Rasha—whose father was a cofounder of a national coalition involving Palestinians, African Americans, and other people of color in an earlier moment—recalled the grassroots organizing among Arab Americans in the 1970s and 1980s; she talked wryly about the ways in which the “younger generation thinks it’s never been done before.” Yet it is also important to consider the new political language that the younger generation has deployed in forging alliances, for example, using the notion of being a “person of color” or through an analysis of the “prison-industrial complex,” as Rasha observed—but perhaps less so the language of imperialism, not to mention Zionism, which is less palatable to the U.S. public. This is indicative of the rise of political movements since the 1970s and 1980s that have provided analytic frameworks for critiquing white supremacy and global carcerality but have also been constituted through gaps or erasures in the post-civil rights, neoliberal era, one in which the U.S. alliance with the Zionist project has been key to U.S. imperial policy and wars abroad and aggressively defended at home (see Feldman 2015).

It is apparent that deeper alliances between Muslim, South Asian, Arab, and Afghan American groups and broader movements are not always easy to forge in the neoliberal multicultural era and the human rights paradigm does not necessarily generate solidarity with other struggles focused on immigrant rights, police violence, incarceration, and economic justice. This cleavage is a problem for both sides of hoped-for solidarity: for Arab, South Asian, and Muslim Americans and also for Latino/as, African Americans, other Asian Americans, and allies from various movements. For instance, some linkages have been made by groups in the Bay Area, such as Critical Resistance or Education Not Incarceration, between post-9/11 detentions in the War on Ter-

ror and the military-prison-industrial complex, situating both in an ongoing regime of incarceration and militarization that is a core strategy of the racial management of populations by the neoliberal police state, but these alliances are not that strong, especially in Silicon Valley. Even in the case of youth engaged with nationalist or race-based politics, the multicultural political apparatus continually constructs movements as discrete and located in ethnically specific communities (see Majaj 1999). There has also been a shift to nonprofit organizations as a structure for community organizing, what Rasha incisively critiqued as the “nonprofit industrial complex,” which is very evident in Bay Area activism, which is riven with all the contradictions of trying to create social transformation or radical protest through grant-funded community organizations (Kwon 2013).

Coexisting with eruptions of intraminority tension after 9/11 was a gap between Palestine solidarity activists and other movements due to an intense, or sometimes singular, focus on the Palestine question among Arab and Muslim American activists, at the expense of other issues and a broader global focus. A Moroccan/white American community activist from the Bay Area thoughtfully observed, “It’s true that Palestine is at the crux of imperial policies targeting Arab countries. The problem is just that the connections aren’t always made through Palestine to other issues.” Saliba (2011) is critical of the lack of coalition building among Arab and Muslim Americans, which she attributes partly to the sense of being under siege that makes it “difficult to extend ourselves beyond the borders of our community” (200). The young Moroccan American activist also noted that other Arab human rights issues sometimes fell between the cracks, such as the struggle in the Western Sahara against the Moroccan state. At the same time, the Palestine question has been a central, if not singular, focus for Arab American communities due to the ongoing, unconditional U.S. financial and military support for Israel, despite changes in American political regimes, and the power of the Israel lobby in the U.S. in censoring and attacking pro-Palestinian voices, making this an exceptional subject of silencing of human rights abuses—unlike the case of China, Burma, or Sudan, for instance, or even other U.S. allies such as Saudi Arabia. But this exceptionalism in the case of Palestine also leads to some unevenness in the attention given by Arab and Muslim Americans to other human rights or Muslim rights issues.

Sabina commented on this dissonance: “I feel that the Palestinian issue is very important but there isn’t much spotlight on Muslims in India, the Gujarat massacre, or Kashmir. I have never see any protests on the Gujarat genocide and no one really even knows about it. I feel both should be given the same level of attention.” Citing the 2002 pogrom against Muslims in Gu-

jarat in western India, which took place with the complicity of the police and functionaries working with right-wing Hindu nationalists, Sabina was frustrated that “these issues are not given much attention at all and a lot of Muslims don’t know much,” even about anti-Muslim violence in South Asia. There has been activism in the Bay Area, including in Silicon Valley, in opposition to Hindu right-wing nationalism and “communal violence” in India against Muslims and minorities, but it is significant that this has not really involved second-generation South Asian Americans and has been largely led by immigrant South Asian leftists. Sabina was concerned that there was even a certain degree of social capital associated with participation in Palestine solidarity protests, which in her view, were considered “cool” among her Muslim American peers in the South Bay; this is an interesting indication of shifts in political culture in the 9/11 generation, especially given the larger context of demonization of Palestine solidarity activism. But it is not surprising that a politics opposing the status quo—one that is, indeed, defiantly anti-status quo—would be considered rebellious and cool among youth. Abed, an Egyptian American from San Jose who was very involved with the SJP group on his campus and MCA, was wearing a wristband with the colors of the Palestinian flag when we met in February 2011. He observed,

During jumma, Friday prayers, I mean, we always say, please help the people in Palestine, Kashmir and Chechnya. But nobody ever knows what’s going on in either one. Everybody knows what’s happening in Palestine, but nobody ever knows what’s happening in Kashmir or Chechnya, because we always pray for them but we never know what’s going on.

Abed was critical of what he perceived to be a tokenistic invocation of global Muslim solidarity, and also of the relative absence of discussion of the U.S. occupations and invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. He said, “I feel like those are the two almost forgotten wars,” and reflected on Muslim American expressions of solidarity:

I feel like people have unfortunately become desensitized with what’s going on there . . . it’s just that its been going on for so long that I feel, I hate to say this, but I feel people have lost hope in sort of saving Iraq and Afghanistan . . . we have been to so many protests for both of those wars, we’ve spoken out, we’ve written letters and nothing’s changed, what can we do now?

There is a critique of gaps in solidarity here and also a sentiment of despair that these other zones of warfare were “forgotten,” a sense of hopelessness that

solidarity actions with Iraqis and Afghans in the U.S. are futile in the face of the imperial war machine. I will dwell in the next chapter on what it might mean to describe acts of solidarity as acts of “saving,” but Abed was clearly critical of a rhetorical notion of pan-Islamic solidarity as well as deeply concerned with what strategies the antiwar movement could effectively use. From such a perspective, Muslim internationalism seems counterproductive if it is a performances of solidarity that leads to desensitization, but this is also, fundamentally, an outcry against perpetual warfare.

Repression and “Radicalism”

The feelings of frustration, disappointment, and danger associated with political protest focused on global human rights issues was greatest for youth in the case of Palestine activism. This is an important site where human rights organizing and discourse, and their slippages, have shaped political subjecthood for Arab, South Asian, Afghan, and Muslim American youth. Antiwar activism and mobilization for Palestinian rights was deeply imbued with sentiments of fear and anxiety and a politics of risk in a climate of policing and surveillance of political movements related to the Middle East. Several young people talked about the hostility, racism, and silencing they encountered while trying to organize in support of Palestine on their campuses as well as in the larger community. Abed recalled that one of the few incidents of “intolerance” that he had ever experienced in the Bay Area was, in fact, after a protest in San Francisco during the “bombings in Gaza” in winter 2008–2009. He was carrying a Palestinian flag and someone hit him and pushed him over in the street. At Foothill Community College in Los Altos, Abed recalled that other students gave him “dirty looks” when he wore a kaffiyeh in solidarity with Gazans in January 2009. The kaffiyeh may have become a fashion item in early-millennium youth culture, but it is also a racially charged signifier of Arab solidarity associated with the PLO and the Palestinian struggle and, increasingly, with Arab resistance to U.S. warfare and Islamist militancy.¹¹ The kaffiyeh has evoked racist backlash and denunciation as a “terrorist” signifier when it appears in the public sphere, including when donned by non-Arab celebrities such as Rachel Ray and displayed on the shelves of youth clothing stores such as Urban Outfitters, indicating its powerful condensation of anti-Arab/Palestinian sentiment.¹²

Both Orientalism and Islamophobia acutely shape attempts to delegitimize Palestine solidarity activism in the U.S., which is why this movement is a revealing site in which to understand the apparatus of repression targeting particular forms of human rights activism in the post-9/11 era. Bashir talked

about the backlash against MSA organizing in solidarity with Palestine at San Jose State: “We have events for Palestine. Unfortunately, these events have led some people to conclude that these Muslim groups are a terrorist front. It’s sad because those people get their news from Fox News and they have strong racism and Islamophobia.” Bashir critiqued the demonization of Palestine solidarity activism, which is bolstered by right-wing groups and commentators, pointing to the likes of political pundits such as Glenn Beck and Bill O’Reilly and talk show hosts such as Michael Savage, who have used their national pulpits to attack Palestine solidarity activism and the Palestinian national struggle as forms of terrorism and anti-Semitism. Bashir touches on an important aspect of anti-Palestinianism, that is, the moral panic whipped up about the “radicalization” of Muslim and Arab American youth is often accompanied by the charge that they are automatically anti-Semites if they are critical of the Israeli state’s policies. Bashir commented:

We’re not anti-Jewish or anti-Israel as we’re called. But the other side has picked up the strategy of labeling. I’ve actually seen them tell people to use this strategy to call us anti-Semitic or radical. Even the left are called radical. Sometimes we’re called terrorist sympathizers. I mean you have to be a strong person to stand up against these people, so there is discouragement.

The label “terrorist sympathizers” (“terror symps” in counterterrorism speak)—or in its more racist variant “Arab sympathizers”—and the conflation of “radicalism” with “anti-Americanism” is fundamentally a tactic of repression that discourages youth from speaking critically of Israel and U.S. foreign policy. It is also a discursive strategy in which support for Israel becomes a litmus test of loyalty to the U.S.; to be anti-Israel is to be anti-American, and since to be anti-Zionist is to be anti-Semitic, being anti-Zionist is also being anti-American and beyond the pale of the multicultural state.

Right-wing Zionist commentators have marshaled the liberal discourse about “tolerance” and inclusion to accuse those who are pro-Palestinian of being inherently intolerant, anti-Semitic, anti-democratic, and anti-American, so that a key tenet of multicultural inclusion is support for Israel. It should be noted that this is not a new tactic of repression of Palestinian rights activism; well before 2001, the infamous case of the L.A. Eight in 1987 involved seven Palestinians and one Kenyan targeted for deportation using the Cold War-era McCarran–Walter Act, which criminalized support for “world Communism” (Cole 2003, 159, 162; Malek 2009). The eight were student activists organizing in solidarity with Palestinians and were later prosecuted on immigration violations, although the FBI admitted that its case against them

aimed to disrupt the political activities of supporters of the leftist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (Cole 2003, 162–169). The case against the L.A. Eight activists was reopened after 2001, in fact, and the charges against them were not dropped until a full twenty years after the case began, in 2007. The figure of the “Communist” has been blurred with the “terrorist” since the 1980s, as Reagan framed the “free world’s” struggle against the Evil Empire as coeval with the fight against Islamists in Iran and elsewhere and American Zionists produced the discourse of “Islamofascism” to suture Arab militancy with totalitarianism in a new “race war” (Feldman 2015, 223). However, this conflation has not been as clearly understood in the case of Palestine solidarity activism due to the invisibility of the Palestinian (secular) left and of leftists and Marxists in solidarity with Palestine, in the U.S. mainstream media and also among progressive movements since the 1970s. A Palestinian or Arab who is also a leftist is thus the ultimately irredeemable enemy of the U.S. capitalist state.

Many young Muslim and Arab Americans who are not “strong” enough, as Bashir suggests, worry about the real threat of vilification and intimidation if they publicly support Palestine and some distance themselves from a politics defined as “radical,” which has come to be a dirty, dangerous word associated with “bad” Muslim and Arab subjects. As Bashir points, this defamatory of radicalism targets not just the Palestine solidarity movement but the left at large in a post-9/11 moment. As Ali Abunimah (2014) points out, the “war on critics of Israel” is a “war on the left more broadly” (171). This is a crucial issue, for the oppositional politics of Muslim, Arab, South Asian, and Afghan American youth overlaps (but is not identical) with left movements in the U.S., and is in transnational conversation with secular left politics in the Middle East, yet it is often calibrated exclusively in relation to religious allegiance and politics. The machinery of repression counters the threat posed by transnational solidarities by stripping the category “radical” of its progressive registers and reappropriating it through the lexicon of counterterrorism. There is thus an evacuation of the political critique suggested by “radicalism”—whether for the left or the right—which is replaced with the connotation of violence, and also religious fundamentalism, in the security state’s vocabulary of “radicalization” and counterradicalization of Muslim American youth.

In organizing in support of Palestinian rights in the U.S., furthermore, the purportedly universalist language of rights operates on highly slippery, if not impossible, ground. The encounter with the apparatus of repression of Palestinian human rights activism on college campuses has also become a key politicizing experience for many youth who are forced to grapple with the

limits of civil rights, “academic freedom,” and liberal models of multicultural inclusion. Yara, an Iraqi American woman from Los Gatos, organized a film series at Foothill College, screening documentaries about the Middle East such as *Peace, Propaganda, and the Promised Land*. However, a member of the Silicon Valley chapter of Hillel complained to her advisor that the films were “pro-terrorist” and the speakers she had invited were “anti-Semitic”—including, ironically, the Jewish American speakers. Yara also faced backlash to her organizing from other students who accused her of “promoting hate” and being “anti-American,” which she felt was contradictory: “I really think it’s the total opposite because you’re being anti-American for, like, silencing people.” Yara turned this allegation of unpatriotism on its head by associating freedom of expression with a genuine expression of American identity, a familiar move enacted within the liberal paradigm of civil liberties. What is more striking about this incident is the ways in which the violence of occupation and dispossession in Palestine was dismissed and suppressed by some students who, paradoxically, cast its critique as an expression of “hate,” a coded word that suggests an irrational affect that can spill over into a violent “anti-Americanism,” part of the liberal disciplinary discourse of the post-9/11 culture wars that targets selective regions, peoples, and struggles. This is summed up in the stunning question posed in response to 9/11: why do they hate us?

Other young activists also experienced institutional and ideological silencing of Palestinian human rights on campuses in Silicon Valley, which has deformed campus cultures and academic freedom through a highly skewed discourse about Israel-Palestine. When I met Marwa at Stanford in 2008, she showed me an exhibit of photographs about Palestine in one of the campus cafeterias that SCAI had battled the university administration for six months to install, in commemoration of the sixtieth anniversary of the Nakba (or “catastrophe,” referring to the displacement and expulsion of over seven hundred thousand Palestinians in 1948). One of the conditions imposed on the students was that they could not have any captions on the photographs displayed in the lounge, only on the images installed inside a small, enclosed room at the back of the cafeteria. This seemed like a highly problematic but also very fitting situation, for it neatly captured the underlying premise that any kind of narrative about Palestinian suffering involving words was too dangerous to display, even at a university. Jenaan recalled that at San Jose State, an antiracist educational program called Tunnel of Oppression that included Palestine as an issue was attacked for being “anti-Semitic” by the Jewish Student Union, which tried to shut it down until an administrator intervened to allow it to continue. As Salaita famously stated, there is a “Palestinian exception to the First Amendment,” including and especially in the U.S. academy.¹³

A pattern of systematic repression across the U.S. focused on youth and student activism related to Palestine solidarity and Palestinian rights is unfortunately by now quite well documented (e.g., Barrows-Friedman 2014; Malek 2009, Salaita 2011).¹⁴ However, the impact this has had on youth movements and on Arab and Muslim American political subjecthood has not been taken seriously enough by researchers and educators—partly due to the suppression of critical research related to Palestine. Thea Abu El-Haj (2010) has done important ethnographic research documenting censorship and racism targeting Palestinian American high school students on the East Coast, including incidents where Palestinian flags were banned at international fairs and students were disciplined simply for stating they were Palestinian or even for asserting that Palestine exists. She points out that despite the rhetoric of liberal tolerance and multicultural inclusion in schools, Palestinian youth felt harassed, silenced, and persecuted, including by other youth, in a climate of resurgent nationalism and anti-Arab and Islamophobic sentiment. This suspicion may rest heavily on the racialized and gendered imagery of young male terrorists, but as the stories by youth here poignantly highlight, repression and censorship—as well as anxiety about political activism and fear of backlash—is felt equally by young women. I think this is a crucial point, for too often the issue of gender has been linked to the War on Terror under the assumption that Muslim and Arab men are the only targets of profiling, and that Muslim and Arab women are only the victims of cultural and religious repression and not also targets of state repression.

Silicon Valley, due to the presence of significant Arab and Muslim American communities and a new generation of activists, has seen the emergence of Palestine solidarity activism but also the repression of this movement by a highly organized Zionist presence. Ali, an Indian Muslim community activist who has been involved with South Bay Mobilization, an antiwar group in Silicon Valley, observed that there was a great deal of organizing in solidarity with Palestine at San Jose State between 2006 and 2008 and during the 2008–2009 war on Gaza, with support from local activists including Latino/a organizers and groups such as De-Bug, the community-based organization in San Jose, which works with diverse groups of youth. Ali recalled that students erected mock checkpoints on the San Jose State campus and that the Palestine movement was much more visible and energetic there than at UC Berkeley at the time. However, this led to reprisals and intimidation from Zionist faculty and pro-Israel groups, who attended events about Palestine and tried to shut them down.¹⁵

At an event with Jewish American solidarity activists sponsored by the MSA in November 2008 at San Jose State, in which Bashir was involved, one

Jewish American faculty member secretly took photos of the activists and students, who were “petrified,” according to Ali. Some students realized that the faculty member was photographing them with his cell phone and quickly dispersed. After Ali and SJSU students organized talks on campus by Robert Fisk, the British journalist and author who has written extensively about the Middle East, and Norman Finkelstein, a Jewish American scholar who has published work critical of the Israeli state, the same faculty member “sent a sixteen-page dossier to all faculty,” including photos, denouncing these events. According to Ali, he also submitted allegations to the administration that the event organizers “were a terrorist organization and supported Hamas.” Bashir, who attended many of these events himself, observed that Muslim American students and solidarity activists were very threatened by these accusations and surveillance activities and felt they were “being attacked” and discredited as terrorists simply for being “young idealist people,” but he commented thoughtfully, “It gives us more motivation.” Repression can also fuel the urgency of resistance, and greater solidarity, but it is a site where the racialized attack on Muslim and Arab American activism and solidarity movements is acutely visible, if undercritiqued in relation to the U.S. state’s policies with respect to Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation.

In addition, as these stories by young activists illustrate, there is a well-established Zionist political apparatus in Silicon Valley, California, and the U.S. more generally, that silences anti-Zionist critique and targets student groups and the Palestine solidarity movement through racialized allegations that are core to the racial culture wars (Salaita 2006a). To take just one of numerous example of repression of campus activism, the ADL, AIPAC, the Zionist Organization of America, the American Jewish Committee, and the Israeli consulate pressured the UC Berkeley administration to oppose the student-led campaign to pass a resolution to divest from Israel, as public records obtained by students later showed.¹⁶ Accusations of racism, that is, anti-Semitism, are used against Muslims and Arabs as well as non-Muslims/Arabs, including Jews, to suppress a critique of the Israeli state’s military occupation, warfare, and racial apartheid, such as in campaigns by the right-wing Zionist group AMCHA, based in the Bay Area. Groups such as AMCHA, the ADL, Campus Watch, and David Horowitz’s Freedom Center have blacklisted academics who are critical of the Israeli state, publishing advertisements in the *New York Times* attacking scholars and deploying students to spy on faculty and report on them to these off-campus, nonscholarly, and highly partisan organizations (for example, Dawson 2007).

Activism focused on Palestinian rights in the U.S. is a site where Arab and Muslim American youth, as well as other students, confront the limitations

of the liberal discourse of academic freedom, freedom of speech, tolerance, and human rights, which is bound up with a defense of the Israeli state's policies as part of patriotic Americanness and with Orientalist discourses about Islam and gender, Arab culture and terrorism that have been consolidated in the War on Terror. It should be noted that the lockdown on open discussion of Palestine, and Zionism, occurs also in liberal-progressive and left arenas, including in the antiwar movement, which resist patriotic nationalism but which also include left Zionists, and which have generally perceived it as an untouchable issue; this was true especially before the Israeli war on Gaza in 2008–2009, which was somewhat of a tipping point for Palestine solidarity politics in the U.S. (see Elia 2011). The inability of the left to provide an intelligent and mature critique of Zionism, for fear of being labeled anti-Semitic and alienating liberal-left Zionists, is poignantly illustrated by El Rassi's (2007) story of being a college student in an antiwar group, dominated by progressive white American activists who wanted to tackle issues of racism and include people of color. However, when El Rassi suggested they consider the Palestinian right to self-determination, the other activists shut him down by insisting the issue had nothing to do with racism and that its discussion could actually provoke anti-Semitism (109–111). This vignette, sadly, could be a template for the experiences of Arab American progressives as well as supporters of Palestinian rights, of all ages. Furthermore, it underscores the contradiction whereby a racist discourse crushes the attempt to resist anti-Palestinian or anti-Arab violence and racism by deeming that politics racist (i.e., anti-Semitic) itself.

Palestinian Rights Activism and “Uncivil” Protest

The mobilization by youth around international human rights issues in zones of war and occupation such as Palestine, Iraq, and Afghanistan is also the link to the infringement of civil rights within the U.S., for the demonization of Muslim and Arab American youth and activists as “terrorist sympathizers” underlies the selective scrutiny of domestic political organizing and “radicalization” in Muslim American communities. What was most striking to me about the narratives of youth and activists in Silicon Valley is that the framework of human rights does not always enable a wider public in the U.S. to identify with the Palestinian victims of occupation, military violence, and racism. In other words, the discourse of human rights does not “work,” and does not always translate into solidarity, in the case of Palestine. It is a claim to rights that is inscribed in international law and performed, over and over again, but it is not accepted or realized in certain spaces of exception. For

instance, the deaths of thousands of Palestinians as a result of the disproportionate Israeli military assault on Gaza in Operation Cast Lead in 2008–2009 or Operation Protective Edge in 2014 and the collective punishment of civilians trapped for years in Gaza due to the Israeli blockade would not even constitute a recognizable claim to “human rights” for many Americans. Israel’s many wars on Gaza have been portrayed in the mainstream media as an act of self-defense by a (Jewish) nation under siege and legitimized by the discourse of homeland security that has been consolidated in the War on Terror, a war that fundamentally needs to be waged by both the U.S. and Israel against the threat of Arab militancy and Islamist violence by uncivilized and socially backward peoples.

As youth from Silicon Valley realized through their many frustrating experiences with censorship and demonization, human rights is trumped by the discourse of terrorism and counterterrorism when it comes to Palestine (and also in some cases Iraq and Afghanistan), and by the rationale of national security, American and also Israeli. The notion that Palestinian rights are indivisibly *human* rights is not legible within a mainstream, U.S.-based rights framework due to the exceptionalism of Israeli security discourse, which posits its disproportionate military violence against civilians and violations of Palestinian human (and civil) rights as a defense against terrorism by the garrison state. No doubt, the legacy of the Holocaust looms large in these debates and is often the explicit or unspoken narrative that is used to frame the defense of the Jewish state as well as in certain instances to legitimize its own racial violence and policies of encampment and enclosure (Finkelstein 2000). However, this dominant discourse about Israel has begun to shift, if only in small increments, after the killing of humanitarian activists on the flotilla to break the siege of Gaza in 2010 and Israel’s wars on Gaza in 2012 and 2014, all of which provoked global condemnation and growing solidarity with Palestine.¹⁷ Scholars have argued that Americans continue to identify with the Zionist narrative—despite growing criticism of Israel in the alternative media and by human rights organizations—due to a deeper national identification with the settler-colonial ideology of Manifest Destiny underlying the violent founding of both the U.S. and Israel (see Mamdani 2004; Salaita 2006b).

Underlying the lacunae in the human rights project with respect to Palestine, moreover, is the deeper question of the racially defined notion of the “human” in colonial modernity. Are Palestinians human too? Or is their humanity illegible within a liberal rights framework and the language of social justice and antiracist redress? Azma commented that she was “surprised” by the mainstream media’s representation of the war on Gaza in 2008–2009,

which killed fourteen hundred Palestinians, including four hundred children, and U.S. support for Israel's rationale that the Hamas rockets fired from the blockaded Gaza Strip were to blame for the war. She said, "I would assume that they would have an Israeli lobby in America and that they would take Israel's side but to condemn Palestinians for starting it really angered me. Humans are dying, you don't compare sides, you know." The disappearance of human life—and death—into the dominant framework of "two sides" of the Israeli-Palestinian "conflict" is part of a necropolitical framework of colonial violence that erases the question of human rights and the right to freedom in this "exceptional" twenty-first-century occupation, the longest in modern history.

In a strange but not uncommon twist, repressive and right-wing campaigns targeting pro-Palestinian student activists and faculty often appropriate the language of civil and human rights and charge that activists and scholars critical of Israel are hostile to academic freedom and the civil and human rights of Israeli Jews and Jewish Americans, and do not deserve the recourse to civil rights or human rights. If Palestinians do not have human rights, or the right to academic freedom—among other freedoms—their supporters must also be denied the right to freedom of expression in asserting those rights claims. For example, this argument was used by the campaigns waged by AMCHA that targeted Middle Eastern/Middle East studies faculty at San Jose State University for doing a workshop on peace building and nonviolence in Israel-Palestine in 2013, as well as faculty and students at San Francisco State for activities related to Palestine.¹⁸ At UC Irvine, off-campus groups such as the Zionist Organization of America and the Jewish Federation of Orange County were on record calling for punishment and prosecution of the eleven students who protested the speech of the Israeli ambassador, a former soldier, after the 2008–2009 war on Gaza. The Muslim Student Association at UC Irvine was suspended, though the group did not sponsor the protest, and ten of the "Irvine Eleven" students, who had staged an act of civil disobedience by disrupting the speech and then walking out of the event and willingly accepting arrest, were not only disciplined by the university but convicted under the California Penal Code (Abunimah 2014, 197–201). The criminal proceedings against the Irvine Eleven had a deeply chilling effect on Palestine solidarity activism across the nation and dramatized the criminalization of student activism in support of Palestinian rights.

Stephen Sheehi (2011) points to infamous Zionist activist David Pipes's Lawfare Project, which has hijacked the "language of social justice" and "human rights" even as it provides "legal, logistical, and financial support to suppress, intimidate, and bankrupt" Muslim and Arab American advocacy groups and activists in lawsuits (143). The Israel lobby has utilized civil

rights in its “lawfare” against Palestine solidarity activists and MSA and SJP chapters, having successfully lobbied the Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights to define anti-Semitism as a violation of Title VI protections.¹⁹ The 1964 Civil Rights Act can now be used to deem illegal criticism of Israel as expressions of the “new anti-Semitism” on college campuses and deny federal funding to universities (Barrows-Friedman 2014, 98). This is yet another instance of the right strategically using the language of antiracism to silence critiques of racism or racialized state policies. A California state assembly resolution, HR 35, passed in 2012 under pressure from Zionist groups, targeted pro-Palestine activism and events, including BDS campaigns, on campuses as anti-Semitic and has exacerbated the fear, repression, and self-censorship among students and faculty in the region (Abunimah 2014, 193).²⁰

Students involved in the Palestine solidarity movement find that the discourse of and civil and human rights—as well as the right to academic freedom—does not serve them on campuses or public forums where their protests against Israel’s (illegal) occupation, or apartheid policies that discriminate by law against Arabs and Muslims, are deemed “hate speech” or inherently anti-Semitic and thus impermissible, if not criminalizable. In April 2013, five students at Florida Atlantic University did a peaceful protest (similar to that of the Irvine Eleven) at the speech of an Israeli military officer, who defended his role in the Israeli war on Gaza. They were put on probation by the university, suspended from campus leadership positions, and required to participate in a training workshop about “difference” so that the incident would not be put on their school records—multicultural pedagogy was used explicitly as a weapon to bludgeon dissenting students into silence. The students concluded, “It became clear to us that the university administration was apathetic to human rights when it comes to those of Palestinians.”²¹ At Northeastern University, SJP students who staged a similar walkout during a talk by Israeli soldiers in 2013 were condemned by the university and required to create a “civility statement,” and the SJP was put on probation (Abunimah 2014, 209–210). The cases of the Irvine Eleven, the FAU Five, and others have become part of a litany of repressive incidents that are used to send a warning message to students and contain campus activism, including rights-based campaigns. In response, students are increasingly resorting to silent protests, with their mouths taped shut to symbolically counter universities’ endorsement of talks by Israeli soldiers, members of an occupying military in the context of ongoing wars on Palestinians; in contrast, it was rare for most campuses to host U.S. military officials publicly defending the war in Iraq while the U.S. occupation was in progress and even protesters who have heckled Obama or Bush have generally not been arrested.

The fear that Muslim, Arab, and Palestinian American students at UC campuses have about involvement with Palestinian rights activism and the worry that it will affect their educational and work opportunities has been documented in a report to UC president Mark Yudof in 2012 by a cluster of civil rights organizations (including the Center for Constitutional Rights, the Asian Law Caucus of San Francisco, and CAIR).²² Having said that, the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights threw out the Title VI complaints filed since 2011 against three UC campuses since, for allegedly enabling a climate of anti-Semitism due to Palestine solidarity protests, as having no legal basis.²³ The ACLU and Center for Constitutional Rights condemned the lawsuits as targeting student activism and political speech protected by the First Amendment, in effect creating a chilling campus climate for groups such as the MSA and SJP.²⁴ One of the important shifts in the academic battles about censorship of Palestine is that Zionist organizations have increasingly used the language of "anti-Israelism," a new term coined to replace the alibi of alleged "anti-Semitism," as they realized that many supporters of Palestinian rights, including Jewish American activists, were challenging this tactic; groups such as the David Project have now defined "anti-Israelism" as a form of "bigotry" and "hate speech" rife on college campuses that deserves to be combated by "criminal and civil legal proceedings" (Abunimah 2014, 171).

The recourse by pro-Israel and Zionist activists to civil rights legislation to provide a cover for repression of criticism of Israel co-opts civil rights discourse as an alibi to defend state violence, militarism, and racial discrimination. It also pits U.S. civil rights discourse against the human rights of Palestinians and Arabs. On the one hand, while pro-Israel groups, including the ADL, claim that they are civil rights organizations fighting hate crimes, their focus on civil rights and freedom of political expression is clearly selective. But this partisan focus is generally not known to many who are exposed only to the public face of Zionist organizations such as the ADL, which professes a multicultural humanism in the best tradition of American liberal pluralism, an issue that I will return to in the following chapter (Salaita 2011, 41). On the other hand, the problem is also that campus administrations are not ideologically neutral and while they may succumb to off-campus pressure from well-established Zionist organizations and organized alumni to ward off bad press, it is also true that, in some cases, these appeals fall on sympathetic ears or are received by administrators who are already schooled in the institutional paradigm of what constitutes "acceptable" political discourse about the Middle East.²⁵ Yudof played a significant role during his tenure as UC president in singling out campus protests of Israel for condemnation, describing them as an anti-Semitic "cancer" spreading across college campuses, and

blocking the growing spate of student-led divestment resolutions from being passed by the UC Board of Regents.²⁶ Students attempting to mobilize around Palestine as an issue of human rights on California campuses thus do so in a context of organized hostility to their claims, which are viewed as “uncivil,” a deeply racialized term.

The strategy to apply a presumably universalist language of rights to the Palestinian condition operates on almost impossible ground. The core problem is that the vocabulary of human rights often fails to make legible U.S. military and racial violence or U.S.-backed military assaults and racism legible in the public sphere of politics and the framework of civil rights generally does not apply to the repression of civil liberties or freedom of political expression of pro-Palestine activists, including youth. In some cases, a liberal model of civil rights actually provides an alibi for the failure of human rights discourse, given that criticism of Israel is deemed uncivil, if not automatically anti-Semitic—an affront to the multicultural humanism institutionalized on college campuses that represses critique of Israeli state policies as “divisive” and racist (Salaita 2011). Critiques of racial discrimination and violence by Israel, ironically, are suppressed by casting them as expressions of racism. This inversion of racism is consistently produced within a multicultural politics that obscures state racism and imperial violence, an example of a larger “language disorder” that distorts our lexicon (Melamed 2006, 19); however, the language disorder with respect to the Palestine question has not been sufficiently acknowledged by U.S. scholars writing about antiracism and multiculturalism.

In other cases of repression, it is the language of human rights that trumps civil rights of Palestine solidarity activists, as human rights discourse is available only to Americans or Jewish Israelis presumably at risk from Islamic terrorists or Arab militants—and Americans and Israelis are increasingly conjoined since 9/11 in a unified imperial, civilizational project. The rights of Americans or Jewish Americans facing a presumably existential, and deeply racialized, threat supersedes the civil rights of critics of state violence, including students and youth. While the demonization and criminalization of those who criticize U.S. or Israeli state policies is selective, and particularly targets Arab and Muslim Americans, it is rarely acknowledged as a racial project. Yet there is a deeply racial logic at work in the institutionalized and systemic patterns of repression of the Palestine question and of Palestinian “rights,” a logic that is inextricably intertwined with a colonial past and present.

Conclusion

The youth I spoke to engaged strategically with the framework of human rights, while trying to push the boundaries in contexts in which rights-talk was considered permissible in the post-9/11 moment. They inevitably grappled with repression and censorship and confronted the contradictions in a legal paradigm of human rights focused on “autonomy [and] choice” and the limits of the human rights industry that denies autonomy and freedom to certain racialized groups (Allen 2013, 13; Merry 2006, 109). In the case of the Palestine solidarity movement, the paradigm of human rights failed to generate the (local) solidarity that young activists hoped for. However, I argue that this failure reveals a crucial critique of the politics of human rights as it has shaped modern governmentality and the hinge between imperial sovereignty, democracy, and surveillance. These young people enact what Rancière (2004) describes as the political subjectivization of those who can “confront the inscriptions of rights to situations of denial; they put together the world where those rights are valid and the world where they are not. They put together a relation of inclusion and exclusion” (304).

In his essay “Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?,” Rancière undoes the tautological bind created by Hannah Arendt, who argued that rights belong to those who already have rights; instead, Rancière suggests that rights belong to those who “can do something with them to construct a dissensus against the denial of rights they suffer,” to engage in politics (306). This allows us to view youth who challenge the denial of rights to Palestinians by deploying rights-talk as not necessarily dupes of a false “rights consciousness.” Rather, they are political subjects who are testing the claims of rights discourse and exposing its paradoxes and gaps, thus challenging the comfortable consensus around liberal democracy, civil liberties, and human rights related to U.S. imperialism, and the Zionist project. Similarly, Lori Allen (2013) argues that the “deep cynicism” about human rights among ordinary people as well as human rights workers in Palestine, where “lost faith flourishes,” is a “form of awareness and a motor of action by which subjection and subjectification are self-consciously resisted or at least creatively engaged” (16, 21). It is the exceptions of rights that these young people expose that produce a political dissensus against the War on Terror, and the wars, occupations, and invasions conducted in the name of human rights in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

The following chapter explores questions of human rights and transnational solidarity as they animate the political geography of the border region that has come to be named “Af-Pak,” a strategic battlefield for the U.S. and

a site of humanitarian warfare that bridges the Cold War and the War on Terror. Why is it that solidarity with Palestine, even if highly contested in the U.S., is visible while solidarity with Afghanistan has been so invisible, despite the direct and indirect U.S. interventions in that country over decades? Linking Palestine to Af-Pak through the exceptionalisms of human rights and cartographies of colonialism, I will demonstrate, is crucial in order to understand the nature of the U.S. imperial project as a flexible empire and to grapple with its decline and possible defeat.