

*The Contingency of the Religious Return among Palestinians in Chicago--
A Meditation on the Dialectics of Loss and Hope in Exile*

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General Claim:

- Media coverage and much scholarship on contemporary Muslim communities presume implicitly that Islam is the sole or main determinant of Muslim identity.
- I challenge this notion by reintroducing contingency. Islam is but one element in the lives of Muslims. The shape it takes results from indeterminate acts of interpretation and negotiation among individuals as they travel across the diverse milieus within which they live out their daily lives.
- If we are to understand the impact of Islam on Muslim lives, then, we have to see and engage those lives in all of their specificity and complexity.
- I seek to illustrate how this is so through detailed analysis of Palestinian narratives as they bear on events, experiences, and institutions that have shaped individual lives “back home” in Palestine and in the diaspora (Chicago)

Theoretical Assertions

- Only three percent of the world’s peoples live outside the borders of their homelands (Bude and Dürrschmidt 2010). Given this fact, the global, although certainly not irrelevant, is not necessarily the only or even primary crucible of identity.
- The limits on mobility apply, I argue, even to the Palestinians, who *do* possess a multi-polar self-awareness grounded in networks that *are* transnational in nature.
- Palestinians in the diaspora make their identities within highly specific, concrete social contexts. These identities are not mere extensions of Palestinian society and culture as it manifests in Palestine.
- “The geography of [transnational] flows” does not exist in some disembodied isolation but rather manifests in highly specific “regional and local forms of social embeddedness” (Bude and Dürrschmidt 2010: 487).
- Consequently, diaspora communities, as they establish themselves beyond their homelands, do not experience “de-territorialization” as much as they do a process of “re-territorialization” (Diantell 2002; Elden 2005; Murray 2007; Entrena-Duran 2009).
- If this is the case, then analytically we need to turn our attention to how individuals appropriate transnational flows—in this case, transnational movements of religious return—within the highly local contexts, relationships, and existential realities that shape the life course of individuals from one day to the next within the specific local settings in which they find themselves (Albrow, et al. 1994).
- These settings are fragmented, composed of diverging milieus with distinct value orientations that not only organize life for individuals locally but also connect them to others sharing similar orientations elsewhere.

Evidence: Three Cases

1. **Iman: 30-year-old female activist**, wears *hijab* scarf and prays assiduously, works in a Palestinian community center with a long tradition of secular-leftist ideological alignment
 - a. Illustrates the effects of **social class transitions**: Born in the city, moves to near southwest suburbs as a nine-year-old girl, becomes integrated in the large new mosque there and is consequently educated into its ethos—scarf wearing, prayer, etc.
 - b. Demonstrates the importance of **institutional milieus/institutional embeddedness**
 - i. Suburban mosque instills disciplines of piety
 - ii. Transfer to a public school causes her to cease wearing scarf and pray regularly, gets involved in other leisure activities
 - iii. In college, connects with Muslim Students Association, which models piety as identity, encourages her to return to piety and claim Islam as identity
 - iv. Also in college, connects with Palestine solidarity groups and networks, which lead to the job in the secular nationalist community center...avoids wearing scarf or praying on the premises
 - v. Her community work takes her into mosques, which reimpose and rehabilitate her to scarf wearing.
 - c. Demonstrates effects of **life-course events**
 - i. Mother becomes terminally ill with cancer...causes Iman to engage in round-the-clock prayer, and this rehabilitates her, too, to constant scarf-wearing
 - d. Show **how individuals negotiate tensions** between milieus—strategic adaptation to competing moral demands: wears scarf at community center but also will shake hands with non-*mabrams*
2. **Intisar: 35-year-old community organizer, mother of two**
 - a. Illustrates the importance of **transnational networks** and **media** for the *nationalist* socialization of diaspora Palestinians: spends two years in Palestine during first Intifada; recounts impact of televised traumas (Sabra and Shatila)
 - b. Illustrates **importance of local milieus and networks**:
 - i. integration into the secular-nationalist institutions in Chicago inculcates secularist dispositions—cigarettes, alcohol, no scarf
 - ii. leads to work with immigrant rights coalitions, and this leads to working with mosque leadership in the suburbs, now works with Chicago Muslim civil rights organization
 - c. Demonstrates **effects of social class transitions**: moves to suburbs, responds to racism there by enrolling daughters in the mosque schools
3. **Rashid: 40-year-old founder of an Islamic social service organization**
 - a. Illustrates impact of **transnational family networks** and also of **media**: visit Jerusalem frequently, experiences ritualized trauma of border crossing (which functions as rite of passage into Palestinian identity), also witnesses major traumas on TV (Sabra and Shatila, first Intifada)
 - b. Demonstrates the importance of **local milieus and networks**:
 - i. Integrated during college into secular-nationalist networks, leads to job at community center on southwest side
 - ii. This leads to connections with Black Nationalists and Black Muslims, which is primary instigator for Rashid's religious turn

Conclusions: The trajectory of the Islamic turn appears multidirectional, resisting facile characterization. Palestine and the events and movements that shape its politics remain highly

relevant, of course, primarily as a site for instilling nationalist consciousness in the second and third generations. Yet, through its overlapping milieus and institutional settings, the diaspora, too, shapes individual and collective consciousness in ways that are not mere extensions of “back home.”