

## THE PALESTINIANS OF DEARBORN, MICHIGAN

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*Summary.*—Michigan has a Palestinian community of 400, of whom 71 were interviewed. Topics covered were assimilation, social relations, USA politics, USA Mideast policy, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The article suggests that Palestinians view themselves as a nation in exile rather than as immigrants and that this affects their attitudes and behavior.

There are probably two to three million Arab-Americans in the United States (Abraham & Abraham, 1983). Perhaps 30,000-50,000 of these are Palestinian (Tuma, 1981). Greater Detroit, with about 200,000 Arabs is one of the major centers of Arab settlement in North America. While nationally about 90% of all Arabs are Christians whose ancestors came to the USA prior to 1940, in Detroit a significant number are both recent immigrants and Muslim. This is especially true of Palestinians. While elsewhere Palestinians appear to be a well-off, better educated group, in Dearborn's Southend neighborhood the pattern is different. This article is based on a public opinion study conducted among the Palestinians of that neighborhood.<sup>2</sup>

### THE STUDY

Dearborn's Southend neighborhood is separated from the rest of the city by a factory complex, a separation reinforced over the years by its ethnic nature. In the past Italians, Rumanians, Armenians, and Southern whites were prominent among its peoples. In the 1960s Arabs became a majority. At present they constitute over three-quarters of its 5000-plus population. Almost all are first-generation immigrants and most are Muslim (Abraham & Abraham, 1983). Some came to escape the violence of Lebanon, some are job seekers from Yemen, and some are Palestinians. While immigrants traditionally used the Southend as a landing zone where they could learn English and adjust to American norms before moving on, there is now an attraction for Arabs to stay in the Southend because it has a Mideast flavor. Walking through the streets, one notices Arabic signs, Arabic shops, coffee houses, a Mosque and a street ambiance more typical of the Middle East than of North America. The schools have a program of bilingual education, and the dominant cultural and community organizations are Arabic.

### PROCEDURE

While co-directing a separate study of public opinion in Dearborn (Stock-

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<sup>2</sup>These interviews were conducted in 1976, but not published because other projects received the author's attention. Belatedly then these observations and interpretations are entered into the case literature.

ton & Wayman, 1983), I interviewed 71 adult Palestinians living in the Southend. A city-sponsored survey conducted about the same time estimated the Palestinian population of the Southend (men, women, and children) at about 400, being 8% of the total and 12% of all Arabs.<sup>3</sup>

Face-to-face interviews using a written questionnaire were conducted by four Palestinian college students fluent in both English and Arabic. Interviews were mostly in Arabic in the Beit Hanina Club and in the Arab Community Center. The Arab Community Center is a public institution where people can socialize, study English, read books and newspapers, and get advice on legal or other government-related matters. The Beit Hanina Club is a social institution for the use of people from the Muslim farming village of Beit Hanina, located between Ramalla and Jerusalem. Most of the Palestinians of the Southend are from that village.

## RESULTS

### *Palestinians of Dearborn's Southend*

Table 1 summarizes some general data about the respondents. The recent nature of the community is clear. In 1976 eighty-six percent were immigrants and about half of those had been in the USA less than five years. Nearly three-quarters were born in Palestine, specifically the West Bank. Most of these had come to Dearborn immediately upon arriving in the USA and only a few planned to leave the city within the next two years. Half either owned a home or lived with the owner, probably a relative. Most seemed to have a regular job.

The data suggest the existence of a stable core of population, a "community" in a sense. Given that for political or economic reasons the respondents could not live in their own land, the Southend seemed a tolerable alternative.

### *Personal Assimilation*

Respondents lived in an Arab neighborhood. It is logical that they would be immersed in Arab social structures and relationships. Table 2 indicates this was the case. While these responses are generally typical of first-generation immigrants, two suggested the possibility of a "Palestinian" pattern. Asked about the Americanization of children and of intermarriage, most respondents indicated a separatist position.

There are several possible explanations for these answers. Three deserve mention. First, 92% of the respondents were Muslim, a fact which very nearly prohibits marriage to an American, obviously non-Muslim, person. Second, almost all Palestinians seem committed to the perpetuation of their

<sup>3</sup>J. P. Bowker, Health and social services needs assessment survey, Southeast Dearborn. (Unpublished data, University of Michigan-Dearborn, 1979)

TABLE 1  
A PROFILE OF THE SAMPLE: PERCENT\*

Item	%	n
Place of birth		
USA	14	
Palestine	73	
Other, Middle East	13	70*
How long in USA?		
< 5 yr.	42	
5-10 yr.	32	
Over 10 yr.	11	
Born here	14	71
How long in Dearborn?		
< 1 yr.	10	
1-5 yr.	52	
Over 5 yr.	38	71
Plan to leave Dearborn within 2 yr.	20	71
Own or rent home?		
Own	35	
Rent	50	
Live with owner	15	68
How long at present job?		
< 1 yr.	17	
1-5 yr.	61	
Over 5 yr.	13	
Unemployed	9	69
Unemployed or laid off in past 12 mo.	29	63
Moslem	92	66

\*Percents are based on the number answering the question. Where response patterns are dichotomous, only the affirmative answer is reported unless otherwise indicated. According to the Bowker study cited earlier<sup>3</sup> the neighborhood as a whole is 73% Arabic and 70% Muslim; 36% of all residents own their homes, and 57% of all immigrants arrived five or less years ago.

national identity. One threat to that identity is nonviolent assimilation. Third, among rural Palestinians, there is a custom of marrying from within one's home village, a custom which would make it hard to marry most other Arabs, much less Americans.

Whether these constitute a true Palestinian model is not clear. Other Muslims may be subjected to similar constraints. One should also keep in mind the possibility of different patterns among Palestinians who live in the suburbs.

TABLE 2  
ASPECTS OF ASSIMILATION

Item	%	n
Most personal friends are Arabs	55	71
Have been a guest in an American home, for a meal or other occasion	63	71
Young people are becoming Americanized. Is this . . . (bad)?	61	69
Would try to stop a son or nephew from marrying a non-Arab	52	71

*Problems of Assimilation*

Immigrants inevitably experience frustration and sometimes hostility in dealing with native peoples. These problems are complicated when the immigrants are disproportionately concentrated in less favored social and economic categories. We asked a series of questions to determine how respondents viewed these matters. The results (Table 3) are interesting.

TABLE 3  
PROBLEMS OF ASSIMILATION: PERCENT

Item	%	n
Do you have problems communicating with Americans in English?		
Quite often	20	
Once in a while	27	
Almost never	54	71
How do Americans react when they do not understand you?		
Patient	60	
Impatient; get upset	7	
Mixed answer	35	71
Would you understand this interview in English?		
Almost all of it	59	
Most of it	23	
Little of it	18	71
How do American store clerks treat you?		
Politely	66	
Not politely	4	
Mixed answer	30	71
Are police fair with Arabs? (No)	62	65
Had personal encounter with police when he was treated badly or rudely	18	67

Two patterns emerge from these data which, taken together, are quite revealing. First, in dealing with Americans on an individual basis, respondents reported positive experiences. In contrast, in dealings with the police, respondents perceived hostile and unfriendly treatment. This alienation from the American power structure, seen within the context of an over-all positive perception of the American people, is a significant pattern which is discussed more fully in the next section. But first, a personal comment is in order.

As a non-Arab and a 10-yr. resident of Dearborn, I can say that the level of hostility to Arabs tends at times to be quite high. There are frequent references to "camel jockeys" and jokes about Arab accents, behavior patterns, and dress styles. In contrast to patterns found nationally (Slade, 1981), local stereotypes about Arabs do not hinge upon allegations of wealth or power. Arabs are clearly perceived as an element of the marginal working classes. It is also significant that at the time of the study, the mayor of Dearborn was openly anti-Arab and had begun implementation of a "slum clearance" plan to level the Southend and rezone it for industrial development. This plan was stopped just prior to the study by a federal court injunction.

*American Politics*

In general respondents were not interested in American politics, did not identify with American parties or political personalities, had doubts about the efficacy of voting, and did not think American politics were relevant to their concerns (Table 4). But this is not to say they were apolitical or ill-informed.

TABLE 4  
USA POLITICS: PERCENT

Item	%	n
Interested in USA politics?		
Some or quite a bit	54	
Not much	46	70
USA citizen	37	70
Identify with an USA party	15	66
Is it important for Arabs to vote in USA elections (citizens only)?	31	29
Has (no) preference in Presidential race	68	68
Consider (both) parties hostile to Arab cause or point of view	86	65
Consider American TV and newspapers (unfair) in Mideast coverage	63	62
Can identify by name* . . .		
Either US Senator	36	70
Congressman	12	65
Mayor	68	69

\*In the community-wide study being conducted at the same time ( $n = 801$ ), 90% knew the 30-yr. veteran mayor and 52% knew the longtime congressman.

The coffee houses and social clubs of the Southend are highly politicized, but it was the politics of Palestine and the Middle East that interested respondents. Some followed American politics, but to the Palestinian interested in the fate of his occupied homeland, American parties seemed to offer little choice.

*United States Policy in the Middle East*

Respondents had doubts about US activities in the Middle East (Table 5).

TABLE 5  
MIDDLE EAST ISSUES: PERCENT

Item	%	n
View of Kissinger Initiatives (positive)	16	61
Will USA diplomacy bring peace?	11	65
Possible motives in USA policy		
USA is "peace loving"	13	70
Desire to strengthen ties with Arab states	64	70
Weaken Soviet influence	91	69
Protect economic interests	94	69
Zionist pressures	90	68
Are USA leaders well informed about Palestinian viewpoints?	60	68
If USA had to choose between friendship with Arab states or with Israel, would it choose . . . (Israel)	82	67

The "Kissinger initiatives" on Sinai disengagement, then underway, were viewed negatively by most respondents. (It is worth noting that these proposals dealt with bilateral Israeli-Egyptian relations and completely ignored the status of Palestinians.) Most thought American policy was flawed, and few were optimistic that those activities could produce peace in the region.

To understand more fully how respondents perceived American policy they were asked about "possible motives" the USA might have in the Middle East or about factors "important to US policy making," and were given a list to which they could react. Response patterns are not surprising; economic interests (obviously oil), east-west struggles, and the influence of Jewish nationalists lead the list. Surely these constitute a realistic assessment of national motives.

An interesting insight into respondents' thinking comes from the view that most believe US leaders are well informed about Palestinian viewpoints. Clearly, then the USA does not violate Arab interests out of ignorance but out of choice. Given such a perception, it is no wonder respondents are indifferent to American politics and elections.

#### *Views on Palestine*

To a people living in exile, the nature and outcome of their national struggle is an overriding concern; how to best promote that struggle was a topic of ongoing discussion among these Palestinians. In 1974 the Palestinian National Council called for the creation of a Palestinian state on any part of Palestine which was "liberated." Many observers felt this resolution indicated a willingness to accept the partition of Palestine into two states, one Jewish and one Palestinian. Yasser Arafat, a major supporter of the resolution, contributed to this perception by frequently stating that once a Palestinian state was in operation it might be possible to "continue the struggle by peaceful means." Such accommodationist gestures generated both positive and negative reactions in Palestinian circles.

As Table 6 shows, respondents reflected the same divergence of opinion found in the Palestinian national leadership. Palestinians at all levels were

TABLE 6  
VIEWS ON PALESTINE: PERCENT

Item	%	n
Favor a West Bank-Gaza state	49	67
Would creation of such a state bring peace or war?		
Peace	42	
War	38	
Mixed response	20	66
Recognize Israel in exchange for such a state	19	63
PLO is too willing to "compromise on important issues"	25	64

confused and at odds over key issues such as the desirability or even the possibility of creating a Palestinian mini-state or of negotiating with the Israeli.

It is worth noting that Arafatist-PLO policy as outlined in two important documents, *Towards a Democratic State in Palestine for Moslems, Christians, and Jews* (1969) and Arafat's UN Speech ("Do not Let the Olive Branch Fall From My Hand," November 13, 1974), also distinguishes between Jewish institutions of power in Israel and Jewish populations. These documents advocate the replacement of Jewish structures with secular structures but specifically reject the idea that Jewish individuals should return to some alleged country of origin. To a Palestinian, opposition to the Jewish "state" has a meaning which Americans often do not understand.

Finally, respondents were asked whether the PLO leadership was too inclined to "compromise on important issues"; three-quarters felt they were not. Again, if we assume that the two-state proposal and the secular state proposal were both fresh in Palestinian minds and that both were drastic deviations from the old PLO National Covenant of 1964, then it does not seem that these evolving policies produced alienation or hostility.

#### CONCLUSION

This study is not representative of Palestinians nationally, but represents one Palestinian community with a coherent identity and character. When assessing the patterns found here, and especially when comparing these respondents with other, non-Palestinian Arabs in North America, the reader should keep in mind that most Palestinians view themselves not as immigrants but as a nation of people living in forced exile and awaiting an ultimate return to their Homeland. However realistic or unrealistic such a view might be, it appears to influence all aspects of the Palestinians' behavior and thought.

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