Palestinian American Women's Marriages within and beyond Borders

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ABSTRACT This article explores American Palestinian women's discursive strategies and identity politics by which they take control of their marital choices. Through the analysis of sixteen in-depth interviews with second-generation Palestinian women and personal observations within the community, the article shows that *nationalist* and *religious* discourses produced by the historical contexts respectively stimulated (semi)arranged in-group marriages in the 1990s and self-initiated exogamous marriages as of the early 2000s. Among the group, Islam has become the primary form of identification, and religious discourse has been circulating within Islamic institutions post-1980s. Based on this transformation, the study draws on the strategic use of religious sentiments and Islamic discourse and argues that women's prioritization of Islamic identity has increased their agency in spouse selection and marriage process. Women's negotiations within an Islamic framework also expose the ways Muslim women counter and redefine gender roles by fortifying their religious beliefs and reinterpreting Islamic doctrine.

KEYWORDS American Palestinian women, marriage, Islamic discourse, identity

Marriage customs, as important cultural particularities, are indicative of a group's values and perceptions of cultural conservation and transformations. Negotiating these customs and individuals' marriage preferences uncovers their differently contextualized identities as well as hierarchical or democratic gender relations and roles. These negotiations are influenced by an array of forces that shape and reshape social values, marriage patterns, and gender roles. Centralizing the renewed interest by Palestinian Americans in Islam among these interconnected forces, this article explores the ways second-generation Muslim Palestinian women in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, with parents who immigrated between the 1950s and 1980s,

have increased their agency in marriage decisions and partner selection by acquiring and using Islamic discourses. These discourses provided women with new forms and spaces of sociability as well as discursive instruments to legitimize their decisions. To explicate how women deal with parents' rooted marriage ideals by maintaining and fortifying their religious beliefs and reinterpreting Islamic texts, I follow a historical discussion of marriage patterns among the Palestinian community in Milwaukee in relation to the *national* and *religious* discourses produced by historical contexts and respectively stimulated in-group marriages in the 1990s and exogamous marriages as of the early 2000s. Drawing on my observations and sixteen in-depth oral interviews, I argue that the hegemonic power of their Muslim identities—among fluid and multiple modes of identities such as Americans, Palestinians, Muslims, educated women, and other self-designations they use— allow them to alter the marriage patterns, particularly regarding the partner choice and selection process.

Palestinians in Milwaukee, especially the immigrant generation that arrived between the 1950s and 1980s, conceived of themselves as a coercively displaced population, and their desire to sustain a collective identity often influenced their marriage ideals and criteria. Their children born in the 1970s and early 1980s mostly possessed strong feelings of Palestinianness and Arab heritage and proudly self-identified as Palestinian Americans or Arab Americans (Othman 2015: 5). They founded national community organizations as extensions of the institutions in Palestine or as new diasporic organizations. Their children attended homeland organizations created to stay connected to relatives and fellow Palestinians. Since the early 1990s the Muslim population, organizations, and mosques[1] have increased to transform the community values and social institutions, including marriage. Second-generation women who were born after the late 1980s—while still self-identified as Palestinian—subtly challenged the prioritization of national and cultural origins, rigid social conventions, and the authoritative role of parents with the influence of the changing historical contexts and social developments. While they opt for defining and expressing themselves through their religion (such as "I am Muslim first"), they also express belonging to Palestinian and American cultures and navigate between identities. For them, Palestinian identity is articulated, in general, by the experience and sense of belonging to the Palestinian diaspora in Milwaukee, with a decreasing role for national culture in the mundane spheres of life. Meanwhile, political and humanitarian alliance with their national cause produces and reproduces national identity, as expressed by a twenty-five-year-old interviewee, Amara: "It is 'Amara the individual Muslim,' and then further, I am originally Palestinian. . . . The only time I am super Palestinian is when it comes to human rights violations with the whole Palestinian issue." Also, for the younger second generation, national identification and citizenship were not exclusive and could be more fluid than past generations perceived (Abu El-Haj 2015: 41–44). Like

Amara, women born in the 1990s expressed stronger religious sentiments as a generation that grew up at a time when the influence of the Islamic discourse was increasing among the community (Othman 2020: 72).

Amara and many other women attended Islamic schools and organizations and socialized in a larger and different group than their elder sisters did. Community Muslim institutions and schools operated as indicatives and instrumental tools of what are widely referred to as the Islamic revival movements that endorsed the rejuvenation of the imagined Muslim community, the *umma* that is unified globally across ethnic, racial, class, and geographic boundaries. These women who have embraced an Islamic identity and/or use Islamic literacy had new and different ways (than their mothers and older sisters) to counter the practices that limit women's involvement in their own spouse selection and marriage decisions. They led the shift toward self-choice marriage. Marriage arrangements between Palestinians in Milwaukee and the homeland were replaced by marriages across national and ethnic backgrounds with a common Muslim identity and a shared experience of American culture.

Conflict with earlier marriage ideals is born not simply out of second-generation rebellion but also out of the historically changing patterns and the strategies deployed to use these changes. Women's marriage practices are influenced by the possibilities around the women and shaped by the changing demographic composition of their community with the arrival of new immigrants from diverse backgrounds (Othman 2020: 71). Changes in socialization spaces, educational attainment and career pursuits, and dominant social discourses in the community are among a web of factors that shape these women's marriage practices. Palestinian women tactfully turned these developments and discourses to their benefit to challenge parental and community control over women. Yet marriage choices and ideals are not the same for all Palestinian Muslim women. A more globalized world with a changing political and social climate makes it impossible to speak of a monolithic immigrant community, even within the same generation. A salient difference, however, is noticeable between the elder and younger siblings in families with more than one child, with considerable variety in the ways of adopting and responding to parents' cultural practices and norms. To explicate this shift, as a historical background, I first introduce the marriage customs that the immigrant generation practiced and aimed to transmit to its children. Then I divide the second-generation into two groups to elaborate on the ways women adopted and used Islamic discourses to transform marriage conventions, which demonstrates that the strengthening of the Muslim identity has contributed to the freedom of women.

This article has benefited from scholarship on immigration, gender and the diaspora, Arab and Muslim American studies, women and gender studies, and Palestine studies. At the intersection of these fields, my study specifically aims to contribute to research on Palestinian American women who are Muslim. The body

of research on this diaspora group focused mostly on male experiences of immigration, cultural encounter and transformation, and politics. Therefore my research aims to extend this literature to women's life stories and their transformative role in the social, cultural, and historical developments taking place within the Palestinian American community. Drawing on scholarship that analyzes the dynamics at play in redefining gender roles and articulating different forms of identification (such as religious and national) in their transnational context, it unfolds Palestinian American women's strategic use of the idea of religion's (Islam's) priority and ideals of religious unity to increase their agency in mate selection and marriage practices. Literature on Muslim American communities agrees that young generations of Muslims in the United States adapt transnational and multiple identities and accordingly use a number of discourses (Haddad, Smith, and Moore 2006; Lybarger 2014; Mir 2009). In *Family and Gender among American Muslims*, Barbara Bilge and Barbara C. Aswad (1996) discuss how second-generation women vacillate between parental-cultural norms and American values. These values and norms do not operate independently of a web of factors including women's use of technology and their pursuit of higher education, careers, social mobility, and increased socialization. Each of these factors individually provides women with tools to obtain agency regardless of religiosity or religious orientation. Yet, as the basic tools and carriers of ideologies, movements, global political and social changes, these factors also function as the components of the rise of the Islamic discourse among Muslim communities.

Developments in women's access to education, technology, and careers and in their sociability also inform the processes of mate selection and the rise of intermarriages. The tendency toward intermarriages and self-choice marriages among Palestinian American women is strongly tied to the incorporation of Islamic discourse into those factors. Research that addressed intermarriages among Muslim American or Arab American communities has revealed how these components operate. Andrzej Kulczycki and A. Peter Lobo (2002), who discuss intermarriages in the Arab American community, with a focus on the Lebanese and Syrian population, argue that higher levels of education result in a higher tendency toward intermarriage due to several factors, including weaker ties with ethnic background and more possibilities to socialize with other national groups. Denise Al-Johar (2005), who interviewed members of Muslim communities in the United States from diverse backgrounds, including Indians, Pakistanis, Iranians, Palestinians, and European and Hispanic American converts, addresses the relationship between identity and autonomy in mate selection. She argues that self-affiliation with Islam provides women with legitimizing tools for choosing marriage partners, a liberty they have less in the case of self-identification through ethnic origin. On the other hand, those who highlight their American identity over the ethnic and religious backgrounds are more open to dating and exogamous marriages (Al-Johar 2005:

557–58). Juliane Hammer (2015) agrees with Al-Johar in her focus on religious identity as a powerful tool for negotiating self-arranged intermarriages. Hammer discusses Muslim marriages in relation to religious and American identity, and gender roles informed by these two forms of self-identification. She explains the importance of customary marriage practices and endogamy in preserving a national identity of origin and unity among Arab communities in the United States. Yet Hammer notes that research on Muslim women's marriage took a different direction as a result of women's attempts to challenge gender and social roles imposed on them (36). She highlights the connection between the growth of the Muslim community and transformations in Muslim marriage customs in the United States. As she argues, the tendency to marry from one's ethnic background has been challenged based on a unified Muslim community and the limited number of potential spouses from the same ethnicity (38).

While second-generation Palestinian women share similarities with women addressed in research on other American Muslim communities, their identity politics and marriage choices are complex affairs influenced further by homeland and diaspora politics. Their national aspirations and self-categorization as an uprooted group complicate their self-identification and marriage patterns, which call for attention to their peculiarities. One of the most comprehensive works on the Palestinian diaspora in the United States is *Palestinians Born in Exile*, in which Hammer (2005: 17) also addresses marriage conventions and shows that marrying a Palestinian, especially for a woman, is expected for the purpose of maintaining national lineage. The expression of national belonging is also made through rituals and traditional celebrations. Renda Serhan (2008: 23) discusses wedding ceremonies as "invented tradition" as theorized by Eric Hobsbawm. Serhan examines the wedding ceremonies in New Jersey and argues that American Palestinians, as a diasporic society, constructed ties with their past through the adoption of certain traditions and "transformed their weddings into celebrations of Palestinian-ness" (28). However, there is a dearth of research addressing American Palestinian marriage patterns from a historical perspective and its implications for women's changing roles within their families and communities. Thus I aim to shed light on the ways second-generation Palestinian women strategically participate in certain discourses to challenge the marriage processes that their parents and elder sisters had to follow.

Methodology

This article is structured to explain the transformations of gender roles and marriage patterns through the periodization of the dominating discourses. In analyzing the changes in historical contexts and corresponding marriage patterns among Palestinian Muslim Americans in Milwaukee, I use the methodology of self-narration as a source of knowledge, and my study is mainly based on the critical assessment of these narrations. The transnational scope and intersectional methodology of this

research bring the disciplines of history, gender studies, and cultural studies together to examine the marriage practices among Palestinian women in a Midwest city in the United States. Palestinians who began to immigrate to Milwaukee in large numbers after World War II have become the largest Arab American group in the area. They contributed to Arab and Palestinian nationalism and to defining the social, political, and cultural activities of the Muslim communities. Thus the study opens the door for a deeper investigation of the manners through which women of different national backgrounds in the United States control, lead, or are influenced by the strengthening or destabilization of cultural ties between homeland and diaspora, and use these developments in reconstructing marriage patterns.

Apart from community observations over thirty years, this research benefits from the life narratives of women who self-identify as Muslim and whose parents came from the Palestinian areas of Al-Bireh, Atarah, Beiteen, Dair Dibwan, Jelljleh, and Sinjil, where most Palestinian Milwaukeeans have originated. Based on the narratees' age, these life stories were selected from a larger corpus of women's self-narratives collected as part of the oral history project conducted by the Arab and Muslim Women's Research and Resource Institute (AMWRRI), a nonprofit community organization.[2] The selection was based on the decade in which they were born and raised, and they were grouped into two categories; one group of the second-generation women who reached adulthood during the 1990s, and another group among the second-generation who did in the early 2000s. The former group includes six married and one divorced single mother, while the latter group includes nine women, all married. The collection of narratives followed the techniques and methods of conducting oral history interviews. The interviewees were asked a varied range of questions including about self-identification, cultural and religious practices, involvement in politics, affiliation with religious or national organizations, gender roles, interracial interactions, dating habits, and marriage processes. The interviews followed all the legal and ethical procedures, and consent of the interviewees was ensured. All the interviewees were given detailed information about both the research and the oral history project. Their names are kept confidential, and attention has been paid to hide or change other personal information that might have yielded their identities. Before delving into these two groups, in what follows I briefly discuss the formation of the Palestinian community in Milwaukee through *marriage migration*.

Historical Background: Social Interactions and Marriages between 1950 and 1990

Muslim Arabs arrived in the United States in significant numbers in the aftermath of World War II. Palestinians in particular arrived in large numbers following the creation of the Israeli state. Among the immigrant Arab communities, Palestinians held deeply ingrained nationalist ideologies, particularly with regard to Arab unity and the Palestinian national cause, and they remain highly aware of and invested in

the politics of their homeland. Overall this political consciousness tended to make Palestinian immigrant communities more close-knit and reinforced cultural persistence and group cohesiveness among the Palestinians (Christison 1989: 19–20). This cohesiveness in turn strengthened homeland marriage patterns molded by overarching kin relations, as well as local and national politics. The nationalist ideologies also emphasized patriarchal relations and ideals of womanhood related to marriage practices and values that enforced wifehood and motherhood.

Women immigrants in this period generally set off as young brides to Milwaukee. Once they were settled in the United States, the male immigrants who had arrived in pursuit of work or education would go back home to get married and bring their brides. These cross-border marriages between male Palestinians residing in the United States and female Palestinians mainly in rural Palestine were arranged by families, based on local considerations, and followed the traditional ways of seeking marriage partners. The inquiry by the groom's family would be done in the smaller circle of their own kinship and/or village. Palestinians wanted their children to marry within their clan or *hamula* (Al-Tahir 1952: 212). Some of the considerations would include family name, implying social status and prestige that certain families possessed, and preserving inheritance within the extended family. The parents of a Palestinian man in the United States would start seeking a bride before he would pay a visit home. These marriages were favorable to Palestinian women because immigrating to the United States would increase their mobility and resources, which were limited in the homeland, particularly in their rural settings, due to the Israeli occupation and certain cultural conventions.

On immigration, these immigrant women would usually have more access to education and jobs and enjoy the relief from the conditions of living under military occupation and from the gaze of extended families and society. These were usually some of the ways these women changed their positions and roles in their families and community. For example, many of them married very young, generally before completing high school. However, some of them went back to school and obtained degrees after immigration. Mariam, mother of one of the interviewees, married at sixteen and immigrated to America without a high school degree. As a mother of seven children, she later finished the GED test, got her high school equivalency diploma, and went to Milwaukee Area Technical College, a vocational-technical community college in Milwaukee. She then joined a nursing program and obtained a master's degree in nursing. Her daughter Azra narrates how strictly her mother encouraged her daughters to prioritize their education (yet not at the cost of jeopardizing marriage opportunities). Palestinians in general place special emphasis on education, which they also regard as the path toward national liberation (Frangi 1983: 93). Thus, based on their individual desires and their national aspirations, it is common for Palestinian parents to prioritize education as a crucial step for prosperity.

Also, on immigration, many immigrant women worked in the small businesses established by their husbands. However, their social interactions were generally confined within the Palestinian community, and they communicated with non-Arabs and non-Muslims to a lesser extent. Moreover, they often opted to socialize with those who were from the same town or region in Palestine (Othman 2015: 11). Within this context, parents usually considered national unity and cultural preservation in the marriages of their children; being Palestinian and being educated were the main criteria they sought in a future son-in-law. Ultimately, immigrant Palestinian women were not passive recipients of long-standing gender roles within family and marriage customs, yet their marriage ideals and practices were informed by a different set of ideas and criteria which they aimed to inculcate in their children.

Women's Agency and Arranging Marriages

Second-generation Palestinian women significantly differed from their parents and negotiated their marriages by subtly eschewing cultural customs imposed on them. There is a smooth yet notable difference among the older and younger generations of second-generation Palestinian women in terms of their reactions to family and community values and marriage practices. Therefore, to trace this transformation within its historical context, I divide the marriage process and Palestinian American women's behaviors and attitudes into two age groups: those more than thirty-five years old and those twenty-one to twenty-nine years old. Between these two age groups—generally corresponding to older and younger sisters within the family—are considerable differences in self-identification, socialization habits, and marriage patterns emanating from different socialization circles, education levels, and dominant social and political discourses in the community. The decade in which older sisters reached marital age, the 1990s, which witnessed a rise in Islamic movements, marks the shift to the stronger influence of religious discourse, compared to national discourse, on the Muslim community in Milwaukee. These women were born in the 1970s and early 1980s, when national orientation still governed social life and family decisions, and reached adulthood in the 1990s, when Islamic literacy began to transform the institutions, identity formation, and marriage conventions in Muslim diasporas in the United States. In addition, the older siblings were more restricted by cultural customs and parental authority compared to their younger siblings, although they had higher levels of education and stronger agency than their mothers had.

Cross-border marriages by means of recruiting brides or grooms from Palestine for Palestinians in the United States, or, in general in-group marriages among Palestinians regardless of the country of residence, were still practiced among the older siblings. For them and their families, being Palestinian was the most important criterion for selecting a spouse. The selection was not entirely made by the parents, but marriage decisions were regulated and confined through parental influence

and control. Second-generation Palestinian women belonging to this age group also validated community standards venerating marriage and gendered conceptualizations of early marriage for women. The younger siblings, however, did not want to marry Palestinians who were not born in the United States, citing the "difference" in culture due to these women's dominant American identity. Key to the new marriage paradigm is a growing interest in national-exogamous marriage with the prioritization of Muslimness rather than Palestinianness in spouse selection and the increasing number of women who postpone marriages and those who choose not to marry. Within families, national and religious discourses contended, intersected, and transformed each other, which was reflected in siblings' marriage choices and negotiations. The marriage choices in one Palestinian family with four daughters and two sons reveal the complicated interplay of different discourses at a time of transition from one generation to the next. The parents in this family migrated in the 1960s and were secular nationalists until they later adopted a religious discourse and lifestyle. Aisha, Lamia, Amel, and Alya are the four sisters; the oldest, Aisha, married her first cousin in 1989, and Lamia married a Palestinian man in 1998, whereas Alya, the youngest, who married in 2010, chose to marry a Moroccan (Amel is unmarried). Similarly, the older son of this family, who was raised at a time when national discourse was still predominant, married a Palestinian woman, whereas the younger son married a Jordanian American. In this sense, this family epitomizes how the decade during which individuals were raised shaped their agency, marriage choices, and self-identification.

Marriages Influenced by National Discourse during the 1990s

The collective sense of identity in American Palestinian communities emerged from several historical events, including the political upheaval in their homeland, wars in the region, and their removal from their land (Abu-Ghazaleh 2011: 18). For Palestinians, both in the homeland and in the diaspora, preserving their ethnic identity and cultural heritage culminated in a struggle, because the creation of the Israeli state in 1948 and the displacement of Palestinians during the "Nakba" were perceived as threats to their heritage and its sustenance (Institute for Middle East Understanding 2006). In Milwaukee parents transmitted the memories of war, displacement, and the fear of community disintegration to their children. Hence the reconstruction of unity and integrity within the national community became an important requisite for the integrity of the Palestinian self. Parents, as the immigrant generation, felt emotionally, socially, and politically connected to their homeland. The attachment to the homeland was expressed through telling their memories of the homeland, frequent visits to Palestine, engaging in transnational activities through organizations, trying to educate others about their national cause, and socialization among a Palestinian immigrant community in the United States. They attempted to inculcate these strong national sentiments and ideologies in their

daughters at a time when the composition of their society had not considerably been changed by new waves of immigration from various Muslim countries. Homeland stories and news told by parents or relatives, along with personal close observation through technological connections, strengthened these second-generation Palestinian Americans' sense of belonging to their national origins. Therefore nationalist discourse occupied a distinctive place in the formation of their individual and collective identities. For example, Dina, an older sister, said that "when somebody says 'your parent's homeland,' I am, like, you mean *my* homeland. . . . I am Palestinian. It does not matter where I was born." Such stress on expressing Palestinianness is almost absent among these women's younger sisters. Palestinian national identity, along with homeland local relations — loyalty to clan, village, town, and region — operated strongly among this older age group of the second generation. In addition, the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict was among the mobilizing forces for both age groups of the second generation to "adopt a diasporic stance" (Brubaker 2005: 12) that included the preservation of their parents' societal standards and wishes. This stance reproduced the sense of belonging to "a Palestinian identity," coupled with fluid and hybrid selves and stripped of strong convictions of culture, nation, and identity. That is to say, second-generation Palestinian women, as members of a diasporic community, varied in their affiliation with and affinity to their national origins, but they articulated diasporic identities as a claim and position against cultural as well as territorial destruction. In this sense, the embodiment of certain selected traditions, including social customs such as in-group marriage, is a reflection of diasporic claims for cultural preservation.

For women of this age group, nationalist projects and aspirations were effectively binding elements between homeland and diaspora. They were raised within a narrower social circle, due to the presence of a relatively homogeneous community, and attended homeland national organizations that strongly connected the community to Palestine and to the ongoing nationalist movements. In their affiliations and self-identifications, these women defined themselves in relation to their national origins; being "Palestinian" was uttered as the first self-designation. They also pointed out their secular lifestyles and looser connections with religion. They attended gatherings such as the Al-Bireh Society National Convention, where Palestinian Americans met annually in different cities in the United States and promoted Palestinian national aspirations among the members of the sponsoring organization. At community conventions, the speakers typically addressed the treatment of Palestinians under Israeli occupation and ways to support the movement for Palestinian statehood (Othman 2015: 6). For instance, Malika's mother-in-law kept her children connected with homeland politics through these conventions. In addition, less educational attainment compared to the generation raised in the following decade narrowed the circle in which these women socialized (they generally attained high school diplomas or associate degrees). This had to do with these women's conformity

with dominant community norms, such as younger marriage age and men's financial control. In other words, these women were more likely to act in line with the requirements of long-standing customs and traditions compared to the younger group of second-generation women.

As other scholars have argued, marriage practices and spousal preferences are often formed by collective as well as personal identity factors (Al-Johar 2005: 38). Hammer (2005: 17) explains that a child is considered to be Palestinian when the child's father is Palestinian. However, the child is not *properly* Palestinian if the father is not, even when the mother is. Therefore national endogamy was imposed more strongly on women than on men to maintain their national lineage. Also, as Suad Joseph (1986: 138) notes, women's role in construing social solidarity is of utmost importance because of the ways in which they "link factions, kin, and political groups . . . in addition to performing important social rituals, holding families together and preserving social interaction." In this way, the continuation of marriage customs (or some aspects of them) was perceived as a form of resistance sustaining their existence as a national and cultural group. Therefore, with the influence of the smaller community of Palestinians, and in the shadow of national politics of the 1990s, being Palestinian, among other criteria, continued to be a prerequisite sought in marriage candidates. For example, Lamia, born in 1975, married a Palestinian born and raised in Kuwait. She faced no resistance from her family because "he met their criteria as he was educated and Palestinian." The preference to marry within the group indeed reinforced the dynamism between diaspora and homeland in the search of Palestinian mates, and diasporic exigencies of maintaining and inventing tradition were ways of keeping the connection to Palestine.

Parents' local considerations, such as kinship, socioeconomic status, and family prestige, influenced a potential spouse's suitability. In this period, even being from different cities in Palestine could affect marriage decisions in terms of compatibility and cultural unity, as in the case of Zara, who thought that her husband adhered to a different set of values because he came from a different city in Palestine. This had more to do with social status and financial unity. For instance, five or six tribes in the city of Al-Bireh are considered major clans and thus prestigious — a notion that families implanted in their daughters' minds. The importance of marrying in one's original village and city in Palestine lay in its indication of social status and privilege, as explained by Malika:

> That was another criterion for my dad. Not only did [the groom] have to be Palestinian, but there is some kind of unspoken rule, or status, with marrying someone from your village too — I call it a village, but we are from the city of Al-Bireh. And so, I almost want to say that it is a status; you have to marry somebody good from your village and then if you do not really find anybody then you can go outside the village, and then if you do not really find anybody then you can go outside Palestine.

Other than the social status such marriages bring, keeping inheritance within the extended family was a facilitating factor for marrying from the same kinship. Ayda, a younger sister, talked about her older sister whose marriage was arranged based on her parents' social, ethnic, and financial considerations: "[My sister] married somebody who was from the same small itty-bitty town as us, who was on the same path as her, and had the same level of education as her. Somebody whose family was well known and was financially stable fulfilled all the expectations that my dad had set." Ayda's tone and words indicate a rational and emotional distance to the views valued by her sister and father. Even her reference to Al-Bireh as an "itty-bitty town," while it has been, in fact, a major city for more than twenty years, illustrates Ayda's subversion of parental notions and values, because this unchanged notion of space is an indication to Ayda of customs and traditions characteristic of towns and villages, and not of urban centers. Resisting saying "city" is part of resisting parents' standards inspired by the village or town parents left in the 1950s.

Women Agency and Marriages during the Early 2000s

The diaspora politics of displacement among Palestinians existed among the younger second-generation as well; profound national commitment and a sense of belonging always surfaced, particularly when talking about the Palestinian national struggle. However, in their daily lives, instances perceived as encounters between "home" and "host" cultures, family and school values, and membership in a larger group (the Muslim community) as they grew up undermined the heretofore deeply embedded sense of belonging to a Palestinian national community. These changes indeed resulted in fluid and multiple identities among younger second-generation Palestinians and a strategic hierarchization and prioritization of identities according to their immediate situations as well as long-term plans. Thea Renda Abu El-Haj (2015: 41) questions the assumption that one-way social incorporation is the goal for youth belonging to transnational communities, because it undermines the meanings and parameters of citizenship today. Thus, unlike the immigrant generation and their elder daughters who mainly affiliated with ethnic-secular identities, the younger second-generation women dissociated themselves from one mode of self-identification and instead used a number of discourses at the center of which religion resided. For example, Leila referred to different forms of self-identification and how she prefers to "change" constantly. With a dominant Muslim identity, and as a teacher at the Islamic Salam school, Leila sent her child to a church's school so that she would not be constrained to one culture and perspective: "I always talk to her about Islam, and she is in a couple of Islamic programs, but I really want her to be exposed to and be with diverse kids to learn. I feel that that is going to create a great person when you are dealing with people from different backgrounds and different religions." Like Leila, many women who reached adulthood in the early 2000s embraced multiple identities and benefited from this situation to acquire more

space and agency in family and social life. For example, Havva, who attended both Islamic and Catholic schools as she grew up, emphasized the importance of belonging to different cultures and of performing in them effectively. Therefore she emphasized that she wanted her children to learn and appreciate both Arab and American culture, and continued: "I want them to be able to experience that, respect it, and understand it. You need to be able to be educated in that sense. I want to be able to teach my kids the difference between culture and religion and how culturally and religiously things are different. This is the way things need to be. I definitely want to teach them this difference, unlike the way I grew up." This type of statement, emphasizing differentiating between culture and religion, is common among women who belong to this age group. Such efforts are generally made to portray gender roles and rights as connected to culture and religion in different ways. Gender plays an important role in negotiating marriage practices between Palestinian American adults and their parents. In Arab communities this is mostly related to the view of women as a symbol and protector of family honor, who therefore need constant protection by their families, as embodied by the Arab/Palestinian saying "You keep worrying about your daughter until the day you are dead." For many Arab parents, marrying their daughters is equivalent to handing their honor to her husband and his family; thus it is important for them to find the suitable husband and the respectable family they trust enough to give their *sharaf* to one who can protect their daughter and their honor. Furthermore, when daughters get married, they are expected both by the community and their families to stay with their husbands for life. This does not suggest that divorce is not allowed; however, a divorced woman is viewed less favorably than a divorced man. When a woman is divorced, her own family will usually put more restrictions on her, and she will most often be the subject of community gossip, because she is no longer a virgin. For all these reasons, the Arab family is invested in carefully choosing a daughter's future husband and investigating him and his family before accepting him as a son-in-law. These beliefs and customs foreshadow the families' reactions to their daughters' self-choice marriages.

Despite reactions from family and community, the changing demographic composition and the evolving transnational context facilitated intermarriages mostly initiated or encouraged by women. In the last two decades Milwaukee became the destination of many immigrants and refugees from Albania, Burma, Iraq, Kosovo, Somalia, Sudan, and Turkey. Newcomers from South Asia (mainly from India, Kashmir, and Pakistan), Arab countries including Kuwait,[3] Morocco, Syria, and other Muslim countries helped change the demographic composition of the Muslim community in Milwaukee. The Islamic identity of this new wave of immigrants and refugees took precedence over the national and ethnic identities (Othman 2015: 9). Also, these new immigrants played a major role in emphasizing the need for Arab American communities to establish Muslim institutions to preserve their religious faith, and they founded an increasing number of mosques and Islamic centers in

different areas in the region. These local organizations along with national Muslim organizations, such as the Muslim American Society and the Council on American-Islamic Relations, serve as social spaces for young Muslims. Thus intermarriages increased as a result of the interactions within a diverse Muslim community in Milwaukee, in addition to higher levels of educational attainment, globalization, new spatial and temporal features facilitated by technology, and the limited number of qualified potential Palestinian spouses. The transformation is apparent in the salient differences between sisters; Azra is a young second-generation woman with an older sister whose desire to marry a Pakistani man was strongly opposed, and ultimately rejected, by her parents. Therefore, following her older sister's failed attempt, Azra "took [her] time with marriage." Later Azra's twin sister, Farah, wanted to marry a Pakistani man whom she had met at the masjid. Despite their initial resistance, her parents ultimately welcomed this choice. After this marriage was accomplished, Azra found the courage to persuade her family to marry an American convert. Both Azra and Farah were told, "We want you to marry Palestinian men whose families we know so that we can do background checks and know they will take care of you." However, Azra and Farah were now equipped with the discursive tools to negotiate their decisions with their parents. Azra talked about how her sister managed to change her parents' minds, which also paved the way for herself:

> My family was still iffy about this whole interracial marriage but decided to give it a shot. My sister actually came and brought things out of the Qur'an. She likes to debate. She came prepared and told my parents, "You cannot reject a man if he has the financial means to take care of your daughter. He is Muslim; he believes in the same thing and he wants to get married. According to Islam, you are not supposed to deny him the right to get married." So my parents decided to try it out. He came over with his parents, and my parents fell in love with him right away. They courted for a little while, got to know each other a little more, and everything worked out for them.

As to her own marriage, Azra also probed into the tenets of Islam regarding marriage and the irrelevance of the nationality; marrying an American convert, she also reflected on her American identity: "The only thing was that they thought it would not be a successful marriage because of the difference of the culture, but it comes down to that we are American, and this is doable."

When negotiating their marriages, women used their identification as Muslim and American, not as Palestinian, to garner their parents' consent. For example, Farah identified herself as a Muslim first, American second, and Palestinian third. When asked about her decision to marry outside her cultural group and how she achieved it, she said that it was difficult at first. For her, the main requirements for potential suitors were education and faith. However, her parents had stressed that a

suitor was supposed to be "Palestinian, Palestinian, Palestinian." Of women belonging to this age group, few preferred to marry Palestinians born and raised in Palestine even if they were educated, as they saw them as culturally incompatible. In this sense, second-generation women challenged cultural conservatism and transformed the exilic yearning of their parents through a set of historically and socially embedded factors. The destabilization of national and cultural boundaries increased women's negotiation of marriage outside these canons. For example, Nur married a Pakistani man after struggling for five years to change her parents' ideas. Her own marriage criteria radically differed from those held by her parents, who prioritized things such as speaking the same language and having the same cultural customs. However, Nur, a twenty-five-year-old second-generation woman, believed that "mutual respect, love, and interest in careers" would make her marriage successful. Nur placed religion at the center of her negotiation to eliminate the objections based on cultural difference:

> But we tell them that it does not matter, and that we are both Muslim; we have the same religion. That is where my values are. That is what matters to me. At the time, he had just completed memorizing the Qurʾan and becoming a hafiz. So I would tell them that, that he prays and practices what he memorizes, and that is who I want to be the father of my children. My mom understood, but she was worried about things like wedding traditions and what our children would speak. I would tell her that we would speak English, and we would teach them each Arabic and Urdu and Farsi. But it took a long time.

Drawing on their Muslim identity, and using their literacy in Islamic history and doctrine and their reinterpretation of them, these women promote their ideas and rights by aligning them with Islamic precepts. Instead of the more established cultural norms, these women relied on religious doctrine, which they base on their interpretations of scriptural texts and prophetic traditions, allows them more leeway, especially in light of the accepted diversity of Qurʾanic exegeses that have existed since the Qurʾan's early years. The Islamic revival movements equipped many women with enough Islamic literacy whereby they brought along new interpretations in support of their rights as individuals and as women. One argument these women strongly advocated was that Islam decrees national and ethnic boundaries as artificial divisions.[4] This assertion enabled women to expose their transnational identities, socialize in a larger community, and strengthen interethnic communications and marriages.

For a global Palestinian community, even though nationalist tendencies coexist today with an Islamic discourse, Islamic movements have grown in relation to the failure of national movements in achieving Palestinian independence. Young generations are immensely influenced by the shift of power to Islamic sociopolitical orientations, as part of a religious rejuvenation that occurred as a result of

demographic changes, religious education and institutionalization, and technological advancements that took shape after the 1990s in Muslim-majority countries and spread among diasporic populations in the West. The seeds of Islamic revival were planted in different locations and were nurtured by several historical and social developments (Dekmejian 1980: 3). The civil war in Lebanon between 1976 and 1990, the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979, the Palestinian uprising (intifada) in the Occupied Territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in December 1987, and the Gulf War in 1990, to name a few conflicts, strengthened Islamic movements in the Arab world (notably the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt) (Ahmad 2011). While some of these events fostered national feelings, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, they also encouraged the supporters of Islamic movements and the espousal of a religious discourse that addressed the feelings of despair, disappointment, and betrayal among many across Arab countries, which caused them to question the legitimacy of their national governments. Additionally, as Islah Jad (2011: 42) succinctly points out, "Islam was amalgamated with Arab secularism from its inception." Therefore, particularly in Palestine, the rise of Islamic movements and Islamic political ideals due to the perceived failure of national movements in gaining national independence did not result in the elimination of a nationalist discourse in favor of an Islamic one.

When it comes to the Muslim communities in the United States, the surge of Islamophobia since the 1990s worked to strengthen Muslim identity and emphasized Muslim unity within the imagined global Muslim community, the *umma*.[5] This generation of Muslims usually identify themselves in relation to cross-cultural membership in mainstream and minority cultures. Popular and intellectual discourses in media, schools, mosques, and at home contain mixed messages that are shaping and reshaping the ways in which they conceive themselves. This period of Islamic revival profoundly affected women's perception of their own identities, their identificatory agency, and their engagement with gendered social and religious institutions. Indeed, for individuals whose parents migrated from Muslim countries, adopting an Islamic discourse functions as a vehicle that connected them both to their local background and to the ever-growing diaspora with the advent of new Muslim immigrants from around the world. Islamic revival had further implications for the immigrant communities. In these communities, the revived Muslim discourse took shape in the form of organizations that constituted both physical sites and social spaces for the second-generation Muslim immigrant communities. National organizations founded by Palestinian immigrants for reproducing cultural activities in Milwaukee did not turn entirely dysfunctional, yet they were incorporated or transformed into larger organizations that aim to bring Muslims together regardless of national origin. This, in turn, had an impact on perceptions of marriage partner compatibility and helped women use the Islamic concept of

brotherhood and sisterhood in one community that bridges class, ethnicity, and racial division in choosing marriage partners. These organizations, among other new sites of socialization, such as universities and workplaces, have become spaces for women to redraw and expand, if not entirely remove, the community, spatial, and ideological boundaries encircling them.

In my interviews, nearly every relationship that led to intermarriage was formed in Muslim organizations or at Muslim events. Education also constitutes one of the main pillars of the new socialization patterns; not only did the higher levels of education and the pursuit of different careers enhance women's circle, but also education in community Muslim schools or in colleges where Muslim student associations exist played an important role in linking Muslims from different ethnic backgrounds. While parents often aimed to restrict their daughters' intermingling to their social and educational settings, they interfered less as Islamic schools and organizations became major players for the community. Nur, whose parents used to allow her to visit only her cousins, became involved in the events organized at the mosque, which provided her with a different space: "I spent a lot of time at the mosque. We would have youth nights at the mosque every Friday and that is where you would meet all your friends. We would have pizza and play basketball and gossip about people; it was so much fun." Over time, either the daughters' involvement transformed parents' perceptions too, or their parents just yielded to the power of change. When Farah, an active member of community organizations, was asked why her parents kept their daughters from interacting with people from different backgrounds, and also from the opposite gender, she replied, "The fear of the unknown." Gradually, many immigrant Palestinians of nationalist-secular back-grounds started adopting a more religious discourse and became involved in these organizations.[6] As the Milwaukee Muslim population increased in size and diversity, more religiously oriented Muslims became present in the community in ways that were not as available twenty years ago. One of the most significant institutions in the community is the Islamic Salam school, established in 1992, which began with twenty-five students and a staff of volunteers. This school not only ingrained Islamic doctrine in children from a young age but also became a multicultural Muslim setting where children met Muslim people from different backgrounds and learned to socialize across national origins.

Demographic changes and community organizations can either increase or constrain intermarriages with their potential implications for marginalization and segregation. The social transformation had strong influences on partner selection and marriage practices among the Palestinian community in Milwaukee. First, while Palestinian weddings and local events were the major social settings where young community members could get to know one another for marriage, women began to meet their potential spouses at Muslim community functions, including

annual conferences and meetings organized by Muslim student associations, the Muslim American Society in Milwaukee, or the Islamic Circle of North America convention held in a different city and state each year. These organizations supported the transformation of women's identities in multiple ways; they helped reconstruct women's role as they got beyond the boundaries of "home" by actively taking roles in these organizations. From public lectures to holiday arrangements, these institutions hosted a wide range of events and gatherings that became uniting forces for many Muslims of different backgrounds.

In addition to the Islamic schools and organizations, another space that led to transforming Palestinian women's values is the digital space encompassing social media and other online forums and websites that particularly inform women's dating practices and marriage preferences. In the last two decades, the surge of technological communications reshaped the temporal and spatial contexts of courtship. Ayda, a second-generation Palestinian woman who married a Syrian man, expressed the role of social media in her marriage:

> Honestly, if it had not been for social media, I probably would have never even thought twice about Ayaan, because I would not know; I would not even have been reminded of him, but logging onto Facebook and seeing that he graduated on the same day I graduated, and his graduation was two hours after mine, in the same building, and we were going to cross paths, made me think twice about things and made me think of him. I probably would not have if it had not been for social media, because we never really crossed paths otherwise. We met in person, but really the interest sparked on social media, and I think that a lot of people do that, and it is okay, because it is not really dating by American standards.

Ayda emphasized that her contact with Ayaan was not in the way of American dating habits because the concept of dating in Islam is substantially different from the mainstream American understanding of the notion. Dating or courtship, according to an Islamic framework, refers to the process by which a man and a woman meet for a limited time for the purpose of marriage under the supervision of other people (usually family members). Along with the transformation of marriage patterns and choices, and the introduction of new spaces for interaction and intermarriage, the framework of dating has also been notably transformed. Until the recent past, most of the dating took place during the engagement period after the partners decided to marry. Such courtship generally ended in arranged marriages. The new generation's marriage practices have brought about novel approaches to the concept of courtship as well. For instance, Muslim dating sites are increasingly popular as young people attempt to search for spouses outside familial arrangements. While the traditional ways are still practiced and many people still find their potential spouses by

attending weddings in the United States or visiting Palestine in the summer, social media and dating websites have immensely expanded the way young Muslims find potential spouses. Although some dating websites tailor their searches to allow for the consideration of ethnic and regional origin, many promote inter-Muslim community marriage. According to Mbaye Lo, a professor of Arabic at Duke University:

> The identity of global Islam is not physical, it's more ideological — its constituency is a global constituency. . . .
>
> That is why the websites often show an African Muslim man with an Indo-Pakistani girl, for example, on their main page. They portray themselves in a physical manner that postulates Islam's globality in order to engage people on a global level and give them more of a global outlook, a global citizenship. (Green 2014)

Thus, in addition to promoting aspirations for Islamic unity, these technological developments created virtual spaces in which women's presence and visibility are enhanced compared to physical spaces in which there are more restrictions on women's interactions with male nonrelatives.

Conclusion

In this article I have shown how in-group and out-group marriages for Palestinian American women are facilitated by both local and global factors. The cross-border marriage among Palestinians, in the diaspora and at home, involves cross-cultural dimensions that fetch a complicated discourse of acceptance and modification. Likewise, the interethnic marriages between Muslim Palestinian American women and other Muslim Americans imply the development of identities that precede country of origin and national, regional, and ethnic loyalties. Both kinds of marriage take place among Palestinian Americans in the Milwaukee region (which is most likely true among other Muslim communities in the United States as well). While cross-border marriages have happened since the beginning of the migration process among Palestinians, their criteria have changed by time of migration and settlement. Some of the changes in marriage practices can be explained by changing needs of women in the context of transnational communities and their changing perceptions of gender roles in an ever-evolving community. Ultimately, these women's articulation of a religious identity, as paramount in their layered self-identification, helped them challenge patriarchal notions of gender roles and ethnocentricity. We see, as a result, how exogamous marriages grew due to the intersection of cultural, intellectual, and political discourses operating within the religious discourse, which enabled an inclination toward marriage between Muslim Palestinian Americans and other American Muslim groups.

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Notes

1. These include the Islamic Society of Milwaukee Main Center (and its K–12 school) and its two new mosques: ISM Brookfield West and ISM University East. Through more-structured instruction provided by these schools, young American Muslims, including Palestinians, have become more literate in the Islamic teachings than their parents, contributing to the strengthened feelings of collective identity observed in their marriage practices.
2. The AMWRRI was established in 2010 with a mission to collect the histories and experiences of Arabs and Muslims in the United States.
3. Immigrants from Kuwait are mostly Palestinians who fled to the Gulf states after the creation of the Israeli state and then to the United States during the Gulf War in 1990–91.
4. This is based on the verse in the Qur'an that reads, "O you mankind, surely We created you of a male and a female, and We have made you races and tribes that you may get mutually acquainted. Surely the most honorable among you in the Providence of Allah are the most pious; surely Allah is Ever-Knowing, Ever-Cognizant" (chap. 49, ayat 13).
5. Paradoxically, the increased hostility against Muslims and Islam sometimes worked to strengthen expressions of religiosity. Though some women removed the veil, others wore it as a sign of political activism and an assertion of identity.
6. Most parents of the interviewees are secular-nationalist Palestinians, yet they began to engage in religious activities and organizations as the mosques, Islamic schools, and other Islamic institutions proliferated. The mothers generally started to wear the hijab in recent years and became "practicing Muslims."

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