

DISCUSSION ON ARAB IDENTITY

Nadine Naber is a professor of Arab American Studies at the University of Michigan.

Deborah Amos (DA): We have been hearing in this program about the shaping of Arab identity for young people in the Middle East and among Arab-Americans. Are there similarities in how these two groups form their identity?

Nadine Naber (NN): I think there are similarities. I think a lot of the trends you see in the Arab region, for example in the 1950s, there was kind of a peak of an Arab nationalist identity – the idea that everyone in the region is Arab and is united. We saw that also in the United States in the 1950s and '60s. Before the 1960s, Arabs in the United States did not necessarily identify as Arab or Arab-American. People tended to identify more with their specific countries of origin or their villages of origin or their family names.

Interestingly in the Arab region post 1980s, we have seen a waning of this concept of a unified Arab identity. We have also seen the rise of various religious movements organized around Islam as a framework for organizing both identity and politics. In the United States, we have seen a similar trend. If you go to a college campus today, you see a lot of Arab students hanging out with a broader kind of Muslim grouping of people. Students are organizing themselves on campus through a Muslim or Muslim American identity.

DA: With Arab-Americans, they are in a sea of others as opposed to Arab youth in the Middle East. Does that make a difference in how they see themselves?

NN: I think that is what really distinguishes the way that people make claims to identity in the United States compared to in the Arab world. In the Arab region, people shape their identity in relationship to the west or to the United States. But the stakes are not as high because when they go outside their door, they are surrounded by other Arabs. In the United States, there is an internalized sense that people do or may see you as different or inferior or a potential terrorist. Or it's the idea that your kids are going to school and people are saying things to them like, "Look! Muhammad the terrorist is coming!" So that also creates a range of responses. Some people might not say they are Arab at all and say they are Italian or Puerto Rican.

Some people might claim a really strong politicized identity that perhaps their parents never claimed where they are joining Arab political movements or Muslim political movements. Some people turn to reactionary or conservative concepts of identity where they construct or create an idea of "We Arabs and those Americans." That happens with any immigrant group. You might have immigrants saying things like, "Our daughters don't stay out late at night. It's American girls who stay out late at night." These are just examples of this rigid sense of Arab culture versus American culture that gets produced after immigration to the United States.

DA: But the point you are making is that all of this is in opposition to or because of? These aren't identities that are formed in a void. They are identities that are formed because the world is smaller and we are all watching each other.

NN: I think that's a great way to put it. There is a constant conversation going on and a great deal of what happens in the Arab region happens in relationship to a conversation with western ideas. Nothing that happens around identity happens outside of this framework of east versus west.