

Transnational Families Under Siege:

Lebanese Shi'a in Dearborn, MI,

And the 2006 War on Lebanon

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An Arab Families Working Group Policy Brief

by

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In 2006, the Arab Families Working Group (AFWG) supported ethnographic research among the southern Lebanese population residing in Dearborn, Michigan, following the aftermath of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. This research focused on the significance of family and gender in the intensification of long-distance nationalism among Lebanese in diaspora. The war inspired a sense of belonging to a transnational family that was under siege and this naturalized the practice of “comfort

mothering,” which met the emotive needs of a diaspora engaged from a distance with a war in the homeland. The war also reinforced the concepts and practices associated with belonging to a transnational “Arab Family” and therefore placed a double duty on women activists in official Arab American Politics. Engagements with normative concepts of belonging to an “American

family” entailed a gendered strategy of resistance in which Arab American official politics deployed women’s narratives to humanize the Lebanese in the face of a “war on terror” discourse that conflated Lebanese Shi’ite masculinity with Hizballah and terrorism. This brief aims to expand theories on the intersections between gender and nation in light of transnational experiences of war. It also questions the expansiveness of intersectionality in light of a collective experience of military invasion in which the urgency of war over determines the significance of other forms of oppression, including gender oppression.

Background

Detroit, Michigan hosts one of the largest and most diverse populations of Arab and Arab-Americans in the United States. In the city of Dearborn in Greater Detroit, they make up 39% of the population, or approximately 40,000 people. The majority are Shi’ite Muslims from southern Lebanon near the border of Israel.

In the summer of 2006, during the period of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Lebanese flags were flown outside virtually every home and storefront along Dearborn’s Warren Avenue. The roads were full of cars with Lebanese flags draped across the hood. At gas stations, supermarkets, and community centers, intense exchanges about the invasion replaced the customary small talk. Lebanese in Dearborn anxiously awaited news from their villages of origin. Neighborhoods became sites for information-sharing and support. People seemed more captivated by cell phones, the Internet, and satellite television than ever before. While U.S. government and media discourses vilified southern Lebanese through gendered representations of violence and terrorism, personal stories from Lebanon circulated around Dearborn via local constellations of friends and neighbors, the local Arab-American press, and religious, cultural, and political networks. The collective experiences of war from a distance brought people

together in a communal state of emergency in which two questions took center stage: “Has our village been attacked?” and “Are our loved ones alive or dead?”

This study explores how the specific rules of engagement through which Lebanese in Dearborn experienced the invasion from afar engendered particular intersections between family, gender, and nation, distinct to the context of diaspora. . This brief is based on research conducted among Lebanese in Dearborn beginning in July 2006 at the onset of the war. Participant observation was conducted at community events related to the war, including protests, demonstrations, fundraisers, teach-ins, and memorial services, and cultural and political networks where Lebanese people and their allies shared stories, lamented, mourned, and envisioned peace, justice, and the possibilities for rebuilding Lebanon. The research is also based on interviews in Dearborn with 22 women and men primarily from South Lebanon, and two Palestinian community leaders in planning events with Lebanese people.

Transnational Families Under Siege

Those interviewed for this study perceived themselves as members of multi-sited, extended families, located primarily within and between the boundaries of the U.S. and Lebanon. Family connected people in the U.S. and Lebanon in three ways. The first entailed some members residing in Lebanon and others residing in Dearborn. The second included families with members born and raised in the U.S. who had extended family members in Lebanon but had never (or seldom) visited them. The third entailed families that primarily reside in Dearborn but had one or more members vacationing in Lebanon when the war began. Hussein, a community leader during the period of invasion, reflected on how Lebanese families transgressed the borders of a single nation-state: “The same family has one leg here and one leg there, literally.” Based

on these family formations, the extended kin networks of interviewees are referred to as “transnational social fields,” or networks of social relationships that link Dearborn Lebanese to Lebanon and bring events in Lebanon to Dearborn in profoundly intimate ways.

These transnational social fields of family were the chief catalyst behind the sense of urgency in Dearborn during the 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. All interviewees considered the invasion to be an attack on their families. Roulah, who was in Lebanon during the invasion, said, “Everywhere, families came together and became stronger.” Suleiman, who was visiting relatives in Lebanon, said, “We spent days and nights together. It made us closer to each other.” Such statements demonstrate how family became a safe haven in the face of invasion. Family provided sanctuary, put people at ease, and gave them strength.

Comfort Mothering: Meeting the Emotive Needs of a Distant Diaspora

Southern Lebanese in Dearborn experience the war through TV, Internet, phone calls, and the stories that circulated through their local networks and neighborhoods. As a result, the Lebanese community, experiencing the war from a distance had needs that were primarily emotive, people needed comfort and support to cope with their fears and anxieties, their worries about their loved ones, and their unknown futures. These needs inspired particular practices of mothering that were crucial to idealized concepts of a Lebanese family under siege, or comfort mothering. Comfort mothering, a practice that typically shapes concepts of motherhood within the domain of extended kin, became integral to the process of coping among the imagined long-distance nation.

As a result of the need to comfort people as they dealt with the unknown and feared for the lives of their loved ones far away, women’s roles changed. Women of the Lebanese diaspora

living in Dearborn, were no longer mothers to their own children, but to their neighbors and immediate community as well. The practice of providing emotional comfort was not only gendered among extended kin, but served the needs of the nation as family writ large. Comfort mothering among the long-distance nation emerged from the experience of war from a distance and the sense of belonging to transnational families under siege.

Double Duty: Visible and Invisible Domains of Women's Work

During the invasion, women were involved in visible and invisible forms of labor in the form of official politics (visible labor) and practical, organizational work (invisible labor). Women held positions on the executive board of the Congress of Arab American Organizations (CAAO), a local network based in Dearborn that played a key role in organizing community-based responses to the invasion. While women participated en masse in demonstrations, shared the podium with male speakers, and held many integral leadership positions in the CAAO, gendered forms of labor continued to structure official public politics. Women currently direct two of the most significant Arab American Institutions in Dearborn. Women leaders have decades of experience interfacing with major U.S. agencies, ranging from the United Way to the office of the mayor to the state legislature. These living histories illustrate that public politics is not exclusively a male domain in Arab Dearborn; these histories also help to explain the very high visibility of women in Arab Dearborn's public responses to the invasion. However, at the same time, women were also the ones behind the scenes, organizing the public responses to the invasion. Samia, a leading activist in CAAO recalled,

During the war, there were a large amount of men with three or four women at the leadership meeting held every couple days. The men argued about who would be on the microphone and who would be speaking on behalf of the community. A lot of the practical concerns were left up to women....getting the paperwork done, meeting with the

mayor and police chief to discuss the demonstration, making sure people come out to demonstrations in an orderly manner. All the paperwork for the City of Dearborn was in my name because no one else was there to sign the papers to hold events and get the permits. I was the city's point person and they came to me for every issue. We had 15,000 people in attendance-so the work was exhausting.

Women in Dearborn worked alongside men activists in representing the long-distance nation in official public politics and determining the character of its activities and events. But the women of Dearborn also encountered a double duty where they were engaging in men's work, but men were not assisting them in the behind the scenes work that has traditionally been ascribed to women.

Conclusion

The specific character of the 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the specific conditions in which diasporas lived it from a distance engendered particular concepts and practices of family, gender, and nation in Dearborn during the period of the invasion. Lebanese diasporas experienced the invasion within transnational social fields where they lived the material realities of the invasion "over there" through satellite TV, telephone calls, social networks, and simultaneously engaged "over here" with U.S. government and media discourses on the invasion. The invasion sparked negotiation with multiple concepts and practices of the nation as family (Lebanese, Arab, and American) that were overlapping, contested, and laden with specific gender constructs. This paper illustrates how concepts of family and gender can permeate multiple nationalist ideologies in different ways within a particular social location and how the mobilization of gender within long-distance nationalisms can be a site of both constraint and empowerment for women.