

A conversation with Moustafa Bayoumi
author of
**HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE A
PROBLEM?**

Can you explain the significance of your book's title?

It comes from W.E.B. Du Bois's 1903 classic *The Souls of Black Folk*. In that book, Du Bois was determined to counteract the hatreds of the Jim Crow-era by pulling back the "veil" separating black and white Americans. He wanted to show his readers a fuller, more accurate picture of the black experience, including "the meaning of its religion, the passion of its human sorrow, and the struggle of its greater souls." And he also understood that the treatment of African Americans was really a kind of social thermometer—an index of how healthy American society as a whole was.

Now, a century later, Arab and Muslim Americans are the newest minorities in the American imagination, and they aren't much better understood than African Americans were in 1903. I believe their treatment too reflects much about the state of American society today.

How have things changed for the Arab American or Muslim American community since September 11th?

Prior to September 11th, Arab and Muslim Americans lived in the shadow of invisibility. They were virtually unknown to the general public. Now, they exist under the glare of the spotlight. But both shadow and glare wash out the details of human life.

What are those details? Some of them are depressing. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11th, there have been mass arrests, indefinite detentions, warrantless wiretapping, abuses of the material witness statute, thousands of FBI interviews, closed-door immigration hearings, and much more. Several major charities have been shut down. Bias crimes are way up, and a general hostility against all things Arab and Muslim has now become routine.

On the other hand, many people have reached out and continue to reach out to Arabs and Muslims out of feelings of solidarity and an honest desire to understand their neighbors. Muslim and Arab organizations too have matured in the years since the terrorist attacks. They have adopted greater openness and now speak in a more American idiom. It's very important to recognize the multiple expressions of good will that have come from so many corners of our civil society.

What comparisons can you draw between the current Arab American experience and the plight of African Americans during the Civil Rights era?

Arab and Muslim American communities have endured much over these years, but in no way does this past compare to the horrors of slavery, segregation, and discrimination faced by African Americans. To say otherwise would be incorrect and an appropriation of another people's history. I'm also certainly not arguing that bigotry against Arab and Muslims is the only racism around. Racism remains a persistent problem in the United States.

The point is that Arabs and Muslims have become the newest minorities in the American imagination. So if we look closely at the African American experience and discover the ways that difference and racial formation work in the United States, we will see many contemporary congruencies. People carry all kinds of assumptions about you merely because of some kind of collective attribute you carry. Your culture is described as the cause of all your problems. People fear and pity you simultaneously. Law enforcement treats you differently. And there are other concrete repercussions, such as employment or housing discrimination. Twenty-two percent of respondents to a 2006 *USA Today*/Gallup poll, for example, said they didn't want Muslims as neighbors.

The Civil Rights struggle was really a long revolution. It changed the very nature of American society. It dismantled an American system of apartheid, and established new notions of citizenship and equality. This is why the creation of new minorities and new racisms, while unsurprising, is dispiriting. The Civil Rights struggle also established a very important principle, namely that a true republic requires a full democracy. Similarly, I think the contemporary situation of Arab and Muslim Americans points to another important question about who we are as a nation. Will the United States be a republic or an empire? Empires, history has shown, are not very good at protecting civil liberties at home or human rights abroad.

How did you come across the people featured in your book?

Once I had the idea for the book, I began visiting social service organizations and talking to imams, lawyers, and other community leaders and activists. But the most important thing I did was ask my friends, especially my Arab and Muslim friends, for help. They then asked their friends, and so on. Sociologists call this a snowball sample, but I wasn't aiming to write a work of pure sociology. I was interested in the literary and journalistic angles of the stories I was hearing.

I also cast a relatively wide net. I didn't rely only on one group of friends, but talked to many different people from different sides of Brooklyn. Before too long, word got around and I began getting phone calls from people who had heard I was writing a book and wanted to tell me something they thought might be worthy of inclusion. People told me a lot of stories of minor indignities, but I wanted to collect the larger experiences. In the end, I had a few parameters: that people be older than 18 and younger than 30, of Arab descent, and live in Brooklyn (or at least have lived in Brooklyn during the story I was telling). I was also more interested in people who were not yet married, since I think youth is less a matter of age and more about a stage of life. After I had heard about a person who had an interesting story, I would contact him or her, set up a time to meet, explain the project, and start listening.

I would meet regularly with people until I felt I had mastered the details of their stories. Often I would just hang out with them so I could feel what their life was like rather than only hearing about it from them. That required developing trusting and respectful relationships.

I entered the project with very few expectations. I knew that it would be inherently interesting to hear about the experiences of an Arab American soldier and about life as an Iraqi American, but even these stories turned out to be not quite what I expected. Beyond these, I didn't go looking for any particular kind of story, though I did know what I didn't want—stories only about victims or only about heroes. I was searching more for the complications of lived experience. I paid close attention to what people around me were saying, and that guided my search.

Can you share a couple of the stories here now that really inspired you to write the book?

There's the email sent on September 13, 2001 to an Arab American list I'm on. "I am the daughter of a Japanese American who was interred during WWII," it read. "I have heard that Muslims are fearful to leave their homes, and with good reason. Is there a way that I can help?" Or the Moroccan guy I used to see at a local coffee shop. Before September 11th, we constantly joked with each other while he flirted up a storm with almost every woman who entered the shop. He was an aeronautical engineer, and after September 11th, he just couldn't find any work. I saw him less and less as his mood grew darker, until one day he just never came in anymore. Or there was the time I was at a party and a group of people was questioning the amount of hostility directed towards Muslims, asking if reports of such hostility might be overexaggerated. One person, a South Asian activist, started lecturing the group. Then he pulled out a false front tooth, telling us in detail how he had been jumped a few weeks earlier. That shut everybody up. Or seeing close friends of mine have to register their whereabouts with the government through the Special Registration program, and hearing them describe with disbelief how the FBI questioned everything about them, including their politics and if they knew Osama bin Laden. Everyone has experiences to share. When I get together with my friends, these are the stories we often trade.

What ultimately inspired you to write this book?

Since September 11th, I have been responding directly to the events of the day, usually by writing op-eds or by lecturing on university campuses across the country. But there came a time about two and a half years ago when I was exhausted by constantly reacting to the news. I felt that it was time to step back, take a deep breath, and assess what had happened to the community and to the country. There was a human dimension to the fallout of the "war on terror" that felt like it was hidden or unacknowledged.

I thought it was important to write a book about people and not just issues, especially since it was beginning to feel like the very humanity of Arabs and Muslims was now at stake. Some excellent work—Charlie Savage's book *Takeover*, for one—was appearing that analyzed how wrongheaded the "war on terror" policy was—but still something was missing. The stories of real people had to be told, especially the stories of young people. They were the

ones who would forge the future of their communities and they are the ones who are most feared by many.

What are the biggest challenges facing the Arab and Muslim community today in the US? How do your subjects face these obstacles?

On the domestic side, the issue is one of true equality under the law. According to a recent Associated Press report, the Justice Department is currently considering a policy that would allow the FBI to initiate national security investigations of Americans without any evidence of wrongdoing. Whatever happened to evidence? Probable cause? This should generate outrage. I suspect however that only a few civil libertarians will get exercised over the report. Law professor David Cole often says that what the last several years have taught us is that people are more than willing to trade away someone else's civil liberties for even a false sense of their own security. Moreover, few people realize that in 2003 the president signed a ban on racial profiling by law enforcement but included "exceptions permitting use of race and ethnicity to combat potential terrorist attacks." The latest initiative seems to suggest one further step, an integration by the Justice Department of ethnic and religious profiling into the FBI's routine practices.

What should also be noted is that the fate of Arab and Muslim Americans is directly connected to the foreign policy of the United States. And on the foreign policy front, the war on terror has been a disaster for the Middle East. Iraq is in shambles, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues to spiral depressingly downward with no end realistically in sight, and Lebanon teeters dangerously between political paralysis and full-blown civil war. The entire region is more unstable now than in any time in recent history. My subjects all have family in the region, and they, like many Arab Americans, are very concerned about what happens over there.

The Bush administration has a very simplistic way of viewing the world that can be summed up with the expression "either you are with us or you are with the terrorists." But the world doesn't work that way. In fact, such facile black-and-white worldviews actually end up encouraging more violence and facilitating the growth of radicalism. We need a foreign policy based on justice, dignity, and equality for all, and not one that relies on conquest, exploitation, and a kind of 21st-century colonialism.

Do you identify with this community? Have you had experiences similar to those faced by your subjects?

Arab Americans, like any community, are not a monolithic group, and an Arab American identity is actually very complex and multifaceted. People unite around a common culture and language, but they also subdivide along predictable lines: class, generation, profession, religion, piety, national origin, etc. My parents instilled in me from very early age a healthy amount of pride in my Arab and Muslim roots. In that way, I do identify very much with the community.

At the same time, my Arab and Muslim friends prior to writing this book came from my social circle. Most are academics or professionals. They are often secular and usually deeply

involved in the arts or politics. The largest Arab American community in Brooklyn, however, is composed of many new immigrants, is heavily working class, and is often entrepreneurial. The center of this community is in the neighborhood of Bay Ridge, and I don't live there, so there were enough differences between me and this community to make me feel like I was both an insider and an outsider. This mostly meant introducing myself to the people of Bay Ridge, but the community was never unwelcoming to me.

I too have been singled out in airports and sent to different rooms for extra screening. My passport often gets extra scrutiny when I travel. Since I write a lot about these issues, I also get plenty of hate mail. Much of it is openly racist, and some of it is quite elaborate! Strangers, when they hear my name or guess my ancestry, will often assume they know my position on certain issues and begin to lecture me about them. Sometimes, it's very strange. You say your name and suddenly a person is berating you about Hamas or confiding some wild conspiracy theory to you. It's as if everyone has an opinion about you, even if you've never met the person before. These are the kind of things I deal with regularly, but I think they have become rather ordinary for many Arab Americans today.

There's been a lot of discussion in the media recently about Barack Obama snubbing the Muslim community. What are your thoughts on this?

Many Muslim and Arab Americans felt hopeful when they heard Obama's 2004 Democratic convention address. "If there's an Arab American family being rounded up without benefit of an attorney or due process, that threatens my civil liberties," he proclaimed. Now we worry that this was a different Obama.

Obama seems to be running away so fast from the rumor that he's some kind of crypto-Muslim, that he's tripping over himself by ignoring—or even selling out—his Arab and Muslim American supporters. His website has called the allegation that he's a "secret Muslim" a "smear," but there's certainly nothing wrong with being Muslim. He hasn't yet paid a campaign visit to a mosque. And his campaign volunteers removed two women in hijab from sitting behind the podium at a Detroit rally in June.

All of these controversies are over political symbolism, but the problems also run deeper. As Obama moves to the political center, he is becoming just like any other politician. Obama appears to be backtracking over his position on drawing down troops in Iraq. Some of his recent speeches on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were also very disappointing to Palestinians, who hoped that he would be more evenhanded than the Bush administration and more sensitive to their plight. That now seems naïve. For all the excitement about change, the Illinois senator who stands for an expansive vision of the United States appears to have drawn the line at Muslim and Arab Americans, who are too much of a political liability. It's really a shame, because Obama is ideally situated to challenge today's pernicious bigotry against Muslims and Arabs. All of this underscores to many Arab and Muslim Americans their vulnerability in American politics today.

What do you think of how Arab Americans are portrayed in the media?

Arab Americans don't really exist in the media. Tony Shalhoub is probably the most successful Arab American actor today and, except for the *Siege* (1998), he rarely plays Arab American roles. Some Arab and Middle Eastern American comedians have been getting more exposure, but the main roles that Arab Americans seem to occupy today are the ones that Arabs have usually held in Hollywood: terrorists. The new crop of comedians makes fun of this. There is a skit where aspiring Arab American actors are taught how to play terrorists so that Latino actors won't land the roles. It's very funny.

Still, representations aren't any better for Arabs generally or for the coverage of Islam in the media. A University of Massachusetts-Amherst survey conducted during the 1991 Gulf War discovered that, shockingly, the more television news people watched, the less they knew about the region. A 2003 survey found a correlation between viewing Fox news and believing that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. Something strange is going on here.

It's true that since 2001 there has been an unprecedented increase in interest in the Arab world and in Islam. And yet, at the same time, people are probably as uninformed as ever. One poll found that ten percent of the population thinks Muslims believe in a moon god. Another discovered that 39 percent of respondents admitted—admitted, mind you—to holding prejudice against Muslims. There's also this idea out there, promoted by many right-wing bloggers and conservative talk shows, that Muslims are poised to take over the United States, abolish the constitution, and institute shari'a law. That's just ridiculous.

The problem isn't really a lack of information. It's a lack of desire for real understanding. Although people in the Middle East are generally much better informed about the United States than the other way around, they also hold many damaging stereotypes about Americans. Conflict exacerbates misunderstanding, which in turn drives more conflict. And misunderstandings are often exploited for cynical, political ends. True understanding demands work.

What do you hope readers will take away from your book?

I hope that everyone who reads this book will be able to relate closely to at least one or two of the stories I tell and discover the very human situations that these young people find themselves in. I think what readers will then find is that it's already hard enough to cope with the stresses of being young in America without the added dimensions of state repression and growing prejudice.

It also seems to me that my book shows how the United States is always an incomplete project, a continuous work in progress. We must be constantly vigilant about protecting the rights of others. By doing so we are not just defending the principles of the nation, but we are guaranteeing our own rights as well.