Letter to a G-Man*

Moustafa Bayoumi

Let me ask you something. Have you heard the story of the vizier's son? His father, the minister, had offended the ruler, and so he and his family were imprisoned for a very long time, so long in fact that the son knew only prison life. He reached the age of reason shortly after his release and, one night at dinner, the son asked his father about the meat he had been eating. "It's lamb," said the father. The son then asked the father, "What is lamb?" The father described the animal to the son, to which the son replied, "Do you mean it is like a rat?" "No!," said the father. "What have lambs to do with rats?" And the same continued then with cows and camels for, you see, the son had seen only rats in prison. He knew no other animal.

You may be wondering why I begin this brief correspondence with such a story, but I beg your indulgence. There will be time for all things. Suffice it to say that, as the son shows us, confinement defeats the imagination. Call it arrested development if you will, but if you are forced to stay put, how can you discover the delicacy of lamb, sprin-

* *In: After the World Trade Center*, Michael Sorkin and Sharon Zukin (eds.), New York, Rutledge, 2002, p. 131-42.

kled generously with garlic, and massaged with allspice, roasting over an open flame? Perhaps you can almost taste it now. Yes, the mind wanders, and the wanderer's mind, well, it expands, you could say. But without knowledge or history or experience, the son could only learn of these things when it was too late. I hope it is not too late for you—and for me.

You see, I fear that you have become like the son. You believe only what you already know, see only what you want to see, but you must ask yourself how you understand those things.

I have been told that you have arrested hundreds of us and seek to question thousands more. I imagine you are looking for me. You are concerned, naturally, after the eleventh of September, as we all are. I too watched the tower fall, as did everyone I know, with a tear in my eye and the air stuck hard in my lungs. Who could have imagined such malefaction! I prayed for the people lost in those towers, just as I have since prayed for the innocents everywhere, my benedictions sounding like Walt Whitman's brassy cornet and drums, which, as he said, play marches for conquer'd and slain persons. Didn't we all suffer on that terrible day, the families of the dead most of all?

The city itself was in mourning, with its gaping wound right there on the skin of Lower Manhattan. And here I am going to tell you something I presume you do not know. This is almost the exact same spot where, just over a century ago, the first of our extended Arab family came to this country. Have you ever wondered how Cedar Street got its name? I cannot tell you precisely, but I like to think it was because on Cedar Street, the Lebanese merchants from

Zahle would sell you milk as sweet as honey and honey as rich as cream. We came first for the 1876 World's Fair, then began arriving in larger numbers, until in the 1890s we lived busily between Greenwich, Morris, Rector, and Washington streets. By the early part of the twentieth century, our community had expanded, reaching from Cedar Street on the north to Battery Place on the south. The western border was no less than West Street, and to the east, Trinity Place. But the center of our world was always Washington Street, a lane now blocked by emergency vehicles and ten-foot fences. To us, Washington Street was never just a street. It was our *Amrika!* After passing through Ellis Island, we would trudge up Manhattan Island with out weathered bags, looking for a friendly face in all the frenetic energy of New York, until we could hear a little Arabic and smell the food from home, knowing that on a street named for an American we had found Little Syria.

We came, like so many others, simply to make a better life for ourselves and our families. You could shovel gold on Washington Street, we were told, and so we trekked across the Atlantic, endured the verminous hostelries of Marseilles, and arrived with our satchels stuffed with hope. City life was new to most of us, since we had lived typically in villages and hamlets, and it was exciting. I remember what Abraham Ribhany wrote back in 1914:

> New York is three cities on top of one another. The one city is in the air—in the elevated railway trains, which roar overhead like thunder, and in the amazingly lofty buildings, the windows of whose upper stories look to one on the ground only a little bigger than human eyes. I cannot think of those living so far away from the

> ground as being human beings; they seem to me more like the *jinnee*. The second city is on the ground where huge armies of men and women live and move and work. The third city is underground, where I find stores, dwellings, machine shops, and railroad trains. The inside of the earth here is alive with human beings; I hope they will go upward they die.

His words never seemed so tragically real to me.

We came as sojourners, and after establishing ourselves in New York, we launched out, men and women both, around the country as pack peddlers. Loading up on goods fom the stores on Washington Street, we carried what felt like the world on our backs. Our shops were fables to you. Never had you seen our soft rugs for sale, or a grossamer web of silken lace with Arabic letters hugging its border. Boxes rested on boxes in our tiny dark shops, full of carved olivewood trinkets or luxurious satins or silver wire as thin as a spider's web. As the *New York Tribune* put it in 1892: "In the midst of all this riot of the beautiful and odd stands the dealer, the natural gravity of his features relaxed into a smile of satisfaction at the wonder and delight expressed by his American visitor. But the vision ends, and with many parting 'salaams' one goes back to the dust and dirt, the noise and bustle" of Washington Street.

We found no magic in our stores, however, just opportunity. We carefully folded the crocheted tablecloths of linen and stiff silk dress collars and loaded them with the spicy perfumes and soft talcum powders into our packs. The scrubbing soaps and gentle creams came next, and on top, the rosaries, crosses, and carved icons that the people across this country so loved to buy from us, the Holy Land vendors.

These are the things we carried. Jewelry and notions, we used to call them, and if you stopped to talk to us along our route, you might, as someone once said, buy a story with your bargain.

From the beginning then, our lives here have been about being on the move, carting goods and people across borders to make life a little bit better, a litle bit easier, just a little more comfortable. We were the ones who brought the city to the country. We were Internet shopping before eBay, the catalogue before Sears. We went places others would not, namely, into the warm hearths of African-American homes, which ringed the cities we visited. There the food was heavier and the laughter heartier, and we would be treated to a hospitality we recognized like home. Detroit, Chicago, Fargo, Kansas City, Minneapolis, Fort Wayne, we knew the veinlike crisscrosses of this country before Jack Kerouac spoke his first French word. And we walked, mostly, and then we ached to come back to Washington Street, where we could replace our worn soles and enjoy a little backgammon before heading out again.

But that was a long time ago, and, well, nothing gold can stay. Maybe it is true that nostalgia makes time simple by the loss of detail, but today things seem so different. Since those early days, we have become doctors and lawyers, writers and engineers, but we are still shopkeepers and taxi drivers, and we continue to move lives around this country. And yet these days many of us sit stationary in our homes, unsure of what will happen to us if we step beyond the threshold of our doors. But I will come to that, all in good time, my good man.

We came from Mount Lebanon, from Syria and Palestine, but you called us all Syrians or, less accurately, Turks. We were mostly Melkite and Maronite, but there were a few Muslims, Druze, and Jews among us. By the 1920s, we had grown as a community into Brooklyn as well as Manhattan, on Joralemon Street, State Street, and Boerum Place, close to Atlantic Avenue, where you find many of our shops today. We continued to trade, and we worked in dusty factories, mostly sewing clothes and fine lace.

But in fact everything started to change in the 1920s. I talk not only about how, in the years leading up to that troubled decade, the immigration authorities became increasingly frustrated by our dusky looks, questioning whether we were "free white people" or "Asiatics." This racial Ping-Pong game used a strange chromatic logic that mostly bewildered us, and after the 1924 Johnson-Reed Quota Act and the harsh Depression of the 1930s, the numbers of our newcomers dwindled. Rather, I refer also to our daring to dream of self-determination back home.

After the door closed on the Sublime Porte, the lofty gate of Istanbul, the dissolution of the Ottoman empire was supposed to mean that we would have the right to determine our own fates. We thought you would support us, in the pioneer spirit of independence from foreign rule. But what we were left with were mandates and protectorates, leading to fracture and complaint in a moment when we felt unified and needed each other. The Europeans did not rule lightly, something I was sure you would have understood, but you have consistently lived up to underestimation, I dare say. It was the catastrophe of 1948, however, that broke our hearts.

Tell me, what did the Palestinians do to warrant having their homes seized from them, their worlds disrupred, their lives bulldozed now for over fifty years? Because another people wanted the land the Palestinians had always lived on, they—the Palestinians—must be dispossessed into misery and squalor? Indeed the genocidal horror inflicted on the Jewish community in Europe was evil unmasked, but what had this to do with the Palestinians, except to turn them into the victims of another policy of extermination and cultural supremacy? It seems I am asking so many questions, but why you continue to deny the rights of the Palestinians just confounds me. It seems that their "crime" is simply to be born Palestinian, and in this scheme, a Palestinian life counts less than another. Yet there is no greater wrong in the world, for whoever degrades another degrades me and you and all of us.

Your ears prick up now that I am talking about the Palestinians. I think that when you hear this word, all you hear is terrorism. To us, we hear the echo of dispossession and the call for justice, but these days especially it appears to us that you are criminalizing all references to us and our Palestinian family, and it is affecting how we live here. For fifty years we have been speaking to you about this tragedy, but the actions of a handful of lunatics, madmen who have never until recently and only when convenient spoken about Palestine, have given you the motivation to shut us up and shut us down. You are infiltrating our mosques and gathering places, tapping our phones, detaining us by the hundreds, and seizing our charity. At airports you search us, and if you find Allah on a leaf of paper, you accuse us of sedition. We

are beginning to wonder what you think you are protecting by all these actions—the people of this country or policies abroad that continue an injustice and lead to slaughter. But never mind that for now. There will be time. First, before you continue to cast us as perpetual foreigners, lent me tell you why Muslim New York is our modern Granada.

For over half a century, we crossed the Atlantic to land on its avenue in Brooklyn. No doubt you know of this constellation of stores, restaurants, butchers, and boookshops, their wares piled high like the old stores on Washington Street. But does it surprise you to hear that our first recorded community organized around a mosque, back in 1907, stood not on this throughfare but in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and was founded by a group of Polish, Lithuanian, and Russian Muslims? By 1931, this American Mohammedam Society had purchased three buildings on Powers Street for worship and community affairs. But Islam in this land surely precedes these intrepid travelers, for the first of us Muslims to arrive in this country dates back far before the birth of the republic. (You are confused because I had written we arrived in the late nineteenth century, and so you think I contradict myself. But I am large. I contain multitudes.)

Islam in this country is about as old as Virginia, and the first Muslims were brothers and sisters of our faith who were captured on the African continent and brought here solely for their labor. Have you read the slave statutes, like this early one, from 1670, which states that "negroes, moores, mollatoes and others borne of and in heathenish, idollatrous, pagan and mahometan parentage and country... may be purchased procured, or otherwise obteigned as

slaves"? We labored and suffered, and yet we continued to pray, fast, and recite the word of Allah whenever we could.

Take Ibrahim Abdur Rahman, for example. A son of royalty from Futa Jallon in West Africa, he was captured and made into a slave, landing in Natchez, Mississippi, in 1788. Over the next forty years, he was known to steal away to the riverbank when he could. There he would sit alone and scratch ou Arabic words in the dirt and remember home. Later, the public learned about brother Ibrahim and his talents, and with his newfound notoriety, he sought to return to his people. Thus began a nationwide tour for Ibrahim. Paraded around the country by the American Colonization Society as an African curiosity, he raised money for his and his family's release from bondage and travel back to the African continent. This tour took Ibrahim not only to our New York but also to the White House, where he met John Quincy Adams. It seems the always polite Ibrahim had a sly, winking view of the politics of this country. He described his visit simply: "I found the President the best piece of furniture in the house," he states in a letter.

We are lucky to have Brother Ibrahim's story preserved. Most of our sisters and brothers who were enslaved have sadly fallen through history's sieve. We do have enough evidence, though, to know that Muslim slaves dot the forcefully tilled landscape of this country throughout its history and across its geography, from Natchez to New York and beyond.

In addition to this part of our family, there are the Muslim mariners, many of whom arrived in the ports of Brooklyn, ruddy-faced, out of breath, and eager for a place to bow

their heads in remembrance of God. They surely came in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. But we know that from 1939, after they landed they made their way to State Street, in the heart of the Arab community, where Sheikh Daoud Ahmed Faisal and his wife Khadija had their mosque, the Islamic Mission of America. (It is still there, but you must know that already.) In the cramped quarters of the brownstone mosque, sailor prayed with seamstress, African American shoulder to shoulder with Arab. It is said that the sheikh, by day employed by the railroad (again, on the road!), and his wife were individually responsible for spreading the faith to sixty thousand souls.

In fact, what we have always loved about this city is that we were never lost in it. By discovering each other, we found ourselves here. The Indian Muslims found the Albanians, the Malays prostrated beside the Africans, and all in front of Allah only. We didn't need mosques, only a clean place to lay our foreheads gently on the ground. The sun gave us all the direction we needed. In those early years, like today, we converted brownstones and storefronts into prayer halls and mosques. And it continues. Did you know, for example, that for the thousands of Muslims who worked in the area around the World Trade Center there was a cavernous room used for Friday prayer? From the beginning, we have lived here in a kind of plurality that reminds me of Cordoba or Haroun el-Rashid's Baghdad, and seems rivaled only by Mecca during Hajj.

But then after September 11 our halls and mosques had targets painted on them, sometimes quite literally. What was for us a geography of freedom and opportunity transformed

overnight into a frightening topography of rage. In the Bronx, our taxis were set on fire; in Manhattan, two drivers were beaten; in Bensonhurst, nine livery cars and taxis were vandalized. Don't move, these thugs seemed to be telling us, because we are coming for you. Death threats, physical assaults, verbal harassment, and a handful of murders across the country is what we (and our brother Sikhs) endured. We were shocked and angry on September 11 too, and then we were afraid. When Timothy McVeigh bombed the building in Oklahoma, was it right to seek retribution on any face that reminded you of him? (Instead, then too, we were blamed and we suffered.) Vengeance is a strong emotion, but as Cleopatra tells her attendant Charmian: "innocents 'scape not the thunderbolt."

By the smoke of my breath, we survived this terrible time with great thanks to the grace of our neighbors. They deserve a thousand blessings and one more, these decent, good-hearted people who wanted to help, understand, and accompany us around out cities and neighborhoods. They helped restore the streets as sites of circulation for us. But while all this was happening. I daresay, now we have you to contend with. Do you realize how you are chipping away at this sense of security we were just beginning to feel again? I think you do.

There are many stories to tell, like our Afghan brother (shall we call him Yousef K?) who was visiting his immigration lawyer's office in Lower Manhattan and was stopped by the police. They inquired into his religion, and after he responded "Muslim," he was put into detention. Or then there is the story of brother Burt. Someone must have been

telling lies about Muhammad Rafiq Butt, for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning. It was September 19, and the FBI was following lead 1556, a telephone tip from someone in South Ozone Park, Queens. The caller was concerned that two vans had stopped outside Mr. Butt's apartment building and six "Middle Eastern looking men" exited from each vehicle (no matter that Mr. Butt lived there with three other Pakistani men). After they arrested him, the FBI rook a day to determine that this harmless 55-year-old man was innocent even to the temptations of the world ("He no smoke, he no drink, he don't go nowhere," is how his nephew put it). On October 23, after being detained for almost five weeks at the Hudson Country Jail, Muhammad Rafiq Butt took his last breath and died that Tuesday morning, apparently of a heart attack. May God have mercy on his soul.

You see, my good man, we have lost our faith in your activities. You are turning what was for us an open geography into some kind of penal colony. Hundreds of us now languish in your prisons, not even sure why. You have admitted to the press that we have nothing to do with terrorism and that we have committed no crime, but still we cannot walk away, even if a judge has ordered us freed. Instead, you invoke an emergency, bond is laid aside, and we sit alone for 23 hours a day, the lights blazing the whole time so that night has lost its identity to day. Then you won't tell us who you have arrested. We have a difficult time finding out where our friends are as you fly them around the country with shackled legs and hands in midnight planes. You claim everyone has an attorney, but we have heard differently. You come in the middle of the night and take away our brot-

hers and fathers and sons, and tell us nothing. Then you require us to "volunteer" for interviews, your reason for choosing us simply the kink of our hair, the caramel of our skin, the country name stamped on our passport. We have felt the freedom of the road in this country for a long time, and so you will understand if we are bewildered that this could happen here.

The other day, I heard a professor say that this was a time when we as a society should be thinking about what the balance between liberty and security should be, but the problem is that most of the country is willing to trade someone else's liberty—namely ours—for their own sense of security. He is a smart man, this professor, and he makes me wonder if this is the deal you have entered us into. While waiting for you, I have been reading James Madison. (Surprised? Didn't I tell you I have been here for over a century?) Since September, haven't we become vulnerable to the passions of the majority? I was under the impression that this required your greater vigilance for our safety, since, as Madison writes: "In a society under the forms of which the stronger faction can readily unite and oppress the weaker, anarchy may as truly be said to reign, as in a state of nature where the weaker individual is not secured against the violence of the stronger." You mouth the words of protection, but then why do we feel your violence lashing our backs?

Everywhere you say you are looking for rats, but I think you are finding lambs and unwilling to admit this. So many of us came here to escape terrible restrictions on our lives, not to rediscover them. But all around the world—in Chile, Iran, Iraq, Nicaragua, the Congo, Indonesia, Panama, and South Africa—hasn't the problem historically been not that

you can't tell the difference between the rats and the lambs, but that you have preferred the rats?

Perhaps you would feel safer if I came to your office? Save you a trip? Under normal circumstances I would, but right now I would prefer not to. Like Bartleby, I have become a wanderer who refuses to budge. So send me off to the city's holding cells, the Tombs, if you wish. What will I discover there but the Egyptian masonry and forlorn history that lonely souls have scratched onto the stone in their spare time, for time is all they have in the Tombs.

In the meantime, they tell me that you are failing to fetch me, but keep encouraged. You may be missing me from one place, and so you search another. But I am here, my good man, under your boot soles. I am at home. I have stopped here, waiting for you. If I go anywhere these days, it is only to my roof, to hear the call to prayer from the mosque on Atlantic Avenue or the Sunday church bells on Pacific, and I sing along in what must sound like the yelp of a Barbary pirate to some. But to me these tunes are the sign of democracy. Don't you think so, too?

So come, ask me your questions. I will listen to them with devoted concentration, my head angled like a mendicant. But I won't answer them right away, for you must first have a sip of my syrupy coffee, a bite of crumbly sweet *halawa*, and a taste of our hspitality. There will be time for all things, believe me. And though you hardly know who I am or what I mean, I will be good to you nonetheless. We have much to discuss, you and I, and a long night ahead of us. *Yalla*, my good man, hurry and arrive. I've been expecting you.