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Forms of Participation

Dialogue, Civil Society, and Resistance

People had come from all different nationalities just to say that we're welcome and then we started running around the court square and having all these signs with us. Then, there was another parade and there was a community session from the refugee office. . . . So, there was plenty of stuff happening just to make people feel welcome.

—Nora, 6 February 2018

Introduction

The previous chapter explored how interviewees regarded democratic membership in the United States and the particular barriers and requirements to its exercise. With that discussion in mind, this chapter considers the experiences that those with whom I spoke shared regarding their participation in various activities and the potential for resettled Iraqis to exercise democratic membership at multiple scales and sites—both formal and informal—in the United States. I use the term “participation” throughout this chapter to frame all of the experiences interviewees shared concerning engaging with fellow members of American society in democratic spaces.

This chapter first sets out the forms of participation interviewees described. I then narrow my focus to the three most salient modes and sites of engagement that recurred in interviews. The first is discussion and debate, broadly conceived, about the issues that affected interviewees' lives. Second, I explore the role of volunteering and nonprofit organizations in the locations where this study's interviewees lived, including Upstate New York, and the Shenandoah Valley Region of Virginia. Third, I reflect on the 2017 US travel ban targeting individuals from select predominately Muslim countries and the ways interviewees interpreted and participated in activism organized against it. Throughout this chapter, I draw on the argument of

ferred in Chapter 2 that exchange among newcomers and native-born Americans is essential to widening participatory spaces and opportunities for all members of society.

Defining Participation and Locating Spaces for Engagement

Interviewees reflected on their experiences participating and engaging with democratic processes and practices. They shared many examples and definitions of what it meant to them to participate and what constituted the exercise of democratic political agency. Those with whom I spoke referenced a wide range of activities in which they had already engaged and/or that they wished to pursue. Those activities included completing surveys, protesting, voting, volunteering, attending Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and other school meetings, educating others, writing to and meeting with government representatives, and serving on nonprofit organization governing boards.

Many interviewees said that voting was an important way to participate in their communities. Some, including Kasim and Walid, who were citizens, had voted, and viewed doing so as important. Others, including Ahmed and Ali, could not yet vote, but said that they looked forward to doing so in the future. As discussed in Chapter 3, for individuals such as Marwa and Zaid, voting was the only way in which they wished to participate. Zaid, for example, said voting is important because it is “practicing your democracy” (27 February 2018). However, beyond that, he wanted to live his life “as far as possible from anything political” (Zaid 27 February 2018).

In addition to voting and engaging in a formal, institutionalized democratic process, three overlapping primary modes and sites of participation recurred in interviews. As Abdullah observed, for example, “I think the main thing that I can do is just to try to convince people not to vote for that person [who would harm others and to vote] for the other person” (14 January 2018). This observation touches on voting, but also on the first mode of participation I will explore: discussion, debate, and dialogue. Thereafter, I examine individuals volunteering with nonprofit and community initiatives engaged in the pursuit of various goals. Finally, I consider the 2017 travel ban and interviewees’ interpretations of and, in some cases, participation in protests organized against that ban.

Participating in Discussion, Debate, and Conversation

Interviews examined whether and where interviewees engaged in discussion, dialogue, or debate about issues affecting their lives. Most individuals interacted with friends, family, or coworkers on such topics in various ways.

In many cases, discussion was informal, while in others they participated in activities sponsored by organizations in their communities.

Sarah, for example, said, “We talk about [government policies] a little. But not too much. [Primarily] at work, when on break” (30 November 2017). Mohammed and I discussed several contested issues in American politics at length, including healthcare provision and policy and the large student loan debt many Americans incur to attend college. He said that he speaks with friends of all backgrounds, fellow refugees and native-born Americans, about such issues and said that he “100 percent” had an equal right and ability to offer his views in such conversations.

In our exchange about sharing his views and experiences with others, Ahmed said that “sometimes I feel I have more than equal share” of space to do so “because sometimes people . . . want to listen to something different from . . . their perspective. Actually, I was given really more than enough share” (2 October 2017). For example, he explained that at a recent monthly office lunch, the subject of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks came up. When Ahmed began expressing his views, his coworkers focused their attention on him; “I was just telling them my experience,” he said, “and instead of going around the table they just stopped, and they kept listening to me for the rest of the lunch. So, I think that was very considerate of them” (2 October 2017).

Despite interpreting his experiences as valued by colleagues, Ahmed voiced doubt about whether he had the right to try to persuade others to alter their views. Rather, he argued, it was the right of others to be exposed to new and different experiences and stories. As he put it: “If you never hear about things, you would only assume one certain way. So, it’s your right to know the other stories, other people. So yes, I would say it’s their right to hear me out. . . . Maybe they don’t like my story, maybe they don’t want stories about newcomers or they don’t want to hear certain stories. But it’s their right to hear it out and take whatever perspective they want to take” (Ahmed 2 October 2017)

Ahmed argued that this process requires listening as well as sharing your story, and there is no guarantee that it will be successful: “First of all, you need to listen to them. . . . Even if it’s the most silly or stupid idea they have about the subject you are talking about, just listen to them. Try to talk sense into them. . . . And then, even if in the end you cannot change their views, you made them listen because you listened first. So, after that, you cannot do anything. You cannot force anyone to think in the same way you are thinking because who said you are right?” (2 October 2017)

As a newcomer, Ahmed suggested that it was important that he emphasize the positive aspects of life in the United States over its negative dimensions. Moreover, he argued, it was important to help Americans “understand that we don’t all fit into one label. . . . The more they know about

not only my story, my side of the story, but they know more about the partners in the community and how they are reacting to people. Maybe that would improve everything” (2 October 2017). “No society is perfect,” he said, and learning from negative and positive experiences helps everyone, in his view.

“We are part of this community” in Chicago, Hashim observed; therefore, “for us, for everyone . . . we have to take care of others, to participate in setting up the rules and policies for that community” (1 October 2017). He explained how he viewed this role and his right to participate in doing so:

I’m involved in everything. I’m involved with the daily challenges just like all the US communities face, so I think I can give my opinion exactly just like them. . . . Maybe three years is a short time for a new person to start giving their opinion and all of that, but I would say I have spent a lot of time reading policies, reviewing what . . . are my rights. . . . I mean we are part of this community, and we really want to keep this community growing and we really want this community to be better organized, safer for us. (Hashim 1 October 2017)

Returning to the example offered by Wissam, Omar, and Kasim in Chapter 3 about private gun ownership as an important issue in which they wished to engage, Wissam said, “I’m a newcomer,” and as a result, Americans might react negatively to him offering a view on such a matter. They may say, “He just came here and he’s trying to change my way of life” (22 October 2017). Indeed, gun ownership in the United States involves complex sets of “symbolic meanings that encompass personal identity, masculinity, power, freedom, racial attitudes, responsibility, morality, and views of governmental threat” (Boine et al. 2020, 7). Wissam continued: “So, in a way I also feel I don’t have that right [to engage in discussions on topics such as gun control] to some extent because their ancestors were here before me, they fought for this country, I just came here and I’m trying to adapt” (22 October 2017).

Omar described how he had been involved with various discussions as a member and leader of a community organization, and I analyze that work in more detail in the following section. He offered two examples of the types of public dialogue the group had already organized or was planning for the future. In the first, the association members had held public discussions leading up to the 2016 election. Overall, Omar described those conversations as “very democratic” (14 December 2017). However, one member, originally from the Congo, left the group, concerned about what he perceived to be the character of its conversation. As Omar explained, “He didn’t like the way we were debating, and he left the association. He thought that everyone in the association would definitely elect [Hillary] Clinton” (14 December 2017). Nonetheless, Omar refuted that perception, saying that

every member of the group had a right to hold and express their views. Through later conversations, he and other participants learned of a specific policy that Clinton had supported concerning the Congo, prompting Congolese members to support Trump. “So, then I understood what happened,” he noted, “and then the debate was very nice. . . . At the end, you get positive things” (Omar 14 December 2017).

In a second example, Omar described how one of his fellow organization coordinators, a white American, works part-time for the public transportation organization in the Shenandoah Valley Region. Omar’s colleague told him that his fellow bus drivers “were talking about the immigrants, saying bad things. And he suggested to me that I should come and talk to them. I said, ‘Well that’s fine. I can’” (14 December 2017). Omar intended to do so, but at the time of our interview, he had not found the time to schedule that conversation. Such an event would be consistent with what he explained as the organization’s ongoing project: “To go and listen to [members of the communities served], what are their issues. Trying to just listen, listen, listen. And then if there is an opportunity to try to explain or reveal anything that is maybe incorrect, by the media or other things. The ultimate goal is to have the city be welcoming for every immigrant” (Omar 14 December 2017).

Zaid spoke to the positive potential effects of dialogue as well. Even though he did not support Trump’s election to the presidency, he viewed that outcome as a potential opportunity for American society. As he explained: “I’m okay with it. I think that having Trump as president is a very good thing to happen to the United States because there are issues. There are problems. People didn’t really get the chance to talk about it, now they have the chance to talk about it. If you don’t talk about it, it will never be on the table. It will never be discussed. It will never be solved” (Zaid 27 February 2018).¹ Democracy, Zaid went on to say, entails accepting other members of society and listening to a diversity of views, “I just want to show you my point of view. You want to show me your point of view. We are going to work on trying to meet in the middle, at least” (27 February 2018). As a result, “We don’t have to agree on every single point, but at least we need to find a way to live and coexist with each other and live in harmony” (Zaid 27 February 2018). As Zaid argued, such processes might have a “rough period in the middle” (27 February 2018), but the outcome is likely to be a better collective future.

Speaking to Trump’s election and policies as well, Ali described a local news interview with a young woman who came to New York as a refugee and lived near the location where we met. Ali related how she told the reporter that she disagreed with the travel ban and invited President Trump to her home to see what life is like for refugees: “It was a shock for me to hear from this . . . 19-year-old and she said that she would invite President Trump

to come and visit us to see what refugees look like . . . and how they live” (14 January 2018). I asked Ali whether he would be willing to do the same and he laughed and said, “Sure. I’d love to. I would love to . . . convince him [to change his policies that harm refugees]” (14 January 2018).

Tariq, too, brought up the idea of inviting Trump to discuss the harm his policies had done to refugee communities. He argued that the policies Trump had enacted were “Creating . . . a tremendous amount of hate and killing us. . . . It’s become a bigger and bigger issue” (Tariq 2 November 2017). Illustrating by way of analogy how to engage with Trump, Tariq said if he had a friend who was harming others, he would sit down with him to discuss why this was wrong, “Like my friend. I have a crazy friend. Doesn’t mean he’s bad. It’s a crazy friend, that’s it. I accepted it. He’s my friend. But, when his decisions affect me, okay, stop. Come on. We got to sit and talk” (2 November 2017). And, in the case of Trump, Tariq observed, “your decisions hurt me and my family and many families. And, not one family, thousands of us” (2 November 2017).

For his part, Abdullah argued, “I think the greatest thing about the USA is the freedom of speech” (14 January 2018). He went on to say, “We don’t actually have that in the Middle East. . . . People say we do. But, in reality, we don’t actually” (Abdullah 14 January 2018). I understood this to be a reference to the post-2003 Iraqi constitutional guarantees to freedom of expression, press, and assembly (Associated Press 2005), but lack of substantive opportunities to put them into practice. As a US resident, Abdullah asserted that he was able to exercise his right to free speech anywhere in his community (New York City), “I could share my political views with anyone here . . . in conversation. . . . I don’t feel threatened at all. Especially now, there is a lot of talk about the current president, and I could really say whatever I want” (14 January 2018). He argued that this right extended to himself as a resident, just as it did for citizens, “The only difference is on paper, and I cannot vote. But in terms of talking and sharing my ideas, no one has ever told me: ‘You cannot say that because you aren’t a citizen. You are not a citizen!’ Never” (Abdullah 14 January 2018). Importantly, however, even though Abdullah has felt confident to express his views on US government policies, he said, “I feel that I don’t have a say in [making those policies] because I don’t have citizenship. So, I cannot vote. I cannot do anything” (14 January 2018). Moreover, despite being comfortable about speaking his mind, he explained: “I’m also careful with people who I talk with. Because sometimes you would talk with, I would say, ignorant people and you don’t get anywhere from this conversation. So, I usually try to avoid talking [to those individuals]. I’m open to having a conversation with people who are willing to listen” (Abdullah 14 January 2018). A final caveat Abdullah brought up about his experience of exercising freedom of speech was the local context in which he lives: “Living here

in New York is for sure, the place to do that [share his opinion]. I would imagine other places might be different” (14 January 2018).

Story Sharing

Several individuals framed sharing their stories as a discursive strategy that could potentially encourage others to shift their views of refugees. Nora, for example, had participated in public events to share her personal narrative to change negative perceptions. As she explained: “I mentioned my story in the university conferences. I went to [Virginia’s capital] Richmond to the mental health conference. . . . I started going and talking, telling audiences it’s not what you see on the news. . . . I was persecuted by both ISIS and the government, so that means I am [not] a terrorist” (Nora 6 February 2018).

Describing how he might make a positive change in his community, Ahmed said, “For me, it’s making people just look at the glass half full, positive vibes, giving them real-life examples” and “sharing stories” (2 October 2017). This approach can influence those who hear these examples, he argued, “Because for me, I always think if you see a face and if you [hear] a story that would stick with you more” (Ahmed 2 October 2017). In elaborating how story sharing can lead to change, he went on to say:

Let’s take the travel ban, for example, and if you tell them I know this person with a name, he or she was affected by this travel ban and they were separated from their family, and for example, they both supported the US Army or the government, why are you doing that? If you keep telling that story, you can utilize social media, you can reach out to groups that support your cause. You can go to local authorities like the [Chicago City Council] alderman or someone within your state or city and write to them. . . . Maybe they can reach out actually to a wider audience that would help you. (Ahmed 2 October 2017)

For Ali, an aspect of his job is to speak with clients, largely immigrants and refugees from the Middle East and North Africa, and to gather their stories and help to disseminate them widely: “We can put them on media. Getting them interviewed. So, people will know the reality of refugees living in the United States. Their stories, they are normal people. They have families. They have a lot of responsibilities. The same, just like here. And it’s doing a lot of good” (14 January 2018). The nonprofit organization for which Ali works also hosts a blog on which its staff post stories from clients about, among other things, their experiences as immigrants.

Although not part of his duties at the car dealership where he worked, Tariq suggested that sharing his personal story with his customers and co-workers is his “second job” and that he engages in that role daily. He does so:

Sometimes with nice people . . . they're nice, so I share it with them. . . . And then, the other group that, when I see them, you can tell from their reactions they know that you are a . . . foreigner. From your accent. And I tell them too. But when I tell them, I tell them the strong story. . . . This is why I'm here and why I came here, and this is what my expectation was and that [it was not met]. And then they are surprised, "Oh yeah, we didn't know that." (Tariq 2 November 2017)

He said that he considers it a success when his experiences provide new information for clients and prompt them to reconsider their views of refugees and the difficulties of the resettlement process.

Sarah, too, spoke about sharing her experiences with others and the importance of doing so: "It's important when I told some people [about my experiences] because some people don't care about this subject. I think it's good for me to tell these people about my experiences in my country and Syria and here in America. Maybe, some people will learn from me. Maybe, some people will discuss with me some of the questions you asked me. Maybe, when he asks me some questions, my answers will be useful to him. I think yes, I think also it's important to discuss these issues with the American people" (30 November 2017).

Limits of Discourse

Engaging in democratic deliberation is difficult. Even with intentional processes and mechanisms in place, fruitful deliberation in which everyone can participate presents a range of challenges (Guttman 2007). In addition to the possibilities and value of discussion and deliberation, several interviewees pointed out the limits to this form of democratic engagement. Ahmed, for example, discussed the need to avoid "alienating" those with whom you are interacting by ensuring conversations remain focused on issues and do not "get personal" (2 October 2017). As he put it: "If you alienate the person in front of you, that's it. You lost the discussion. . . . Even if they are not hostile, they will never come back and listen to you" (Ahmed 2 October 2017). Ahmed contended, "In the end, if they still cannot agree with me, that's fine. . . . The aim is not making them 100 percent agree with me, but the aim is to have a conversation, open their mind to my beliefs and my ideas and open my mind to their ideas and their beliefs. No one knows everything" (2 October 2017).

Wissam highlighted the challenge of securing "fruitful conversations" (22 October 2017). In his view, there is always a risk that certain participants will dominate a discussion, causing others to acquiesce to their position or perspective: "There are certain things here people discuss, . . . maybe a point of view, but it's not really valid. And they keep spending hours and hours on it so they can distract you from the main goal of the discussion.

And that will exhaust people and they just want to say, ‘Okay let’s just do that, this is never going to end’” (Wissam 22 October 2017). Determining what are legitimate or important topics for discussion is difficult, he said: “Because you don’t want to shut everybody out and say: ‘Shut up! I know what I’m doing, let’s go with it.’ But, it’s between getting a fruitful conversation and wasteful conversation. It’s very hard to balance between those. So, I don’t know” (Wissam 22 October 2017).

Concluding this point, he laughingly said, “It’s the government’s job to figure out, not mine” (Wissam 22 October 2017). Wissam continued on the topic of discourse and dialogue, identifying the “paradox of tolerance” (Popper 1947, 226) as a particular challenge to the exercise of speech. He explained by way of an extended example an area in which it seemed to him that speech *should* be limited for the safety of others and in which expression violates the basic principles that American democracy claims to uphold and defend. As he explained:

There are things that I can’t really understand. For example, with the citizenship exam, they ask you were you a member of the Nazi regime.² At the same time, you see . . . what happened in Charlottesville [Virginia],³ they’re wearing all the swastikas and they are having conventions, things like that. . . . I know it’s their right, but there must be a limit to that. . . . There shouldn’t be a freedom to oppress people, to kill people, things like that. This is not freedom. This is like a lunatic. (Wissam 22 October 2017)

Wissam gave another example of a public event planned by well-known white supremacist and neo-Nazi Richard Spencer at the University of Florida in early 2017 (Levenson 2017). Students organized protests in response to the event, intending to prevent Spencer from giving a speech. “So,” he noted, “There are a lot of contradictions. So, why do you ask people not to belong to these parties at the same time you allow people to have conventions, seminars and talk about [such ideas]? These kinds of things make you think, ‘What’s going on?’” (Wissam 22 October 2017).

Wissam opined that a large university like the University of Florida should not allow individuals or groups to have a platform to speak about white supremacy. In his view: “These things should be a matter of the past. I mean America fought a lot for that, they lost lots, hundreds and hundreds of soldiers, for that and now these people just come and speak about it. That doesn’t make sense” (Wissam 22 October 2017).

Strategic Silence

Another concern this study explored in-depth was contexts that interviewees perceived as difficult, unproductive, or dangerous in which to share their views or opinions. In such cases, several individuals described how

engaging in *strategic silence*—choosing not to engage in dialogue or debate—can be prudent and is itself an agentic choice and act. As Ahmed explained, since coming to the United States, he had “not yet” encountered a situation in which he kept his views to himself. However, in Iraq, he had routinely done so. Echoing Marwa’s comment in Chapter 3 concerning the dangers of expressing opinions about the Saddam Hussein government, even in the apparent privacy of one’s own home, Ahmed said, “You used to be silent because that’s a way you can express yourself about certain subjects. . . . It is a tool you can use. Sometimes you better just say nothing” (2 October 2017). In his view, freedom of speech protections in the United States allowed individuals to “say whatever you want, as long as you are not offending people” (Ahmed 2 October 2017). However, choosing not to engage may be better “if you think maybe that someone will be impacted negatively,” he said (Ahmed 2 October 2017). Another context in which keeping one’s opinions to oneself may be prudent, according to Ahmed, is when “there is a safety issue, although I have never experienced this so far. . . . If you will be personally harmed, then it would be better to find a better occasion to speak about the issues you want to speak about” (2 October 2017). Tariq, too, explained that although he regularly shares his personal story with his clients, he also often withholds his views, “Oh yeah. A lot . . . of the time, I just avoid that” (2 November 2017). But, he continued, that “doesn’t mean that I’m going to say nothing whatsoever. No. I will say it later” (Tariq 2 November 2017).

For his part, Abdullah noted, “If I am seeing someone who is saying extremely racist things, I really don’t see the point of talking to them” (14 January 2018). In such a case, “I just try to ignore it and then I hope that person will wake up” (Abdullah 14 January 2018). For example, Abdullah related a situation in which a stranger shouted at his friend on the New York City subway. The man yelled disparaging remarks about Islam and about individuals from the Middle East. Abdullah noted that his friend is also Iraqi, but is Christian, not Muslim. He attributed this incident more to the individual’s mental state rather than to prejudice. He did not take the encounter personally because the person began harassing other passengers when Abdullah and his friend ignored him.

Another topical area that Abdullah said he avoids discussing on social media is politics. Although, as described above, he argued that it was his right, he often has chosen not to do so: “Because it really creates problems. . . . People back home, we have different sects and if you say something people will take the wrong way. . . . So, we end up losing friends if you share your political views about stuff back home, which is sad. . . . So, I try to avoid that so I don’t, you know, lose people” (Abdullah 14 January 2018).

Nonetheless, Abdullah said that if he sees a post on social media about “something that is wrong” he will engage with it. For example, Abdullah

said that if someone expresses a racist sentiment or if they are “attacking a certain sect or certain religion, I have to say something, and I usually do” (14 January 2018). As I explore in more detail below, Walid similarly explained that in his work with members of the refugee communities in Upstate New York, it can be better to avoid discussing certain sensitive topics in order, first, to build sustainable relationships.

Zaid expressed unease about discussing political subjects with anyone other than friends or family, “It’s not that I don’t feel safe. This is a big word. But I don’t feel really comfortable discussing these ideas with people I don’t know. . . . I would rather keep these discussions with the people that I know” (27 February 2018). For example, as we sat down for our interview, he received a phone call from a friend who had voted for Trump. He said, “I have no problem with that. I know this person. I know his background. I feel safe discussing these things with him” (Zaid 27 February 2018). “For example,” he observed with a laugh, “When Trump suggested that he wants to give weapons to teachers to protect the kids, I just asked him: ‘Okay, so are you happy with your president now?’ But I don’t really feel comfortable discussing these things with people I don’t know” (Zaid 27 February 2018).⁴ When I asked whether he would consider attending a public event or discussion on such a topic he responded, “Never.”

During our interview, Nada chose to remain silent on the topic of US government policies. She said that she was comfortable sharing her views and opinions about life in the United States with Americans, Iraqis, and others in her life. However, when I asked her whether she would feel secure discussing her views concerning explicitly political issues, such as her perspective on President Trump, she laughed and responded that it was a “difficult question.” Elaborating her answer, she suggested: “Anyone when he hurts another person, he deserves to be punished. And this, this is what our God said. Anyone. From any religion. From any country. This is the rule for our life. I will just say that. And you understand me, of course” (Nada 1 November 2017).

I attempted to clarify if she meant that if a president were doing something wrong, they should be punished for hurting others. She laughed and said, “I don’t know. I don’t know. Pass” (Nada 1 November 2017). Considering our full conversation, I understood her to mean that she disagreed with some of Trump’s policies and that he ultimately would face punishment for those actions. However, she chose not to make that point explicitly.

Finally, Mohammed related a story about a time when, after remaining silent, he had decided to speak his mind. To improve his English language skills, Mohammed had enrolled in English as a second language (ESL) classes at a community college in Upstate New York. He described the course instructor as having “some issues with the refugees. . . . I was very careful to talk with him because I know he’s a little bit racist” (Mohammed

2 November 2017). However, when his teacher spoke about the war in Iraq and its consequences, without—in Mohammed’s view—sufficient knowledge or understanding, he confronted him. When his instructor said, “We helped the people in Iraq,” Mohammed refuted that claim, saying: “No. Listen to me, I don’t want to talk about politics . . . but really, Saddam Hussein was a bad guy, I know that. And he was a dictator, 100 percent. But, when he was deposed, we now have 100 dictators in Iraq, the same thing. . . . I don’t know which democracy you are talking about, which freedom. We don’t have freedom. . . . We have a mafia right now in our government in Iraq” (2 November 2017). Mohammed interpreted that his instructor held this discussion against him saying, “And this is the point I failed in the class. He didn’t like me, and I changed my class finally and I passed it. . . . He didn’t accept my opinion. But he started to ask me about my opinion, and I told him my opinion” (2 November 2017).

Community Engagement: Volunteering and Nonprofit Organizations

Moving from discussion and dialogue, civil society organizations constituted the second primary site and mode of engagement for interviewees. Some individuals, such as Mohammad and Wissam, volunteered with nonprofit organizations. Others, including Ahmed and Ali, worked for such organizations, and still others, including Walid and Omar, had founded their own. Interviewees engaged in a range of activities with those entities, such as providing services to other refugees and immigrants, building knowledge and awareness of US law and institutions, creating bonds among diverse members of their communities, and participating in discussions and dialogue. As described by Nora, Ali, and Omar, such organizations and activities served, in many cases, as spaces to inculcate and expand robust norms of belonging, diversity, and understanding among individuals of different backgrounds.

In Chicago, for example, Wissam has served as a board member for an organization working with immigrants from the Middle East and was, at one time, the chair of that group. Recalling the discussion in Chapter 3 about time constraints as a barrier to engagement, Wissam reported with a laugh, “I’m still on the Advisory Council, but I couldn’t keep up because I have to do like ten hours a week. It was very demanding. So, I couldn’t” (22 October 2017). The nonprofit provides services such as job placement, assistance applying for Green Cards, citizenship exam preparation, parenting programs, and Arabic classes.

Ahmed works full-time for another nonprofit that serves immigrant communities in Chicago. When I asked him whether he would like to become involved outside of work with other activities, he said, “I think yes. If I care

for the cause, if the cause is close to heart . . . especially if in the end this would help spread the cause in a different part of the society” (Ahmed 2 October 2017). Elaborating on what sorts of issues these might be, he said that a coworker had asked him if he would be willing to speak at a high school located on Chicago’s Southside to bring new and different perspectives to the school’s students. Ahmed’s coworker thought of him because of his Iraqi background. Ahmed referenced the term “Chiraq,” a portmanteau of Chicago and Iraq, as a reason his colleague thought Southside students might respond to his experiences. This contested neologism purports to describe a level of violence experienced by Chicago residents equal to, or greater than, that of Iraq after 2003 (Williams-Harris, Ford, and Crepeau 2015). Ahmed had spoken with those Southside students when we met and described it as a positive experience and an example of an activity in which he would like to engage again.

Omar began our discussion on volunteering by explaining why he had become involved in many activities in the Shenandoah Valley Region. He said there was a “will inside . . . to show to this community . . . you have kind of an obligation . . . because every single person from the community represents me. And I also represent him. So, if you did bad, that will influence me. If I did good, that will influence him. So, yeah. That’s the reason. Being a volunteer in different things, in different places. Volunteering everywhere” (Omar 14 December 2017).

When he first settled in Virginia, Omar and several other individuals created a volunteer group to welcome newly arrived refugees at the airport, organize transportation to their homes, prepare meals for them, and provide translation. This work was carried out via a formal agreement with the local resettlement agency. The group engaged in this work for several years, leading to a program to create the first Arabic translation of the Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) driving exam booklet. This group also provided Arabic classes for children in cooperation with a municipal community center.

Omar went on to describe the process of founding several other initiatives in the area, “I started to form a group and after one or two years that group vanished or reformatted into another group. . . . The aim was to help the refugees and to make them productive members [of the community]” (14 December 2017). The organization undertook surveys of residents to advocate for them more effectively. Among the activities held, were public events for immigrants to discuss elections and the pros and cons of candidates and government policies. Omar stressed that in such discussions: “We had a lot of perspectives. . . . Some, they were [in favor of] electing Trump, for example. Some were against. And we took that in a freedom way and in a [democratic] way that each can express and is not prevented from [disagreeing]” (14 December 2017). As an organization comprised of

members of various immigrant and refugee populations, they also meet with local government representatives to put forward plans and ideas for their communities.

Omar described a focus of his work as uniting communities, “That’s strength. If I’m [a member of the] Iraqi community, maybe working alone will not give me power or my voice will not be heard by others” (14 December 2017). However, he argued, “if I have other communities working together and supporting each other” (Omar 14 December 2017), they can create a base of support. For example, if the Iraqi community is targeted by another group or government authorities, “standing as one” (Omar 14 December 2017) with other immigrant or refugee communities will provide a basis from which to organize.

Nora has volunteered with Omar and been active in the projects described above, among many other activities, including working part-time for a resettlement agency in her city in Virginia. The organizations she is active with offer classes to prepare immigrants for the US citizenship exam, advocacy concerning such issues as child migrants and family separation, classes designed specifically to support women, and driving lessons and assistance navigating public transportation in the area. As described in the previous section, part of her work includes public engagement, and Nora has spoken about her life at conferences in several parts of Virginia.

Nora also described efforts that several community groups in the Shenandoah Valley Region had taken to create a welcoming, multicultural environment for the city’s residents. For example, her local school system has recognized Spanish, Arabic, Kurdish, and Russian languages and certain schools in the district cater specifically to Russian and Arabic speakers. Omar had helped establish the Arabic language school, an accomplishment Nora called a “big step forward.” Her city is “getting more open. People are starting to realize that there are different communities in the area,” she observed (Nora 6 February 2018). Aligning with the cooperation between local churches and community groups noted by Omar in Chapter 3, Nora suggested, “the churches are doing an amazing job here with the community with the growing difference and highlighting what those differences are” (6 February 2018).

Walid shared, “I feel I have a responsibility . . . to do something for the community” (27 September 2017). As a result, he is very active in Upstate New York, founding and serving as chair of an Iraqi and Arab immigrant-serving nonprofit organization in Western New York. That organization provides services such as ESL and case management to teach parenting skills, for example. Walid described the organization’s mission as building leadership skills for those with whom it worked. At the time of our interview, he was also serving as president of a local coalition with the goal of “empowering refugees, not only Iraqis but all of the communities

that came from different parts of the world” (Walid 27 September 2017). He described the group’s work this way:

We work on different levels. On, education, public safety, immigration issues, . . . housing, employment, so we try to address . . . major issues for refugees in general including Iraqis. . . . Each community has unique problems. For example, when we come to people from the Middle East, . . . there’s a lot of background checks and suspicion about where they come from, how long they’ve been in the Middle East, who are their friends. So, it’s not easy to get the Green Card or become a US citizen. . . . So, each community they do have a problem. It just depends on where they come from and the culture, on education, on where they live. (Walid 27 September 2017)

Walid also contended that “the empowerment part is making a big difference for participants to understand” their rights (27 September 2017). In his view, the process of understanding and exercising rights is part of practicing democracy. For example, Walid described how members of his community group approached the mayor’s office of his city to create a “language line” for non-English speakers to call in case of emergencies. They based their petition on federal law mandating interpreter access for non-English speaking residents. They enlisted the help of lawyers to demonstrate that lack of such a line violated the law. Group members met with the mayor and city council members to discuss this issue. They were successful and were able to push the municipal government to set up the line. The city police department also hired a community liaison and began providing language services.

Walid is also active in a yearly event celebrating his area’s immigrant communities. At the time of our interview, he and others were planning the 2018 program, and he invited me to attend their organizing meeting. He described several others similarly involved, some of whom are native-born Americans, as “very passionate about international issues. . . . They love people from different backgrounds, so they attend our meetings because of their interest to support the event” (Walid 27 September 2017). For Walid, planning this occasion is “part of changing American culture.” As he explained, to do so, “We invite twelve teams from different ethnicities, from different backgrounds, from the refugee community and immigrants. We cook food. . . . It’s open to the public in a local park which is close to here. . . . We invite elected officials, we invite the community, we announce through the media . . . to show them our culture, to show them folklore dancing, traditions and also try to break this kind of stereotyping about unknown people. I know you are scared of these people, but it’s good to talk with them to know who they are, which reduces their fear” (Walid 27 September 2017).

Walid pointed out that the city he lives in is a divided city with significant segregation between residents of different racial backgrounds. When he

moved there in 2008, his goal was to “bring the entire community together and also to invite the American people who have some concerns to build friendship and relationships with people [from different backgrounds] so at least they have no fear” (Walid 27 September 2017). However, sustained activism is difficult, in Walid’s estimation, “There are a lot of activists in different communities, but . . . there is no support. . . . I found many leaders and activists who help one year, two years, and feel frustrated [because there are] not enough support” (27 September 2017) programs for resettled refugees. The lack of financial resources, language training, and access to other services leads many to turn away from public engagement and say, “Let’s focus on our families” (Walid 27 September 2017). Organizing community members is particularly challenging in refugee communities, in Walid’s view, because of existing tensions among members. For example, Walid reported, those from countries experiencing civil wars may be uncomfortable working with individuals who were on opposing sides of those conflicts.

By way of example, he explained how he had met with a Kurdish Syrian family and had to steer the conversation away from religion, politics, and Kurdish independence from Iraq. “Let’s put politics or religion aside,” he suggested, “I know you agree or disagree. Because if we talk about religion or politics, we won’t be friends. We have different opinions about that. . . . So, some people they became very isolated because of these things” (Walid 27 September 2017). Therefore, he proposed, “Let’s focus on the family, kids, . . . school, education, how to be successful here, how to benefit from this opportunity, being in this country” (Walid 27 September 2017).

Marwa worked with Walid to help establish the immigrant-serving nonprofit organization in Upstate New York, an entity with which Mohammed also volunteers. The organization had been operating for approximately four years at the time of our interview in November 2017. Marwa was particularly involved with the nonprofit’s women’s empowerment programming: “We do many events for the women. [For example], how to raise your kids here. How to get your necessary [immigration documents]. How to be independent. How to have power in your family. How to support your family and how to be involved with the community” (25 November 2017).

The nonprofit’s events, often facilitated in both English and Arabic, may draw between 100 and 150 participants. According to Marwa, “My community, they are growing now. They are a huge number. Also, not just Iraqi. Now we make it for all Arabic speakers. Like Syrians, anyone. Not just Iraqis now” (25 November 2017). Marwa’s nonprofit organization extends invitations to local government officials to give talks on various subjects as well. As a volunteer, she has shared her contact information with local police in case community members have questions or concerns or need an interpreter. Her organization also holds events to celebrate holidays such as Ramadan, inviting residents to share communal meals, discuss issues they

may be having, and offer assistance. They provide Arabic classes for children as well.

Ali stressed the importance of working together with diverse others in his community in New York City during our conversation. To that end, he had participated at the time of our interview for four years in a row in the Brooklyn International Day of Friendship events, recruiting volunteers for that festival. The annual gathering is a major facet of then-Brooklyn borough president Eric Adams's "Embrace Your Hyphen" campaign, which seeks to encourage residents to celebrate and learn more about the diversity of individuals living in the community (Leonhardt 2018). The 2018 International Day of Friendship, which Ali was helping to prepare at the time of our interview, included a "Unity Parade of Flags" on a main Brooklyn thoroughfare, cultural events featuring traditional dance and music from Panama and Tahiti, and a "Global Village" of "tents from countries around the world showcasing their cultures, cuisines and customs" (Leonhardt 2018).

In his full-time job for an Arab American-serving nonprofit, Ali works closely with the borough president's office as he conducts outreach to Arab American and refugee communities in the New York area. He also works to educate donors who, in his view, are often misinformed about the level of support refugees receive for resettlement. "The problem is," he said, "Most of them they think the refugees when they come here the government pays everything for them. But, in reality, they are already in debt. When they were in another country, not their mother country, seeking refuge or asylum, they spent their last penny over there and then when they come to the United States, they face this challenge to pay their airfare. . . . So, it's a lot. They are already in debt" (Ali 14 January 2018).⁵

Nada works for a different Arab American-serving nonprofit in New York City that provides training on various topics as well as undertakes advocacy trips to the New York State capital, Albany, and to Washington, DC. The organization places particular focus on issues Muslim women face in the United States and women's rights more broadly. Women "want to know their rights. It's very important because they want to protect themselves. This is good for us," Nada said (1 November 2017). She said that in Iraq, unlike in other countries in the Middle East, she had rights as a woman, and "My family gave me my rights and my husband is good. We don't have any problems in our . . . family or my country" (Nada 1 November 2017). However, she went on, "always, I think I need to know the rights here. Of course, not just as a woman, everybody should know their rights here. How they can protect them. How they can protect their kids. This is the most important. And . . . I'm learning that from my association" (Nada 1 November 2017). Nada was engaged in teaching others about their rights, while simultaneously seeking to build such knowledge herself.

No Ban, No Wall: Pro-refugee Protests Invoke Norms of Welcoming and Support

After speaking of Muslims and refugees as dangerous and irrational during his campaign, newly elected President Trump moved almost immediately to enact policies to prevent immigrants and refugees, particularly those from Muslim-majority countries, from entering the United States. On 27 January 2017, seven days after his inauguration, Trump signed Executive Order 13769, which sought to lower overall refugee resettlement to the United States in the long-term, to suspend all such admissions for 120 days, and to block new entry into the United States by individuals from seven countries: Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen (Hersher 2017), all of which have Muslim-majority populations. This fact, and Trump's pledge to ban Muslims from entering the country while campaigning (Johnson 2015), prompted many opposed to the policy to frame the executive order as a Muslim ban (BBC 2017). As noted in Chapter 2, several thousand individuals were detained at airports upon arriving in the United States, some for multiple days, immediately upon the order's initial implementation (Cheng 2017). The US State Department denied thirty-seven thousand visa applications in 2018 as a result of the executive order (Torbati 2019).

The ban sparked immediate protests, with thousands occupying major airports such as John F. Kennedy (JFK) in New York City and gathering in large numbers in squares, parks, and other public spaces in many cities around the country. A common slogan of these protests was "No Ban, No Wall," linking opposition to the travel ban to another Trump anti-immigrant policy of expanding and further militarizing a partially constructed border wall located along the Mexico-US border (Rodgers and Bailey 2019). The American Civil Liberties Union launched a legal challenge to the ban, and a federal judge temporarily ordered a stay against the action (Hersher 2017). On 6 March 2017, Trump issued a superseding executive order, 13780, removing Iraq and Sudan from the list of targeted nations, after intense diplomatic pressure and negotiations with those governments (K. Liptak 2017). He added North Korea and Venezuela to replace those countries. At the time of interviews, the final status and legality of the ban were uncertain. However, in June 2018, the US Supreme Court upheld its constitutionality (Totenberg and Montanaro 2018). When Joe Biden assumed the presidency in 2021, he signed an executive order reversing the ban; however, the harm that this policy caused was fresh and salient at the time of the interviews.

The ban created increased precarity and uncertainty for those refugees already in the United States, as I turn now to explore. For some, including

Abdullah, Ali, Nora, and Ahmed, the pro-refugee responses to the executive orders, such as protests in airports and marches in city squares, were significant. They indicated a type of welcoming from native-born Americans toward refugees—particularly those from the Middle East—that these interviewees found new and meaningful. Those actions entailed a significant invocation and mobilization of norms by many Americans, such as welcoming newcomers, diversity, and openness to difference.

Only one individual with whom I spoke, Kasim, remarked that the travel ban was unimportant. At the time of our interview, Iraq had already been removed from the list of banned countries. Kasim dismissed the ban with a shrug, saying it “doesn’t affect Iraqis and I have all my family here” (27 February 2018). He went on to say, “I mean, I understand [Trump’s] point of view. But he’s doing this for show” (Kasim 27 February 2018). Because, he argued, “Obama’s administration did their best to vet everybody who comes in. Trump can’t put any more security measures. But he’s just saying that. I don’t think it’s applicable. The law is the law. You have to go by the book, and he cannot do anything to change the process. I mean, they did their best, Obama’s administration, what can you add? It’s just, he’s trying to get more publicity and votes” (Kasim 27 February 2018).

All of the other interviewees who spoke about the ban viewed it as having consequences for themselves, their families, and others in their communities. For example, Tariq responded to Trump’s action with incredulity. He called the initial decision to include Iraq on the banned country list “crazy,” and observed, “We are the only country fighting ISIS. And you banned us? That doesn’t make sense” (Tariq 2 November 2017). He then put it in personal terms, saying, “I served with the US Marines. He [Trump] didn’t serve in his life. I served with your Marines, and I got the death threat, and I was forced to leave the country. And you ban me from coming? It doesn’t make sense” (Tariq 2 November 2017).

Tariq paraphrased the US military’s “Soldier’s Creed” (Rawlings 2012) “leave no one behind” principle to support his argument against the Trump travel ban. As he put it: “We don’t leave anybody behind, and this is our rule in the military. . . . This is what I learned from US Marines. We can’t leave anybody behind. We got to get them, no matter what. And now you leave these people like me? Before, we put my life and my family’s life in danger. I had death threats. They came to my house” (Tariq 2 November 2017). To reiterate his point, Tariq asked rhetorically if Trump faced death threats because he had worked as an interpreter with US Marines, would he support a policy that put him and his family at risk? The self-evident answer for Tariq was no.⁶

Whereas Tariq spoke about the danger the executive order potentially created for those still living in Iraq, others, including Abdullah, spoke about the precarity it created for their lives in the United States. Before the execu-

tive order was signed, Abdullah suggested: “I felt I’m protected. . . . I have rights. This country believes in human rights and I’m staying here. Finally, something good, you know? And then, he came up with that order and I felt that my rights got stripped away from me” (14 January 2018). Trump banned “seven countries and I was from one of those countries,” Abdullah said, “I really felt that I was going to be kicked out. When I heard of it, I did not even leave my place. I stayed in my room. I was so depressed, stressed, I was like, I don’t know what to do and I felt unsafe” (14 January 2018).

However, the efforts by many Americans to oppose the ban began to ameliorate some of Abdullah’s fears. Soon after its initial enactment, “American friends started texting me,” he noted, “they are trying to come up with a solution. It was like, ‘We are there for you if you need anything’” (Abdullah 14 January 2018). After that, Abdullah began to see groups of people in New York City creating social media campaigns and organizing protests in Battery Park and at JFK Airport. *CBS New York* reported that ten thousand protesters participated in a rally and march opposing the ban held at Battery Park in lower Manhattan. US senators for New York, Chuck Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand attended along with New Jersey senator Corey Booker and New York mayor Bill de Blasio (Falzon 2017). “They started protests,” Abdullah said, “So, I felt these people, they made me like so much safer” (14 January 2018).

These protests, as Abdullah understood it, had “pushed people, certain judges . . . to make the right decisions for this country” (14 January 2018) and at least to temporarily block the ban from taking effect. He compared these rallies to earlier resistance movements, such as the large-scale marches organized against the 2003 Iraq War, noted in Chapter 1. As he said, “I don’t know of any other protest that had this direct effect. I have heard there were some protests against the war in Iraq, but they didn’t change anything. But that specific one [against the travel ban], it actually changed something” (Abdullah 14 January 2018). Before the protests in reaction to the travel ban, Abdullah was not involved in any political or activist activities. However, Trump’s action pushed him to become engaged in such efforts. As he put it: “I contacted some people, and they were at JFK airport because there were a lot of people who were held at JFK. And they were asking for translators. So, I contacted some of my friends [to tell them] people need translators: ‘Are you guys willing to go to JFK?’ All of them said, ‘Yeah, of course.’ And then we were going to go. But then, by the time I wanted to put my name, there were a lot of people who were already signed up for this” (Abdullah 14 January 2018).

While he had been willing to provide translation, Abdullah said: “I didn’t feel safe to go and protest, because anything could go wrong, I could get picked up. They could deport me” (14 January 2018). However, “there were a lot of Americans, really good Americans, who stood up for us and protected us. That was so beautiful to see” (Abdullah 14 January 2018).

Like Abdullah, Ali witnessed the protests against the ban unfold in New York City. He viewed the executive order unambiguously as a “Muslim ban,” saying, “I cried when I saw the ban, my first response” (Ali 14 January 2018). He went on to say the “Trump administration, I don’t know what he is going to do, the next step, to be honest with you. . . . It’s hard when you think about that. Like, it’s not only me. It’s a lot of people in the community. And I’m listening and I’m hearing they are in fear” (Ali 14 January 2018). This fear for Ali was based on material impacts the ban had already had on those he knew. For example, he reported, “When the ban happened, the first one. I have a friend he’s a citizen. Country of birth: Iraq. They didn’t allow him to enter the United States. And then there were lawyers and . . . the ban was blocked” (Ali 14 January 2018).

However, in response to the ban, the first who went out to the airports and to squares to protest, Ali noted, “were Americans and they were born here. And they work in, some of them, in government, they work . . . a lot of places. The first response, they went” (14 January 2018). The fact that so many native-born Americans went out to protest was significant for Ali, who said, “I cried when I saw this scene in front of me” (14 January 2018). He described the effect of this response in the following way: “The Arab people now have this courage, come, like we [Americans] are protecting you. Just come, go out, let’s be hand in hand. And I went to the airport at that time to give translation service, whatever. And, it was a huge thing for me” (Ali 14 January 2018).

The fact that government officials attended the protests was meaningful for Ali as well. “I love New York. I love the government of New York,” Ali told me: “I love what they are doing because they are working not for only a specific community. Not only for a specific religion. They are working for all as Americans. . . . Let’s have the federal government [do the same], just like the New York government” (14 January 2018). The government should “protect the American people,” he argued, “not divide the American people” (Ali 14 January 2018).

Nora described how, after the executive order was signed, a protest in her city’s downtown area drew a large crowd of several hundred residents. According to Nora, protestors gathered with signs, some expressing “welcome” in multiple languages. “I was there,” Nora declared, “and it was very emotional” (6 February 2018). Several of her friends also attended and one, who is the leader of a local activist group, spoke to the crowd. As she explained, in addition to the initial protest, local organizations planned events for immigrants in the area: “People had come from all different nationalities just to say that we’re welcome and then we started running around the court square and having all these signs with us. Then, there was another parade and there was a community session from the refugee office. . . . So, there

was plenty of stuff happening just to make people feel welcome” (Nora 6 February 2018).

Nora also saw local residents come to the resettlement office where she works and inquire about volunteering because of the ban. The new volunteers asked how they could “support families so they don’t feel they are alone because of the ban” (Nora 6 February 2018). These responses gave Nora a sense of belonging, she said, and she interpreted the protests and outreach as Americans saying, “Trump doesn’t represent me, I welcome you in here. . . . We’re here for you. We support you, we’re completely with you” (6 February 2018). She compared this sentiment to refugees/Iraqis/Muslims asserting that extremists or terrorists do not represent them. Nora repeated that strangers had no obligation to go out of their way to show their support for refugees, and yet they had done so after Trump issued his executive order. In addition to receiving supportive reactions from other members of the community, after the ban was signed, Nora and Omar organized and held a “know your rights” workshop for immigrants residing in the area. This event covered topics such as what to do if you are approached by the police or ICE agents, when to contact a lawyer, and what support services are available.

Walid reported that, in Upstate New York, “when the ban happened . . . we saw a lot of people in this park [where we held our interview]. They came marching and supporting refugees” (27 September 2017). Many of the protesters were Americans, according to Walid: “It was a huge number of Americans talking about the ban, which made me feel really happy to see the democracy and the people who don’t agree about the . . . injustice or [policies] that harm other people. . . . Really, I felt proud about this society that cares about unknown people or a refugee or an immigrant and they want to get justice” (27 September 2017).

Ahmed opposed the ban, although he said there could be an alternative way to “implement and improve” vetting potential refugees to prevent abuse of the system. When the president issued the order, his colleague called to check on him. “How do you feel?” his coworker had asked, to which Ahmed had replied, “I really feel wonderful. . . . And I said I feel wonderful for two reasons: One I have never seen support for the country I came from, or even the region, from American people like this. And second, I have never seen the power of the people like this in my life” (2 October 2017).

He went on to say that “you get accustomed, especially after all the events in the last twenty years that happened, you get a certain stereotyped image about the Middle East” (Ahmed 2 October 2017). “So,” he continued, “when you see someone go and block three major airports in the nation . . . protesting [in support of those who have been negatively stereotyped]

against the ultimate power in the country. . . . I have never seen such support” (Ahmed 2 October 2017). The potential for such protests to exercise the “will of the people,” in Ahmed’s words, was “one of the reasons why this country is great” (2 October 2017). Without the freedom of speech protections enshrined in the Constitution and law, Americans “would not be able to go to the airport to protest,” he said (Ahmed 2 October 2017).

Finally, Zaid interpreted Trump’s election in similar terms to Ahmed’s view of the travel ban. He characterized Trump’s policies as “radical,” “extreme,” and “racist.” However, “To be honest,” he said with a laugh, “it’s not that I felt happy that he won. But I felt kind of relaxed. I felt kind of comfortable knowing that there are so many, the majority of people are against these ideas, and they are fighting on our behalf” (Zaid 27 February 2018). The fact that the majority of Americans rejected Trump’s racist views and policies was important to Zaid because, “just as I told you earlier,” he said, “I can’t really say what’s on my mind any time or anywhere I want. So, I’m so happy that I have this privilege that there are so many people who are like fighting this fight, this war for me” (27 February 2018).

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the various activities in which interviewees engaged to participate in their communities. Many of those with whom I spoke sought opportunities to discuss issues they found important with their friends, families, and colleagues. In some cases, this effort meant putting forward their personal stories and narratives to challenge negative perceptions held by a significant percentage of Americans concerning refugees, Iraqis, Muslims, and Arabs. As several interviewees pointed out, to have productive discussions and interactions that hold the potential to change views, reciprocal listening is important. As Ahmed and Omar similarly observed, to change beliefs and values, one must be willing to hear others’ views and attempt to understand their perspectives, with the expectation that they will do the same. This mutuality can entail, as Tariq and Ali described, engaging with individuals with whom one fundamentally disagrees and who may actively be harming you.

Importantly, as Wissam argued, there may be limits to the degree to which one can participate in dialogue with individuals who harbor views that are counter to fundamental democratic norms. One cannot necessarily engage in dialogue with individuals, such as white supremacists and neo-Nazis, who espouse hate and support violence against particular groups within society. A fundamental precondition to engaging in dialogue with others is the assumption, implicit or explicit, that, because they are human, all participants are morally equal agentic individuals. Groups such as the

neo-Nazis that Wissam referenced do not agree with the essential principle that all human beings are equal in this way, targeting in violent rhetoric and action various groups such as African Americans, Jews, and Muslims whom they deem inferior to themselves. Therefore, while interviewees indicated that discussion with individuals could be effective in changing views in some cases, in other instances, especially when confronting those who have a fundamental opposition to one's humanness, different strategies and tactics will be necessary to maintain and expand the rights of the groups they target.

This tension speaks to the need for multiple forms of democratic activities and participation: deliberative dialogue and engagement, civil society initiatives, and agonistic struggles with a strong emphasis on collective action. Unlike Ali and Tariq, I am not optimistic that individuals—such as Trump; his immigration advisor and author of the travel ban, Stephen Miller (Levitz 2019; Darby 2019); or the right-wing militia members who illegally detained fifty-six hundred migrants at gunpoint near the Mexico/US border between February and March 2019 (Hay 2019)—who advocate and use violence to exclude and expel those different from themselves can be convinced to welcome newcomers by discussion, interpersonal interaction, or increased understanding of the difficulties of displacement and resettlement.

Indeed, some of what may be required to push back against these reactionary forces is reflected in the activities and activism of civil society as described by interviewees. The volunteering and nonprofit work individuals such as Walid, Omar, and Nora described included providing essential services, supplementing the supports offered by government and resettlement agencies, facilitating discussions on important political issues, and working directly with individuals from diverse backgrounds to build connections and relationships among members of different communities. One of the themes woven throughout interviewees' experiences volunteering for events such as the Brooklyn International Day of Friendship and the Upstate New York immigrant festival was the desire on the part of both newcomers and native-born Americans to foster and reinforce the positive norms of diversity, inclusion, and multiculturalism, and to bring people together to have meaningful interactions and to learn about varied cultural expressions. These activities are the public version of the experiences with interpersonal exchange among participants and their friends, neighbors, and coworkers discussed in Chapter 2.

An even more direct strategy to confront a politics of exclusion, as Omar described, involves bringing individuals together to build power collectively. He contended that community and social movement organizing with residents of all backgrounds is likely better able to confront government repression than isolated individuals. The resistance to the travel ban as described in this chapter suggests the aptness of this insight. Educating immigrants about their rights, as Nada and Nora explained, is an avenue through

which to prepare newcomers to assert their position as equal members of a democratic community. The large-scale protests and airport occupations are examples of individuals acting in concert to pressure government officials to reverse exclusionary policies and targeting of vulnerable populations. These actions represented a moment in which it was possible, as Ahmed framed it, for the “power of the people” to resist the “ultimate power in the country” (2 October 2017). As Nora, Ali and Walid explained, this effort involved significant numbers of native-born Americans joining with those directly targeted to demonstrate their opposition.

As Abdullah and others pointed out, rights such as the freedom of expression are written into the US Constitution. Newcomers and native-born Americans can mobilize existing rights, even limited ones, to push back at oppressive social and political structures toward further expansion of rights and protections. As multiple interviewees pointed out, the lack of even limited protections to protest and oppose the government in Iraq under both Saddam Hussein and the new American-imposed regime left significantly more circumscribed possibilities for action. The rights those living in the United States have are neither static nor ahistorical (Benhabib 2006). They have been contested through legal challenges (ACLU 2019), civil society, and agonistic conflict between progressive and reactionary forces. In some cases, formerly oppressed groups have succeeded in expanding such rights through those struggles. It is incumbent upon those Americans who wish to see a democratic, diverse, and multicultural society to use these rights and to demonstrate publicly that this is a society that should be open and welcoming to newcomers and that ensures the equal right to belonging and democratic membership for those who seek them. Finally, as Abdullah, Ali, and Nora’s experiences with the protests against the travel ban demonstrated, “Individuals learn to participate by participating” (Pateman 2012, 10). Multiple examples of organizations and activities that began as part of the mass reaction against the travel ban have continued and expanded.⁷ People learn democratic skills and attitudes by engaging in democratic processes. Those individuals can then go on to reproduce and expand a democratic ethos in the activities in which they later engage. Fully democratizing society, then, requires undoing undemocratic institutions and creating potentially new, more democratic norms and structures.

Notes

1. Zaid did not elaborate further on what specific issues he believed could be publicly addressed under a Trump presidency. From our full conversation, I interpreted that he was primarily referring to racism and other prejudice within American society.

2. Question 13 of the N-400 form asks: “Between March 23, 1933 and May 8, 1945, did you work for or associate in any way (either directly or indirectly) with: A. The Nazi government of Germany? B. Any government in any area occupied by, allied with, or established with the help of the Nazi government of Germany? C. Any German, Nazi, or S.S. military unit, paramilitary unit, self-defense unit, vigilante unit, citizen unit, police unit, government agency or office, extermination camp, concentration camp, prisoner of war camp, prison, labor camp, or transit camp?”
3. Here, Wissam was referencing the 11–12 August 2017 “Unite the Right” rallies held in Charlottesville, Virginia, organized by Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazi, and other white supremacist groups. During the event, James Alex Fields Jr. intentionally drove a car into antiracist counterprotestors, killing Heather Heyer and injuring nineteen others (Caron 2017; Stolberg and Rosenthal 2017).
4. On 24 February 2018, Trump tweeted in support of training and arming teachers in schools as a way to deter school shootings (Landers 2018). These comments came in response to the massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High in Parkland, Florida on 14 February 2018. A gunman entered the school and shot and killed seventeen people including fourteen children and three staff members. Seventeen other individuals were injured (Landers 2018). Such massacres are regular occurrences in the United States, and the Parkland shooting was the most recent before my interview with Zaid, occurring less than two weeks before.
5. As a condition of resettlement through the USRAP, individuals who do not pay for their airfare to the United States upfront are required to pay back the cost of their flight to the United States government (Westcott 2015).
6. Tariq questioned more broadly the disparity between Iraqis who worked for the United States and Americans who served in the occupation forces. Although some of his friends had been injured or died while working with the US military, he explained, “We’re locals so we don’t have any of the services that help us” (Tariq 2 November 2017). Because Tariq and Iraqis like him are not officially US military veterans, they are ineligible for any of the basic benefits veterans may receive, including GI Bill education benefits or Department of Veterans Affairs healthcare.
7. One such example is the Yemeni American Merchants Association (YAMA), an organization that began as an effort to resist the travel ban and has continued and branched out into other activities since its founding. When Trump signed the initial version of the ban, a group of Yemeni Americans quickly organized a temporary work stoppage/strike among Yemeni businesses in the city. More than one thousand Yemeni stores in New York temporarily closed on 2 February 2017 (Nigro 2019). Organizers and supporters of the strike also held a rally at Brooklyn’s Borough Hall, drawing a large number of participants and support from elected officials such as then-Brooklyn borough president Eric Adams (Stack 2017). These actions brought together individuals who sought to continue the momentum from this organizing to create a shared space for ongoing activism. The NY merchants’ protest of Trump’s action led to the founding of the YAMA of New York. In its relatively short existence, the organization has assisted individuals whose family members were affected by the travel ban and offered support to families with members separated by it (Iqbal 2019). By

August 2019, YAMA had worked with ten families. Former congressman Max Rose (Democrat, New York) supported this work, and YAMA members have participated in activities such as a Congressional Briefing on Temporary Protected Status for Yemen and Somalia. In April 2019, YAMA launched a boycott of the *New York Post* by Yemeni-owned and operated bodegas in New York City. The action came as a response to a *Post* front page showing an out-of-context quotation by US Representative Ilhan Omar (Democrat, Minnesota)—herself a former refugee—alongside an image of the 11 September 2001 World Trade Center attack. By the end of June, five thousand businesses were boycotting sales of the *Post* in their establishments. In addition to participation leading to more participation, YAMA’s work speaks to the importance of building relationships and organizing across communities, issues, and goals. For example, in 2019, several YAMA founders created Arab Women’s Voice, a political consulting firm focused on issues/candidates of importance to Arab American and Muslim communities (Touré 2019). They have also worked to build other organizations such as Yalla Brooklyn, a civic organization that spun out of the strong, but unsuccessful, city council race of Khader El-Yateem, a Palestinian-born Lutheran Pastor who ran as a Democratic Socialist and came in second in the Democratic Primary in 2017.