



**AROC** مركز العربي  
ARAB RESOURCE & ORGANIZING CENTER

# Developing Alternatives to Policing in the Arab and Muslim Community

BY RACHEL HERZING FOR BUILD THE BLOCK



## Build the Block

Between 2015 and 2016, with support from the Soros Justice Fellowship, Build the Block was created to pilot strategies aimed at decreasing calls to 911 and contact with law enforcement among residents in Oakland and San Francisco. The project worked with neighborhood groups, formal organizations, and individuals to consider the circumstances under which people may rely on law enforcement intervention and what no-call<sup>1</sup> resources, relationships, knowledge, and practices may be employed to decrease that reliance.

## Arab Resource and Organizing Center

The Arab Resource and Organizing Center (AROC) evolved from the San Francisco chapter of the American Arab anti-Discrimination Committee (SF-ADC), which built Arab leadership, defended

civil liberties, mobilized against war and occupation, and challenged anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia. In 2007, the local group began operating as AROC and shifted its focus toward grassroots organizing, legal service provision, and youth leadership development. AROC's work has focused on advancing immigrants' rights, challenging war and occupation (with a particular emphasis on Palestine), and resisting state repression, racial profiling and surveillance.

AROC is unique in its emphasis on Arab-led grassroots organizing combined with legal services, migrant justice, and youth development that is also orientated toward liberationist and Third World solidarity politics. The organizational shift away from civil liberties and toward more transformative political stances has made AROC a powerful voice in San Francisco Bay Area organizing communities, but has also increased the number and seriousness of attacks against them by Zionist forces who are threatened by AROC's work against racism.<sup>2</sup>

1. For the purposes of this project, "no-call" refers to analysis, policies and practices that assume that law enforcement contact should be a last resort rather than a first response. In this context, no-call policies and practices are those that ensure that an organization, group, or community has taken agreed upon steps to take actions that do not rely on law enforcement intervention.

2. Zionism is a racist political ideology and a form of Jewish nationalism. It is the set of beliefs that drove the founding of the settler-colonial state of Israel in Palestine and continues to drive its expansion today.

In 2015 AROC undertook a review of its work and structure. The review resulted in an organizational restructuring and a commitment to four core areas of programmatic work: ending war and occupation, anti-repression and anti-Zionism, youth empowerment, and immigration and immigrant rights. The structural re-organization included new leadership and decision-making processes and a new membership structure. The restructuring also coincided with staffing transitions, and two new full time staff members joined the staff just after the new structure, vision, and programmatic focus were approved.

This period of growth and transition seemed to be an opportune time to incorporate policies and practices that reduced a reliance on law enforcement, in AROC's executive director, Lara Kiswani's opinion. Lara understood the restructuring as an opportunity to build knowledge and skills around reducing contact with law enforcement and other aspects of the prison industrial complex (PIC), to integrate an anti-PIC analysis into the organization's revised mission and visions, and to develop policies and practices that could help AROC's staff, leadership, members, and community reduce law enforcement contact. Further, as AROC was managing these transitions, they were also experiencing targeted attacks by the Zionist organization Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC). AROC worked with a group of community partners and consultants to defend against the JCRC's racist attacks.

AROC's approach was bold. Although not an anti-PIC organization, but one rooted in immigrant and migrant justice work, work against war and occupation, and resistance to state repression, Lara understood that AROC's work would be strengthened by infusing its ongoing work with anti-PIC analysis and practice. AROC's community experiences broad and intensive surveillance. While a significant amount of that surveillance (and related entrapment) is from

federal law enforcement, Bay Area communities have also experienced similar pressure from local law enforcement agencies as well. Some sectors of AROC's community, especially store owners, have faced pressure from police to put surveillance cameras in their stores that are connected to local police department feeds, thereby facilitating surveillance of their stores, but also their neighbors. Sometimes, cops have pitted neighbors against each other—profiling Black residents as people likely to rob their stores, for instance—as a way of encouraging the placement of these cameras.

A portion of AROC's community, especially more recently arrived immigrants, have different experiences of police from their home countries, so may be unaware of the potential dangers of collaborating with law enforcement until they have already become deeply ensnared in informant-type relationships.

Finally, as an organization that uses public events, mobilizations, and direct action as tactics, AROC's members frequently find themselves in contact with law enforcement agents. AROC had a commitment to doing its own safety for events and actions, and also wanted to ensure that the volunteers engaged in those safety teams were skilled in creating an effective buffer between the community and police, and also didn't inadvertently wind up taking on a policing mentality in their safety team roles.

It was within this context that AROC became a Build the Block pilot site: an organization in growth and transition with new staff members coming on, a revision of the core mission and vision, and an organizational restructuring. AROC identified working with Build the Block as an opportunity to infuse no-call policies and practices into AROC's new structure and programmatic work.

## Step 1: Understanding the Context

AROC began this work with a strong group of long-standing members who had been involved in the organizational assessment and restructuring and who were also connected to other organizations and movements. The organization had done a good job of documenting its work and could return to those documents as a basis from which to develop this new strand of work. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the organization had a commitment to fighting state repression and building self-determination that could serve as a jumping off point for developing no-call practices.

When Lara expressed interest in AROC joining with Build the Block, she had three primary goals: 1) to establish shared values and principles around engaging law enforcement that aligned with AROC's politics; 2) to develop organizational protocols and practices based on those values and principles; 3) to provide political education and training for AROC's staff, leadership, and members that could inform campaigns, projects, and their community safety teams.

As AROC's membership was on hold during the restructuring, Build the Block and AROC's joint approach was based on the idea we should begin our work with AROC's staff and leadership team. We hoped to build political alignment around a no-call approach and commitment to integrate those policies and practices into AROC's structure and programming. The staff and leadership team would then be responsible for educating and training the membership and AROC's community in this orientation and practice.

To meet these goals we began with some initial steps. First, AROC shared documents describing the organization's history, its revised mission and vision statements, its new organizational structure, its existing security documents, and



the policy manual for its fiscal sponsor. We then interviewed two long-standing members who have been central to AROC's safety and security practices for many years to solicit their sense of underlying organizational assumptions and established practices around safety and security, about knowledge about the prison industrial complex, and attitudes toward engaging law enforcement. From the information gathered in that interview, follow-up notes provided by the members interviewed, and from the organizational documents, we then generated a summary document laying out AROC's organizational assumptions about safety, the PIC, and engaging law enforcement (APPENDIX 1). That document was shared with the rest of the leadership team for discussion and feedback, and to draw out points of strong unity as well as those of contradiction or disagreement. Those conversations also helped us identify gaps in knowledge, analysis and practice that we should address through our process. We were then able to talk through the contradictions and disagreements to eventually come to a version of the document everyone could support.

The outline of organizational assumptions became the basis for statement of principles about AROC's orientation toward the prison industrial complex

(APPENDIX 2). The document was modeled on the statement of vision and principles that the organization had developed during its assessment process and is meant to be a touchstone to which AROC can return to ensure that it was able to integrate a no-call approach into its structure, operations, membership, and programs.

## Step 2: Aligning Values and Vision

Questioning AROC's assumptions about the PIC helped us see that before jumping into developing policies and practices, we should spend time ensuring political commitments and alignment. Without that alignment, any policies Build the Block and AORC established would not be as likely to stick. AROC's commitment to fighting state repression provided an important point of entry to discuss employing a no-call approach. Because of its experience withstanding and resisting Zionist attacks (many of which aimed to close the organization), the organization had not only strengthened its commitment to self-defense and self-determination, but it already had fairly developed security practices in place. This gave us a good foundation from which to build. Despite those strengths, as executive director, Lara also astutely identified that while AROC was able to implement individual security measures (in the office, for instance), it faced more challenges in integrating a more comprehensive approach to diminishing PIC contact and sometimes experienced inconsistencies or contradictions in its practices

as a result. She hoped that work with Build the Block would bolster AROC's capacity to diminish contact with the PIC in all aspects of its work, not simply make the staff and members more security conscious.

To help articulate and solidify AROC's anti-PIC principles and begin to apply them to every aspect of its work, we took up a series of political education workshops. We adapted tools that had been developed by national anti-PIC organization Critical Resistance on the prison industrial complex. We also developed some new tools and workshop aspects to meet AROC's specific needs (APPENDICES 3-8). Following the model of building first with AROC's leadership, the majority of the political education sessions happened with the staff and the leadership group. We also did an introduction session with potential new members as part of a political education series AROC held for its new membership process.

Taking time to have political conversations and think about applying to those politics to the situations AROC faces regularly, helped the leadership team develop its own language and to pull out priority areas that would resonate most

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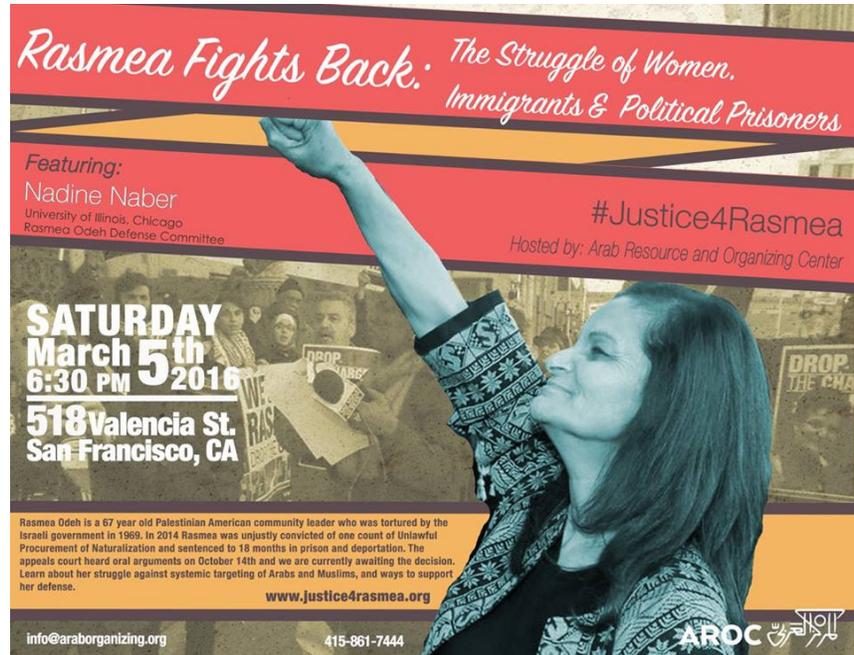
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with AROC's community. It also reinforced the values and principles they had established, better preparing them to integrate a no-call approach into its structure and work. The workshops also encouraged them to think creatively about organizational assets, allies, and community resources to bring to bear in situations in which they might otherwise engage law enforcement and to brainstorm alternate responses in a safe learning environment. This kind of preparation increases the likelihood that when harm occurs or a crisis arises a group will be more likely to apply what it's developed together than to default calling on law enforcement.

### Step 3: Putting Ideas into Practice

Analysis, of course, is only as useful as its application. AROC's community is continually confronted with profiling, surveillance, and entrapment by all levels of law enforcement. It is targeted for deportation and detention. It is also subject to xenophobia, racism, and racist violence at the hands of its neighbors, especially in periods such as those following attacks in San Bernardino and Paris in 2015. This context generated obstacles to which AROC had to respond including incidents of law enforcement entrapment of young people in AROC's community and the call for self defense from sectors of its community targeted by neighbors. Despite all these challenges, AROC took up addressing these needs and putting its anti-PIC principles into place.



To respond to these community needs, AROC and Build the Block developed additional programmatic pieces. In response to requests from community members who were experiencing increased verbal and physical abuse from their neighbors following the San Bernardino shootings and presidential candidate, Donald Trump calling for a ban on Muslims entering the US, AROC supported community members to hold a press conference and rally calling on public officials to speak out against racism and Islamophobia, and for communities across the Bay Area to stand in solidarity with Arab and Muslim communities. The rally was a success, and the leadership team reported feeling confident about integrating their anti-PIC values into their messaging and talking points (APPENDIX 9 and <http://pacificaeveningnews.blogspot.com/2015/12/muslim-americans-protest-rising-racism.html?m=1>). AROC felt able to discuss the need for a response to the violence happening in their community without defaulting to law enforcement intervention as an appropriate response.

Through the planning for the rally the concept of self defense was central. That theme helped

us consider how incorporating a self defense approach to Build the Block and AROC's work together could create a useful point of entry to draw community members into the no-call work. Having a framework grounding a response to harm in community strength rather than reliance on state intervention allows people experiencing fear and violence to understand that there are a range of responses they can participate in to respond from within their own community. We pulled lessons from community self defense programs such as Barrio Defense Committees and Black self defense groups that have operated within the US for decades while drawing on structures and experiences from people's home countries to consider what hybrid forms might work best for AROC's community (APPENDIX 10).

Similarly, AROC works with a community of young people, doing leadership development with them and supporting their organizing efforts. When AROC got word that a young person in its community had been visited by federal law enforcement, jailed, charged and convicted, and concerns had been raised about potential entrapment both from in-person interviews and via social media, AROC's leadership used their principles and values and employed a community self defense response to help understand which community members may have been at risk and to educate the community about their options in dealing with law enforcement as well as about self defense strategies for participating in social media.

From those concerns we created a guide for social media security (APPENDIX 11), and reached out to the National Lawyers Guild (NLG)-San Francisco and the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) for additional support. The NLG-SF created a guide for avoiding entrapment (APPENDIX 12) for use by AROC, but that could also be used more broadly. The NLG and EFF also collaborated with AROC to facilitate a Know Your Rights workshop tailored for AROC's community (APPENDICES 13-15). AROC

***“AROC provided my parents and I with Know Your Rights trainings and workshops. I never thought of ways to protect myself from police and FBI before attending these workshops. Through these workshops and political education on the prison industrial complex, I also became aware of the practices that police departments and FBI use to target people on the basis of religion and race and ways that I can work in my community to fight them.” AYO member***

also held follow up meetings with they youth organizers with whom they work to learn more about the pressures they are facing, to share information about what they had been hearing about law enforcement visits, and to reinforce some of the tools from the workshop.

After months of discussion, education, training, and practice, we also developed tools that could be integrated into AROC's organizational policies and procedures as well as some new supplemental tools. In developing these tools, we revisited Lara's initial goals for working with Build the Block in addition to thinking through the kinds of practical supports that AROC might need to really be able to integrate a no-call approach into every aspect of its structure, operations, membership, and programs. The materials ranged from practical office security measures, to guidelines for AROC's safety teams, to guidelines suggesting steps AROC could take in addressing interpersonal harm within the organization (APPENDICES 16-24).

## Step 4: Integrating No-Call Analysis and Practices

The hardest part of taking up new approaches is fully integrating them to the point where they become a seamless part of how the organization functions. Rather than creating a host of new rules and regulations for AROC and its members to follow, we hoped to offer a political analysis that was both compatible with AROC's existing values and principles and that added a new practical dimension to its work. We hoped that a no-call approach would become completely common sense within the organization.

For this approach to become common sense, AROC will need to put the tools to use and will need to practice using the analysis over and over and over. Examples include:

- AROC has incorporated its no call policies and practices into its general membership orientation and membership documents.
- AROC's leadership has sharpened its analysis about the relationship between policing and US state repression, and that analysis is informing choices about the work they take up and how they represent their work to external audiences.
- AROC's youth arm, Arab Youth Organizing (AYO), has been trained in the anti-PIC workshop, know your rights basics, and no-call policies.
- AYO leader, Sharif, has conducted alternatives to policing and knows your rights workshops at various high schools in San Francisco with Arab and Muslim youth to help them integrate the ideas into their daily lives (APPENDIX 25) and in response to the young people's requests for support in responding to police violence in San Francisco.
- AROC is developing new bilingual outreach materials informing communities about how to protect themselves from law enforcement from visits and raids.
- All new AROC members will be trained in the anti-PIC workshop, and member leaders will receive a training for trainers on the Build the Block approach.
- AROC's staff will begin regular outreach to corner stores and mosques to raise awareness about alternatives to law enforcement.
- AROC developed relevant outreach material in Arabic to use in its office, in the streets, and in tabling at events, to discuss militarization, policing and Zionism in support of its participation in the Stop Urban Shield Coalition (APPENDIX 26).
- Through work with Build the Block, AROC also recognized potential digital security vulnerabilities and has since begun work with digital security consultants to fortify its digital infrastructure and practices.

## Conclusion

The contexts in which Arab and Muslim communities find themselves encountering law enforcement agents and experiencing harms related to policing have suggested to groups like AROC that diminishing contact with law enforcement is likely the best way to reduce those harms. More and more communities of color and marginalized communities are reaching the same conclusion. As AROC's Lara Kiswani notes:

*Given the ongoing attacks on our community, we have found know your rights workshops and trainings to be insufficient. The day-to-day interactions with law enforcement that youth face in schools and in their neighborhoods and families face at home and work, the growing fears of deportation and detention, as well as the infiltration and attacks on organizations, necessitate a deeper understanding of surveillance, policing, sentencing and imprisonment. We need an understanding that draws out the relationship between these forces and our relationship to them. Today, it isn't far fetched for the same family to have a parent that was a former political prisoner in Palestine, been visited by the FBI in their Bay Area home, have a jailed son that has found himself caught up in the system that criminalizes young Brown and Black*

*men, and an activist daughter that regularly fears surveillance of her and her friends at protests. This is in fact a real story, and a story that illustrates why immigrants, Arabs, and Muslims in the US must understand and fight state violence.*

*We need ways to respond to harm and fear that do not make us rely on law enforcement or on the criminalization of other communities. We need to ways to develop internal capacity to respond, defend, and build power in places that are most vulnerable. The work we did together has laid the groundwork for AROC to move in that direction with clarity and alignment with our values and principles.*

Through concerted efforts to build up knowledge, skills, confidence, and capacity to reduce contact with law enforcement in a way that aligns with and reinforces their politics, AROC is increasingly able to draw connections between policing in

the US and state repression, Zionism, and war in their members' homelands. They have increased the number and variety of tools they use to fortify and intentionally articulate why reducing contact with law enforcement is central to their work against war and occupation and for anti-repression and anti-Zionism, youth empowerment, and immigration and immigrant rights. And, they have reduced the likelihood that their staff, leadership, members, and broader community will call on law enforcement without considering alternative approaches first.

While time and practice will be essential for these early efforts to become effective and lasting, the commitment that AROC has made to integrating this approach holistically into its organization's structure and programming stands as a model for what other organizations may take up. The time for creative thinking about reducing the violence of policing is ripe. If not now, when?