

“You're the one they're protecting white people from” with Hoda Katebi - Transcripts

Nahid Salaam Hoda, Thank you so much for accepting our invitation to be part of this project. I'm really excited to have this conversation with you. But before we actually dive in, can you tell us a little bit about yourself, who is Hoda Katebi and why does she care about this project?

Hoda Sure, Salaam Nahid joon, Thank you for having me. I'm excited for this, I think , very needed and important and timely - It's always timely, but- particularly timely conversation.

My name is Hoda Katebi. I am an Iranian-American writer and organizer. And I think that this idea, the idea or the concept of policing is like deeply important for many reasons. And I think has always been deeply important for many reasons. I think, you know, as just people living in this country, as people of color, as Muslims, as Iranian-Americans, as women, I think there's just so many reasons to give a damn. So I'm excited to delve into those in this conversation.

Nahid Great. So let's just start from the beginning. What does divestment from the police mean to you and maybe how does it show up in your life on a daily basis, If it does.

Hoda Yeah, it does, definitely. I think divestment from police for me is like a, like a step toward abolition, ultimate abolition of police and abolition of policing and the ways that it shows up both as an external force and acting violence against our communities, as well as policing that shows up within our communities against each other and inter community policing. So I think what defunding the police looks like is is not just like taking resources away from institutions of violence and institutions that are actively killing our neighbors, killing ourselves, killing our people, surveilling our people, but also like very deeply even more important than that, like it's about building the world that we want. You know, like if we are all against violence, I think that's something that we can all agree on, state violence, so what does it look like in order to create a world that is rooted in everything that this country is not? And I think that it's such a particular important conversation to have at this moment and even easier to have at this moment, because if we just look around us like COVID has has not, you know everyone says COVID is the grand equalizer and we can tell that it's not like very, very quickly and very easily. If we just look around us. That COVID has really sort of hyphenated and underscored continuously pre existing forms of structural violence in our societies and sort of has exacerbated that.

That's why we see in Chicago alone, Black Chicagoans are significantly more likely to contract or die from COVID than white Chicagoans because of lack of access to health care, systemic disenfranchisement. And so all we're seeing, all of these sorts of, like right now, this like great desperate inequality, we see at the same time so much money going toward militarization of both the military militarization of policing. And this moment is such a clear, clear picture of what America cares about and what America does not give a damn about. Well, we can see if resources being funneled into weapons, resources being funneled into enacting violence, tools of violence and tools of surveillance, and doctors having to wear garbage bags to take care of us. You know, us not

having basic PPE. And so this is such a stark difference that allows us to really realize that really the depth of this issue is that this country and the systems that we find ourselves and whether it's policing, whether it's surveillance, but also public health is not actually made to care for us. If it was, then we would not be seeing in the middle of a global pandemic, where the priorities are and where the resources are going. And so we can use this moment as such an important teaching tool or like point of understanding or framework to see how things have existed in this country since day one, since day zero. That this is not new, you know. It's not suddenly that a global pandemic is hitting is that people care about militarism, but it's showing that even in the worst case scenario, like something that like drama, movie producers couldn't even dream up. You know, like the worst sort of dystopian future is actually our lived reality.

So defunding the police for me is taking resources away from violence and putting those into Life-Giving institutions into things that we need not just today, but we need it yesterday and we're gonna need definitely tomorrow.

Nahid Yeah, definitely. I do want to come back to something that you mentioned in the very beginning of what you were saying about intra-community policing and not something that is coming at us only from the outside world. And I want to pause on that a little bit. Can you tell me what you mean by that?

Hoda Yeah...

Nahid Or if You have experiences to share about that?

Hoda Definitely. So policing is obviously like state policing is very clear to identify. But the ways in which also interpersonal violence appears in our communities, oftentimes is the result of sort of cycles of violence that start not with, like, with ourselves, but from the state. So we see so much violence the state is enacting against our community is replicated within our homes, within our neighborhoods, replicated within our communities. Because, the ways in which we've been taught to normalize this false reality of a world, we have to internalize. So the ways that the state tells us that, oh, yeah, if we put this person who has committed harm in a cage, that is called justice. And so now we've learned to internalize that. OK. Putting people in cages means justice. Or the, for example, the fact that, like, yeah, the police are here because they're keeping you safe. And so we've internalized, OK, people sort of policing our behaviors, telling us where we can and can't go, how we can and can't dress, who is, whose life is and is not valuable. We've internalized that ourselves. So we can see that also not just with policing, but just like the very fundamental reality of what we're taught as like human existence. I think capitalism has so much —also rich conversation that we can have about productivity, about our own values, about how we interact with each other. And I think for many of us who have an alternative idea of what society could be arranged as, as Muslims, as people from the Middle East or Africa, from the East, we know that this is not always the case. You know, like the ways that people in the United States form friendships or like relationships, for me feels so surface level, it feels so like vapid. But in the Middle East, in Iran, for example, like someone like literally help you fight, like go out of their way to make sure you get home and then invite you over for dinner, even if they know they're never going to see you again.

So like this deep and rich relationship that humans have with no expectations of like transactions afterward, you know, there's so much that we've internalized. But we have an idea of what an alternative cross looks like. I think it's easy to see how when it comes to policing, the same thing really exists is that we have the ways in which our bodies are policed by the state. That's also replicated in our communities, in our homes and things like that. I think specifically, many women probably have experiences of policing regarding dress code, the ways that we dress our bodies being policed by men on the streets and the ways in which we are told, you know, whose fault it is and things like that. This is inter-community policing as well. I think a lot of it also gets racialized. And we talk about tone and also a lot of these, again, the forms of systemic gender based violence, racism, they turn into just like the way that we operate and see ourselves and see our neighbors in our communities.

Nahid Yeah, and this reproduction of the systemic dynamics of oppression that you're talking about, that happens in our communities and inside of our homes, I also know that you have, like, you're super active, you have a very active online presence. And I'm wondering.. Like I know and I have experienced as an Iranian organizer here in the US.

Hoda [laughs]

Nahid yeah. You know what I'm talking about that like...

Hoda Just say Iran...

Nahid That idea of being policed not just by the police, but like the people who feel entitled to tell you what you're allowed to do or what you're not allowed to do, it's not just in our homes or in our community. It also shows up in online spaces. And I'm just wondering, like, what is your experience? How does that show up in the online spaces that you are a part of? And how does this conversation translate to the online world?

Hoda Yeah. That's a really, really good question. And I think that also timely when we think about cancel culture, which I know that people have been discussing a lot online. And for me, I think there's a lot of relationship, obviously, between policing and capitalism and the way in which we treat each other, obviously, that's like the replication of violence.

I think at, one of the core sort of ideas that we're like quote unquote values that I think sort of underlies the carceral state is the idea of disposability of lives. That lives, um, some lives are more important than others. That some can be tested upon, when thinking about pharmaceuticals right now, even with, like, covered, you know, like a lot of like schools that are in Black and poor neighborhoods are kind of being opened first to be able to see, like, how COVID treats, you know. So we have this like very underlying fundamental understanding of humans as unequal and disposable. Especially, you know, Black people being utmost disposable in this country, and indigenous people as well. So when we think about disposability and really trying to unlearn that, like, that actually is really challenging. And I think that social media does the opposite for us. I think, unfortunately, on social media and the ways in which we engage with each other has become

incredibly toxic. And, um, really conducive to this idea that one person can make one mistake, make one sort of harm, and they have to be erased like they're canceled. Right. There is no space for growth. There's no space for understanding that person's complex humanity.

And so I think that we have to have really important conversations about, you know, how do we call each other in, but also how do we build community both online and offline? What does it mean to hold somebody accountable in a way that allows for them to grow and allows for them, And we see them as like a full person. And I think that that's really, really important. And that, I think is so deeply tied to even the way that we think about a carceral state, prisons and policing in general.

I think it's like who do we view as worth having a conversation with and who do we just want to, like, get rid of and erase and not even engage with? And I think at the core of that, both in terms of like a state response, but also like in a way that we ,sort of, our ideas of justice, sort of allowing the state to define that for us both on a systemic level and a carceral state, but also in an individual capacity, Online, for example, is just our our inability to be anything but lazy. Like, I think it's really rooted in laziness that we don't want to do the work. And it's challenging. Like it's hard to, like, get a death threat from somebody that you know, and be like, I know that you're dealing with a mental health crisis right now. So I'm going to actually not just cancel you and tell the world that you just threatened to kill me, but instead, I'm going to talk to your family, see if you're OK. And that is hard, you know, to, like, take a deep breath, and just like , you have to like, second your pride and be like, I know that you hate me and you literally want to come to my house and kill me. And you live in Chicago, but let's talk about what you need right now.

And those are really challenging conversations that I think if we're... And the answers aren't always in front of us, because they're not given to us, you know, we have to literally sit and think about, like, what does this situation need? And those are really challenging conversations. But I think if we're just being lazy, then we're just going to keep calling the police or asking for people to jail or just keep canceling people.

Nahid Yeah, that like those moments of.. Those moments that you have to pause and take a breath and be like, OK, maybe the learned... the solution or like the way out of this crisis moment that we have learned is that call the police. That is where you get safety because you're being threatened. And that is like you are in danger. You're looking for safety. Go to the police, just like you were saying, because then what is the cause of this danger that is posed on you? Like. Immediately, the person on the other end of this being erased from all the other conversations. And I'm curious to know, like, what do we need for those moments? Because as you said, it is challenging and it is hard. And I don't.. I think part of the part of the reason that we are doing this project, and part of the reason why I'm super interested in this conversation is that we do.. Like now that more people are talking about abolition, we do talk about how we should not be calling the police and how we should look at root causes. But then that is where we stop. And for people who do not... There is a process of unlearning that needs to happen, and then you can't just leave it in the vacuum of like, don't call the police. OK, but then what? What do I do to feel safe? like there are needs and there are gaps there that people are trying to navigate when they are in those situations. And I don't know.

I feel like, at least with the issues that we share in our work, I know that you have been in those situations a lot and you have been receiving serious trolling on the Internet.

Hoda to put it lightly

Nahid Exactly, I, yeah, I'm leaving that for you to word that, like in whatever detail that you're comfortable with. But I just wanna know what are the resources that you draw on? And like, where do you go when you don't go to the police or law enforcement?

Hoda That's.. Yeah. This is a really important conversation. And I think... So I think there's... yeah, this is a really good conversation. I think. I've had a lot of these conversations with non Black Muslim, like whether it's masjids, like community spaces or just individuals. And I think the first thing that is so important to recognize is that the police also are not going to do anything because they don't care. They're not here to actually, like, save your life. They're here to protect property and wealth, and particularly white wealth. And white women tears. And so I think what's really, really important is that there's been so many situations where.. Like at a Masjid, we'll get like an actual threat of like a mass shooting. And that's like a, that's a very legitimate fear, something that happens, unfortunately, to Masjid not uncommonly, you know, Muslims have been shot and killed over a parking spot, quote, unquote. So I think that there's there's actually like there is a real fear. Like there's danger. Right. Like there's there's danger by the state and there's danger by people. So what do we do when there's actual danger by people like white supremacists?

And so I think that this conversation is really, really challenging to have, because I think I think first is just an unlearning that the police or the FBI, whoever they are planning on calling, will do anything that would be safe. The few times that they've, you know, that they have eventually ended up calling the FBI or calling the police, nothing came out of that. You know, like there's never been a situation where our Masjid has called the police and it's ended in like the apprehension of a white supremacist that.. And then, like, everyone feels safe after that and like their hands are in the air. Like, this was perfect. Oh, my God. Thank you. You know?

And so I think that that's like one thing is that like, do you actually anticipate that this institution of violence, specifically think about FBI or DHS that was actually enacted to not only create violence against communities of color and Black communities, but also specifically Muslim communities. Like you're calling on the very institution that was created after 9/11 in order to police you. Right. Like their job is you. You're the threat. You're the one that they're serving and protecting white people from.

So I think that it's it's really challenging because I feel like a lot of people, especially recent immigrants, are really sort of quick to to feel a sense of, oh, yeah, now that I'm in this country like I am American. But that's not how things work. And you could have been here for ...like your ancestors could have been here for hundreds of years. But that doesn't mean that the police are here to keep you safe. And I think that that's a very, very unfortunate like understanding that people need to have, especially, I think, like our elders in these spaces. knowing that if we just look at the ways in which that these institutions were created, the reason of their creation, we can tell immediately

that calling the FBI is not going to be doing anything but adding us as a file to the FBI list. If anything, you know. in many cases that's actually happened. And it's like, if anything, it's backfired.

But beyond that, also, I think what is particularly important is that, like, not only do like these institutions, not keep us safe, is that they actually enact harm, as we see constantly against Black people and Black Muslims, in particular. and Black working class Muslims. So. US as like nonBlack Muslims, like we have an obligation to make sure that we're not calling upon like a system of violence that could also harm people in our community who also attend the masjid or who are, you know, maybe our neighbors and things like that as well, because we can see and recognize this like clear history of violence against Black communities. So even if you're not a Black community, that doesn't mean that it's OK or that the police are going to care for you, because we have to make sure that we're in solidarity with Black Muslims and Black people in general. For obvious reasons. One, obviously, but to name it. Is that even if even if you just want to be selfish about it, so be it. But know that institutions of anti-Muslim racism, systems like the like CVE, for example, countering violent extremism, that sort of criminalizes everyday Muslim behaviors, things like the Muslim ban even, these didn't just like pop up out of nowhere. These are built on top of preexisting structures of anti Blackness. If there is no anti Blackness in this country, there will not be anti-Muslim racism. And so even if we're just trying to be selfish, right. Like we have to be invested in the dismantling of anti Blackness within our communities and the structures that enact anti Blackness on a state level. Because those are literally the foundations of what are going to come after us, you know.

And then obviously on an Islamic level, like we have to be against oppression. Right. It's an obligation. And we're called upon to be fighting oppression, so there's no way that we can also feel like if we do something and it's again, is this in a vacuum and it's not actually going to enact and enable more harm. So by calling the police, not only are we not fighting against the oppression, were complicit in it. And I think that that's very important for us to recognize.

And in terms of like what we need, I think that that's also a really challenging conversation. But I think one that's so much easier to have in Muslim spaces. because I think a lot of our Muslim communities already have a lot of the infrastructure for what we need to envision a world without police. and that's strong communities.

Nahid That's so interesting.

Hoda You know, for better or for worse...

Nahid [laughs] for better or for worse.

Hoda You know everybody on your street. For better or for worse you know the details of all of their personal lives. But instead of using that for worse, if we're able to actually use that for better and be able to have these relationships built, that can give us safety. That is so beautiful, you know. And I think that's really it's like it's up to us right now to determine what safety looks like and be able to unlearn that. And to actually think about, like, OK. Like, if I actually have a threat, if I

actually am feeling unsafe, like with like an armed man standing outside my Masjid who is like also paid by the same government that bans my people, that's safety? Like we really need to be able to, like, break that down.

And after we get rid of that, we have to sit down. OK. What actually does safety look like? When something that my dear friend Benji Heart, like sort of did in a workshop once for like white suburban kids that I always use too because it's so powerful, is that when we..this this world without policing already exists. Right. It's not even something we just have to like like figure out. And there's like no model for it. If we go into any white neighborhood, white upper class neighborhood, you don't see police anywhere, but you feel safe, you know. And why is that? It's not because there's like a police on every corner. The contrary, it's because there are no police anywhere. But you know that there are schools, you know, their after school programs. You know, the people in that community trust each other. To some degree. I don't know white people. I don't know what they're on these days. But they should.

There's community infrastructure that the needs of that neighborhood are met. And so that is, that already exists. That world exists. But it's only for like wealthy white communities. And so we need to be able to envision that world for ourselves, a world in which our neighborhoods also have the needs met of our youth, have the needs met of working class members of our community needs met, of recent refugees and immigrants. And if if people's needs are met, then there is no purpose for police to come in and like enact violence against the communities who are just trying to get justice for themselves. So I think that's like just really, really important is thinking about before we like we think about like, OK, who are we going to call? We need to ask what do our communities not have? Like, why is there a cause for a feeling of unsafety and how can we actually address that before we do anything else?

Nahid Yeah. And that.. in thinking about that question, there is also, again, the systemic aspects of it. Like, what does our community not have? There is also.. There is also like. There is also a way out of that question and way out of that challenging conversation to be like, yeah. We have been oppressed. We don't have these things. We have these needs. Therefore, like. We also need this system because we can't we can't meet those needs because of the... And I feel like the examples that we're trying to bring together in this project are basically all that. Like examples of communities who have... Because we do how we do have everything that we need to get to that point.

Hoda We do. We really do. But people are just using their skills for like Amazon or Google.

Nahid Yes! Speaking of which, do you feel comfortable sharing that experience that you have that you shared me before?

Hoda I know you're trying to get to that.

Nahid I was trying to get to that before. But now that you brought the Google thing up. But yeah, I feel like that is also... yeah I'm gonna let you talk about it and then ask you some questions.

Hoda Cool. Yes. So I guess on a very practical level, about like like a a literal next steps of what I do when I, for example, instead of calling the FBI, when I get a very serious like I guess quote unquote serious death threat, that people that someone might have emailed me or messaged me that names also places that I frequent or, you know, knows where I live. -Not like my address but like general area, for me, I think what I what I do is like I always contact a few friends who I know who are like tech geniuses and they trace back their IP address. They're able to use all their, like, computer magic to figure out, like, where the start came from. And so nine times out of ten, it's from somebody who doesn't even live in Chicago, doesn't even live in the United States. And so I don't care. Right. Like, there's there's nothing that this person can do. So it's just like an intimidation factor that they're trying to do.

And the few times that it actually has ended up to be somebody in Chicago, my next steps has been to let people in the building that I live in know that if they see somebody like this person, to let me know, to not let them enter the building. The place that I, you know, the studio that I'm at, we have somebody at the front desk. I let them know.

And also, like I think for me, I feel safety knowing that I have people that I trust very deeply in the places that I live. And I think that goes back to community. Like I know that like I have people who check up on me really regularly that like if I do go missing one day, God forbid, they will know. You know. and then they'll be able to figure out what to do without calling the police.

Or I live in a building that like I know people who live in the building and that makes me feel safe that like I know I can trust them. To, like, keep me safe and vice versa. And then we know each other's needs and things like that. So I think on a very like, tangible level, like just getting to know my neighbors, getting to know the people I live with, getting to know where I work, the people around the neighborhood, like it's literally just like building relationships for me has turned into like like actual safety and like in a very tangible way.

Nahid Yeah. Thank you for sharing that. We hadn't talked about what if those threats become real.

Hoda Shoutout those tech friends also.

Nahid Exactly.

Hoda i.e. We have everything we need.

Nahid Yeah. I was like before you just, like, shared it, shared everything that you just shared, I was just thinking about the tech level of it. That, like, we do have people who have skills in our community that can do more than the FBI or police would ever do for us. And then. What you just shared about, well, people in my building know. I will let them know.

It was like such a grounding like part of this, like, oh yeah, like eventually, like you might have a million tech techie genius friends. And then eventually you are living next door to people that you're living next door to. Like that relationship building is actually, part of what keeps us safe or

keeps you safe on a very practical, like Step-By-Step level. Like, if tomorrow something is going to happen to me that those are the people that I go to. And just like having those people. Which sounded, I mean, at first it sounded like a very quick escalation to you going missing. But then it felt safe and warm.

Hoda I'm glad.

Nahid Yeah. And I really appreciate everything that, like, every time that you're emphasizing on relationship building and community.

Hoda Yeah, I do think it's really important and just under.. Under-mentioned, I think or like undervalued. And that's why I feel like these conversations are so easy to have with Muslims, are they should be so easy to have with Muslims. Is that we do that all the time. Like, your neighbor always brings you food, you know, like this is something that's like built into our, the way that we understand relationship building, which, I feel like like abolition, like policing and prison abolition in the United States is like, it should be so basic for Muslims, because not only do the the idea of what a world without policing in prisons look like has already been charted out for us in the way that the prophet, peace be upon him, the Sahaba, the ahl-al-bayt have already interacted and built that world and showed what those relationships look like and how you deal with like restorative justice and non punitive justice. But also just like on a very cultural level, like we're already, we always do the groundwork of building those relationships and like not looking at humans as disposable and things like that. So this should be like this should be a very easy conversation for us. But white supremacy just has us tripping.

Nahid That is so true.

Hoda And sectarian, no, secularism. liberal secularism

Nahid Thank you, Hoda. I don't really have more questions for you. I mean, I know you and I could just, like, keep talking about this forever, but, As the last thing for the people who have been listening to this conversation, what do you want to leave with them?

Hoda Well, I mean, I guess, like I mean, I think one thing that people always ask is like, what can I do today? You know, like, what is one thing I can do? And I think that it's what is really, really important also to recognize is that it's totally possible. And it requires us to collectively be re imagining the world every single day and every single thing that we're doing. You know, the fact that we think that if we have an education and like if we know, like how to use computers very well (really giving myself away in my tech skills) if we're like semi tech literate, then like we have to, or our highest pinpoint is like a job at Google or Amazon or things like this, other than the ways that we can actually creatively use whatever skill that we have at any point in our lives to be able to start imagining what how we can use that skill to build our communities and to help our people. Even the way that we interact with each other. Like abolition is just as much like, you know, burning cop cars and ending, you know, tools of violence as it is about the way that we view the humanity of each other, both within our family, but our neighbors and our communities beyond that. So I think it's

like a discipline and a practice that we have to do every single day or else it's just not going to happen.

Nahid Yeah. I mean, you said you're not good with these questions, but that was a really beautiful answer..

Hoda Thank you. I guess I just wrote an Instagram post about it so it's on my mind.

Nahid Shout out to Instagram. Yeah. OK. Is there anything else you want to add to the conversation that you wish I had asked you?

Hoda No, I appreciate it. Mamnoon.