

## Recognizing the “We” in “I”: A Conversation with Saira Rafiee

Saira Rafiee, a political science Ph.D. student at the Graduate Center, was traveling from her home country of Iran when Donald Trump signed his executive order banning travelers from seven Middle Eastern countries, including Iran. She was prevented from boarding her connecting flight from Abu Dhabi to JFK and was sent back to Tehran.

Members of the CUNY community quickly mobilized in response, securing legal counsel for Saira, calling elected officials to demand they intervene, and demonstrating outside the federal courthouse in Brooklyn and the GC — with wide media coverage. A week after the ban was issued, Saira boarded another flight from Iran to Boston’s Logan Airport, where a judge had previously ordered that no travelers should be detained.

Now that she is safely back in New York, I asked Saira to share her perspective on the recent events. We started our interview with a quick review of the facts. “I feel that I have told this story so many times,” she laughed. “I just want to say that it is really because of everyone who got involved, both in the Political Science department and the PSC, that I am here.”



Celebrating Saira's safe return in Logan International Airport, Boston  
(Photo cred: Hercules Reid).

Saira has been very clear about the need to put her experience in perspective. “I don’t want my story to become a sensational story that people just feel sympathy,” she said in a recent [interview with WNYC](#). “I need them to use this sympathy to resist.”

In her recent [article for the PSC blog](#), Saira elaborated on the larger need for organized resistance. “The army of xenophobes, white supremacists, Islamophobes, racists, homophobes, and misogynists that have taken office could be deemed insignificant when compared to the bigger danger that is a frustrated society that might cling to any hand reached out to it,” she writes. “What matters is to understand how we got here, how to fight the deep-rooted structures of inequality and discrimination that have been at work for decades and that under different administrations, in the absence of real public participation in politics, have just intensified.”

Saira also reflected on the changing face of contentious politics in the Trump administration. “This is not an identity politics that focuses on difference and is incapable of realizing the ties between the particularity of distinct identities and the universal conditions of society and their relations with other social groups.” Instead of deepening cleavages, Saira points out that “the emerging politics is based on the recognition that the freedom of the workers, of women, of undocumented immigrants, of LGBT community, of Muslims and people of color is tied to the freedom of each and every individual, that individual freedom is not possible without recognizing the ‘we’ in ‘I.’”

I asked Saira for her take on the best venues for action. “I think that all the actions that we are taking should not just be about Trump. We should reflect on the structural discrimination that is at work. We should not ‘just’ resist Trump. There should be an offensive aspect to our action that leads to true alternatives,” she said.





During our conversation we also talked about her perspective on the role of academia. In her piece for the PSC, Saira is critical of academia for failing to foresee and respond to the current crisis. She explains, “The unexpectedness of Trump’s victory by academia is a sign of its straying from its responsibility; it long ago set aside even its original conservative aim of maintaining the stability of society, let alone the more radical ideal of seeking a more rationally organized and just society. This is a sign that it has almost totally given up the critical reflection upon what society ‘is’ and what it ‘ought to be’ in the name of a professionalization that only serves particular interests that are necessarily at odds with the well-being of the 99 percent.”



From the #GetSairaHome press conference held by the PSC, the CUNY Student Government Association, and Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams Jan 30 (photo cred: Beth Newcomer).

Given these shortcomings, how could academia better engage in and support political action? “More than anything else, academic social and political science is in need of self-reflection. It needs to reflect upon itself, and its relations with power as well as society.”

“This self-reflection could be our first step in the long fight we have ahead. In order to overcome our feeling of powerlessness and defenselessness, we need to not only build an organized resistance bloc that is capable of enforcing its will and not just defending itself in the face of current assaults, but also pursue more progressive goals.”



From the rally in support of Saira outside the GC Feb 1 (photo cred: Beth Newcomer).

Saira is involved in several organizations at the GC actively working to counter the Trump agenda. “There are many venues for concrete action at the GC. The [GC Resist Trump](#) group and the PSC-CUNY are actively fighting against Trump’s agenda and the broader political establishment on different fronts.”

She concluded, “It is time for us to get more organized, to defend the right of unionization for all workers, to try to make this emerging sense of solidarity permanent; a true solidarity that is based on the recognition of the ‘we’ in ‘I.’”

