

Life or Liberty presents



## Enemy Alien

A film by Konrad Aderer

Documentary, USA 2010  
84 minutes

### SHORT SYNOPSIS

*Enemy Alien*, a first-person documentary, is the gripping story of the fight to free Farouk Abdel-Muhti, a gentle but indomitable Palestinian-born human rights activist detained in a post-9/11 sweep of Muslim immigrants. Told through the eyes of the filmmaker, the grandson of Japanese Americans interned during World War II, this documentary takes on unprecedented intimacy and historical resonance.

### LONG SYNOPSIS

*Enemy Alien* begins with the quest of a Japanese American filmmaker, Konrad, to document the underside of the patriotic fervor comparing the attacks of September 11, 2001 and Pearl Harbor: the post-9/11 detentions of Muslims and internment of Japanese Americans. Finding these aftermaths to be not only historically resonant but linked by immigration policy, he soon finds his own life transformed by this theme as he becomes involved in the fight to free immigration detainee Farouk Abdel-Muhti.

Like thousands of other detainees taken from Muslim immigrant communities, Farouk is not charged with any crime, but the government goes to great lengths to link him with terrorism. A

Spanish-speaking Palestinian who arrived in New York City in the early 1970s, Farouk has become well known as a human rights advocate adept at building bridges between diverse communities. The activists who rise to his defense see a repressive political agenda behind the arrest of a Palestinian unafraid to speak out in the wake of 9/11.

Even in his institutional green uniform, in a cramped prison visiting room, Farouk gives off a gentle but indomitable charisma. No self-pity or fear is evident in his lively retelling of his arrest, interrogation and beating by the federal agents who tried to coerce him into naming other Palestinian activists. Farouk's idealistic vigor in these dire conditions makes a deep impression. Unprompted, he invokes the internment of Japanese Americans as a parallel for post-9/11 detentions, all but shaming Konrad into confronting his own family history.

Asking his grandmother about her World War II internment for the first time, Konrad begins to claim his generational legacy: the betrayal and helplessness of the "enemy alien." What truly inspires him, however, is the political consciousness emerging in the acts of resistance, large and small, by the incarcerated Japanese: the refusal of many to submit to the "loyalty questionnaire," and his own grandfather's defiance of the ban on photography, illuminating a personal history the government tried to make invisible.



But resistance brings consequences: after organizing a hunger strike with his fellow detainees, Farouk is locked in indefinite solitary confinement. The government develops as a shadowy but palpable adversary, denying access to Farouk and arresting Farouk's son Tarek in a counterterrorism investigation of the documentary itself. In a landmark legal case, the Center for Constitutional rights takes on the fundamental injustice of Farouk's detention. He is held solely on the basis of a deportation order, but as a stateless Palestinian, he is undeportable. The clash of state and citizen is ultimately resolved in a jubilant victory, followed by searing but ennobling tragedy.

*Enemy Alien* breaks vital new ground in the ongoing public conversation about the human rights of immigrants and refugees. This compelling real-life dramatic narrative offers an enriching update to documentaries on the World War II internment encompassing issues of detention, confinement, immigrant and refugee rights, and vital insights on grassroots organizing. In an era when immigration policy is dominated by agendas of militarization and enforcement this film can bring trans-generational, diverse communities together in vital education, discussion and social action.

## BIOGRAPHY OF FAROUK ABDEL-MUHTI



Farouk Abdel-Muhti was born in Ramallah, Palestine in 1947. His mother died when Israeli Occupation forces refused to let his family through a checkpoint to reach a hospital. He came to the U.S. in the late 1970s. Over his decades living in New York City, Farouk became a well-known figure in the activist community who worked hard for the cause of human rights at home and abroad. He is one of several Palestinian activists across the country who were put in immigrant detention after protesting Israel's military operations in the West Bank and Gaza.

Farouk was arrested on April 26, 2002, in Queens, New York, by the Absconder Task Force, a joint federal-state immigration enforcement unit which has primarily pursued Muslim men of Arab or South Asian extraction. His arrest came a month after he began working regularly at the New York radio station WBAI-FM, arranging interviews with Palestinians in the Occupied Territories.

In his interrogation at 26 Federal Plaza, FBI and INS officers attempted to coerce him into giving names of people who had given aid to Palestinian organizations. When Farouk refused, he was knocked to the floor and methodically beaten by agents for 15 minutes. Farouk was not charged with terrorism or any crime. He was held on the basis of a 1995 deportation order. But partly because he was a stateless Palestinian, the BICE (INS) could not deport him.

Following a hunger strike Farouk conducted with four other immigrant detainees, Farouk was kept in solitary confinement for almost 250 days in York County Prison in Pennsylvania. In November 2003, guards beat and kicked him in the Bergen County Jail, in New Jersey, after finding what they called "anti- government" publications in his cell.

The Supreme Court ruled in the *Zadvydas vs. Davis* decision 2001 that an immigrant awaiting deportation cannot be held for more than six months. In Farouk's case the BICE ignored this ruling for nearly two years, cynically evading and disrupting the legal efforts of attorneys Joel Kupferman and Shayana Kadidal (Center for Constitutional Rights), until his release was ordered by Judge Yvette Kane on April 8, 2004.

After several days of further delay, and its unexplained move of flying Farouk to Atlanta and holding him there, the BICE put Farouk on a plane to LaGuardia Airport, where his son Tariq and five of his supporters met him as a free man the night of Monday, April 12. [[more coverage of Farouk's release](#)]

Farouk was a whirlwind of activity upon his release, speaking on WBAI and Democracy Now! and appearing at events in New York, New Jersey, Washington D.C. and Berkeley, California.

On July 21, 2004, at the Ethical Society in Philadelphia, Farouk gave an impassioned speech calling for unity in the fight against the oppression of human rights in the U.S. and in Palestine. Just as he finished his speech and the audience erupted in applause, Farouk fell forward onto the table. He never regained consciousness. He is believed to have died of a heart attack.

[[Philadelphia Inquirer story](#)]



Farouk is remembered as a truly selfless man who literally gave his last breath in the cause of human rights. He is survived by his son, Tarek Abdel-Muhti, fiancée Sharin Chiorazzo, and an extended family of comrades and supporters.



#### **DIRECTOR'S BIO**

Konrad Aderer lives and works in his native New York City as a field producer, videojournalist and editor for NGOs, local TV and nonprofits including the United Nations and the ACLU. Since he established Life or Liberty ([lifeorliberty.org](http://lifeorliberty.org)), a nonprofit multimedia project, in 2002, much of Konrad Aderer's work as an independent documentary producer has focused on immigrant communities coping with deportation and detention.

His 2005 short *Rising Up: The Alams* screened internationally and in the U.S. at venues including Brooklyn Academy of Music and the New York Museum of Modern Art's Documentary Fortnight. By a twist of fate in August 2005, Konrad found himself in the direct path of Hurricane Katrina, an experience he documented in his first personal work, *A Corner of Her Eye*.

Konrad's work has garnered numerous grants including a James Yee Fellowship from the Center for Asian American Media, and an Individual Artist Grant from New York State Council of the Arts. He received his first training as a filmmaker at Third World Newsreel's production workshop, holds a BFA in Drama from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, and is completing a Masters degree in Sociology at Brooklyn College.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Unlike my earlier work in this subject area, I chose to produce *Enemy Alien* as a first-person documentary because of the extent to which my subject, Farouk Abdel-Muhti, changed my life. My sense of my own family history was transformed by today's revival of national security profiling, but most of all by Farouk's indomitable spirit of resistance to this injustice.

As a teenager, when I first learned about the World War II internment of Japanese Americans, I was angered by the injustice of the U.S. incarcerating its own citizens, including my grandparents, because of their ancestry. It wasn't until after 9/11 that I gave a thought to the detention of non-citizens from countries with which we're at war. Decades after its formal apology for the internment, the U.S. government used immigration law to target Arab and South Asian immigrants from 25 countries.

But as I learned about the immigration detention system, the question of profiling any particular community gave way to the larger picture of deportation and detention of non-citizens of all national origins. The average number of immigration detainees being held on a given day has skyrocketed, rising from 6,785 in 1993 to 32,020 in 2009. The total number detained in 2008 was 378,582. To cope with this staggering expanse of state violence requires cultivating the kind of expansive conviction of solidarity Farouk inspired with his internationalist consciousness – progressing from the individual, to the community, to the global.

### Questions & answers with the director:

#### *1. Why did you personally feel compelled to make this film?*

After 9/11 I was disturbed that my government was targeting ethnic communities using the same principle that was used to incarcerate Japanese Americans in World War II. The way Muslim noncitizens were being incarcerated opened my eyes to the fact that immigration law today holds millions people in that same state of being without rights, locks them up in conditions much worse than what my grandparents faced.

I started off trying to answer a basic question that was being largely ignored: what happens to immigrant detainees swept up in the post-9/11 era of enforcement? How do they get out? And the story of Farouk really took over my life; I found myself answering the factual historical questions I started with but opening up new personal questions too, about how our family histories of being part of some immigrant community shape us.

#### *2. What do you think is the value of the film in today's society?*

This film tells a true dramatic story that's largely hidden from public view. The fight to secure the human rights of an immigrant detainee is a grueling struggle against the absolute power our government has claimed over the lives and bodies of literally millions of people branded as "illegal." The film also puts today's "counterterrorism" enforcement regime in context with how racial stereotypes of immigrant communities as dirty, subversive, and dangerous have been used throughout history to create the "illegality" of people, starting with Asians.

#### *3. Who do you hope will see and benefit from this film?*

I hope people affected directly and indirectly by immigrant detention, and people who want to know more about it, will gain a clearer understanding and get more personally engaged with it. Even inside a cell, Farouk was remarkable for bringing diverse communities together through shared experiences and galvanizing them into action, and that's what this story of his struggle is meant to accomplish.

## LIFE OR LIBERTY project history

Life or Liberty (lifeorliberty.org) is a nonprofit multimedia project addressing the continuing need for professionally produced documentaries and short videos to enhance the outreach and organizing campaigns of the organizations that protect the human rights of immigrants.

The post-9/11 era has aggravated racial and anti-immigrant attitudes long entrenched in our legal system, immigration authorities, and law enforcement agencies. The growing mandate of Homeland Security's Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) for placing asylum seekers and other migrants in indefinite detention also continues to inflict untold suffering on individuals, families and communities.

Life or Liberty emerged through director Konrad Aderer's involvement in immigrants' rights issues since October 2001, and from relationships and methods developed in the successful campaign for the release of Palestinian activist Farouk Abdel-Muhti in 2002-2003. In that campaign, a 6-minute video which included a prison interview with Farouk was used to organize events across the country, spread awareness of Farouk's situation, and raise support for his needs.

In 2004, as the Republican National Convention approached, Life or Liberty documented the life of a Bangladeshi American family facing deportation of the father as the result of Special Registration, a massive act of national security profiling which targeted 80,000 immigrants from predominantly Muslim countries. The resulting short documentary, *Rising Up: The Alams*, became a valued outreach tool highlighting the work of South Asian community organization Desis Rising Up and Moving, and was screened internationally at venues including Museum of Modern Art's Documentary Fortnight. In 2011 Life or Liberty is premiering its first feature length project, *Enemy Alien*.

### *Enemy Alien credits*

Director, producer & editor	Konrad Aderer
Camera	Konrad Aderer Loch Phillipps Michelle Chen Lorca Shepperd John Rae Kaushik Shridharani
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