



A Conflicts Forum Monograph

ISLAMIST WOMEN'S ACTIVISM IN OCCUPIED PALESTINE

Part I

Interviews with Palestinian Islamist Women Leaders on Women's Activism in Hamas

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Interview with Sameera Al-Halayka

Sameera Al-Halayka is an elected member of the Palestinian Legislative Council. She was born in the village of Shoyoukh near Hebron in 1964. She has a BA in Sharia (Islamic Jurisprudence) from Hebron University. She worked as a journalist from 1996 to 2006 when she entered the Palestinian Legislative Council as an elected member in the 2006 elections. She is married and has seven children.

Q: There is a general impression in some western countries that women receive inferior treatment within Islamic resistance groups, such as Hamas. Is this true? How are women activists treated in Hamas?

Rights and duties of Muslim women emanate first and foremost from Islamic *Sharia* or law. They are not voluntary or charitable acts or gestures we receive from Hamas or anyone else. Thus, as far as political involvement and activism is concerned, women generally have the same rights and duties as men. After all, women make up at least 50 per cent of society. In a certain sense, they are the entire society because they give birth to, and raise, the new generation.

Therefore, I can say that the status of women within Hamas is in full conformity with her status in Islam itself. This means that she is a full partner at all levels. Indeed, it would be unfair and unjust for an Islamic (or Islamist if you prefer) woman to be partner in suffering while she is excluded from the decision-making process. This is why the woman's role in Hamas has always been pioneering.

Q: Do you feel that the emergence of women's political activism within Hamas is a natural development that is compatible with classical Islamic concepts regarding the status and role of women, or is it merely a necessary response to pressures of modernity and requirements of political action and of the continued Israeli occupation?

There is no text in Islamic jurisprudence nor in Hamas' charter which impedes women from political participation. I believe the opposite is true -- there are numerous Quranic verses and sayings of the Prophet Muhammed urging women to be active in politics and public issues affecting Muslims. But it is also true that for women, as it is for men, political activism is not compulsory but voluntary, and is largely decided in light of each woman's abilities, qualifications and individual circumstances. None the less, showing concern for public matters is mandatory upon each and every Muslim man and woman. The Prophet Muhammed said: "He who doesn't show concern for the affairs of Muslims is not a Muslim." Moreover, Palestinian Islamist women have to take all objective factors on the ground into account when deciding whether to join politics or get involved in political activism. In the

final analysis, however, efforts must be made to ensure that every activist, man or woman, is entrusted to carry out a role that conforms to his or her abilities and circumstances.

Q: What are the obstacles and difficulties facing Islamic women activists within Hamas?

There are numerous obstacles facing Palestinian women in general, including the harsh political realities as a result of the on-going military occupation. Women are exposed to all forms of repression that men are exposed to – including arbitrary arrest, humiliating frisking, and recurrent assaults, especially when traveling through Israeli army checkpoints and roadblocks. Now, I can say that impediments have been doubled, especially after the events of 2007 in the Gaza Strip when Hamas routed and ousted Fatah militia from the coastal enclave. In fact, women, especially women activists, are now hostages to a political reality that is not of their making.

In short, there are thousands of women activists who are suffering the consequences and ramifications of the rift between Hamas and Fatah.

Q: Does Hamas take women activists, including women lawmakers, seriously? There are those who claim that Islamist women activists and lawmakers are merely “window dressing” and that they are not really consulted with regard to the decision-making process?

We have to make a distinction between women's activism within Hamas and membership of the Legislative Council. As to the latter, I believe that Islamist women lawmakers have significantly enriched the Palestinian political environment. In the past, especially since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1994, the Palestinian national movement lacked any genuine Islamist representation. However, following the 2006 elections, the overall Palestinian political panorama became more representative of Palestinian society and therefore, in my opinion, richer than ever before.

Q: What makes the Palestinian Muslim woman in Palestine more progressive, socially and politically, than her peers in other Arab countries?

Well, this is mainly attributed to the way women are raised and educated and also to the harsh conditions resulting from the Israeli occupation which make all Palestinians, including women, more resilient. In many instances, women find themselves facing a situation where they have to take over the job of the husband/ father due to his absence as a result of arrest, assassination or constant hounding by the Israeli occupation authorities. So, in general the peculiar Palestinian situation makes women tough, resilient and more creative in coping with harsh realities.

Q: It is often said that women's votes contributed decisively to the Hamas electoral victory in 2006. How did women activists within Hamas mobilize women to vote for the Islamist movement?

I think women played a distinctive role in mobilizing efforts that eventually led to the electoral triumph of Hamas in the 2006 elections. This happened as a result of laborious efforts and effective campaigning done in full accordance with the law. The Muslim women activists enjoyed a certain advantage over activists affiliated with other political movements. This advantage manifested itself in the fact that many ordinary Palestinian women were already religious or religiously-oriented. This fact alone significantly simplified and facilitated the task of convincing them to vote for Hamas – in other words, our success in polarizing an Islamic public opinion, one that could be mobilized, greatly facilitated and simplified the realization of elections tasks. This is not to say though that this was the only factor contributing to Hamas' election victory. The image problem facing Fatah, especially with regard to corruption allegations, also seriously militated against that group, which benefited Hamas to a large extent. These religious women, or Islamist-oriented women, proved to be consistent voters for Hamas. True, the political positions of Hamas played a certain role, however, the religious commitment was always the main consideration making these women vote for Hamas.

Q: What role did or do women play in the armed resistance?"

I can't answer this question.

Q: Political and social activism necessitates mixing with men. How did you deal with this matter and how do you reconcile your home duties with political responsibilities?

Mixing of men and women is wrong only when it leads to immoral behavior. Otherwise, the mixing that is shielded by Islamic restrictions and is unlikely to lead to immoral behavior is not prohibited. As to how we reconcile our domestic duties with our political and public responsibilities, it is left for the woman herself to do the reconciling. It is not an impossible job. Speaking for myself, I can say that I successfully reconciled the two dimensions. Sometime, one would need and receive help from relatives, especially from your husband and grown-up daughters. In some cases, like when a woman MP has a baby to care for, assistance from day-care providers was sought.

Q: As women lawmakers, how did you deal with the mass arrest by Israel of nearly all Islamist MPs in the West Bank?

Well, it is like having to do a lot of work by yourself when that work requires many people to get it done. The duties were many, the burden overwhelming, and time for rest was very

scarce. But we are a people who have long got accustomed to coping with harsh times, which enabled us to overcome the numerous problems we faced. Generally, our supporters understood the situation very well and wouldn't blame us for a reduction in activities with regard to serving our constituencies. They knew that the mass incarceration of our male MPs made it virtually impossible for us to function normally. You just can't function normally in a conspicuously abnormal situation. Besides, people understood that Hamas was under attack, not only from Israel, but also from the PA, and the American-led international community. Many people protested the flagrant incarceration, but very little could be done to force Israel to free the detained parliamentarians.

Q: How would you evaluate the experience of five years of political activism?

Our opponents and enemies thought erroneously that their pressure tactics would seriously undermine our ability to function as we should. But from experience, I can say that the persecution and harassment we faced actually strengthened us and made us more determined to carry out our tasks and duties. For example, we have successfully convinced people that Israeli, American and other western pressure was aimed at forcing Hamas to give up on inalienable Palestinian rights such as the issues of Jerusalem and the refugees. We have also been able to maintain widespread support for the Islamist camp in the West Bank despite the harsh inquisition clamp down on Islamist activism, in co-ordination with Israel and the United States.

Q: To what extent did women in Hamas get involved in public relations campaigns such as conducting interviews?

Prior to the elections in 2006, the situation was more or less manageable for Islamic women activism. Women activists carried out their activities relatively smoothly, given the fact that a wide margin of freedom of speech and other civil liberties was available. For example, they would freely hold rallies marking Islamic anniversaries and attend cultural activities organized by the Islamic movement. However, in the past three years, and as a result of the plummeting level of human rights and civil liberties, women engaging in political activities or political campaigning were hounded, harassed and arrested, especially by the PA regime. But women activists had to find the way to expose and resist the repressive reprisal measures of the western-backed PA regime, including seizing Islamic institutions, dismissals from jobs and widespread detentions and incarcerations. In Hebron, for example, the Palestinian Authority took over nearly all the Islamic institutions, such as the *Hebron Charitable Society*, the largest in the occupied territories; they sacked the elected board of trustees and appointed Fatah activists in their place. In fact, I can claim that there was not a single Islamist institution - civic, religious, cultural, or athletic - that has not been targeted.

Q: Have you sought to learn and benefit from Muslim women activists outside occupied Palestine?

On the contrary, it was women activists from outside occupied Palestine that sought to learn from us. In the aftermath of elections, we were contacted by women organizations, Palestinian (mostly those functioning among expatriate Palestinian communities) and non-Palestinian, enquiring about the modalities we used in our activism. It is true that our situation is unique because of the Israeli occupation and cannot in that sense be copied. However, it is clear that women's groups can learn much from us in terms of empowerment and activism as well as Islamic education.

Q: Have you ever been arrested by the Israelis?

No, personally I have not been arrested. But my husband and son were arrested both by the Israelis and the PA authorities. More over, a large number of my family and relatives have been arrested by the PA security agencies due to their political views and affiliations.

Interview with Jamila Shanti

Jamila Shanti is a former head of the Women's Department in Hamas and is widely considered to be one of the most influential women in Hamas and one of the most politically-active women in Occupied Palestine. She won the third slate on Hamas' electoral list in 2006, coming directly after Ismael Haniyya in Gaza and Muhammed Abu Tir in Jerusalem. Shanti is widely considered "the pioneer" of Muslim women's activism in Palestine. Many say she played a key role in leading Hamas to victory. She was formerly a lecturer at the Islamic University in Gaza and a teacher both in Gaza and in Saudi Arabia for many years. She has a BA in English Literature from Ein Shams University, Cairo, a Master's degree in the Philosophy and Psychology of Education and is currently working on her Ph.D.

Q: You have been active in Hamas' women's department for many years. How would describe the status of women within Hamas? Do they take you seriously?

Irrespective of western stereotypes, I can say that Hamas – a movement I know very well - is a moderate Islamic movement that adopts a comprehensive approach to society. This is probably the reason why Hamas has been able to receive widespread support from people. Hence, I can say that Hamas' philosophy stems from Islam which gives women their rights and dignity. So, it is only natural that the status of women within Hamas is very advanced as women are considered a fundamental component of the movement. In fact, I can say for sure that women are more representative in Hamas than they are within any other Palestinian political movement. Take for example colleges and universities in occupied Palestine and you will find that a clear majority of the supporters of the Islamic student blocks are women. Similarly, it is widely believed that a majority of those who voted for Hamas in the 2006 elections were women. It is true though that formal representation of women within Hamas is still smaller in proportion to their proportion in the population. However, we view this as an evolutionary and cumulative process, which means that we will continue to make progress toward a more equitable representation of women within the Islamic movement.

Q: Do you feel that the emergence of women's political activism within Hamas is a natural development that is compatible with classical Islamic concepts, or merely a necessary response to pressures of modernity and requirements for political action?

Our political activism as women appeared first in the context of the debate about Islam and modernity which impelled us to stand up in defense of Islam in the face of secular assaults. Followers of non-Islamist parties, including Fatah nationalists, and leftists, would attack Islamic thought and try to promote secularism. This onslaught provoked us and made us rediscover the strength of Islam. Eventually, we found at our disposal a huge body of detailed arguments, developed by Muslim scholars and activists over the years, which

enabled us to put our ideological and political opponents on the defensive. Ultimately, a political program came out of these Islamic ideas. That political program was a necessary response to Islamist political evolution and the emergence of Hamas as a predominant socio-political force in the Palestinian society.

Q: What type of difficulties did you face in carrying out your activities?

Undoubtedly, the security situation constituted the main obstacle impeding and restricting the involvement of women in political activism. Many women feared reprisals from the Israeli occupation authorities. But this dimension, of course, is not confined to women. The security aspect didn't completely disappear following the establishment of the Palestinian Authority as the "ghost of security" continued to hound women activists by way of summoning them for interrogation by the various PA security agencies.

Then there were other impediments such as the traditional cultural inhibitions and restrictions, which by the way have little or no justification from the Islamic view point. For example, it was widely understood that politics was a male-only field. However, through education, we gained a certain level of empowerment which enabled us to challenge these negative traditions by highlighting their inconsistency with Islamic principles. This was not an easy task as many women thought that involvement in politics was none of their business and that this domain belonged almost exclusively to men. So, we had to face them and show that this was a mistaken point of view. I am glad we have been able to overcome this problem. As to women's contribution in the decision-making process, I can say that women have played an important and real role in this regard by being constantly present in the movement's various organizational organs. In some cases, the women's vote proved to be critical, which underscored the success of our mobilizing efforts. Predictably, the backbone of our mobilizing efforts has always centered around the concept of educating women at the grass-roots level. This is what we did and what we continue to do.

Q: There are those who would say that Hamas women MPs are always "yes-people" and that they are only used as a sort of "window dressing" by the movement's leadership?

No, this is a mistaken observation. Hamas women are not a decoration as some people might think. We carry out real responsibilities of a qualitative nature on equal footing with our male colleagues. It is true that we are currently only six MPs - 3 here in Gaza, and the rest in the West Bank. However, I can say that what we have done and achieved has been exemplary in parliamentary work. For example, speaking for myself, I am a member of the influential Parliamentary Affairs Committee, as well as the Education, Social and Legal Affairs committees. In fact, our sisters in the West Bank have had to bear more than their share of parliamentary tasks particularly after the arrest and protracted incarceration of our brothers. This invited Israeli reprisals as some of our sisters were detained and imprisoned by the

Israeli occupation authorities and/or hounded and harassed by the Palestinian Authority's security apparatus. I personally have suffered immensely. My home was bombed by the Israeli air-force and my brother's wife was killed. These and many other stories like this show that both men and women in Hamas operate in parallel with each other. As to the municipalities, it is true that Islamist women are not yet at the helm of a municipal council. But they are represented on many municipal councils and the day is not far off when Islamist women will be mayors. Indeed, if they can be cabinet ministers (for example, Miriam Saleh, who was Minister of Women's Affairs in the national unity government), there is no reason why they can't be mayors.

Q: What makes Palestinian women more socially and politically progressive compared to other women throughout the Arab world?

We grew up in the middle of the fray, in the midst of severe suffering. This has given us strength and tenacity and, yes, defiance as well. This strength enabled us to successfully challenge the grim reality imposed on us by Israel, especially in light of the fact that the bulk of Gaza Strip's inhabitants are refugees. Our refugee status, coupled with unmitigated suffering, convinced us that no one would help us if we didn't help ourselves. And the first step was women's empowerment which couldn't be realized without proper education and political involvement. In addition, the Islamic education that we received in mosques through the Islamic movement empowered women and gave them a sense of being in control. What I mean by that is that whereas in the past women were more or less on the receiving end of decisions, now we are able to impose important items on Hamas' agenda, such as the acquisition of funds to cover expenses for women's activities and to empower women in general.

Finally, it is important to mention that Hamas' interest in women's activism began from the very inception of the movement. I remember that Sheikh Ahmed Yasin made sure that women were politically organized in parallel with men. The Sheikh always argued that society could not take off with one wing, which necessitated the empowerment of women.

To advance this vision, Hamas supervised the establishment of the *Young Muslim Women's Association* in the Gaza Strip which played and continues to play an important role in preparing women for future leadership roles. Similarly, there are always women nominees included in Islamic student blocs contesting college elections all over the occupied territories. Finally, when Hamas created the *Islamic Salvation Party* in Gaza in the mid 1990s, two women were members of that party's politburo. This meant that Hamas was from the beginning keen to create a women's leadership as well as male leadership and resources - including financial resources - were allocated to women's activism in mosques, schools, colleges, which eventually enabled us to reach this advance level of activism. Of

course, without the responsiveness of women, we wouldn't have been able to achieve these successes.

Q: It is often claimed that women's votes in the 2006 elections played a decisive role in Hamas' election victory. How did you go about mobilizing support for Hamas?

Well this is not a claim, it is a reality. In fact, many studies have shown that the turn-out of women was greater in the elections than that of men. Hence, I can say that our experience was pioneering to a very large extent. First of all, there was a supervisory committee made up of women (Islamist women) to oversee the voting and the election amongst women. Second, according to our plan, no household was to be left unvisited. Therefore, we visited virtually all the people in their homes and we never missed any opportunity to visit people and sit down with them in a very harmonious manner - without being pushy or unnecessarily invasive. We concentrated on households which we thought might be harboring "some reluctance" In addition, we facilitated, to a large extent, the arrival of our sisters to the ballot boxes to vote. In parallel, we carried out a remarkable process of education aimed at urging women to participate in the elections. It was very much like a carnival, with our women carrying aloft Islamic banners or wearing colorful Islamic bandanas bearing Islamic slogans. We also took no chances and so we made sure to evaluate our operations and avoid possible mistakes.

Q: What role have and do Palestinian Islamist women play in the resistance?

Palestinian women have and continue to play an essential role in the resistance. We embrace the resistance in every conceivable way. We remain attached to our homes which are often destroyed and collapse right on her head. We don't panic but rise up and pitch a tent on, or next to, the rubble. In fact, I am proud to say that the leaders of Hamas, their husbands and wives, and their sons and daughters and relatives are always at the forefront of the resistance against the Israeli occupiers. This is why people respect and trust them. Moreover, many of our women know how to use firearms when necessary. We are a people who constantly have to fight for our lives, our honor and dignity.

Q: How did you cope with the mass arrest by Israel of Hamas' Legislative Council members?

That was a real burden as more than 40 MPs were arrested as an act of political vendetta. But the bigger problem was the harassment of our sister MPs both by the Israeli occupiers and the PA. You know the sisters Mariam Saleh and Muna Mansur were both arrested by the Israelis and Samira Halaika was also harassed. This meant that Hamas in the West Bank became nearly voiceless which placed on us an additional burden here in the Gaza Strip since we had to make up for our colleagues who had been arrested and detained.

Here in Gaza, we continued to carry out our parliamentary duties as much as possible. We were able to conduct an effective public relations campaign to expose the harassment and maltreatment to which the sisters were subjected in the West Bank. We also made sure to follow up conditions of the imprisoned lawmakers' families. Eventually, we formed the International Committee for Supporting the Imprisoned MPs, headed by our sister Huda Naim.

Q: How would you evaluate your experience in politics in the past five years?

We have been able to learn much in terms of working with the media. We have also acquired new skills in dealing with the public in ways that differ from our previous activities in the field of *daawa* (inviting people to Islam). In our new capacity as MPs, we have had to be constantly available to help people in every conceivable aspect. We also have gained a profound understanding of the judicial and legislative systems. For example, we had to have a thorough grasp of the laws, bylaws, regulations and norms pertaining to parliamentary processes. This has helped us assert ourselves as effective MPs. Nonetheless, the paralysis of parliamentary life following 2007 has not allowed us to reach our potentials.

Q: To what extent have you been involved with the media?

The media seems constantly preoccupied with the situation of Muslim woman for a variety of reasons - some legitimate but others malicious. Sometime we feel we are being hounded and harassed by the media. At the beginning, we faced some difficulties, as we were somewhat inexperienced in dealing with the media. However, eventually we learned how to better deal with the media, especially hostile perceptions and coverage of Islamists. We learned to provide convincing answers to questions. This was very important for us since it helped consolidate a positive image for Palestinian women's activism. In all, I can say that we have performed well in terms of public relations and in dealing with the media. Today, we have several PR offices staffed with young, educated women, mostly college graduates who have majored in journalism and mass communications. We also encourage high school graduates to major in journalism and media skills.

Q: Have you benefited from the experience of Muslim women activists in other countries?

Yes, we studied the experience of women's activism in countries such as Egypt, Sudan, Jordan, Indonesia and Algeria. We learned that women activism was more successful and more fruitful depending on the extent to which freedom of action was available.

Interview with Huda Naim

Huda Naim is a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council representing the Bureij Refugee Camp in the Gaza Strip. She is a leading activist in Hamas' Islamic Women's Department and is Head of the Board of Trustees of the Thorayya Multimedia Center. She worked as social specialist at the Islamic University of Gaza and has a BA in Social Studies and an Associated Degree in Sociology. She is married and has five sons and lives in Bureij Refugee Camp in the Gaza Strip.

Question: How would you describe the overall status of women political activists in Hamas?

Hamas is an Islamic political movement that is part of the Muslim Brotherhood movement which adopts an Islamic ideology based on moderation. I can say that the founders of *Hamas* accorded women special attention out of a conviction that the success of any political or social movement depends to a very large extent on the successful participation and contribution of women. In fact, Sheikh Ahmed Yasin (the founder and spiritual leader of *Hamas*) personally oversaw the creation and growth of the women's organization within *Hamas*. He allocated funds and encouraged the growth and development of the women's department.

Moreover, the clear Islamic principles upon which *Hamas* is based has enabled many women to rid themselves of many of erroneous social traditions which significantly restricted women's social and political empowerment. For example, some of our slowly-disappearing earlier traditions would consider a woman activist in politics as "somewhat wantonly rebelling against traditions", whereas in fact Islam urges women to get involved and do their share of nation-building and strengthening the Muslim community.

Q: Is women's activism in *Hamas* a natural, home-grown phenomenon or, as many would say, an inevitable response to the pressures of modernity?

Women's participation in *Hamas* was an integral part of *Hamas'* growth and evolution. From the very inception, *Hamas* allowed and urged women to take part in politics at all levels, especially in local and mayoral elections. But we cannot ignore the fact that growth in women's activism within *Hamas* benefited from the introduction of some of the laws that helped empower women in general. For example, these laws set quotas for women in every electoral circuit which obliged political movements and parties, including *Hamas*, to nominate women as candidates.

Q: Do Islamist women activists and political leaders face particular hardships when carrying out their tasks and duties?

Yes, of course, there are a number of difficulties facing us, but these are not peculiar to *Hamas*, particularly its ideology or political conduct. Most of the impediments we face have to do with the general situation which stems from the Israeli occupation. The security situation and harassment of activists by Israel and its agents makes women's involvement in politics especially difficult. Also, the ongoing boycott of many Islamist institutions has seriously undermined our ability to interact with the outside world, including the West Bank, the Arab world or the world at large. Finally, the fact that we have been deprived of financial resources has had a negative impact on our ability to meet the needs of women. But we are seeking alternative channels of financing.

Q: Does *Hamas* take Islamist women activists seriously? Some say that the women activists are merely "Yes-women" and are simply taken for granted?

No, this is not true. The truth is that the involvement of women in the decision-making process emanates from their respective positions of responsibility. The issue of gender here is almost completely irrelevant. For example, Islamist women lawmakers employ the same mechanisms as men do in accordance with the law and follow the same modes of parliamentary behaviors. And when a decision is reached through consensus, not voting, women are of course, consulted as seriously as our male colleagues are.

Q: What makes the Palestinian woman more advanced socially and politically than other Muslim women outside Palestine?

The involvement of Palestinian women in the resistance against the Israeli occupation made her acquire certain political skills and develop a good general political awareness. This awareness eventually helped mould nationalist and Islamic political movements in Occupied Palestine - which in turn enabled special attention to the issue of women's involvement in the overall national movement.

In addition to this, the absence of husbands or bread winners, either because of martyrdom or detention in Israeli jails, forced many Palestinian women to assume the role of father and mother, and this has given women significant strength and resilience.

Nonetheless, our involvement in social work, education, mobilization and promotion of health care is much wider than our involvement in the military resistance. This fact encouraged many families to allow their sisters, wives and daughters to participate in national and political activism, which has really empowered women and increased self-awareness amongst them. Moreover, the often sharp rivalry and competition between the nationalist and Islamist camps forced Islamist women to be more knowledgeable and skilled in the art of arguing and debate, which, I believe, eventually produced more public support for *Hamas*.

Q: It is often said that women's votes played a critical role in Hamas's electoral success in 2006. Would you agree with this assessment?

Yes, this is true to a large extent. But this was not done on the spur of the moment, as some people might think. In fact, it was the cumulative effect of 20 years of hard work, including serving the people and identifying with their hopes and pains. Indeed, for years we helped women economically, or more correctly financially; we occasionally helped female students pay college tuition fees, and we saw to it that poor women should benefit from free or cheap health care facilities subsidized by Hamas. And at the top of all of this, we were able to convince people that Islam was the solution for all problems facing them, not only the Palestinian people, but people everywhere. Needless to say, this enabled the movement to win the confidence of people and women in particular.

I can say that Palestinian women in general love *Hamas* because *Hamas*, unlike other political movements, gives special attention to moral values and religiousness. Many women find a huge moral gap between Islamist youth and non-Islamist youth in terms of their respective behaviors. They also believe that joining *Hamas* shields young people from the pitfalls of corruption and bad company.

Finally, women realized that moral decadence was nearly always the penultimate step preceding falling into the hands of the Israeli intelligence services. Hence, many women wanted to be affiliated with *Hamas* because this would make them more confident, more serene and secure.

Q: What role have Islamist women played in the resistance?

The resistance is more than just shooting and fighting. Strengthening our society against Israeli infiltration and manipulation is also a form of resistance. In fact, Islamist women and Palestinian women in general, have played an extremely important role in securing and protecting the internal front without which the resistance front would collapse. But there are, of course, many women who played an active role in the resistance, such as Reem al Rayashi and Fatema al Najjar who were martyred, and Ahlam Tamimi who was imprisoned for life. Nonetheless, the main role of Islamist women has been to shield and fortify our society against moral decay.

Q: How would you evaluate your experience as an Islamist lawmaker?

It is difficult to evaluate our experience based on normal standards and procedures since our experience is highly abnormal, and is even unique in many respects. The outcome of the 2006 democratic elections was rejected virtually by the whole world, including the Palestinian Authority, much of the Arab world and the West, in addition to Israel. On top of this, there was no real transition of power which meant that we were not allowed to

function as lawmakers. Then, we were boycotted and barred from traveling outside occupied Palestine. And finally, more than 40 Islamist parliamentarians in the West Bank were promptly arrested and dumped into Israeli jails as an expression of political and ideological revenge for our election victory.

Personally, my experience being an elected parliamentarian has been very enriching for me as a woman, and it has been a great achievement for Palestinian women in general. However, due to the political boycott and internal friction, we have effectively not been able to carry out our electoral platform.

Q: How would you explain your experience with the media?

At the beginning we were a little anxious and apprehensive. However, as our involvement in political activism deepened, our self-confidence increased dramatically. Now we have become quite open to the media and well-versed in public relations as we have had to explain our views and positions to an often hostile media which generally viewed Islamism as a sort of an anomaly that would have to always justify itself. So there was no room for a mediocre job which meant that we have had to constantly improve our performance.

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Part II

The Evolution of Islamist Women's Activism in Occupied Palestine

Khalid Amayreh

Introduction

While the intervening period between the creation of Israel in 1948 and the 1967-war witnessed several attempts at building women's organizations in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, these attempts were generally , sporadic, limited in scope and confined to a small stratum of educated women who were few in number and had little overall influence in shaping society. Moreover, these organizations were generally perceived to be essentially elitist, leftist-oriented and incompatible with Islam. Many women activists were viewed as "too westernized" and pursuing goals that were not compatible with the mainly conservative Palestinian culture.

Hence, whatever semblance of women's activism that took place during that period acquired a generally negative reputation of "conflicting with local culture" and of being "hostile to Islamic traditions." The main activities of these mainly leftist organization included disseminating communist propaganda about the dialectical conflict between capitalism and socialism and incitement against Arab feudalism, reactionary regimes and religious traditions. Zionism and the occupation of Palestine by Israel would loom large in the indoctrination sessions. However, the creation of Israel and expulsion of the bulk of Palestinians from their ancestral homeland would be explained in the context of the overall communist doctrine, namely the eternal dichotomy between socialism and capitalism.

There was some basic form of Islamic women's activism that had appeared in the 1950s and early 1960s, especially in the West Bank, as part of the Muslim Brotherhood's activities under Jordanian rule. (In Gaza, which was under Egyptian rule, Muslim Brotherhood's activities were banned or tightly restricted). Nonetheless, these activities were largely traditional and were confined to educating women about the general tenets of Islam, and because of the high levels of illiteracy among the women's population at that time - which exceeded 75% - these efforts were largely symbolic and mostly ineffective.

The few lectures and religious instruction given to Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated women focused on the centrality of Islam in Muslims' lives. It was often explained that the loss of Palestine was due to the absence of Islam in people's life, especially at the political and government levels. Secular ideologies such as communism, Baathism and Nasserism were attacked and refuted mainly through highlighting contradictions with Islam. None the less, despite their rudimentary nature, these pioneering efforts introduced the spirit of Muslim women's activism and involvement in public matters -- a phenomenon previously unseen for many decades.

The 1967 war

The occupation by Israel of the rest of Palestine (West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem) in 1967 had a devastating impact on all aspects of Palestinian communal life. It also gave a

strong incentive for resistance, which required a certain amount of release for women from traditional restrictions that had characterized the Jordanian era such as the involvement of women in politics and public life, let alone in resistance against Israel.

Established in 1957, the *Fatah* movement, formally known as the *Palestinian National Liberation Movement*, became a household name, especially after the *Karama* Battle in 1968 during which *Fatah* fighters along with Jordanian forces successfully drove back an Israeli raid into what was then the eastern bank of Jordan. This event was a great boost for *Fatah* which exploited it to the full to recruit *fedayeen* to fighting the Israeli occupiers in order to liberate Palestine. A number, though not many, of the new recruits were women.

Soon, the Marxist group, the *Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine* (PFLP), chimed in, giving a new previously-unknown dimension to the Palestinian struggle. PFLP guerillas carried out some of the most spectacular plane-hijacking operations which, while deeply despised by much of the international community, proved highly popular amongst frustrated Palestinians as they brought the world face to face with the Palestinian cause and struggle. One of the most outstanding figures in these operations was Leila Khalid who, in 1969, made history by becoming the first woman to hijack an airplane.

Such operations which became part of the fabric of Palestinian resistance which had by this time become a prominent feature of the Middle East's political arena galvanized Palestinians in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip and generated immense enthusiasm for the resistance especially among younger generations. Young women, who were increasingly educated, joined and established professional associations and unions in many social fields such as education, health, childcare and women's affairs. Up to 65% of these groups were affiliated with *Fatah* and 25% with the PFLP.

Until the late 1970s, the Islamist camp was not a serious contender in the Palestinian political arena as both *Fatah* and the left looked down on the Islamist movement as too traditionalist, as being "remnants of the Muslim Brotherhood" and "agents of America, Britain and reactionary Arab regimes."

This image began to change following the 1973 war, and the phenomenal rise in oil prices. Soon, thousands of Palestinian teachers from the occupied Palestinian territories traveled to Saudi Arabia to teach in Saudi schools. When they returned, either for good or for summer vacations, they actively disseminated the religious knowledge they had acquired in Saudi Arabia. The period also saw a process of mosque-building all over the occupied territories, taking advantage of the flow of petro-dollars from Palestinian expatriates as well as from a growing number of Islamic charities in the Gulf states and Sheikhdoms.

With tens of thousands of Palestinians frequenting the mosques, and with more educated Imams who had graduated from top Arab universities such as the University of Jordan taking over mosques and replacing the un-politicized and more traditional Imams, an Islamist public opinion was gradually but definitely polarizing. Soon, Islamic student blocs at the main colleges and universities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip gradually began to challenge and pose serious competition to the previously-unchallenged PLO forces on college campuses. This challenge grew significantly with the appearance and growth of Islamic or quasi-Islamic universities such as the Islamic University of Gaza and Hebron University.

By the early 1980s, especially following the Iranian revolution in 1978, Islamic political activism became a fixed feature at the arena of Palestinian public opinion in occupied Palestine (and the Israeli state -- for example, Sheikh Raed Salah, the head of the Islamic movement in Israel, graduated from the *Sharia* College in Hebron).

The Iranian revolution's impact

There is no doubt that the Iranian revolution, led by the late Ayatollah Khomeini against the American-backed Shah regime in 1978, had a galvanizing impact on Muslims in much of the Middle East, and particularly occupied Palestine. In the West Bank and Gaza, many Imams - who were becoming important public-opinion shapers - praised Khomeini and urged Arab masses in countries like Egypt and Jordan to rise up and topple their regimes (the Shiite-Sunni rivalry was at that time a distant afterthought for most Palestinians).

On college campuses, Islamic student blocs became more appealing as PLO groups were increasingly seen as futile, unprincipled and essentially incompatible with Islam. In many cases, female students came to constitute a majority of Islamic-oriented students. In the

mid 1980s, when the *Kutla Islamiya* (Islamic student bloc) won student elections at Hebron University, a frustrated *Fatah* student leader dismissed the Islamist victory rather sarcastically, calling it "a women's victory." Interestingly, at that time, the modest women attire, known as *Jilbab* was increasingly being worn by women replacing the more western-style dress.

Meanwhile, Islamist students were gradually taking over college student councils at universities until then considered bastions of secular nationalism and strongholds of the PLO such as Beir Zeit and al-Najah University. Islamic political activism, which covered professional unions and other civic societies, continued to grow, effectively becoming equal in strength and influence with PLO supporters and affiliated groups.

In December 1987, the formal appearance of Hamas instituted the Islamist camp as a permanent feature at the Palestinian political arena.

Hamas's approach to women's activism

According to Hamas leaders, the movement accorded the 'women's sector' ample attention, especially during the movement's formative years. Jamila Shanti, the former head of the women's department in Gaza, explains that Hamas's founder Sheikh Ahmed Yasin personally saw to it that the movement's women members and supporters be organized and that funds be made available for their various activities. "There is no doubt that Hamas opened for us broad horizons without which we couldn't have achieved what we have achieved. Hamas's approach to women was progressive and advanced from the beginning. Needless to say, this allowed us to acquire a qualitative experience in a number of fields including working with the masses," she said.¹ Shanti explained how Sheikh Yasin founded the first "organized group of women activists" in parallel with the first group of male activists: "This meant that there was a women's leadership from the very inception, and funds were allocated for women's activism in the mosques, universities, schools and for other cultural and socio-political activities".²

Recruitment

The Department of Recruitment is probably the most active and most successful organs of Hamas. Indeed, it can be said with little exaggeration that the movement's electoral victory in 2006 can be attributed to a large extent to the effective efforts of this department, and in particular the so-called *Daerat al Amal al Nissae* - the Women's Action Department. It is

¹ Interview with the author. The Israeli *Ma'ariv* newspaper reported on 5 February 2010 that Jamila Shanti had been targeted for assassination by the Israeli domestic security agency, the Shabak.

² Ibid.

also true, however, that the work of this department often coincided with the general Islamic *Da'wa* activities ('Invitation to Islam') so much so that it was often hard to draw lines of distinction.

This overlap occurred because in many instances Hamas's women had focused mainly on promoting religious commitment and would not directly urge women to vote for Hamas. Instead, they would urge them to show real commitment to Islam -- undoubtedly a brilliant and effective tactic. It was then a foregone conclusion that displaying genuine commitment to Islam implied in 90% of cases lending political support to Hamas.

The mosques

Mosques have always been and continue to be Hamas's ultimate default base. This is the place where the message of Islam is voiced and heard unchallenged. Hamas has never explicitly tried to transform mosques, especially in the West Bank, into exclusive political or religious instruction centers for the movement. For a number of reasons, Hamas did not want mosques to be politicized too much lest this lead to undesired ramifications. However, Hamas has always sought to justify itself, its ideology and even its political policies by citing convincing texts from the Quran or the traditions of the Prophet Muhammed. As one prominent member of Hamas in the Hebron region remarked: "We don't tell people to join Hamas. We only challenge them to be faithful and true to their Islamic commitment. And, yes, if they are true to their Islamic commitment, they know what the next step will be".³

Islamist women have utilized the mosques very successfully by holding lectures and marking religious anniversaries such as the Prophet's birthday or the *Israa* and *Miraj* (the Prophet's flight from Makka to Jerusalem and his subsequent night journey to the throne of God as elucidated in Sura number 17). And as outlined earlier, in carrying out these activities, women participants were not told to vote for Hamas or to join Hamas -- they even didn't discuss explicitly political matters. Instead they were advised to embrace the Islamic way of thinking.

Nevertheless, in anticipation of the 2006 elections, some less indirect messages were disseminated throughout the mosques, especially during the *Jumaa* (Friday) congregational prayers. A number of *imams* and *Khatibs* (sermon deliverers) would urge the audience to vote for whomever they think is righteous and closer to Allah -- a message that was clear to everyone.

In addition to mosques, facilitating massive public Islamic rallies which are attended by tens of thousands of people, including many women, would often create a psychological

³ Interview with the author. The person did not want to be identified out of fear of arrest by the PA security agencies.

atmosphere that was conducive to encouraging ordinary Muslim women to lend political support to Hamas. Similar activities were also held in colleges and universities which represents the foothold of women activists in occupied Palestine. But these type of activities by Hamas supporters have been effectively banned by the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank since the summer of 2007 although they stopped short of outlawing all Hamas' activities.

More recently, Hamas has been using various means of communication to attract women - and men - to its camp, including the internet, print and electronic press and an increasing number of Islamic-oriented satellite Television stations such as Hamas's successful *Al-Aqsa* TV.

Hamas' Women's Department

The Women's Department in Hamas played a critical role in political mobilization of women in the period leading up to the 2006 elections. These efforts, says Jamila Shanti, maximized women's turnout to the extent that it exceeded that of men, especially in the Gaza Strip.

The mobilization efforts were by no means casual and haphazard but were guided by a carefully-devised plan taking into consideration demographic, psychological and educational factors. What specifically distinguished the mobilization plan was its comprehensiveness since it covered almost every home in the Gaza Strip. Special attention was given to homes and families in which some members were thought to be undecided or reluctant to vote for Hamas. Again, Hamas women activists would not exert direct or any psychological pressure on people or make them feel uncomfortable since this might produce the wrong effect. Instead, they would use a 'personal and religious touch' which, according to Shanti, worked in most cases. Similarly, they would not show explicit displeasure toward those refusing to vote for Hamas but would say that they respected people's own choice.

Although the Women's Department facilitated the transportation of women voters to the ballot stations, which minimized the gap between actual and potential voters, these efforts would not have been successful had it not been for years of religious instruction which convinced women that voting for Hamas was compatible with Islam and that not voting for Hamas would be virtually *haram* -- religiously prohibited. This unspoken message was always in the air among Hamas voters in general, and amongst women voters in particular.

Community Services

Like other Palestinian political groups, the Islamic Resistance Movement (*Hamas*) had a large network of community services such as the *Zakat* committees and affiliated organs which played an important role in helping the poor and the needy. The committees were not affiliated with Hamas in any formal way, especially in the West Bank where nearly all

charities had to be accountable to the Palestinian Ministry of Wakf and Islamic Affairs. However, those overseeing the committees were often religious people who either supported Hamas or were members of the group.

But it is not true that the *Zakat* committees practiced favoritism and nepotism as some *Fatah* operatives have claimed. In fact, this writer, who was a leading official in one charity in the Hebron region for over 15 years, I can attest that the *Zakat* committees carried out their functions professionally away from political and factional manipulation. Some of the assistance the committee this author was a member of gave financial support to people in need, included helping students pay tuition costs, helping to build a house for a widow, paying partial expenses for a kidney transplant and distributing food to the poor every few months. Women were among the main recipients of charity.

It is hard to objectively measure the extent to which the *Zakat* committees helped Hamas in the elections. Western reports claimed that Hamas' electoral success can be attributed to a large extent to the group's charitable network. However, there is no proof that this was the case. In fact, there are reasons to believe that at least in some instances, the *Zakat* committees might have been a liability rather than an asset for Hamas. This was due to the limited resources available and the dissemination by the opponents of Hamas of unfounded charges claiming that the committees were conducive to supporting "terror." The US did exert strong pressure on Saudi Arabia and Persian Gulf states to clamp down on local charities assisting Palestinian charities.

For political reasons, most *Zakat* committees in the West Bank have now been taken over by *Fatah* and the Palestinian Authority. However, this has resulted in a large fall in donations as most donors were religious people and institutions who do not trust the new administrative set-up of the *Zakat* committees. The *Fatah*-dominated government in Ramallah has tried to circumvent this situation by appointing a number of highly respected people as heads of committees, but this seems to have had little impact in terms of endearing the new committees to the general population and encouraging them to give donations.

In the Gaza Strip, Islamic charities are likely to have made a greater impact with regard to Hamas' popularity as more people in the Strip benefited from the charitable network. And unlike the situation in the West Bank, where the western-backed PA rules, Gaza charities are still functioning which is especially important given the huge increase in the number of poor people and families in the wake of the on-going Israeli-Egyptian blockade and last year's devastating Israeli attack on Gaza in which more than 1,400 Palestinians, including over 300 children, were killed and thousands of homes and mass economic and social infrastructure destroyed resulting in a large-scale humanitarian catastrophe.

False stereotypes

Islamist women are often portrayed in the Western media as conservative, anti-modernist, ignorant of their rights who blindly follow their husbands and are oppressed. And while a few examples can be cited which corroborate these stereotypes, it is difficult to apply them to women activists and leaders who are active under the rubric of the Muslim Brotherhood - the mother organization of Hamas.

This stems mainly from the fact that the Brotherhood's general interpretation of Islam is markedly moderate and more liberal in comparison's to the Salafi (e.g. Wahabi) interpretation. For example, the Muslim Brotherhood which is the largest and most influential Sunni religious-political movement in the Muslim world places no restrictions on female education, a woman's freedom to choose her husband, drive a car, or even serve in the army as long as certain disciplines and guarantees are ensured. Such aspects are actually taken for granted by society at large. Moreover, while Palestinian society, like most other Muslim societies, is still essentially dominated by men, women - including Islamist women - are making important inroads toward social equality with men.

It has been women themselves who have discovered that the key to reach this goal is education. This explains why there has been a remarkable and continuous increase in the number of professional women such as doctors, engineers, university professors, and scientists and why there are probably more female college students in West Bank universities and colleges than male students.

Conclusion

It is true that Palestinian Islamist women are not aspiring to emulate or even imitate their western women in many aspects of social behavior. However, it is also true that these Palestinian women are no longer content with their erstwhile traditional status of subservience to their husbands and families. It is also the case that husbands and relatives are now better educated to understand that a truly Muslim woman would have to be enlightened and educated.

This is not to say that these women are rebelling or rising against their families and society. What is happening is that society at large, and Islamist movements in particular, are trying to 'Islamize' what is generally called modernity but in practice reflects a contemporaneity in a way that does not collide with or contradict Islamic sensibilities. Their motto, which is not confined to occupied Palestine, is that a woman can be modern without having to be westernized, since 'modernity' is generally held to be an essential requirement without which society cannot progress, while westernization is a socio-cultural value that often carries with it undesired side effects and different values and beliefs.

In some respects, one can argue that a typical Islamist woman can be even more creative than a typical secular woman. For example, Islamist women in co-operation with the Hamas' leadership have been able to organize mass weddings in the Gaza Strip for poor couples -- a pioneering act that no secular group in Palestine has ever done. Moreover, many of the young widows of fighters killed by Israel have been able to remarry, thanks to generous financial inducements from Hamas.

None the less, while the status of Palestinian Islamist women is more advanced in comparison to the status of women in countries such as Saudi Arabia, it is clear that many struggles remain to be fought in terms of eradicating some of the obstacles impeding women's liberation. These obstacles have to do with women themselves underestimating their abilities and potentials, as well as with a dismissive attitude on the part of many women - Islamist and others - which can be summarized in the phrase 'let the men do it'.

The biggest obstacle facing the empowerment of women (and men), however, in the occupied Palestinian territories remains the ongoing Israeli occupation. This is the mother of all problems for the entire Palestinian people, irrespective of gender or ideological orientation.

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The opinions in this paper are the author's own and do not necessarily represent those of Conflicts Forum.