Palestinian Women: Mothers, Martyrs and Agents of Political Change

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the Josef Korbel School of International Studies

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

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June 2011

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation seeks to understand the role of women as political actors in the rise of Islamo-nationalist movement in Palestine. Using a historical and ethnographic approach, it examines the changing opportunity structures available to Palestinian women in the nationalist struggle between 1987 and 2007. It looks into the sites of political engagement of Palestinian women as mothers, organizers and political candidates, suicide bombers, and nonviolent activists with attention paid to the evolution of the Islamist ideology within these four pathways for political participation. The goal of this work is to engage the question of how some Palestinian women who appear to diverge from the commitments of feminist emancipatory visions are active participants in the Islamist transformation of the Palestinian nationalist struggle. In doing so, this dissertation seeks to unveil the evolution of gender relations within the Palestinian nationalist struggle while providing a deeper analysis of the emergence and significance of the Islamist movement in contemporary Palestinian society. It makes an interdisciplinary contribution to existing literature in nationalism and post-colonial studies, social movements, identity politics and feminist political thought in the Middle East.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the course of my research and writing, I have incurred many debts of gratitude for which I hope to acknowledge, however inadequately. I am grateful for the support of my dissertation committee and wish to thank Martin Rhodes, Nader Hashemi, Alan Gilbert and Islah Jad. My appreciation also goes to Betty Bayer for the gift of her support for my work and professional growth at Hobart and William Smith Colleges. My deepest gratitude goes to my family and family-of-friends. If there is a word beyond gratitude, it is especially reserved for my brother and best friend, Mark Otis. I also wish to thank my colorful cadre of fellow life-walkers: Sarah Amesbury, Katie Rothery, Jessica McBride Wilson, Yvonne Zimmerman, Nicholas Bowen, Allison Friederichs, Amentahru Wahlrab, Amanda Donahoe, Eric Fattor and Raslan Ibrahim whose affection and support have carried me through the many twists and turns of my time as a graduate student.

Finally, if not for the continuous love, support and laughter provided by my life partner, CJ Remmo, this project may have seen no end. As the workspace of our dining table is now cleared to make way for many celebrations ahead, I am certain that CJ and I will gather around it and tell many stories to our children. One story that will never be forgotten is the legend of a brave Palestinian woman named Elham and her three children, to whom this work is dedicated.
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INTRODUCTION

The month of September 2007 brought an end to my first long stint as a resident member of the Al-Azzeh refugee camp in Bethlehem. In the countdown of days before I planned a quick trip to the USA to stand in the wedding of a dear friend, I devoted every free moment to spending time with my host family. Like any large and boisterous brood, we often came together for an evening meal, which we ate on the rooftop of the family home. The open space provided a respite from the cramped living quarters of the refugee camp. Along with this, the rooftop always bore the promise of a cool breeze to mitigate the enduring heat of the day.

On the final evening before my departure, I sat in my white plastic chair beside the other adults in the family on the rooftop. Per our nightly custom, one of the youngest members of the family asked to climb into the child-sized space in my lap. By this point in my time as an auxiliary member of Palestinian society, a small child in my lap was a regular and welcoming feature of my daily routine. However, in these quiet and gentle moments of human contact, I often wondered if I was the one holding these children of Palestine, or if, in fact, they were the ones holding me. The affection of one child in particular, a little girl named Amal, served as a healthy departure from the daily and extreme stresses of being a participant-observer of political life in the Palestinian West Bank.
Three months earlier, in mid-June, the long-strained relations between the West Bank and Gaza Strip—long considered the territories of the future Palestinian state—had come to resemble enemy countries, where the pools of human blood in the streets expressed the opposing political ideologies at play. I was visiting a friend in Ramallah when I first experienced the tremors of this particular political earthquake. Ninety kilometers away, Hamas violently overthrew the Palestinian Authority in the Gaza Strip. Meanwhile, the residents of Ramallah poured into the streets of the city to watch masked men with large guns encircle Manara Square, the city centre, in their string of large SUVs.

Swept up in the historic moment as it unfolded around me, the terrifying sight of masked men shooting live rounds of ammunition in the air prompted me to ask a woman in the gathering crowd if Hamas forces had somehow arrived from Gaza to overthrow the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah? No, the woman informed me, these men were the security forces loyal to Fatah and the Palestinian president, *Abu Mazen* (Mahmoud Abbas). Upon closer examination, I recognized that each of the gun-toting men was wearing an olive green uniform, even as their faces were covered with black masks. From this, I was able to ascertain that this group of men represented a parade of force for Fatah—a hyper-masculinized peacock ritual of sorts, a demonstration to the members of the Hamas opposition that the Palestinian Authority (and Fatah) remained in control of the West Bank. I interpreted this show of force as the veritable growling and barring of teeth as two male lions might do before engaging in a battle of supremacy over their pride. With this, I was reminded of other forms of masculine expression, such as the hyperbolic threats and muscle-flexing rituals made by icons of the professional wrestling
world. The scale and scope of the political ritual taking place that day made me wonder how to say in Arabic, “My gun is bigger than your gun!”

In my role as a member of the audience, I played my ancillary part by chanting unfamiliar slogans of political support while being dazzled by the sight of so much bellicose machinery. Perhaps seeing the look of trepidation on my face from the sporadic rounds of gunfire spit into the atmosphere, the woman next to me squeezed my hand and said, “Don’t worry, girl! We are safe because Fatah still governs the West Bank!”

This sentiment of the woman from the crowd in Ramallah remained with me throughout my time in the Occupied West Bank of Palestine. From her political statement of support for the secular-nationalist Fatah regime, I often wondered if this woman included herself as a woman in her sweeping reference to the Palestinian people and their “safety” under the Fatah-backed Palestinian Authority? From many divergent conversations I had with other Palestinian women, while some firmly swore their political allegiance with Fatah on the basis of its early secular and democratic socialist principles, others maintained that Hamas was the party of choice for respecting and upholding the rights of women and their safety. Moreover, some women felt that Hamas ensured a more or less “equal” place for women in overall political and family life. Yet, how could Hamas, a political entity known for its embrace of religious ideologically conservative social mores and seeming antipathy for women’s rights and gender equality, manage to capture the hearts and minds of so many Palestinian women?

This question and the many that have since come to frame this dissertation, loomed in my mind as I sat with little Amal in my lap that final summer evening on the

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1 Notes from fieldwork 2007.
rooftop of the refugee camp in 2007. Overhead, a blanket of stars began to permeate the sky. Along with the cool breeze, a welcome sense of peacefulness encircled us, even as sporadic rounds of gunfire could be heard echoing between the hillsides of Bethlehem and the rest of the Holy Land. I pointed to the heavens to show Amal one star directly above us that seemed to blink more than the others. I whispered to her that a girl could wish on a falling star to make all of her dreams come true. The blinking star suddenly darted across the sky, and Amal excitedly clasped her hands together and secretly made her wish. Sadly and silently, I realized that the entity I encouraged this Palestinian child to wish upon was actually an Israeli reconnaissance drone taking pictures of us from above. Caught between the violence of the Palestinian fratricidal civil war that now raged around us on the streets of the West Bank and the radical injustice of Israeli military occupation that hovered over head, I could not help but wonder if the Palestinian people—and most especially its women and girls—will ever be “safe” in the name of political freedom, much less able to wish on a star for gender equality?

While the body of the work that follows is not entirely ethnographic, it is grounded by the time I spent with the people of Palestine, and most particularly, its women and girls. Between 2007 and 2009 in the name of field research, I became immersed in the fabric of daily life, a witness to weddings, births, funerals and overall daily routine. Because politics is infused in every personal choice and aspect of the Palestinian reality, each hour of the day served as an opportunity to bear witness to the ongoing political story of the Palestinian people. In 2007, I lived with a young family in the Azzeh Refugee Camp in Bethlehem and worked with a small women’s development non-profit in the nearby community of Beit Sahour. In 2009, I resided in an Palestinian
Arab community in East Jerusalem known as Sheikh Jarrah and split my time between volunteer work at the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) and making regular trips to visit with the women I knew in Bethlehem, Beit Sahour, Beit Jala and Ramallah.

Within these two years of field research, I regularly noticed how some of the Palestinian men I encountered seemed to perform a series of silent-yet-obvious mental gymnastics to accommodate my presence (as a young, unmarried Western woman) among them. Sometimes they regarded me as if I was a doll in a glass box—I was politely acknowledged but otherwise ignored. Other times, they seemed to warmly welcome me as a novelty among them. In the latter case, some of the more self-described, “progressive” men invited me to be an “honorary man”, whereupon I was asked to join male-only social gatherings. As I enthusiastically gathered with the men to eat and discuss politics, my female counterparts awkwardly served me plates of food and drink. As if my sex had temporarily changed with these invitations to the exclusive circle of men, the women did not make eye contact with me again until I left the circle and we were back together again, as women.

Of course, I amassed a trove of observational writings and journal missives of these moments, which I imagine compiling for my next project, a full ethnography. But for the purposes of this project, I can safely say that it is through this cultural immersion and so many first-hand experiences that this dissertation on Palestinian female political behavior was framed and written. As I awkwardly lumbered through the cultural and linguistic barriers around me, and, with this, a series of so many highly gendered encounters in the Holy Land, I quickly learned that the real story of Palestinian politics
today was taking place in the lives of women and girls. Meanwhile, however, it also became apparent that while I was busily focusing my gaze upon the objects of this work, the women and girls I encountered in Palestine took it upon themselves to observe and mirror me—the “young” ajnabiyye (foreigner), uninitiated in the ways of marriage, motherhood, self-sacrifice, poverty, political oppression and war.

In this most valuable crucible of interaction between observer and observed, many powerful social and political forces violently raged around us. In the spring and summer of 2007, buildings were burned and the body count rose as internecine violence between Hamas and Fatah spilled from the Gaza Strip into parts of the West Bank. At the same time, the devoted foot soldiers of the Israeli Defense Forces encircled us at military checkpoints and roadblocks, blended in among us in the market place as they sat in unmarked cars and carried out targeted assassinations and suffocated us from above in the military reconnaissance drones that littered the sky. It was in the intersection of all of this that I learned of the political choices available to Palestinian women at the center of the most complex and longest running nationalist struggle to date. Thus, along with the political behavior of these women, my witness to the historic shift in the politics of Palestinian nationalism also undergirds this dissertation.

This dissertation is a study of the relationship between the Palestinian Islamist movement and Palestinian women as active participants in the collective struggle for self-determination against the ongoing Israeli military occupation and control over the long-sought state of Palestine. By also bringing research on Palestinian women up to date, the objective of this work is to observe and account for the changes in Palestinian women’s political participation between 1987 and 2007. In this an attempt to understand role that
Palestinian women play within the Islamist movement, which can appear as antithetical—and even inimical—to Western conceptions of social and political rights and understandings of the equality of women. Focusing on the evolution of and points of contestation between traditional aspects of patriarchy and modernity in gender relations in the Palestinian nationalist story this study also provides a deeper analysis of the evolution of the Islamist movement and the factional politics that plague the Palestinian nationalist movement. While the history of the Palestinian people and continued horrors of Israeli occupation make any study of the Palestinian people and their struggle unique, the conclusions of this dissertation offer a broader applicability of this study by way of looking at the politics and practices that underpin Islamist movements and the role of women within their rise and evolution. Accordingly, this dissertation contributes to the development of more nuanced feminist analysis for understanding female participation in the religio-political movements of the Arab and Islamic worlds that have often attempted to falsely categorize female participants in Islamist movements as passive pawns or victims of male-centered political and social circumstances.

Asserting the claim that Palestinian women are more than pawns of the greater political processes and machinations in which their daily lives are embedded, this dissertation sees women as active agents in a long-standing and continuous struggle for gender equality and women’s rights within the historic endeavor for Palestinian statehood. For many Palestinian women, these issues of self-determination and gender equality exist in tandem and are not mutually exclusive. This project demonstrates that despite the shift from secular to Islamo-nationalist forms of political expression, the
vision of gender equality and statehood remain central elements of female participation across the ideological spectrum.

**Chapter Overview**

This study begins with a review of literature followed by the question of the large-scale sociopolitical processes governing the rise of the Palestinian Islamist movement and its relationship to Palestinian women as citizens and participants in the nationalist struggle. From this, the question becomes: What happens to notions of gender equality and traditionally secular modes of female political participation within the Islamization of the Palestinian nationalist struggle? I endeavor to show that even as the expression of political activism has become (sometimes literally) dressed in Islamist rhetorical garb, the desire and commitment of women to remain firmly in the public sphere while promoting feminist ideals of gender equality remains the unchanged.

The attempt to focus this question draws this dissertation into chapter-by-chapter investigations into micro levels of female political behavior. How does the rise of Islamo-nationalist politics impact the mobilizing identities of secular versus Islamist in terms of Palestinian motherhood, female political representation, female suicide bombers and the work of nonviolent female activists? Looking more sharply at these four aspects of female political behavior, this dissertation captures the dialectical relationship between the smaller and often-overlooked aspects of female collective action and larger political and ideological processes underway in the Palestinian struggle and the greater Middle East. Each chapter identifies the impact of the larger sociopolitical forces at play during these times on the mobilizing identities of women. In turn, each chapter demonstrates
how Palestinian women responded to the changing opportunity structures available to
them within the rise of the Islamist movement as well as the interplay between secular-
nationalist and Islamist forces over the course of 1987 to 2007.

Chapter One presents a brief background on Palestinian women and an overview
of the problematic and method. The method of study is generated by a two-pronged
methodology that historically and ethnographically seeks to understand the complexities
of female roles in the Palestinian struggle by tracing the shift in the political expression
and political identity of Palestinian women in the Islamo-nationalist rise.

Chapter Two gives a review of literature and analysis of the four scholarly areas
where this dissertation makes its greatest contributions. These areas are nationalist and
post-colonial studies, social movements, identity studies and feminist political research in
the Middle East. By examining the political opportunities afforded to women in the
Islamist rise, this dissertation extends the existing literature in each domain. The result is
a more nearly complete account for understanding the often-overlooked relationship
between women and the emergence of the Islamo-nationalist movement in Palestine in
recent years.

Chapter Three draws upon research in the area of religion, Islamization, Middle
East and Palestinian history to present a streamlined account of Palestinian Islamism
within the rise of Islamist politics in the Muslim world. This chapter grounds the project
in the vocabulary of Islamist politics and a historic understanding of the rise and
significance of this particular movement in the Palestinian context.

Marking the latter half of the dissertation, the chapters that follow give a detailed
account of the rise of the Palestinian Islamist movement along with the discursive shifts
in the conception of Palestinian motherhood in the political domain, the rise of
Palestinian Islamist women’s organizations, the emergence of female suicide martyrs,
and the role of Palestinian women as nonviolent activists.

For example, Chapter Four examines the maternal imagery in the secular-
nationalist discourse, which was used during the 1987 intifada to politicize femininity in
the Palestinian struggle and mobilize female participation in the framework of the
traditional social norms of Palestinian society. In particular, this chapter analyzes the
Islamization of the Palestinian struggle since the 2000 intifada and seeks to understand
how ‘political motherhood’ has been co-opted as a tool for political representation of all
Palestinian women. A comparison of the political characteristics of female leaders as
“mothers” of the first intifada and second intifada periods is used to illustrate how the
Islamization of the Palestinian struggle has increased the political presence of women as
mothers in the 2006 Palestinian elections.

Chapter Five provides an account of Palestinian women’s political mobilization
and organization in the 1987 and 2000 intifada periods. Exploring the shifting role of
women at the point of contestation between the secular-nationalist movement and the rise
of the Palestinian Islamist movement, this chapter demonstrates how the rhetoric of
Palestinian women’s contributions to the nationalist movement changed, and with this,
how the rhetoric used to justify the mobilizing effort of women by the women themselves
also evolved.

Chapter Six examines the rise of female Palestinian suicide martyrs and the
violent role of female militants as a point of collision and competition between secular-
nationalist and Islamist political ideologies and their respective approaches to ending the
Israeli military occupation through the use of force. This chapter examines the paucity of female suicide bombers in the 1987 intifada and the rise of this phenomenon in the 2000 intifada from within the entrenched factionalization of Palestinian politics following the failure of the Oslo peace agreements and Camp David Accords. Between 2002 and 2007, eighty-eight Palestinian women attempted to become suicide martyrs. Although only ten women were successful, this small number is actually quite revealing when compared to the fact that there were no female suicide bombers in the 1987 intifada period. The changes in the secular and Islamist stance concerning females as violent militants are examined both through speeches and the fatwas, or religious decrees, of Islamist leaders, and through accounts by Palestinian women themselves.

Chapter Seven seeks to understand the role of secular-nationalist and Islamist Palestinian women as nonviolent political activists in the nationalist movement. Moving beyond the spotlight of organized violence that has resulted from the entrenched violence between Israelis and Palestinians in addition to the internecine violence that is taking place between the Palestinian factions, this chapter focuses on Palestinian women as continuously active agents of nonviolent political protest against the Israeli occupation, which is not usually visible to the outside world.

The Conclusion of this work returns to the main arguments and findings of this study and suggests how the findings relate to larger bodies of literature, including research on Islamism, social movements in the Middle East and gender politics. It also addresses the decline of secular-nationalist politics in the Palestinian nationalist movement in recent years and comments on the future of Palestinian women and Palestinian gender politics in the years to come.
CHAPTER ONE
THE PROBLEMATIC AND METHOD

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the history of women in the Palestinian nationalist movement and the questions raised by their more recent participation in the Islamo-nationalist rise. The questions that are raised drive the problematic of this project and method of study. This chapter demonstrates that Palestinian women are widely celebrated for their instrumental roles in the Palestinian nationalist struggle. Specific to these accounts is a strong reverence for Palestinian women as agents of women’s rights and gender equality in the secular-nationalist political platform that historically represented the nationalist movement. However, what is missing in much of the literature on Palestinian women is an account of a transformation of female political participation from secular-nationalist to Islamo-nationalist, especially in light of the rise of Hamas as a major political power in the Palestinian Territories to date.

The study presented here is generated by a two-pronged methodology that historically and ethnographically seeks to understand the complexities of female roles in the Palestinian struggle by tracing the shift in the political expression and political identity of Palestinian women in the Islamo-nationalist rise. In doing so, this dissertation demonstrates that the demand for social and political equality remains a stable feature of female political participation across the changing ideological spectrum of Palestinian
nationalism. Moreover, the rise of the Islamist movement in the Palestinian context can be attributed in part to the active (and continued) political involvement of Palestinian women as participants and supporters. Last and most important to this study is the observation of the small ways in which the Palestinian Islamist movement has evolved to incorporate female participation within its ranks. This is seen in incremental ideological changes and adjustments in response to the demands of its female supporters.

**Framing the Problematic: History of Women in the Palestinian Nationalist Movement**

Foundational to this study is the fact that Palestinian women enjoy a long and celebrated history as secular participants of the national resistance. As far back as the British Mandate, Palestinian women organized politically and mobilized as women in the name of defending their homeland (Fleischmann 2003). Since the establishment of the Israel in 1948 and the dispersal of the majority of the Palestinian civilian population from their homes and villages (before, during and after the Arab-Israeli war that followed), Palestinian women have managed their families’ survival under social and economic displacement, physical insecurity and political uncertainty. Especially since the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967, the social and political behavior of Palestinian women has been fashioned by the spirit of survival and resistance to the humiliations and injustices associated with life under Israeli military control.

In the decades prior to the founding of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) in the late 1980s, Fatah was the most dominant political voice in the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) represented the hegemonic secular-nationalist voice of the
Palestinian struggle. In addition to Fatah, the PLO consisted of an array of highly organized, grassroots, secular-nationalist women’s organizations. These organizations became the bedrock of grassroots civilian mobilization in the 1987 intifada, and female participation in this political cause revealed a growing social acceptance of female engagement in activities beyond the family hearth and home. Along with this came an increased emphasis on social and political equality not only for the Palestinian people in general, but also for the Palestinian women as principle players in the realization of the nationalist dream. Female participation in the resistance movement engendered a rise in secular-nationalist women’s organizations, which maintained a decidedly feminist agenda for the pursuit of social and political gender equality in tandem with the vision of Palestinian statehood.

Since the end of the 1987 intifada, the rise of the Palestinian Islamo-nationalist movement has attempted to refame the language and expression of female political participation. Rejecting the secular-nationalist leadership and its political ideals as an inauthentic import of the West, the leadership of the Islamist movement connects the future triumph of the Palestinian resistance to a society-wide revival of a conservative Islam. Adler to this vision, the Islamo-nationalist agenda reframes Palestinian women in accordance with its conservative norms. As politically engaged advocates of the Islamist agenda, Palestinian women are venerated for their renewed commitments to Palestinian nationalism. Such women are now piously outfitted in the conservative

\[\text{Esposito (1984) argues that Islamic revivalism in the twentieth century was a response to the perception that Islamic communities were in decline. He writes that in many cases, such as Saudi Arabia, the Sudan and Libya, this led to the creation of Islamic states, which has since created a pattern of modern Islamic movements with similarities in world view, ideology, language and methods. A more in-depth analysis of this phenomenon is presented in Chapter Three.}\]
“Islamic” female costume of the Middle East. They act according to strict rules of female comportment and social segregation from men in public spaces. As a result of these adaptive behaviors, Islamist Palestinian women today are cast as prominent figures in the Islamo-nationalist struggle. They are the wives, mothers and political representatives of this new brand of Palestinian nationalism, and the symbol of the Islamo-nationalist movement.

On one hand, the involvement of Palestinian women in the Palestinian struggle in recent years appears to be a continuation of their long history of political involvement and mass mobilization. On the other hand, the recent void created by the demobilization of secular-nationalist women’s organizations has been filled by Islamist female voices that seem to diverge from the secular-nationalist language concerning women’s rights and gender equality (Jad 2009). Meanwhile, as the Palestinian Authority struggles to be popularly seen as the true representative of the Palestinian street, Hamas has built extensive infrastructure of support among the people, and most especially among the women. Hamas is seen as an attractive alternative to the moral bankruptcy and corruption of Fatah and the Palestinian Authority. Concordantly, Palestinian Islamist women have emerged as activists and agitators for the new Islamist political agenda.

One example of the changing character of Palestinian female political expression is Miriam Farhat, a 2006 elected female representative of Hamas. Commonly known as Umm Nidal (“Mother of Struggle”), Farhat became widely hailed in 2005 as a Hamas Party representative of Palestinian women. Farhat is the mother of three sons who were killed or “martyred” through their actions against Israel. Famously portrayed as the “Mother of Martyrs”, Farhat was held in wide acclaim for her public declaration of a
prayer she once made to God, in which she wished for ten Israeli settlers and soldiers to be killed by each of her sons (Bostom 2006, 1). Whereas in the 1987 intifada, the connection between motherhood and militarization was one of resistance—best characterized by the life-preserving, defensive techniques used by women to physically shield their children from the brutality of Israeli military occupation and violence—the Islamist shift since the 2000 intifada has rhetorically reinvented Palestinian motherhood as a “new” political trope where women-as-mothers gain respect for the loss of their sons in the battle against the Israeli occupation. Here, the evolution of the child-turned-suicide bomber has grown in line with the evolution of the trope of the Islamist mother-of-martyr. Within this paradigm shift, the Islamist movement explicitly uses aspects of faith and traditional social mores to honor women like Umm Nidal for her reproductive power in creating children to be soldiers in the political struggle, even for the purpose of suicide terrorism or “martyrdom”.

Beyond rallying women as Islamist political organizers and pious-yet-politically-assertive mothers, the Al-Aqsa intifada in 2000 saw the emergence of yet another new aspect of Palestinian women’s political behavior: the female suicide bomber. Until it was used in Palestine, suicide martyrdom was foreign to Sunni Islam. Moreover, prior to the outbreak of the 2000 intifada, Islamist leaders in the Palestinian Territories did not deem it appropriate to use woman as suicide martyrs. Of note is the fact that the leadership of Hamas was initially reluctant to recruit female bombers but inevitably removed the ban under pressure from its female members, some of whom “threatened to act on their own

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3 Of course, social and political reverence for mothers of fallen sons in battle is nothing new or particularly inventive in the Palestinian context or beyond. However, what is noteworthy here is the Islamist reinvention of the motherly symbol of moral and nationalist sacrifice as it pertains to the Islamist political agenda.
initiative or in association with other factions” (Tamimi 2007, 162). Importantly, the first female suicide bomber in the Palestinian nationalist struggle was not sent by the Islamist factions at all, but arrived in the form of 26-year-old, Wafa Idris who blew herself up in Jerusalem in 2002 with the assistance of the military wing of Fatah, known as the Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades. Following a sporadic campaign of female suicide bombings dispatched by the military wing of Fatah, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Hamas soon joined in rank (Tamimi 2007, 162). Between 2002 and 2007, ten Palestinian women, ranging in age, education and social background, successfully engaged in suicide martyrdom. Dozens of women on similar missions that failed are seen as threats to the security of the Israel and are spending their lives in Israeli jails.

Today, the Islamist agenda has become firmly embedded in the political process of the Palestinian Territories, most recently with the 2006 Parliamentary election of a Hamas-led majority to the Palestinian Authority, and in the 2007 Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip. The issue of social and political fragmentation within the Palestinian struggle has most recently been seen in the threat of a civil war in the struggle for power between the leadership and supporters of Fatah and Hamas in the Palestinian Territories. Through this, the emergence of traditionally conservative socio-political thought in the Territories (associated with the rise of Hamas) has been widely noted as an impediment to women’s social and political emancipation from patriarchy (Saliba 2000, 1089). Browers writes that in the name of national liberation and Islamic authenticity, female behavior is circumscribed and regulated through the gendered constructions of Islamist discourses, even through those that imagine an emancipated status for women (Browers 2006, 24).

However, what is lacking in this approach is the pertinent question of how has Hamas
grown to be so popular among Palestinian women? Accordingly, has the continued
demand for attention to “women’s issues” changed in the rise of Islamist political parties
in the Palestinian Territories? The literature on Palestinian women is yet to fully address
this.

The Problematic

The central problematic of this study is informed by the observation that secular
Palestinian female activism once stood at the center of the Palestinian nationalist story.
However, this form of nationalism is no longer the hegemonic political voice of the
Palestinian people. Looking to the women of the Palestinian struggle, the question
becomes, what happens to notions of gender equality and traditionally secular modes of
female political participation in the rise of the Islamo-nationalist movement as the
Palestinian story continues to evolve? At the root of this question is the observation that
the Palestinian Islamist movement is a brand of politics that embraces a conservative
social and political platform. From this, feminist scholars and human rights activists
lament that the Islamist agenda is contradictory to traditionally secular ideals of female
empowerment and gender equality. But is the Islamist political movement permanently
fixed and unchanging when it comes to women’s rights and gender equality?

To answer these questions, this dissertation begins with an examination of four
main expressions of female political participation in the nationalist movement. It
compares secular-nationalist female political participation against female participation in
the Islamo-nationalist rise, and gives a nuanced account of how notions of gender
equality and women’s rights persist through the still unfolding story of Palestinian
nationalism. It also finds that a powerful demographic of Palestinian women has emerged. Importantly, this new demographic of Islamist Palestinian female activists challenges the assumption of the enduring incompatibility between the Islamist political platform and women’s rights and gender equality. In light of these revelations, one can begin to see how Islamist women continue to occupy a political place while perpetuating notions of gender equality in the political process still underway.

By looking at female participation through the continuities and ruptures associated with the transformation of Palestinian nationalism to date, this project serves to deepen an understanding of the less revealed aspects of female participation in the Palestinian Islamo-nationalist movement. This entails a recognition of the fact that women are central to this process are “frequently university educated, highly articulate, and vocal in their defense of women’s rights, conceptualized, of course, in Islamist terms” (Winter 2001, 16). While women can and do find involvement in the Palestinian Islamo-nationalist movement empowering, this does not mean that the acknowledgment of such agency is the same as tacit or implied approval. As Winter writes, to give unsanctioned approval for this type of female political behavior would be to “fall into either the “multiculturalist” trap of paternalism or the “pluralist” trap of liberal acceptance” (Winter 2001, 16). For example, in the former case, it would be all too simplistic to declare that we must withhold any scholarly scrutiny of Palestinian female political behavior, not only because these women happen to be Arab or Muslim, but also because they have suffered the effects of displacement and Israeli military occupation for over six decades as a people. In the latter case, falling into the trap of “liberal acceptance” would be to superficially celebrate Islamist female activism as working in
the name of progressive ideas. Thus, the key to this purposed method of study is to acknowledge Palestinian women as social and political actors while rigorously exploring their political behavior in the finer details of each case.

**Methodology**

Generated from the problematic above, the methodological approach of this dissertation contains two complementary aspects. The first aspect is an in depth historical case study of Palestinian female political behavior between 1987 and 2007. The second aspect is an inductive, ethnographic approach driven by my time spent as participant observer in the West Bank and East Jerusalem between 2007 and 2009. In combination, this two-part method of study helps to reveal new ways of looking at the evolving aspects of female political behavior in the Palestinian Islamist movement.

Looking to the emergent themes of female political behavior between 1987 and 2007, the first aspect of the methodology presents a historical overview, which is divided into four independent case examinations of female political engagement. The four cases are emblematic of the enduring opportunities for direct female political participation in the nationalist movement. Within each case is an account of the relationship between women and the secular and Islamist political movements, respectively, which enables the project to draw upon the historical intersection of secular-nationalist paradigm and the Isamo-nationalist rise. From this, the project is then able to demonstrate the historical transformation in Palestinian female political activism and discourse from secular-nationalist to Isamo-nationalist by design. Figure A presents a descriptive overview of each case.
Figure A: Four Cases of Female Political Behavior Examined in this Dissertation

Case 1: Political Motherhood

- Working within traditional view of Palestinian motherhood, secular Palestinian women are seen to utilize the traditional imagery of motherhood as a tool to gain and retain their influence in the political sphere. Similarly, the development of an Islamist conception of political motherhood builds upon this traditional view, and remains an avenue for female political participation. As Amal Amireh writes, “This brand of nationalism, where men bear arms and women bear children, is currently openly advocated by the Islamic movement in Palestine” (Amireh 2003, 757). In the Islamist paradigm, women-as-mothers are not just revered in the home or local community, but also emerge as viable political candidates for the Islamo-nationalist agenda.

Case 2: Political Representation

- Historically, a once-vibrant Palestinian women’s movement proliferated from within the array of secular-nationalist organizations, which comprised the Palestinian nationalist movement. However, the rise of Islamist Palestinian women’s organizations against the backdrop of secular women’s organizations has produced a plurality of voices concerning the role of women in the nationalist struggle. The rise of Islamist Palestinian women’s organizations has since generated new discussions and interpretations on the issue of women’s rights and gender equality along with new female political candidates in opposition to their secular-nationalist sisters.

Case 3: Violent Activism

- Throughout the 1990s, male operatives from the Islamist political organizations carried out the most violent attacks on Israeli targets. In the aftermath of the failure of the Camp David Accords in 2000, the military wings of Fatah joined the ranks of the Islamists in their own dispatch of suicide operatives. Prior to this time, Palestinian women sought out the Islamist groups and an effort to participate in the suicide bombing missions, but the Islamists refused to recruit female candidates for these controversial missions on the basis of their femininity. Until the Fatah-backed military wings began to dispatch female suicide bombers in 2002, Hamas maintained that women were unsuitable for violent operations on the basis of its conservative logic. However, after the secular-nationalist military wings released a string of female suicide bombers in early 2002, Hamas leadership began to renegotiate the political meaning of Palestinian femininity in response to a new political situation vis-à-vis the secular-nationalist groups and female demands for a more direct role in resistance operations.

Case 4: Non-Violent Activism

- Throughout the decades of resistance, Palestinian women have assumed an active and engaged role in nonviolent campaigns as a strategic alternative to the use of political violence. Within this endeavor, secular-nationalist and Islamist women have joined in various nonviolent protest and activities to end the Israeli occupation and the confiscation of Palestinian lands. In recent years, Islamist women have contributed to these activities with a modern Islamist interpretation on the role and expression of women as peacemakers and advocates of conflict resolution.
Each case shown above represents an avenue for female political engagement as it is expressed through the secular-nationalist discourse that rose to prominence in the 1960s and remained the hegemonic voice of Palestinian nationalism through the 1980s. Broadly, the women who filled these political roles considered themselves to be secular and progressive vanguards for women’s rights and gender equality in the greater Middle East. They appeared in the streets of the Palestinian Territories wearing denim jeans and uncovered hair, in a style that emulated the fashions of Western secularism of the 1980s and early 1990s. Beyond their physical appearance and attire, female political activists characteristically embraced the ideals of women’s rights and gender equality within a framework of democratic self-governance for the Palestinian people.

However, as the popularity of secular-nationalism waned and the Islamo-nationalist movement gained ground, Palestinian women remained in these available avenues for active political engagement, albeit in a newly fashioned, “Islamist” way. The female political activist of recent years is Islamically-dressed and seemingly “anti-secular”. Yet, like her secular counterparts, she still holds to the vision of Palestinian freedom, human rights and notions of gender equality. This time, however, she is doing so through the lens and new language of Islamo-nationalism.

Each case fits together to present a more coherent historical vision of Palestinian female political engagement. With this in mind, Figure B demonstrates the approach to seeing how each case contributes to the overall historical approach of this study.
In the order of cases shown above, the individual cases are sequentially presented in a chapter-by-chapter account as the project unfolds. Each chapter demonstrates the historic rise of the Palestinian Islamist movement and the changing opportunity structures for civic and political engagement afforded to women. In turn, each chapter then looks to various ways in which Palestinian women continue to engage in a political atmosphere that may appear as antithetical to female participation. Following this, a demonstration of the perspectives, voices and motivations of key female participants in context and their impact on the evolution of Palestinian nationalism is then highlighted by the second aspect of the methodological approach in this study.

The second methodological aspect of this study is an ethnographic approach, which is inductively driven through a fusion of primary and secondary sources and extensive field research. Figuratively, the ethnographic approach “rounds” the square containers of the case-by-case historical study to fill each frame with a more robust account of the nuances and adaptations of female political behavior. Qualitative in
design, this element of the methodology relies on what Cédric Jourde refers to as an “ethnographic sensibility”, an approach which undergirds the evidence presented here. As Jorde writes, ethnographic research methods are based on person-to-person contact, which helps to elicit insider perspectives and sensibilities (Jorde 2009, 202). This allows political scientists to see and question political relations and political sites that are generally “unseen” by mainstream research methods traditionally used by political scientists (Jorde 2009, 201). In this study, the historically “unseen” elements of female political engagement are, in effect, “seen” through first-hand anecdotes and participant-observer accounts of Palestinian women in their own contexts. As a result of my first-hand experiences in the West Bank and East Jerusalem between 2007 and 2009, the synthesis of ideas and observations presented here is done through what Jorde describes as an “ethnographic lens” that would not otherwise exist if I (as the researcher) had not interacted extensively with Palestinian women and their social world as a participant-observer (Jorde 2009, 202).

Combining the two features of the methodological approach of this study helps to generate a new understanding of female motivations for political action while, at the same time, highlighting the finer nuances of the Palestinian Islamo-nationalist movement as a coherent force. In doing so, this dissertation seeks to build upon previous studies of the Palestinian Islamist movement, such as Robinson (1997), Mishal and Sela (2000), Tamimi (2007), Gunning (2009) and Milton-Edwards and Farrell (2010). Importantly, these studies focus on a descriptive evolution of Hamas as an evolving social and political movement. At the same time, however, they fail to look at the interplay of Islamist leadership and demands placed on the movement by female supporters and
detractors alike. For example, Beverly Milton-Edwards and Stephen Farrell’s most recent study of Hamas claims to get “inside” the mind of Hamas. In doing so, these authors present Hamas as a coherent force with absolutely no ideological “middle ground”, as they claim in the opening pages of their book (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010, vi). Yet, in spite extensive first-hand accounts with Hamas fighters and activists and a chapter devoted to “Women”, Milton-Edwards and Farrell also do not explicitly engage in the evolving details of Palestinian female political behavior vis-à-vis the Islamo-nationalist movement or perhaps see it as a compelling story worth telling.

Admittedly, what Milton-Edwards and Farrell indicate concerning the lack of political or ideological “middle ground” in the Islamist movement is what drives this dissertation to produce a more nuanced account of the movement by looking at the women of Hamas. As Milton-Edwards and Farrell also note, “Hamas can be excoriated, but it should not be underestimated” (Milton-Edwards and Farrell, Hamas 2010, viii). Not only is Hamas one of the most important Islamic organizations in the Middle East today, its centrality to the Palestinian nationalist movement will resonate for years to come through the generations of Palestinians who remain, as ever, stateless and politically disenfranchised. Bearing the plight of these two issues in mind, what this project demonstrates is that female participants in the Palestinian struggle still have not abandoned feminist principles of gender equality and women’s rights in exchange for the brand of hard-line political extremism that may exclude them from the political process. Moreover, these ideals are incorporated and infused in the vision of the “new” Islamo-nationalist woman. It is from these observations that this project shows how historically secular ideals of gender equality and women’s rights remain with Palestinian women in
their interaction with the Islamo-nationalist movement and continued demand for Palestinian self-determination as a whole. Finally, from this inductively-driven perspective, this dissertation proposes that a “new” Palestinian woman is emerging from the Islamist challenge to secular-nationalist politics. In this synthesis of ideas, the new Palestinian woman, in turn, is also shaping and bringing forth the next era of Palestinian nationalism. Shown below, Figure C demonstrates the synthesis of ideas emerging from the methodology of this inquiry:

**Figure C: Inductive Synthesis of Ideas**

![Diagram showing the synthesis of ideas in the dissertation]

Emerging from the historical and ethnographic approaches used in this study, we can begin to see the greater nuances of Palestinian women as political participants and agents of their nationalist struggle. Are the Islamo-nationalist aspects of Palestinian female political engagement a vital element in the politically evolving animal of the Palestinian Islamist movement? As this study demonstrates, the official Islamist political
platform is less coherently fixed than what is presented in prevailing studies. As such it has been historically pressured to accept and accommodate Palestinian women as constituents and political actors within it. At the same time, some Palestinian women have gradually-yet-critically accepted and accommodated the Islamist political platform as a vehicle for political participation and social contestation in Palestinian society.

**Conclusion**

This dissertation seeks to develop a new analytical approach for understanding the Palestinian case in order to challenge the question of how and why some women—who appear to diverge from the sensibilities and commitments of Western feminism’s emancipatory visions—are active participants and supporters of the Islamist transformations. I argue that the available avenues for female political participation in the Palestinian nationalist struggle have not been limited or controlled by the Islamist movement in its rise. Nevertheless, while the avenues for political participation available to women remain unchanged since the start of the 1987 intifada, the mode of expression of female political participation has changed by becoming more “Islamist” as a result of a dynamic and evolving opportunity structure generated by the proliferation of the Islamo-nationalist movement.

From these observations, this dissertation builds upon Saba Mahmood’s observation of a prevalent yet false supposition in the West that female supporters of Islamist movements are “pawns in a grand patriarchal plan, who if freed from their bondage would naturally express their instinctual abhorrence for the traditional Islamic mores used to enchain them” (Mahmood 2005, 3). With this in mind, this study, begins to
answer Lila Abu-Lughod’s call to more closely follow the discussions of Muslim women’s rights as the important issues of social and political equality that “circulate through debates and documents, organize women’s activism, and mediate women’s lives” (Abu-Lughod 2010, 2).

The chapters that follow build from the methodology in order to examine the core argument presented that illuminate the pathway of female commitment to gender equality and women’s rights through the various manifestations of Palestinian women’s political behavior. However, before moving ahead, Chapter Two provides a review of existing literature and a discussion of the scholarly contributions made by this project.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

In light of the recent and profound ideological shifts concerning the Islamization of the Palestinian struggle for statehood, the political role and objectives of women in the Islamo-nationalist movement of Palestine deserves greater scrutiny. To date, few academic studies attempt to critique the secular-Islamist shift in female involvement in the Palestinian struggle. This dissertation clarifies the story of what happens to Palestinian women and their notions of gender equality through the changing patterns of political participation, while making a contribution to studies in nationalism and post-colonial movements, social movements, identity and feminist research in the Middle East.

Seeking to broadly explain the role of women in nationalist endeavors, Deniz Kandiyoti explains, “Despite the extensive literature on nationalism, there are relatively few systematic attempts to analyze women’s integration into nationalist projects” (Kandiyoti 1991, 429). Responding to this statement, this project assumes a systematic approach to women in the Palestinian nationalist projects in a blended, interdisciplinary approach. This approach draws from four scholarly areas of thought in order to account for the shifts in female political behavior in the Palestinian nationalist story. These areas are: 1) nationalism and post-colonial studies, 2) social movement research, 3) identity studies and identity politics, and 4) feminist political thought.
Depicted below in Figure D are the four scholarly areas from which this project draws and, in turn, seeks to make its scholarly contribution:

**Figure D: Four Foundational Pillars of Thought Framing this Dissertation**

The figure above demonstrates the bodies of literature used to integrate the project as a whole. Each area is considered an individual pillar of thought upon which this project builds. Moving horizontally, each area possesses some overlap with the next. Adding complexity, this overlap helps to form the interdisciplinary nature of the project. To demonstrate the layers of overlap or interaction between the areas shown above, the diagram on the following page gives a visual account of the role that each area of thought plays both individually and overall in this dissertation as it contributes to the existing literature.
In the onion-like model in Figure E, the relationship between the four areas of thought framing this project occurs in stratified layers, where each individual area contributes to the dynamism of the project as whole. At the center of this study is the theme of nationalism and post-colonial scholarship, which is then layered upon by social movement research. Enveloping both of these approaches is the body of work done in the scholarly domain of identity studies and identity politics. Lastly, the outermost layer of this study—the level that entirely “wraps” the project together—is a feminist political research pertaining to women in the Middle East. In its entirety, the body of work is an interdisciplinary approach to each area of study. In light of the integration of these four areas, the greatest contribution of this work is to the field of feminist political studies.
The following sections of this chapter provide a review the existing literature within each area of thought by highlighting the scholarly contributions and connections brought to the dissertation. In turn, each section highlights what this dissertation adds to each area of thought and explains the contribution that this project makes to the gaps in the preexisting literature.

**Literature Review**

*Nationalism, Post-Colonial Studies (and Women)*

Since the late eighteenth century, the study of nationalism has been the subject of scholarly inquiry. Emerging in the latter half of the twentieth century, nationalism studies relevant to the Middle East demonstrate the paradoxes and limitation of a Western-inspired enterprise of nationalist thought in the post-colonial world. Preliminarily, this dissertation draws from the work of three more mainstream scholars of nationalism and post-colonial thought in the Middle East. These scholars are Elie Kedourie, Benedict Anderson and Edward Said. Added to this critique are feminist studies on women and nationalism, which also inform this area of the project.

Drawing from twentieth century scholarly approaches to nationalist projects, Elie Kedourie’s work speaks directly to the development of nationalist thought and its limitations in the Middle East. As a critic of the imperial order and Western values that the British attempted to instill and then subsequently abandon in the Middle East, Kedourie published *Nationalism* in 1960. *Nationalism* demonstrates Kedourie’s perspective the historic downfall of nationalist projects under the political circumstances created by the British in the Middle East. For example, this work builds a theoretical and
historical case against nationalism as an ideology that has generated new conflicts, exacerbated tensions and brought large-scale catastrophes to innocent people. As Kedourie simply writes, “The attempts to refashion so much of the world on national lines has not led to greater peace and stability” (Kedourie 1993, 133-4). A decade later, Kedourie published a collection of essays known as the *Chatham House Version and Other Middle Eastern Studies*. Once again, against the prevailing perception in Britain that the post-colonial moment brought forth a “liberation” or “awakening” to the former subjects of the British crown, Kedourie is critical of the dislocation of millions, the extreme flashes of violence, and emerging tyranny and despotism of the self-appointed leaders that took root in post-colonial lands, all in the name of the nationalism (Kedourie 1984).

Of particular importance to this dissertation is Kedourie’s reference to the modern Middle East as ‘a wilderness of tigers’, or a product of radical (“leftist”) nationalism, which came to fruition in the hasty British withdrawal from the Middle East in the mid-twentieth century, and came more fully to light in the pan-Arab political designs by the leading powers of the Middle East thereafter (Pryce-Jones 2004). Here Kedourie’s dissatisfaction with the ideological perspective that sees the “awakening” of the Middle East under British colonialism is evident. Of course, Kedourie’s acrimonious account of nationalism depicts the new countries of Middle East as “awakening” to their own despotic traditions, which are exacerbated by the Western model of self-determination.

Kedourie’s work is pivotal to this dissertation for explaining the historic rise of secular Palestinian nationalism in the twentieth century and the story of the Islamist shift of this brand of nationalism in the 1990s as it correlates to the broader political history of
the Middle East in the twentieth century. Certainly, the Palestinian case is not immune to the rise of nationalism in the post-colonial era and the degree of extreme destabilization and the emergence of despotic leaders that came with it. (This is especially relevant in the current revolutions taking place in the Arab world in recent events as well.) However, what is missing in Kedourie’s writing is an account of how the finer intricacies of the same notions of self-determination vis-à-vis the Palestinian nationalist endeavor. For example, what is missing is an account of how the participation of women in the nationalist movement may have facilitated the Palestinian nationalist story in a unique and interesting way. In this silence, Kedourie’s work omits the fact that one essential and lingering component of the post-colonial nationalist legacy in the Middle East is the political behavior and ideological expression of the women of the Middle East today as proponents of self-determination and gender equality—admittedly, two very Western conceptions in origin and design. Focusing on the outcome and legacy of post-colonial nationalist thought in the Palestinian case, this study bridges the gap between Kedourie’s focus on the detriments of what he sees as an uncritical view of post-colonial nationalist movements in the Middle East and the question of what more has come from the contradictions of nationalism in the Middle East—particularly in the Palestinian case for self-determination and its female proponents/participants.

Kedourie’s political stance on the poverty of nationalist designs in the Middle East is clear, yet this trenchant viewpoint of nationalism also overlooks the fact that nationalism is considered by some to be based on deeply rooted feelings of unity and community among peoples. For example, in his work on nationalism, Anderson’s Imagined Communities sees a nation as a socially constructed entity, created by a group
of people who perceive of themselves to be a part of a definable entity. Anderson argues that it is the notion of an imagined community that makes it possible for many millions of people to kill in the name of the community and die for it as well (Anderson 2006, 7).

With this, Anderson uses culturally rooted ideas of national consciousness to support his claims. While Anderson’s work fails to address the case of Palestine directly, he would argue that the inspiration for nationalism in the Palestinian case is not the nation itself, but the nationalism that “invented” it.

Building on Anderson’s claim but taking it a step deeper, Julie Peteet argues that the notion that all national identity is “constructed” is a dangerous claim (Peteet 1998). For example, insofar as Palestinian nationalism can be perceived as a modern invention with no historical roots per se, simply seeing Palestinian nationalism as a social construction can potentially empty the nationalist cause of its moral (and even practical) validity. Responding to Anderson, Peteet demonstrates that the veritable “dream” of Palestine is tied to the actual nightmare of the nationalist dream of Zionism in Palestine. This nightmare arrived in the Middle East in the socially constructed form of Zionism, or “exclusivist sectarianism”, with a self-styled logic calling for the displacement and erasure of the Palestinian people from a land called Palestine (Peteet 1998, 81-82).

According to Peteet, the identity of the Palestinian people became dramatically sharpened under Zionist claims. Historically, the Palestinians were long considered Arabs—broadly identified by regional elements of kinship, religion, class, tribe and a much broader Arab identity under Ottoman rule. However, as we know it today, the trajectory of Palestinian identity and nationalism is correlated to the suddenness and particular experience of collective dislocation.
Building from Hall and relying on the in depth nature of the study done by Peteet, this project demonstrates that the “dream” of the Palestinian nationalist project is continuing to evolve in a socially constructed way due to the active and expanding role of women as authors and agents of Palestinian nationalism in the twenty-first century. In doing so, this project seeks to add more to the study of nationalism in two ways. First, this dissertation demonstrates how the idea of Palestinian nationalism is not only an obvious and valid claim, but also one that is continually evolving beyond the initial features of Anderson’s social constructivist design. This is shown by tracing the more recent emergence of Islamist political movements in the Middle East and their impact on the character of the Palestinian nationalist movement to date.

Second, what Anderson misses in his model is the role of women as active members of the imagined community. Here, Anderson only goes so far to say that the objectives of nationalism use the vocabulary of kinship and home, terms used in association to classically feminine idyllic behavior of selfless attachment and personal sacrifice. However, the finer details of female actions and interactions within nationalist movements and group identity are overlooked. Tracing the four specific aspects of female political engagement in the Palestinian nationalist struggle mentioned in Chapter One, this dissertation seeks to bridge Anderson’s theoretical design nationalist ideology with a demonstration of its implementation.

While arguments and approaches to the defining characteristics of nationalism in the Middle East continue to be challenged by scholars, the field of postcolonial studies is also relevant to this study. In particular, the work of Edward Said offers another important foundation for the research presented here concerning Palestinian nationalism.
Said’s work shows how Palestinians were collectively dispossessed of their homes, lands and identity, and thus denied the right to claim their national identity in relation to a particular place. In a well-known essay entitled, “Permission to Narrate”, first published in the *London Review of Books* in February 1984, Said states that the Palestinian narrative has “never been officially admitted to Israeli history, except as that of “non-Jews,” whose inert presence in Palestine was a nuisance to be ignored or expelled (Said 1994, 254).

Said argues that political recognition of national identity is the basis for giving justice to the people of Palestine and resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. From this, Said’s work challenges any researcher of the Palestinian struggle to explore the dark silences in the study of history, anthropology and international relations (and other academic disciplines) in an effort to cast greater light on the Palestinian voice and claims for a universally recognized national narrative.

Interestingly, where a study of Middle East women is concerned, credit is given to Said’s publication of *Orientalism* (1978) as engendering the emergence of recent feminist scholarship and debate in Middle East studies. However, the social and political agenda of Said’s work is not to address women in the Palestinian nationalist movement per se. As Abu-Lughod writes, *Orientalism* was not meant to be work of feminist scholarship or theory, yet the work “opened up the possibility for others to go further than Said had in exploring the gender and sexuality of Orientalist discourse” (Abu-Lughod 2001, 101).

To this end, Said’s work provides the foundation for more robust research, and specifically a “burgeoning historical and anthropological research that claimed to be going beyond stereotypes of the Muslim or Middle Eastern woman and gender relations in general” (Abu-Lughod 2001, 101). Again, however, while Said’s writing has served to
inspire the emergence of feminist scholarship in the Middle East, it stops short at the role that Palestinian women play in their own nationalist story. Every chapter of this dissertation endeavors to bridge this gap.

At the heart of this study, the work of Kedourie, Anderson and Said inform this project on Palestinian nationalism. Their work also provides this project with an intellectual jumping off point where the issue of female agency in the nationalist struggle is concerned. Due to this missing piece in the mainstream literature on nationalism, feminist research on women and nationalism also informs this dissertation. Yet, while feminist research on women and nationalist movements is particularly robust, an account of Islamist women in the Palestinian nationalist movement is yet to be fully developed.

Historically, the gendered elements and aspects of female support for nationalist projects have long been a staple of feminist intellectual inquiry. This is especially highlighted by Virginia Woolf’s essay on women and nationalism, *Three Guineas* (1938), which presents the dilemma of why English women were asked to support the nationalist cause in the Second World War when they had not yet attained full citizen rights in their own country. Woolf writes, “Our country…throughout the greater part of history has treated me as a slave; it has denied me education or any share of its possessions…in fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world” (Woolf 1938, 107-109). Woolf’s critique of the contentious relationship between feminism and nationalism informs the evidence presented in this dissertation between the tensions that arise when Palestinian women become nationalists in the name of their country while also struggling for recognition as equal citizens.
From Woolf’s work, this dissertation gains its foundation as a project seeking to build upon the tensions already observed from the relationship between women (as citizens), feminism (as women’s equal rights) and nationalism (as territorial integrity, political independence and sovereignty). To this, Deniz Kandiyoti’s work on women and nationalism elicits the observation that the integration of women into nationalist projects in post-colonial societies has been “rich in paradoxes and ambiguities” (Kandiyoti 1991, 440). Kandiyoti’s work indicates that the bulk of academic discourse on nationalism more generally demonstrates how women and gender remain ignored or marginalized in nationalist movements. Against Woolf and Kandiyoti’s observations on women in nationalist projects, however, this project sees Palestinian women as part of the nationalist movement as citizens and activists, and not as passive recipients whose rights and voices become eclipsed in the political sphere. Even if female involvement in nationalist endeavors can be rife with inconsistency and contradiction, nationalist and post-colonialist movements have also created the space for debate over the question of women’s role in society. Moreover, this dissertation sees women in the Palestinian nationalist movement as struggling to define and re-conceptualize their relationship to the movement as it evolves.

In sum, this first pillar of the project works within the intersection of studies on nationalism, feminism, and female agency in nationalist movements, and builds upon this foundation by studying the case of Palestine. Literature on nationalism and post-colonial nationalist movements in the Middle East serves this area of investigation. Additionally, key studies on women and nationalism in feminist studies help to generate the feminist
lens of this project as a whole. From these two approaches, this dissertation furthers two relevant insights to the study of nationalism and feminism:

First, this dissertation builds upon the demonstrated tensions in feminist political thought between feminism and nationalism by providing an analysis of female agency within the Palestinian nationalist struggle. Second, it demonstrates the evolving character of nationalism in the Palestinian context and the role that women play within it. Some Palestinian women have come to support the Palestinian Islamist movement as an answer to the enduring struggle for nationhood, and also as a response to the insecurity that has plagued their society as one under military occupation. Certainly the rise of Islamist political movements in the Middle East more broadly has served to reinforce harsh stereotypes about the people and the region—especially in regard to the status of women in Islamic cultures. However, this dissertation sees the tie between nationalism and feminism in Palestine in a far more complex way as a means of drawing new connections from the relationship between women and the story of the Palestinian nationalist struggle.

Social Movement Studies (and Women)

The next pillar of this research comes from existing literature in social movement studies. Seeking to explain how and why social mobilization occurs, interdisciplinary approaches to social movements are found in a wide range of sociological, cultural, psychological and political studies. On one side of the spectrum of social movement research is the structural approach, which focuses on states and groups and the international system to explain large-scale episodes of collective action. On the other side of this spectrum is the rational choice model, in which individuals (as opposed to states or
groups) are rational actors, who interact in the world around them on the basis of strategically maximizing their utility. Meanwhile, social movement theory (SMT) falls between structuralist and rational choice schools of thought, in a “middle ground approach in analyzing episodes of contentious collective action” (Robinson 2003, 113). For the purpose of this study, each approach adds increasingly greater layers to a more complete understanding of the Palestinian struggle and the agency of female participants within it.

The structuralist approach to understanding collective action is well known in Theda Skocpol’s *States and Social Revolutions* (1979). Skocpol’s work explains that social revolutions are essentially rapid transformations of a society's state and social structures. Unlike a rebellion, which may not engender a structural change to the state apparatus, Skocpol writes that a social revolution can be distinguished by fundamental changes occurring within a state’s structure as a result. From this, two aspects are prevalent in social revolution: 1) basic changes in social structure and political structure occur in a mutually reinforcing fashion, and 2) these changes occur through intense sociopolitical conflict.

Employing the structuralist approach to collective action in this study, this project addresses four instances of social movements taking place in the Palestinian case. First, the evolution of secular-nationalist Palestinian nationalism as early as the 1950s is in itself a social movement occurring in the broader historical and sociopolitical structure of the Middle East in twentieth century Arab nationalism. Second, within this movement is the historic emergence of Palestinian women as agents of Palestinian nationalism. Subsequently, some female Palestinian nationalists became advocates of the evolution of
viewpoints concerning the gender-based social structures governing Palestinian society as a whole. In this case, feminism (based on ideas of gender equality) and nationalism came to be seen as mutually reinforcing issues for the women of the Palestinian nationalist movement. Third, is the emergence of Palestinian Islamism from the greater structure of Middle East history and the Palestinian struggle, and particularly the political entity, Hamas, which is, itself, a social movement engaging in extensive and social activities that continue to shape the character and expression of the Palestinian nationalist movement. Finally, a corollary to the rise of the structural forces that gave way to Hamas is the emergence of the Palestinian Islamic female activist in recent years due to the changing opportunity structure created by the rise of Palestinian Islamism.

Approaching social movements from a structural perspective, Skocpol argues that the voluntaristic (rational choice) theories, which are common in political science, fail to perceive the structural forces that create opportunities for social revolutions. To this, it can be seen that the emergence of Palestinian feminism was not autonomous, but bound to the structure of the national context which helped to not only produce it, but give it space to proliferate. However, by taking only a structuralist perspective in this study of Palestinian female agency necessarily entails a failure to perceive why some women choose to more directly participate in the Palestinian struggle, whether as secular or Islamist activists, respectively. Here, in light of the larger structural issues at play, Skocpol’s account of greater structural issues fails to illuminate the more personal and circumstantial choices demanded of Palestinian women as citizens of what can appear as an enduring and an unending struggle for personal and political freedom.
Against the structuralist approach to social movements, rational choice theorists, such as Edward Muller and Karl-Dieter Opp (1986), strongly consider the personal convictions of individuals when participating in social movements. According to Muller and Opp, “Rational individuals will compare the benefits and costs of participation with those of inactivity, and choose the course of action in which their expected utility is maximized” (Muller and Opp 1986, 471). The structural explanations of the four Palestinian movements mentioned previously are best explained by looking more widely at the whole of the Middle East. However, to answer the question of why some Palestinian women choose to become Islamist political activists on one hand, while, on the other hand, other women become secular political activists is best explained by the emphasis on the individual in the rational choice approach. According to rational choice theory, states, systems and groups do not make rational choices, but individuals do. This accounts for why—as feminist scholar, Valentine Moghadam, claims—“it is a mistake to see Islamist women as passive and subservient. In many of these movements, one finds women activists and ideologues” (V. Moghadam 1991, 268).

Observing and incorporating the systemic forces at play in the Middle East as well as voluntaristic choices made by Palestinian women, this study incorporates the structural and rational actor units of analysis in what is more recently known as Social Movement Theory (SMT). According to Glenn E. Robinson, SMT emerged as a more nuanced approach in studying episodes of collective action by serving as a middle ground in social movement research (Robinson 2003, 113). For example, SMT sees large-scale structural change as beyond the control of any individual. At the same time, however, structural elements are also important in providing changing opportunity structures in
which an individual chooses to act. Changing opportunity structures do not necessarily dictate specific outcomes since the individual is the one with rational agency.

Using SMT, Robinson’s (2003) work sheds light on Hamas as a social movement. He regards the middle-ground approach of SMT as both useful and relevant to his research for constructing a more powerful understanding of groups like Hamas. To Robinson, SMT avoids more polarized analytical frameworks, which is especially important in the study of social movements such as Hamas, which may already appear as polarized and extreme in its own political stance. Importantly, Robinson writes that his research demonstrates that, “Islamism, like other things Muslim, can be understood through the application of general concepts and does not exist in a parallel explanatory universe where a completely different set of theoretical tools is necessary to make sense of it” (Robinson 2003, 135-136).

Particularly in the Muslim world today, more contextualized approaches to social movements are beginning to be used in order to understand the patterns unique to Islamic activism (Wiktorowicz 2003). As Quintan Wiktorowicz writes, these new developments in social scientific research can provide “theoretical leverage over many issues relevant to Islamic activism” (Wiktorowicz 2003, 3). In sum, this project takes into account the pillar of structural and rational choice models for interpreting the evolution of the Palestinian nationalist movement as a study of social movements. However, it most relies on Robinson’s embrace of SMT as an analytical framework for studying the Palestinian Islamist movement. From this, the structuralist and rational theoretical approaches in social movement studies are used as a mean for explaining the choices and agency of Palestinian women in the nationalist movement and their struggle for gender equality.
Importantly, this second pillar of intellectual inquiry furthers Robinson’s work with SMT on Hamas as a social movement by providing a fuller conceptualization of the Islamo-nationalist shift in Palestinian nationalism by seeing the agency of female participants within it.

*Identity Studies (and Women)*

For the past four decades, social and nationalist movements have shifted scholarly attention to issues of group agency and political action (Cerulo 1997, 386). As a result of this, identity studies now focus on an array of areas that inform the field. These areas are mainly gender/sexuality, race/ethnicity studies and class-based research as a way of understanding the mobilizing aspects of collective identity. As the third intellectual pillar framing this project, identity studies is joined in an interdisciplinary manner to feminist studies in nationalist movements mentioned previously. For example, as Kandiyoti writes, “The very language of nationalism singles women out as the symbolic repository of group identity” (Kandiyoti 1991, 434). As the third pillar of this investigation, studies in identity form a critical cornerstone within modern sociological thought and provide this project with a lens for observing women in the secular and Islamist aspects of the Palestinian nationalist movement in greater detail. For the purpose of this investigation, the work of Stuart Hall and Judith Butler, scholars in identity and identity politics, respectively, are discussed. While each author’s work contributes to the pillar of thought informing this study, they also provide a jumping off point from which this dissertation contributes to the canon of identity and identity politics in the study of Palestinian female identity in the nationalist movement.
At the heart of sociological studies of identity, Stuart Hall maintains that identity is a continuously evolving construction or “a process never completed—always ‘in process’” (Hall 2000, 16). For Hall, specific formations and behavioral practices within historical and institutional sites inform the evolution of identity. To illustrate this, Hall writes that his use of the word “identity” refers to meeting point between discourses and practices and the social processes which create them (Hall 2000, 19). Asking the question of what makes identity or where does it come from, Hall cites cultural critic Kobena Mercer, who observes, “Identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty” (Mercer 1990).

While Hall and Mercer’s work does not speak directly to the Palestinian case, this project evokes their mainstream sociological approach to identity and nationalism to build a contextualized understanding of the historical struggle for a nation called Palestine in light of the awakening of the Palestinian people to their sudden disenfranchisement with the establishment of Israel in 1948. Building from Mercer’s observation above, a distinct sense of Palestinian identity emerged from the catastrophic realization that the stable sense of transcendent Arab “unity” would do nothing to save or preserve the people of Palestine from the territorial aims of the Zionist national project. In fact, it is only after the physical displacement of the Palestinian people from their homes and ancestral communities in 1948 that a distinct and coherent conception of Palestinian identity became crystallized. To this, Hall notes that the process of “identification” is open-ended and variable, and therefore open to new conventional layers and re-invention. As the systems of meaning and cultural representation multiply,
Hall writes that human beings are “confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with—at least temporarily” (Hall 1996, 598). Thus, as identity is socially constructed and the quality and character of identity is fixed to the influences of time and place, it is not fixed, but open to continual interpretation and evolution.

Hall and Mercer’s views on identity studies enable this third pillar of the project to demonstrate how the understanding of Palestinian identity was initially formed from a moment of crisis and has since evolved in response to the changing circumstances facing Palestinian nationalism. However, where their work shows the theoretical construction and ever-changing aspects of identity in a very broad sense, there is failure to articulate how elements of national identity and cultural difference are exerted in a local context. This is especially pertinent in forms of social control over women and girls (such as compulsory veiling in the Gaza Strip) that ultimately impinges on female rights as citizens of the modern state. This secondary aspect of identity studies in this project is framed by the feminist thinkers in identity politics, Judith Butler and scholars in Middle Eastern gender identities, Floya Anthias, Deniz Kandiyoti, Valentine Moghadam and Nira Yuval-Davis, who focus more acutely on the intersection of identity construction and gender relationships in nationalist contexts.

Like the work of Stuart Hall, Judith Butler’s contribution to the framing of gendered political identities is foundational to this investigation for her demonstration of how subjects of political structures are “formed, defined and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of those structures” (Butler 1999, 4). Related to this is the question of how Palestinian women operate within changing political opportunity structures, and,
in doing so, how they are constituted as recognizable subjects by the secular and Islamo-nationalist leadership, respectively. Butler writes, “the feminist subject turns out to be discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation” (Butler 1999, 4). In this, Butler’s work challenges this new research on the politicization of women in the Islamo-nationalist movement as a way of understanding how the category of “women, the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought” (Butler 1999, 5).

Like Hall’s work on the social construction of identity, Butler’s work presents a theoretical call for greater critique of the relationship between feminist political identity and practice, the empirical question of the fate of female identity in Palestinian nationalism question remains unaddressed. Acknowledging this gap, this dissertation observes and demonstrates how elements of female identity can ultimately be articulated as forms of control over women and infringe upon their rights as citizens. Yet, as mentioned in previous sections, this project continues to see women as simultaneous subjects and authors of their political fate. From the perspective of identity studies, the approach to female subjectivity in this dissertation adds to Hall and Butler’s analysis. Moving further, it also builds from the work of Yuval Davis and Anthias on women in nationalist movements, insofar as women are not only “signify the nation but also embody it as subjects, as authors narrating the nation, as participants and leaders in nationalist struggle, and as those who bear and nurture children for nation-state projects” (Yuval-Davis and Anthias, Woman-Nation-State 1989, 8). Thus, while the relationship between political Islamization and the role of Palestinian female behavior may seem counter-intuitive to a feminist political agenda at first glance, this dissertation fills in the
gap in how the role of women in Islamist movements is understood, by way of seeing female identity in the Palestinian nationalist movement as a result being influenced by the rise of the Islamo-nationalist movement within it.

In sum, Hall’s work tells us that identity is a product of ever-shifting social conditions dictated by time and place. Butler’s work shows us that the development of political identities are also context-dependent, but can be perpetuated in a manner to ultimately work to dampen the rights and notions of citizenship afforded to female subjects within systems of power. Taking these two approaches in identity studies into consideration, what this dissertation seeks to demonstrate is how the Palestinian nationalist movement has evolved from secular to Islamo-nationalist, and within this context, how Palestinian female identity has shifted and adapted while Palestinian women continue to demand equal political rights and social equality in a new political terrain that may be antithetical to such notions.

**Feminist Political Studies in the Middle East**

Forming the final foundational body of literature in this dissertation is feminist political studies with a regional emphasis in the Middle East. This is also the area of thought where this project makes its greatest contribution in terms of expanding the literature on the role of women in Islamist political movements. From an interdisciplinary perspective, feminist political research draws from wide range of studies, including (but not limited to) work in nationalism and post-colonial movements, social movements and identity politics, and feminist political research. Feminist case studies of the Middle East provide multifaceted and extensive accounts of female experience and social history of
the region. The paragraphs that follow contain an overview of the existing literature relevant to this dissertation and a discussion of the existing gaps in the literature, which this project ultimately seeks to fill.

To date, the existing literature on Palestinian women forms a distinct subset to feminist research on the Middle East. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, many celebratory accounts of Palestinian women’s movement emerged. These accounts roundly praised Palestinian women for their embrace of secular feminist principles within the struggle for Palestinian freedom. The existing literature includes Abdo (1991, 1994), Abu-Duhou (2003), Gluck (1995), Hammami (1990), Hasso (2005), Hiltermann (1993), Jad (et. al), Jad, Johnson and Giacaman (2000), Kuttab (et. al), Mayer (1994), Najjar (1993), Peteet (1991, 1994), Rubenberg (2001), Sabbagh, ed. (1998), Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2009), Sharoni (1994), Strum (1992), Warnock (1990). Similarly, these authors demonstrate that Palestinian women have long been active at the center of the Palestinian nationalism, albeit reluctantly, as agents of Western feminist ideals. As a result, the secular forms of activism and feminism are now well-known aspects of the Palestinian case. However, a new critique of the rise of Islamist female political activism in recent years is yet to be fully developed.

With this in mind, much of the work in feminist political studies of the Middle East is ethnographic in design, with a deliberate effort made by the researcher to profile the lives of Middle Eastern in their own social and political contexts. For example, Elizabeth Warnock Fernea’s groundbreaking feminist study of women in the Middle East, *Guests of the Sheik* (1965), uses feminist ethnography to study Iraqi women from the remote village of El Nahra in the mid-twentieth century. As a cultural anthropologist,
Fearnea’s work inspired the realm of contemporary feminist research on the Middle East, which this project seeks to make its greatest contribution. Recently, ethnographic studies have begun to focus on women in religious movements, demonstrating the ongoing need to expand on research in this vein. For example, Sherine Hafez’s work *The Terms of Empowerment: Islamic Women Activists in Egypt* (2003), questions the applicability of the term “empowerment” as defined by Western liberal discourses to Islamic women's activism. Hafez follows this with *An Islam of Her Own* (2011), which looks to religion and secularism in Egyptian women’s movements. This work challenges binary representations of women in Islamic movements as secular/religious, liberal/non liberal, rational/irrational. Focusing on the Shi’a community in Lebanon, Lara Deeb’s account of gender and public piety in Lebanon in *An Enchanted Modern* (2006) how women are at the heart of their community as “everyday Islamists”, where the realms of politics and piety are not at all discreet.

Missing in the geographic variety of these ethnographies is an equally rigorous approach to women in the Palestinian Islamist movement. Although this project is decidedly not a full ethnography by design, it is inspired by two years of field research and firsthand accounts of Palestinian women in the pivotal rise of Islamist politics of the nationalist movement between 2007 and 2009. As such, the opening and concluding chapters of this project pull from the enormous amount of time spent living and working with Palestinian women in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Interspersed throughout the chapters of this work are various references to field notes, which support this project’s contribution to the expanding genre of feminist scholarship pertaining
Palestinian women. Moreover, this project serves as an inspiration for my next project, which is a feminist ethnography of my own fieldwork and experiences in Palestine.

Supported by fieldwork and the ethnographic insights this generated, each chapter returns to the theme that women in the Palestinian Islamist movement are not only searching for a sense of respect in their society, but also for a redefinition of status as women. This approach furthers Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s account of third world women in terms in their daily lives within the framework of underdevelopment, oppressive traditions, high illiteracy, rural and urban poverty, and religious fanaticism (Mohanty, Russo and Torres 1991, 3-4). It also adds to Valentine M. Moghadam’s work on the relationship between women and Islamic social and political conventions in the Muslim world, by bringing greater awareness to the merging aspects of politics and religious piety in women’s lives in the Palestinian case.

Moving further into the evolving debate on women and Islam, this project builds upon Saba Mahmood’s groundbreaking account of women in the Egyptian piety movement, *The Politics of Piety* (2005). Mahmood deconstructs the distortions that common modes of liberalism and feminism still impose on the women of the Muslim world. In recent years, Islamist political movements and their emergence in the Islamic world have been broadly disparaged for their social conservatism and rejection of liberal values, particularly in the area of gender equality. As Mahmood indicates, Islamist movements have been disliked on this basis, which further reaffirms their status as “agents of a dangerous rationality”, especially where “women’s active support for socio-religious movements that sustain principles of female subordination poses a dilemma for feminist analysts” (Mahmood 2005, 1, 5). Mahmood’s work demonstrates the continuing
need for Western feminists to question the basic assumptions that inform their understanding of feminism, and thus, their approach to understanding the lives and intentions of women living beyond the context of the Western world. Mahmood’s work shows how the adherence of women to the patriarchal norms of illiberal social movements demonstrates the limited scope of key assumptions within feminist theory concerning freedom, agency, authority and the female subject. It forms the baseline for this inquiry, insofar as it builds upon what is already known of female involvement in the Islamic political movement in the Palestinian case by seeing the agency of Islamic women, even in a movement that is antithetical to Western notions of gender-based social and political equality and rights.

Each substantive chapter of this dissertation seeks to demonstrate the continued discussion of women’s rights and gender equality in the Palestinian case is now linked to the integral project of Islamization and the opportunity structures for women this movement has created in terms of political motherhood, opportunities for political representation, and forums for participation in violent and nonviolent modes of resistance. Pertinent to this approach is the work of Islah Jad (2009), whose most recent writing on Palestinian women demonstrates the need for a greater critique of the classic secularist stance that separates faith from politics. Importantly, Jad makes the observation that, “By ‘Islamising’ Arabs and ‘nationalising’ Islam, the Islamists have proved themselves successful in forging a brand of nationalism on which Islam was integral and constituted a mobilising force for the masses” (Jad 2009). Where newer studies of Palestinian women are concerned, Jad’s work creates a new space for continued scholarly contributions on the women in the Palestinian Islamist movement, specifically. In light of
this, this dissertation seeks to add to Jad’s commitment to a fuller account of non-secular women, by seeking to demonstrate their agency and voices in the Palestinian case.

**Conclusion**

This dissertation attempts to make several contributions to the areas of thought and the literature highlighted in this review. Broadly, the first is a synthesis of previous work that sees women’s lives and political choices in scholarly accounts of nationalism, social movements, identity politics and feminism. By examining the political opportunities afforded to women in their role as mothers, political representatives and participants in violent and nonviolent aspects of the struggle, this dissertation extends the existing literature in each domain. The result is a more nearly complete account for understanding of the often-overlooked relationship between women and the emergence of the Islamo-nationalist movement in Palestine in recent years.

Broadly, this dissertation makes its greatest contribution to feminist political research in the Middle East. Here, the evidence of feminist elements in female participation in the Islamo-nationalist movement remains a widely contested issue due to the fact that this sort of female behavior can be easily interpreted as counter-intuitive to notions of gender equality and the promotion of women’s rights as human rights. In light of ongoing attempts made by the West to strengthen democracies throughout the Islamic world by focusing on the role that women play in the development and maintenance of their civil societies, a focus on female political agency in Islamist political movements is unlikely to fade in the years to come. With an eye to the development of civil society
through the furtherance of human rights and human security, greater attention will continue to focus on the modes of female citizenship in this design.

The Palestinian struggle remains at the center of regional conflict in the Middle East. Since the establishment of Israel in 1948, Palestinians have been dispersed throughout the globe with the concentration of growing refugee populations in the greater Middle East. Consequently, the conflict itself is not limited to the boundaries of a single state; rather, it includes local, regional and international politics. However, a study of the political behavior of Palestinian women within the emergence of Palestinian Islamist political groups cannot begin in isolation from a critical discussion of the elements of Palestinian Islamization and its connection to the Islamic world. For this reason, the following chapter presents a review of the historic rise of the Islamist movement in Palestine since the late 1980s.
CHAPTER THREE
THE ISLAMIZATION OF THE PALESTINIAN STRUGGLE

In the minds of the unprepared or the unalert, Islam calls up images of bearded clerics and mad suicidal bombers, of unrelenting Iranian mullahs, fanatical fundamentalists, and kidnappers, remorseless turbaned crowds who chant hatred of the United States, “the great Satan,” and all its ways. And behind the wave of “Islamic” images battering the United States’ unprotected shores stand the string of Palestinian terrorists—hijackers and masked killers of airport crowds, athletes, schoolchildren, handicapped and elderly innocents—who in the unexamined popular mythology of our day are presumed to have begun the whole shameful and frightening thing.


In 1988, the late Edward Said observed that notions of contemporary terrorism are most often identified with Islam. Before the end of the first Palestinian intifada and the rise of Islamist politics in the Palestinian struggle thereafter, Said recognized the way in which the terms “Islam” and “terrorism” were commonly conflated. According to Said, the melding together of this terminology created the subliminal subtext of Western vernacular, causing the usage and understanding of the term “Islam” to develop into a notion “no less overused and vague than terrorism itself” (Said 1995, 342). Similarly, Said noted in his writings on the Palestinian people that while “a huge body of literature has grown up, most of it polemical, accusatory, denunciatory…for all the writing about them, Palestinians remain virtually unknown” (Said 1986, 4). It is for the sake of these issues that this chapter endeavors to explore Palestinian Islamism and the emergence of
Palestinian Islamist identity in context and detail. Inherent to the project as a whole is an exploration of the way in which the Islamization of the Palestinian struggle affects Palestinian women’s political participation and identity as citizens. However, prior to focusing on the specificity of Palestinian female citizenship and the relationship between women and the Islamist political agenda, it is pertinent to understand the historical basis and evolution of Palestinian Islamism first.

Islamism Defined

Broadly, the adherents of “political Islam” or “Islamism” ascribe to an understanding of Islam as a theological body of faith with the ability to establish and implement social and political order in the contemporary Muslim world. However, this basic understanding of Islamism does little to explain the complexities and political activity undertaken in the name of Islam in the context of Palestine. Here, the political history of Palestine, in addition to the confluence of religion and politics (in this case, in the form of Palestinian Islamism) is far more complex than a generic approach to Islamism that fails to account for the circumstances from which this new brand of politics popularly emerged. Where the historical context is pertinent to understanding Islamism more generally, it would be remiss in studying the case of Islamism in Palestine to fail to underscore the significance of 20th century statelessness, military occupation and the neocolonial exploitation of the state of Israel vis-à-vis the Palestinian people as key elements in the advent of Islamism in the Palestinian story.

These very specific political circumstances play a large role in the formation of the modern Palestinian Islamist movement today as opposed to Islamist movements
elsewhere. The ideas of the Islamic movement in Palestine reflect the social, economic, religious and political aspects of the Palestinian historical experience and modern-day reality. As such, the rise of Islamist groups in the West Bank and Gaza Strip constitutes not only a new wave of Islamic life in the region, but also a new, formidable and unprecedented challenge to the Palestinian national movement internally. As Beverly Milton-Edwards states, “Palestinian Islamists are calling for an end to the Israeli occupation, the creation of an Islamic state system, for national leaders to represent all Palestinians and for a social order that permits the free practice of religion and respects the religious rights of the majority population” (B. Milton-Edwards 1996, 3-4). Relying on Denoeux’s terminology, and also taking into account Lybarger’s extensive ethnographic research on the question of identity and religion in Palestine, I use terms, “Islamist,” “Islamism,” and “Islamo-nationalist movement” here to describe the spectrum of groups committed to the social and political integration of Islam as a framework for Palestinian national aspirations (Denoeux 2002, Lybarger 2007).

Despite that fact that a great deal of the literature on political Islam and Islamism refers to these sorts of political movements as “fundamentalist”, I am avoiding the use of this term in this project. Drawing from Milton-Edwards’ work on Islamic politics in Palestine, my objective is based on the observation that terms, “fundamentalist” or “fundamentalism”, are often pejoratively tainted or distorted in their usage. As Milton-Edwards states, these terms fail to characterize those who are truly ‘fundamentalist’ from the groups and organizations that promote or purvey an Islamic ideology that is based on certain political objectives, strategies, and political phenomenon (Milton-Edwards 1999, 3). Citing Sami Zubaida and Yousef Choueiri, Milton-Edwards also notes that Islamic
fundamentalism has “become a catch-phrase which is supposed to define and describe all active involvement of Muslims in politics” (B. Milton-Edwards 1999, 3). Esposito notes that the use of the term is both controversial and has pejorative implications, but adds, “there is general recognition that activist movements of Muslim revival are increasingly important and reference must be made to them” (Esposito 1995, 32). Among the many terms used for this purpose, Esposito also suggests “Islamism, integrism, neo-normative Islam, neo-traditional Islam, Islamic revivalism, and Islamic nativism” (Esposito 1995, 32). Also important to the nationalist debate from which the Palestinian Islamists have emerged is the difference between Islamist and Islamic. For example, drawing on central symbols, discourses and narratives specific to the Islamic religion, the Islamist outlook—as a specific type of religious-nationalist belief and political behavior—is different from those for whom Islam is a personal religious orientation (Lybarger 2007, 3). Not taken for granted in this is the fact that Palestinian Islamism fits into the broader spectrum of Islamist phenomena, while also having its own unique distinctions as well (Esposito 1995, 32-34, 250-251).

Islamist Politics in the Muslim World

It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to produce a comparative study of Palestinian Islamism to Islamist movements elsewhere. Nevertheless, it would be remiss not to briefly explicate the historical rise of political Islam and the significance of Palestine to Islamist movements in the greater Muslim world.

4 Italics are mine.
Like a study of women in any country or context, Islamism itself is not a monolith. Spanning the Middle East, North Africa, Central Europe and Asia, the modes of Islamist expression are fundamentally tied to time and place. In the Palestinian case, colonization, the dispersal of people and families, military occupation and neocolonial exploitation are each a part of the political and ideological elements of Palestinian Islamism. Similarly yet also distinctly, Islamist movements elsewhere are also a result of the clash of emergent social and political circumstances (Esposito 1995, 250-254). For example, Zubaida (2004) describes the earliest instantiation of the clash of Islam versus Christendom in the Ottoman, Persian and Indian worlds against the European powers in the nineteenth century as an example of politics becoming reduced to religious communitarianism (Zubaida 2004, 408). Using the case of Egypt, Zubaida cites Lufti al-Sayid who saw the unity of Egypt’s Muslims as a protective stance against European hegemony. Of course, this use of religious faith as a tool for social and political solidarity at moments of instability is not a tool used by Islamists alone. Noting the history of nationalist movements in the Muslim world, Zubaida observes that Arab nationalists have often considered Islam as the most valuable element in the heritage of the Arab nation (Zubaida 2004, 407). Before the confrontation between Christian Europe and the Islamic realms of influence, religion was a centuries old, defining factor for local solidarities and conflicts. However, the rise of religious communalism since the nineteenth century has become a more generalized model of international relations (Zubaida 2004, 408).

In sociological terms, the emergence of twentieth century Islamism is a “product of a religious crisis in authority, the failures of authoritarian nationalist governments,
and the socio-economic divisions that have been exacerbated by neo-liberal globalization” (Turner 2003, 140). It is argued that the development of Islamism stems from the frustrations of a specific social stratum of unpaid civil servants, overworked teachers, underemployed engineers and marginalized university educators, whose interests were not well served by the secular nationalism of Nasser, Muhammad Reza Shah, Suharto or Saddam Hussein (Turner 2003, 140). Additionally included in this wide sociological swath of Islamists is the fact that many nationalist-turned-Islamists are the product of a general disenchantment with the neoliberal ‘open-door’ policies of Anwar Saddat in Egypt, or Chadli Benjedid in Algeria (Turner 2003, 140).

The label “Islamism” is a relatively recent term coined in the 1970s to describe the political ideology that gained ground after the death of pan-Arab dreams on the battlefields of the 1967 war between Israel and the neighboring states of Egypt, Jordan and Syria. As the Israelis celebrated their swift victory in the 1967 war, Islamist ideas infused the ideological vacuum left behind by the failure of pan-Arab aspirations. Thus, the more recent use of this term Islamism is used to refer to the “rise of movements and ideologies drawing on Islamic referents—terms, symbols and events taken from the Islamic tradition—in order to articulate a distinctly political agenda” (Denoeux 2002, 61). Inherent to this Islamist ideology was a central reference to Islamic themes of collective injustice and equality. These themes where then mobilized against secular regimes perceived to be corrupt, bankrupt and authoritarian and often supported by the West in the Cold War confrontation with the Soviet empire (Turner 2003, 141).

Putting Islamist ideology into greater historical context, Zubaida (2001) contrasts the current Islamist model with previous political models of Islamic history, thereby
situating modern Islamist movements as emergent with nationalist movements of the twentieth century. Notably, the “dynastic, patrimonial state (if it can be called a “state” at all, that being a Western concept for a different phenomenon), and the all-inclusive *umma*, which knows no territorial ‘national’ boundaries, but operates with the concept of *dar-ul-Islam*, (the house of Islam), which distinguishes the domains of Islam from those of the infidels” (Zubaida 2001, 129-130). To this, Zubaida adds that the new instantiation of modern political Islam is “not the product of a historical continuity with an essential Islam preserved in the hearts and minds of the people as ‘popular culture’, but quite the contrary, a modern ideological construction relating to current conjectures of nation state and international politics” (Zubaida 2001, 137). Thus, as the popular draw for secular ideologies declined in the Muslim world in response to the events of 1967 and their aftermath, so came the claim that Islam was the “sole organic culture existing in the Arab world and the only cultural tradition whose symbols and values substantiate and give meaning to collective action” (Mishal and Sela 2000, 4). Like any other political project, an Islamist project provides “a comprehensive critique of the existing order, challenges it and aims to change it” (Denoeux 2002, 61). Yet, the most important aspect of Islamism is that it is a rational form of political instrumentalization of the religion of Islam used by individuals, groups and organizations in the pursuit of specific political objectives.

However, no two “Islamisms” are alike because they are so largely determined by the context within which they operate. As Ayoob states:

What works in Egypt will not work in Indonesia. What works in Iran will not work in Turkey. Anyone familiar with the diversity of the Muslim
world—its socioeconomic characteristics, cultures, political systems, and trajectories of intellectual development—is bound to realize that the political manifestations of Islam, like the practice of Islam itself, are to a great extent context specific, the result of interpenetration of religious precepts and local culture, including political culture (Ayoob 2008, 15).

Similarly, Denoeux illustrates this point in offering a descriptive distinction between certain “types” of Islamists. He writes that the “typical” Taliban Islamist—a “poor, largely uneducated Pashtun of peasant origin, born in a Pakistani refugee camp and with extremely limited horizons” is conspicuously different that the “typical” jihadist Salafi-Arab who is “rather cosmopolitan, well-traveled and often well-educated” (Denoeux 2002, 71). Adding another layer to these comparisons, what fuels Islamist groups and prompts individuals to join them differs greatly from one country and context to another. This is exemplified in the case of Palestinian Islamists versus Islamists elsewhere, where “those who have drifted into these movements primarily because of their aversion to Western forms of modernity may have little in common with Palestinians driven into Hamas cells because of their hatred of Israel, the occupation of Palestinian land, and the accumulated feelings of anger and humiliation created by Israeli policies in the West Bank and Gaza” (Denoeux 2002, 68).

As a broad spectrum of phenomena, Islamism and Islamist thought today refers to a hybrid of ideologies that borrow from and mix Islamic history, local traditions and ideas in a distinctly modern way. As previously mentioned, what is common to all forms of Islamism is what Denoeux describes as a form of instrumentalization of Islam by individuals, groups and organizations that pursue political objectives. Common to all Islamisms is that Islamist thought creates a political response to today’s societal
challenges by imagining a future, the foundations for which rest upon re-appropriated, reinvented concepts borrowed from Islamic tradition (Denoeux 2002, 61). Similarly, Mishal and Sela contend that political Islam in our time represents “an effort by social and political revisionist groups to articulate their grievances and redefine the national agenda accordingly” (Mishal and Sela 2000, 1).

In recent years, however, Islamist movements have been frequently portrayed as a mass movement of enraged men (and their veiled and “victimized” women) intent on demonizing the West and dismantling Western influence in the Arab world. With this, Islamism is popularly understood as an anti-secular, and thus, “anti-modern” trend that only advocates a return to an age where, as Lybarger states, “social and political order based on despotic rule and barbarian practices” (Lybarger 2007, 2). Moreover, Zubaida notes that Muslim youth have increasingly “fallen for the idea that Arab and Middle Eastern cultures have always been dominated by religion, and that the ideas and attitudes associated with secular cosmopolitanism are completely alien, a corrosive import from the west” (Zubaida 2005). These interpretations, however, fail to account for the distinctly modern nature of the Islamist response, the popularity of Islamist groups, or the pragmatic orientations of Islamist political factions in local settings. Ultimately, dismissing Islamism as inherently backward or debased fails to produce an account of the actual migration of voting citizens (including women) from secular-nationalist

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5 In his 2005 article for The New Humanist, Zubaida contrasts the “narrow, anachronistic, and putatively ‘pure’ aspect of modern Islamist movements as alien to and bearing little resemblance to the historically “cosmopolitan” precedent of the Ottoman Empire, which was composed of broad mix ethnic groups and religions in a relatively peaceful and stable co-existence. He also cites Cairo as a center of Islamic cosmopolitanism in the first half of the twentieth century—as a “center of an unprecedented flourishing of intellectual and artistic movements.” To this Zubaida adds, “In the first half of the 20th century a generation of outward-looking intellectual Muslim reformers was replaced by a generation of populist leaders interested in mass mobilisation, with a much more puritanical and nativist notion of Islam, inspired most notably by Hassan al-Banna’s Muslim Brotherhood.”
factions to Islamist political parties in recent years, in the Palestinian context and beyond.

Mentioned earlier, the rise of Islamism was witnessed in the contexts of international conflicts in the 1980s and the ultimate collapse of the Soviet Union, which left another ideological vacuum for Islamists to fill. Following the success of the 1979 Iranian Revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini, the next decade was characterized by a struggle between Khomeini’s Shi’ite regime in Iran and the conservative Sunni monarchy in Saudi Arabia. Iran attempted to export its revolution abroad, while Saudi Arabia internally struggled to constrain a new wave of Islamist fervor coming from tens of thousands of young, middle-class urbanites led by preachers, teachers and students, mostly from religious universities (Dekmejian 1994, 629). Elsewhere, conservative governments in “Egypt, Pakistan, the Persian Gulf and Malaysia sought to encourage Muslim radicals in their struggles against communism and to contain Islamism through co-optation and concessions, primarily over the role of religious law (the Shar’ia) (Turner 2003, 141). By 1991, Islamist political success arrived in Algeria when the *Front Islamique de Salut* enjoyed a decisive democratic victory in the first free elections since independence from France. Prior to this, although many would argue that the peak of Islamism arrived with the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Turner contends that the demonstration of far-reaching political success for Islamism came in 1989 during the Palestinian intifada, a moment which marked the start of a real struggle for power between the Palestinian Liberation Organization and the newly formed Hamas (Turner 2003, 141).
In his ‘Afterword’ to *The War for Palestine: Rewriting the History of 1948*, Edward Said writes, “For Palestinians, a vast collective feeling of injustice continues to hang over our lives with undiminished weight” (Said, Afterword 2001, 249). This feeling of collective injustice is not confined to the Palestinian people alone, but also felt by fellow Muslims—both Islamist and not—throughout the Islamic world. This by-proxy sentiment for Palestine is buttressed by the fact that third most important mosque to the Islamic faith is located in Jerusalem. The Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock are a central focus of all Muslims, and so a concern for Jerusalem as a holy center is not exclusive to the Palestinians alone. It is due to the widespread focus on the significance of Jerusalem to Islam that Tamimi writes that Muslim scholars have widely expressed their opposition to “any recognition of the legitimacy of the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine” (Tamimi 2007, 157). Moreover, Muslim scholars and jurists throughout the Islamic world have “issued numerous fatwas, or religious edicts, declaring null and void any agreement that legitimized the occupation of any part of Palestine” (Tamimi 2007, 157). Much of the defense of Muslim Palestine is manifested in hatred of Israeli Jewish Zionists and, thus, the modern existence of Israel (Ma'oz 2010). This hatred is elaborated in speeches, writings, in schoolbooks, mass media and horrific terrorist actions. Separately and stemming from their independent political motivations, Iran’s current president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, former Al Qaeda ringleader Osama Bin Laden and the leaders of Hezbollah, have nevertheless used the rhetorical tool of calling for the destruction of Israel in the name of protecting and preserving the holy sites of Islam.
Added to this is the fact that Islamists propagate the basic message that the fundamental ills of the Muslim society are due to a deviation from the teachings and practices of Islam due to the fact that Muslim people around the world—and, most especially in Palestine—are occupied and/or ruled by outsiders (or “infidels”) of the Islamic faith. In order to establish a true Muslim society, Islamists leaders generally advocate the return to Islamic principles can be performed in a political sense through a struggle against the specific oppressors and enemies of Islam, otherwise known as *jihad*. In light of the failures of secular pan-Arabism and the seeming powerlessness in the face of continued Israeli occupation of the lands of historic Palestine, the Islamist message particularly reverberates. For example, Ayatollah Khomeini entreated Shi’ite Muslims to join the Islamic Revolution, but his appeal extended to Sunnis as well. Inasmuch as Khomeini’s cry was not only for Shi’ism, but also for the whole of Islam, his appeal extended to the Sunni masses and intellectuals in Palestine. Added to this was Khomeini’s invention of the annual Iranian holiday that takes place on the last Friday of Ramadan, “Quds Day” (officially known as “International Al Quds Day”) was a way of demonstrating pan-Muslim solidarity with the Palestinian people in opposition to Israeli Zionism and to Muslim claims on Jerusalem. The targets of Khomeini’s attacks included the world’s great powers, Zionism and politically corrupt Arab dynasties. As Palestinian historian Walid Khalidi writes, Khomeini’s “constant reference to the liberation of Jerusalem is as effective as it is deliberate” (Khalidi 1988, 776).

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6 This is captured in Qutb’s Milestones (2007), in which he writes of *jihad* (“jihaad”) as a defense of the “true character of Islam”, which he defines as “a universal proclamation of the freedom of man from servitude to other men, the establishment of the sovereignty of God and His Lordship throughout the world, the end of man’s arrogance and selfishness, and the implementation of the rule of the Divine Shari’ah in human affairs” (Qutb 2007, 39).

7 Al-Quds (literally translated as “The Holy”) is the Arabic and Islamic name for Jerusalem.
The sentiment is amplified by Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, one of the most authoritative Islamic scholars of the present time, who explains, “Palestine is an Islamic land that cannot be forfeited voluntarily” (Tamimi 2007, 157). This fact was notably illustrated by Al Qaeda leader, Osama Bin Laden, who specifically cited aggression against Muslims in Palestine in his list of reasons for Al Qaeda’s targeted terrorist attacks against the United States. In his 2002 “Letter to America”, which was originally posted in Arabic on Islamist websites, Bin Laden reportedly says to America:

Why are we fighting and opposing you? The answer is very simple: You attacked us in Palestine: Palestine, which has sunk under military oppression for more than 80 years. The British handed over Palestine, with your help and with your support, to the Jews, who have occupied it for more than 50 years: years overflowing with oppression, tyranny, crimes, killing, expulsion, destruction and devastation. The creation and continuation of Israel is one of the greatest crimes, and you are the leaders of the criminals…The creation of Israel is a crime which must be erased. Each and every person whose hands have become polluted in the contribution towards this crime must pay its price and pay for it heavily […] (Bin Laden 2007, 265).

Also beyond the borders of Palestine, another example of deep antipathy toward Israel on behalf of the Palestinian people lies in the Libyan leader Colonel Muammar al-Qaddafi, who reportedly spent his youth suffused with “anger at the perceived injustices suffered by the Palestinians” (Khalidi 1988, 774). With this, it is no coincidence that Khalidi wrote in 1988: “The rise of Middle Eastern radicalism, for example, is not altogether

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unconnected with the continued non-resolution of the Palestine problem” (Khalidi 1988, 774).

Across various Islamist contexts, the struggle for the liberation of Palestine has been the central and single most important issue sustaining political Islam in the late twentieth century until today. As Meir Litvak’s research indicates, a more radical Islamist reading of the Qu’ran leads some to a certain understanding of history which points to the idea that “Palestine is the focus of the religio-historical confrontation between the Muslims and their eternal enemies, the Jews” (Litvak 2003). According to this interpretation, the confrontation between Islam and the West began with Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798 and climaxed with the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, the symbol of Muslim unity (Litvak 2003). Litvak argues that this approach centers on the idea that “Palestine was the focus of Western imperialist designs and was meant to serve as a launch pad to take over other Muslim territories” (Litvak 2003). More than any other, the Palestinian problem resonates deeply and widely with Arab and Muslim peoples.⁹

Related to Islamist sentiments concerning the land of Palestine is the concern that the irresolution of the Palestinian problem is derivative of nearly all of the conflicts in the region since 1948. As Schlomo Ben-Ami writes, “One does not have to second the cynical discourse of the Bin-Ladens and the Saddam Husseins, and of the many other much more benign figures throughout the region according to whom all the ills of the Arab world stem from Israel’s occupation of the West Bank” (Ben-Ami 2006, 292).

⁹ Roy (2002) cites a survey by journalist David Hirst, in which nearly 60 percent of the people of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the Gulf Emirates and Lebanon regard Palestine as the “single most important issue for them personally. This figure increases in the Egyptian population to 79 percent.
Writing in 1985, Khalidi attributes all of the Arab-Israeli wars of the previous three decades to the irresolution of the Palestinian problem. Eerily foreshadowing the combination of current nuclear pursuits and virulent anti-Semitism of Iranian regime under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Khalidi wrote in 1985, “If some Arab regimes in one way or another go nuclear, one of their most powerful incentives (and alibis) will have been the non-resolution of the Palestine problem. Already, more than one nuclear alert has occurred in connection with an Arab-Israeli crisis” (Khalidi 1985, 37). Even Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat said in 1974 when he addressed the leaders of the Arab world at the Arab Summit in Morocco: “Palestine is the cement that holds the Arab world together, or it is the explosive that blows it apart” (Arafat 1974).

The demonstration of a longstanding and unwavering commitment to the liberation of Palestine is employed as a rhetorical device by many Islamists and secular Muslim leaders around the world to promote the idea of universal Muslim solidarity. As Litvak notes, “Inasmuch as the Jewish presence in Palestine symbolizes Muslim inferiority in the modern age, commitment to Palestine cannot be framed in the narrow confines of Palestinian nationalism” (Litvak 2003). Thus, even from afar, the Islamist strategy of liberating Palestine is infused with the goal of a pan-Islamic revival.

Important to note, however, is that the general underlying motive of Islamist’s alliance with the Palestinian cause is more political than religious. Denoeux writes, “Politics lies at the heart of Islamism, which ultimately has far more to do with power than with religion” (Denoeux 2002, 63). To this, Denoeux adds that Islam is more of a “blueprint” than a “faith” for Islamists, and so, “Islamist discourse is to a large extent a political discourse in religious garb” (Denoeux 2002, 63). By invoking concepts drawn from the
past of Islamic society, Islamists have effectively become “social and political activists intent on building a new type of society” (Denoeux 2002, 63). Ultimately, the aim of Islamists is to exercise political power, and although their vision of the future is reminiscent of a mostly mythical and invented past, they are modern and forward-looking in intent, and their power lay in grassroots action (Denoeux 2002, 63-65).

**Palestinian Islamism**

While the strong revisionist opposition to the goals and means of the secular Palestinian nationalist movement can be viewed more broadly as typical of the widespread phenomenon of political Islam in our time, Palestinian Islamism is also an exception to the norm. Put into context, Palestinian Islamism grew out of a reaction to the type of multi-confessional, secular nationalism of the PLO that popularly constituted the Palestinian national movement from 1967 to the mid-1990s, and its perceived failure to adequately represent the will of the Palestinian people. As such, Palestinian Islamism is committed to its own particular banner of national liberation in direct competition with the secular-nationalist inclinations of the PLO. Until the more recent rise of Islamist groups in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the secular Palestinian nationalist movement embraced the Islamic orientation of the native Palestinian constituency, allowing the same symbols, discourses and narratives of Islamic faith to exist alongside, or secularly integrated within the framework of a multi-confessional (mainly Muslim and Christian) secular nationalism (Lybarger 2007, 69-72). This is best exemplified in Arafat’s speeches and PLO-UNLU statements issued to the
Palestinian people, which were laced with Islamic references.\textsuperscript{10} The symbolic use of Islam is also documented in the 1988 Proclamation of the Palestinian State, which, while recognizing that Palestine is the land of three monotheistic faiths, begins and ends with the Qu’ranic reference, “In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful” (Lockman and Beinin 1989, 395-399).

More recently, adding to the decades long struggle for national self-determination vis-à-vis Israel, the most contentious issue affecting the national struggle from within Palestinian society lies in the formidable political challenge that the Palestinian Islamists pose to the secular-nationalist groups primarily anchored by Fatah, and the disunity and internal instability this creates between opposing viewpoints and leaderships. To date, Palestinian Islamists have adopted the overriding message of Islam as central to the means and ends of this political movement. They have adroitly co-opted and re-appropriated the secular Islamic idiom of Palestinian nationalism for popular consumption. Through the development of parallel symbols, narratives and institutions to the secular model for nation building, the Palestinian Islamist have successfully created a counter model for the hope of Palestinian nationhood.

Milton-Edwards writes that since Islamism is not a monolith, Palestinian Islamist groups are “not the reincarnation of the Khomeini-style rhetoric of the early 1980s, nor are they like the Wahhabi fundamentalists of Arabia, nor do they mirror the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt” (Milton-Edwards 1996, 4). Against this claim, however, Palestinian Islamism is also not an isolated phenomenon. While the means and ends of the Palestinian Islamists may not precisely mirror that of Islamists elsewhere, the

\textsuperscript{10} For communiqués issued by the Palestinian National Council see Laqueur and Rubin (2008) and Lockman and Beinin (1989).
structures and ethos of Palestinian Islamism are historically rooted in Islamist movements beyond the boundaries of historic Palestine. Specifically, the political ancestry of Palestinian Islamism today can be traced to the Muslim Brotherhood as it took form in Egypt in the 1920s and spread to the wider Arab and Muslim world (Lybarger 2007, 75). The movement was founded by Hassan al-Banna, who, in life charismatically projected the image of a “living manifestation of the spirit of the shari’a” (Lybarger 2007, 76). As Egypt’s leadership struggled with issues of colonialism, public health, social inequalities and secular conceptions of Arab nationalism, Banna offered an “up-to-date” nationalistic Islam that was tailor-made for the emerging proletariat and lower-middle-class groups. Emphasizing social and political concerns that appealed to a variety of constituencies, Banna’s appeal was widely felt across the layers of Egyptian society. Banna’s Islamist vision consisted of two equally important goals: First, the re-Islamization of Egyptian society, which would liberate Egypt, and second, liberating the Muslim world more broadly from colonial rule (Gunning 2009, 26). Through his assassination in 1949, Banna became a symbol of militant jihad, as “the first Islamist martyr to fall at the hands of a repressive, seemingly apostate Muslim government” in Egypt (Lybarger 2007, 76).

The second seminal figure of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt was Sayyid Qutb, described by John Calvert as “the influential Egyptian ideologue of Islamism” (Calvert 2010, 1). Qutb joined the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1940s in his extensive writings about the downfalls of Egyptian society. According to Qutb, Egyptian society had regressed to the pre-Islamic condition of jahiliyya—a state of ignorance, lawlessness and polytheistic chaos—for adopting Western forms of secularization and modernization.
Qutb introduced the concept of purification and struggle, which inspired both radical and gradualist Islamists in the decades to come. He attained martyr status when Nasser ordered his execution in 1966. Revivalist in design, Qutb’s writings linked the renewal of Islam to the overall Islamization of society through preaching and education. Importantly, he suggested that a believer should “withdraw to separated communities of the faithful, purify his consciousness of foreign values, and then reengage society through missionary outreach and, when the moment was right, join in outright revolution” (Lybarger 2007, 77). According to Calvert, Qutb had no illusions as to the difficulty of the task ahead. Noting that the struggle would be long and difficult, Qutb wrote that, “the vanguard would have to deal with Islam’s traditional Christian and Jewish enemies, but also the legions of deceivers and hypocrites from within, the faux Muslims who fed from the troughs of Western-inspired barbarism” (Calvert 2010, 2). Qutb’s emphasis on gradualism—study and spiritual growth as a way of leading social and political change against the tide of an otherwise inimical world of enemies—later became a central element of Hamas’ social and political vision for Palestine.¹¹

The combination of Banna and Qutb’s writings (along with the writings of Pakistani intellectual Abu al-Ala al-Mawdudi) formed the core themes of Sunni Islamist ideology and practice later incorporated into Palestinian Islamism (Lybarger 2007, 77). Prioritizing the liberation of the Palestinian nation through Islamist ideology is the central component of contemporary Palestinian Islamism. Even today, Qutb’s ideas, commentaries and political tracts “suffuse Palestinian Islamist orientations” (Lybarger 2007, 80), and Banna’s emphasis that the revival of Islam should be dependent on

¹¹ For more on the significance of Qutb to the rise of Islamist movements, see Calvert (2010).
preaching and education and the Islamization of society is especially important to Palestinian Islamist activists (Milton-Edwards 1996, 123). Initially, these ideals were embraced by the Gazan revivalist leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, who Milton-Edwards depicts as leading a generation of young activists into the heart of Gazan society and later into the realm of politics (Milton-Edwards 1996, 98).

Undertaking the principles of the Muslim Brotherhood, Yassin became a founding leader of Hamas in his quest to bring Islam to the secularized youth of Gaza. He encouraged his followers to be “exemplary Muslims” by reading the Quran, praying five times daily and observing Ramadan. Recalling Qutb in Egypt, Yassin was a reformist who called for a gradual approach of Islamist politics. In this, he sought to encourage a return to Islam within society first before addressing wider political issues facing the Palestinian people (Milton-Edwards 1996, 99). While Yassin and his colleagues maintained a close association with the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt and saw their activities in Palestine as an extension of the Muslim Brotherhood’s work, it is also roundly recognized that Yassin was the creator of the new Islamic movement in the Palestinian Territories (Milton-Edwards 1996, 100, 123).

Although practically focused on education, social activities and Islamic learning, Yassin simultaneously kept a patient and pragmatic eye on politics. His pragmatism stemmed from an overarching wariness of the power struggle between the Egyptian

12 Led by Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, Hamas emerged from the Mujama movement, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza. By the start of the first intifada in 1987, Mujama had already mounted an Islamist challenge to the secular political monopoly of the PLO. Emerging with the same leadership of Mujama, Hamas was established in February 1988. The Hamas covenant describes itself “as a wing of the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine”. Milton-Edwards argues, “It was clear from the outset that Hamas would find it hard to ignore its legacy and links with Mujama, and some nationalists have argued that the new organization was in fact just the old groups in a different guise”. See Milton-Edwards (2006, 146-7) and Gunning (2009).
Muslim Brotherhood and Egypt’s President, Gamal Nasser. Nasser was particularly hostile to the inclinations of autonomous Palestinian resistance groups under his watch in Gaza, which caused Yassin to focus on Islamic education in Gaza rather than violent or more direct military resistance to either Israel or Egyptian rule at the time. Yassin was once quoted as saying, “We have to be patient because Islam will spread sooner or later and will have control all over the world. Patience will shorten the journey of Islam” (Qutb, interview cited in Milton-Edwards 1996, 147).

Yet, in spite of his professed patience, Yassin’s leadership of Hamas quickly added a new dimension to Palestinian politics as Hamas attracted (and rapidly amassed) a large following in Gaza and the West Bank the late 1980s. Opposed to the long-standing political hegemony of the umbrella of secular nationalist organizations under the PLO, Hamas generated a unique appeal among the Palestinian population. In particular, young men “joined up in droves, many of them already Islamic activists, others disaffected supporters of PLO factions” (Milton-Edwards 1996, 147). As the second and third generation of Palestinian refugees, the new recruits and supporters of Hamas “saw an opportunity for self-identity and esteem vis-à-vis the rest of society through their association with this religious organization which put a mark of holiness on them” (Milton-Edwards 1996, 147). In addition to drawing considerable support from the extant refugee population, Hamas also gained popularity among non-refugee groups in the middle class and elite, as well as members from the far left groups of the Popular Front and Communist party, who migrated to the Islamist groups (Lybarger 2007). Hamas inevitably grew to become the greatest political challenge to secular Palestinian nationalism today, but it was not the only Islamist group in the Palestinian political
milieu with popular support and an agenda to challenge the PLO while confronting Israel. Formed in 1981 as another off shoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Jihad al-Islami or Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)\textsuperscript{13} also politicized the struggle for Palestinian national identity and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Known as the “most radical terrorist organization operating in the Palestinian arena” (Litvak 2003), leaders of PIJ have routinely parted with other Islamist and secular groups alike over the political aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Crucial to this approach was PIJ’s departure from the mainstream Islamic approach taken by Yassin, which adhered to the notion that Islamic society must return to and revitalize Islam from within before turning outward and facing Israel (Litvak 2003). PIJ adopted a markedly less patient political stance of the mainstream Islamists by taking on a radical activist bent in order to achieve their political goals.

As Milton-Edwards writes of the PIJ, “This independent, Islamist movement views itself as a vanguard for Islam in a battle to wrest control of Islamic land back from the Jewish people” (Milton-Edwards 1996, 116). Where the end objective of PIJ lay in liberation of the land and people of occupied Palestine, the means for achieving this objective rested in armed military struggle. Like Hamas, PIJ challenged the secular nationalist sentiments of the Palestinian struggle, appropriated them in Islamist terminology and used this to call for the liberation of Palestine and the Palestinian people. Indeed, the preeminent feature of PIJ’s call for liberation was the “end to Israeli

\textsuperscript{13}Milton-Edwards’ (1996, 116-121) extensive research on Palestinian Islamism cites four groups that emerged in the early 1980s under the name of Palestinian Islamic Jihad. They are: 1) Islamic Jihad (Shaqaqi-Auda faction, 2) Islamic Jihad Jerusalem Brigade, 3) Islamic Jihad Battalions, and 4) Islamic Jihad Palestine (Amar faction). Lybarger (2007, 83) notes that the PIJ was represented by the integration of these four factions as they broke away from the Muslim Brotherhood and also the Fatah movement. Esposito (1995, 374) adds that the organization was not revealed to the public until 1987.
occupation as a prerequisite for the transformation of society and Islamic ascendency” (Milton-Edwards 1996, 117). As Esposito writes of the PIJ, “For the movement, the struggle against Israel does not revolve around the question of the rightful ownership of the land, but over the religio-political duty of Muslims to fend off religious enemies” (Esposito 1995, 374). Unlike the deliberate emphasis on education and Islamic scholarship espoused by the leadership of Hamas, however, those of PIJ saw the gradualism of the Hamas approach as fundamentally distracting from the struggle for Palestine (Milton-Edwards 1996, 118). These dissatisfied members of the mainstream Islamic movement resented the political and military passivity of the Muslim Brotherhood (Esposito 1995, 374).Instead, the PIJ believed that “the creation of an Islamic state can only be attained as a result of armed confrontation with Israel” (Roy 1991, 64).

Indeed, the central difference between PIJ and the mainstream Islamist approaches of the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas to Israel was a matter of means and not ends to its existence. On one hand, the mainstream Islamists felt that once Muslim unity was achieved, the destruction of Israel would occur quickly and inevitably. On the other hand, PIJ leaders argued that, “pan-Islamic unity would emerge on a mass level only through direct action to liberation the holy land, site of the third-holiest Muslim shrine, the Dome of the Rock, and al-Aqsa Mosque” (Lybarger 2007, 84). In this approach, PIJ leader Dr. Fathi Abd al Aziz argued that, “Israel, by its very existence, was a source of moral and spiritual corruption that prevented Muslims from remedying

14 Esposito (1995, 374) writes that the Islamic Jihad Movement considers itself a “continuation of a long line of Palestinian activists and martyrs who combined their anti-Zionist stances with a political ideology based on their interpretations of Islam.” He notes that the spiritual leader of the movement, Abd al-Aziz Awdah, “often expresses his firm belief in the efficacy of military combat against Israel.”
the malaise of their society”, and therefore had to be destroyed in order for Muslim unity to be achieved (Litvak 2003). Meanwhile Sheik Auda, the leader of the PIJ faction in the Gaza Strip, believed that infidel rulers seized the Islamic land of Palestine, and the only way to restore the land to Muslims was through direct and violent revolt against the occupiers. Thus, from the mindset of the PIJ: “to ignore Palestine was to ignore the call to jihad as a religious obligation” (Milton-Edwards 1996, 118). Recognizing the difficulty of any Palestinian movement going very far in political mobilization without reflecting the nationalistic sentiments of the Palestinian struggle, Esposito notes that PIJ’s leadership maintains that the Palestinian cause is not in the service of Islam, but that “Islam is to be used in the service of the Palestinian cause” (Esposito 1995, 374). With this the physical battle for Palestine has become no less synonymous with a battle for Islam.

As separate entities, PIJ and Hamas were offshoots of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, yet each group was respectively influenced and financially supported by Islamist forces elsewhere in the Muslim world. Despite these very practical commonalities, however, the Israeli authorities treated both groups very differently. For example, Hamas grew to be a strong force, especially in Gaza, due to the fact that the Israeli authorities effectively destroyed many PIJ cells and deported the bulk of its leadership (Roy 1991, 64). Sheikh Yassin shrewdly worked to distance his organization from the violence of the PIJ as well as its association with the Muslim Brotherhood in order to win permission from the Israeli authorities for the group’s activities at a time when Israel outlawed all levels of political organizing in the Palestinian Territories. As Milton-Edwards writes, “While the Israelis were happy to extend a license to the
organization with charitable status and to all intents and purposes dedicated to welfare and education work, they might have rejected an application from the Muslim Brotherhood” (Milton-Edwards 1996, 123). Thus, unlike all other Palestinian political groups at the time, the nascent Hamas was free to organize, recruit members and receive funds. The official registration of Hamas with the Israeli authorities as a “charitable society” enabled it to build its organizational base from which to officially launch the Islamist movement in Gaza (Milton-Edwards 1996, 124). Meanwhile, despite its commitment to violent struggle, PIJ’s organization ideals and objectives were never widely embraced by the local population (Milton-Edwards 1996, 121). Unlike Hamas’ careful focus on separate cultivation and recruitment of its member base, the PIJ also never “attempted to position itself as a replacement for the PLO; on the contrary, it saw itself as working in tandem with secular forces that sought to end the occupation and liberate historical Palestine through armed revolution” (Lybarger 2007, 84).

Additionally, even though PIJ as an organization remained largely elusive, the Israeli authorities poured considerable effort into quelling the organization and dissolving its leadership and membership infrastructure by demolishing homes, making arrests and deporting leaders (Milton-Edwards 1996, 123).

As Milton-Edwards notes, in the wake of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, a euphoria swept across the Muslim world. Following the formation of Hamas, its leadership initially declared support for the revolutionary ideals of Khomeini (Milton-Edwards 1996, 119). However, it is reported that after Iranian attacks on the regimes in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States that directly funded Hamas, the organization’s leadership encountered an ideological and practical dilemma. Milton-Edwards writes, “If the
Mujama (early Hamas leadership) in Gaza pledged its ideological support to Iran it would alienate its Gulf sources of funding; if, on the other hand, it criticized the Iranian Revolution, it was denying the important political and religious effects of the event on the entire Muslim world” (Milton-Edwards 1996, 119). As the story unfolds, it is suspected that Hamas was in the pocket of the Saudis, who, due to being directly threatened by Iran, denounced the 1979 revolution, causing Hamas to stop its own support for Khomeini (Milton-Edwards 1996, 119). Meanwhile, Palestinian Islamic Jihad leader, Sheikh Auda and his associates, saw the 1979 Iranian Revolution as a model for Palestine, and saw no contradiction in its message to the greater Muslim world (Milton-Edwards 1996, 119). Facilitated by the massive increase in oil prices, Saudi Arabia became a prime benefactor for Hamas. For Auda and the PIJ, however, the success of the Iranian Revolution gave greater merit to the moral obligation for jihad against Israeli occupation. Long before Hamas looked to armed resistance the PIJ began armed operations against Israeli targets in 1984 (Litvak 2003). In exchange, the new Iranian leadership supported PIJ in its call for an armed response to the Israeli occupation in Palestine as a way of countering the Saudi support of Hamas in addition to more secular leaderships in Syria, Iraq and Egypt.\(^\text{16}\)

\(^{15}\) The parenthetical note here is mine. \textit{Al-Mujama al-Islami}, or “Mujama” is the name used by Milton-Edwards (1996) to describe the Hamas movement after it broke from the Muslim Brotherhood and before it was named Hamas.

\(^{16}\) Litvak notes that while Hamas was always an independent movement in Palestine, PIJ largely took its direction from its ties to Iran and also Hezbollah in Lebanon. In particular, Hezbollah provided weapons training and logistical aid, and thanks to this support, PIJ was able to expand its network into the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. More so than Hamas, Litvak notes that PIJ became an instrument of Iranian policy in the Arab-Israeli conflict (Litvak 2003). Esposito (2005, 375) has also noted the ties between the PIJ and Iran, stating: “In recent times, the Islamic Jihad Movement failed to become the major political force that the Hamas organization has become. It also suffers from a reputation of blind allegiance to the Iranian regime. Information about the nature of financial, military, and political ties between the Palestinian Jihad movement and the Iranian regime are not easily verifiable.”
Without question, the 1979 Iranian Revolution became a powerful symbol for the Palestinian Islamists in the decade to come. The success of the Iranian Revolution became a pillar of hope to the Palestinian people as a testament to the fall of powerful regimes. With this, the sentiment became, “If the shah could be toppled, Israel could follow” (Milton-Edwards 1996, 119). At the same time, however, support for the Iranian Revolution was also one of the central sources of the deep split between the Palestinian Islamists in the 1980s. (In addition to tensions internal to Palestine, the split was also due to the tensions between Sunni and Shia groups and emerging neo-Salafi and Wahabi influences in the region.) Here, the inevitable split in the Palestinian Islamist camps came from the leaders of PIJ striving to establish themselves as the comparatively more militant and violent of the two Islamist organizations. Although smaller in numbers, PIJ directly challenged Hamas’ refusal to join the armed resistance under Yassin (Gunning 2009, 36). Milton-Edwards writes that although the “ideals and objectives of the Islamic Jihad were never widely embraced, the organization did find support in the local community and was respected by the various factions of the national movement” (Milton-Edwards 1996, 121). Fiercely committed to military struggle against Israel, PIJ set the stage for such activities for the generation of Palestinians Islamists of Gaza to come. As Milton-Edwards notes, “The Israeli authorities appeared powerless to stop the wave of mass sentiment that gripped the Gaza Strip in November 1987, a sentiment that was empowered by political Islam” (Milton-Edwards 1996, 123). To this, Lybarger adds that the PIJ’s militancy “radicalized a new generation of Islamists” (Lybarger 2007, 84).
The Popularity of Hamas

Hamas is the most popular and powerful Islamist voice in the Palestinian Territories today. It is a product of the unique and constantly changing internal and external circumstances of Palestinian politics. From its origins as a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Gaza Strip to winning the 2006 Palestinian national elections, and its subsequent takeover of the Gaza Strip from Fatah in 2007, the organization (and its leadership) has displayed a rational and operational logic of social and political goals while navigating through the Palestinian political framework and gaining the support of men and women alike. In light of the noted history of Hamas’ rise to power, and looking ahead to the subsequent chapters of this project, the question readily becomes, Why did so many people embrace Islamist structures, and what are the effects of this mobilization on their political identities?

A common misconception of Hamas is that it completely held the support of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip as early as the 1990s. While the organization was always stronger in Gaza than in the West Bank it remained a minority movement for much of next decade (Roy 1991, 64-65), especially as its attacks on the secular-national political left cost it political legitimacy in the eyes of many Palestinians (Esposito 1995, 94). Also during the early 1990s, Hamas angered many and alienated the movement when it allowed young men to patrol the streets of Gaza searching for inappropriately attired women. Threatening, name-calling and dousing the offenders with vegetable dye in punishment did little to increase its popularity among the local population. Yet, by the early 1990s, secular Palestinian nationalism was failing to deliver on its promises of

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Palestinian statehood and self-determination. A particular blow to secular nationalist identity emerged in the form of the Likud party in Israel, which maintained a deliberate strategy of weakening the PLO by suspending municipal elections and systematically removing local Palestinian leadership through imprisonment, deportation or assassination throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Gunning 2009, 33). Here, the Israeli leadership claimed that in order to ensure its security, it was necessary to hunt down secular Palestinian nationalists (Cypel 2006, 215). Yet, by strategically targeting the leadership of the PLO, it is widely recognized that the Israeli Likud tactically fostered the growth of Islamist groups as an alternative to Palestinian leadership (Gunning 2009, 33-34). Israel’s promotion of the development of mosques and Hamas arrived at the moment when Palestinian secular nationalism happened to be the greatest existential threat to the Jewish state. As such, Israel’s divide-and-conquer policy toward the Palestinian political organizations directly benefitted Hamas at the time. Hamas was, at a maximum, directly encouraged by Israel to confront the secular nationalist leadership of the PLO, and, at a minimum, largely unmolested by the Israeli authorities, and so it grew in strength and numbers with relative impunity (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010, 210-212, Higgins 2009, Mishal and Sela 2000, 21). As Amira Hass writes, “For several years the Israeli authorities had allowed the Islamic institutions almost free rein in their social, cultural, financial and religious activities in the hope that their influence would weaken the PLO” (Hass 1999, 36).

In comparison to its more secular predecessor, the Labor Party, the Israeli Likud rose to prominence in Israel on the basis of increasingly religious claims to the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and this resulted in the rapid expansion of Jewish settlements in
these areas (Gunning 2009, 33). To counter the religiously inspired growth of Jewish settlements, the Palestinian people more generally began to long for an Islamic response (J. Gunning 2009, 33, Mishal and Sela 2000, 26). As Mishal and Sela write, the intensified struggle between the ultra-radical Jewish messianic groups over the religious shrines most sacred to both Judaism and Islam increasingly caused the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to be identified as religious rather than political (Mishal and Sela 2000, 26).

With this, Hamas was in an advantageous position to reflect the mood of disillusionment among the Palestinians, strategically mobilizing the feelings of disappointment and discontent with the weaknesses and failures of the PLO and its inability to protect the Palestinian people from the daily abuses of occupation by the Israeli military and the influx of zealous, religio-nationalist settlers.

As Gunning notes, the shared experience of military occupation, curfews and collective punishment, in addition to the “rapid expansion of Israeli settlements,

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18 The rise of Likud in the 1977 Israeli elections represented an unprecedented ideological shift in Israeli politics. Referred to as “the revolution”, Likud’s success in the polls ended the almost thirty-year dominance of left-wing political alignments. (For the next twenty years, the left-wing and right-wing party blocs held roughly an equal amount of seats in the Israeli Knesset.) Important to the discussion here is that at the helm of the right-wing was the Gush Emunim, or “Bloc of the Faithful”—a messianic political group committed to the establishment and strengthening of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, or the biblical land known as Judea and Samaria and the Gaza Strip. Historically, the Gush Emunim emerged in response to the 1967 war, when Israel gained control of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. However, the organization was not formally recognized until 1974, following the Yom Kippur War. The organization ceased to exist in the 1980s, but the political influence of its supporters became a central part of the Israeli political process and remains so today. The movement’s ideology gave birth to the contemporary Israeli settler movement. The political legacy of Gush Emunim (as the settler movement) directly encourages Jewish settlement as a divinely inspired Jewish right, as interpreted from the Torah. Certainly, the inner machinations of Israeli politics are beyond the scope of the study at hand, yet it is interesting to observe the coincidence of the timing in terms of the rise of Gush Emunim and the ascendency of more religiously-infused, right-wing politics in Israel with the rise of Islamist politics in the Palestinian Territories. Without a doubt, the military superiority and ultimate triumph of Israel against the aggression of its Arab neighbors in 1967 marked the demise of Arab nationalism. However, it seems that the marriage between religion and politics that was engendered as a response to the events of the 1967 war was not exclusive to the Arab nationalists (or the Palestinian people) alone. Indeed, 1967 marked the rise of a new brand of nationalist groups on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which infused the language of the conflict with a new, distinctly religious—if not divinely inspired—cast. For more on Gush Emunim, see Newman (2005).
competition over water resources, attacks on religious sites, and public calls for the transfer of Palestinians out of Palestine” fostered the emergence of a new Palestinian national consciousness where Palestinians feared that “both their land and their identity were under threat” (Gunning 2009, 39-40). Hamas appealed to the younger generation of Palestinians who had come of age during the Israeli occupation and, thus, challenged Sheikh Yassin’s embrace of patient and passive resistance in the Palestinian struggle.

As the generational experiences and constituency of Palestinians changed hands, a shift in the Hamas movement occurred. Following the example of PIJ, Hamas operatives began attacking Israeli targets. With this, the prioritization of Islamic revival became synonymous with the privileging of armed struggle, and no longer were these two concepts mutually exclusive. The shift is poignantly reflected in the words of Ezzedine Khatib (a pseudonym), who was a student leader of Hamas in Gaza: “Zionism is a component of an imperialist project. Like all forms of colonialism, it will ultimately disappear. Freeing Palestine through armed struggle will be very hard, but reaching a just peace through negotiation is sheer utopia…Time is on our side. Whatever they do, we’re not going away” (Cypel 2006, 188).

By the early 1990s, Palestinian Islamo-nationalism in the form of violent armed struggle against Israel rapidly accelerated Hamas’ popular position among the people as the only organization that would tirelessly promote the Palestinian people and their cause. The success of the organization came with its self-promotion as a credible alternative to the secular-nationalist agendas that many Palestinians considered bankrupt (Esposito 1995, 375). Created in 1992, Hamas’ military wing, Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, began to dispatch attacks against both Israeli soldiers and civilians in 1994.
Most famous among these early attacks are operations carried out in response to the February 1994 massacre of twenty-nine Muslim worshippers in al-Haram al-Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron by an American-born Jewish settler named Baruch Goldstein. In response to Goldstein’s targeted killing of civilians in the West Bank, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades initiated a series of revenge attacks against Israeli civilians. The first attack occurred on 6 April 1994 when a member of Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades drove an explosive-laden vehicle into the Afula bus station, and blew it up, killing nine Israelis and injuring more than one hundred and fifty (Tamimi 2007, 160). In the aftermath of the attacks, Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades claimed responsibility and publically issued a stern warning to the Israelis to evacuate the settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (Tamimi 2007, 160). Tamimi writes, “In a clear reference to Goldstein’s actions inside the mosque, Hamas vowed to make the Israelis pay for the pain and harassment Jewish settlers inflict on Palestinians under occupation” (Tamimi 2007, 160). The next attack that Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades carried out in response to the Hebron massacre was on 31 April 1994, when a male suicide bomber targeted an Israeli bus in Hadera bus station. The attack claimed five Israeli lives and wounded more than thirty others. As the decade stretched on, Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades carried out many more violent attacks Israeli military and civilian targets, clearly pronouncing the attacks as revenge for attacks on Palestinian civilians carried out by Israeli troops or settlers (Tamimi 2007, 160).

Still controversial among the population to this day, suicide missions or “martyrdom operations” were equally controversial when they first appeared in
Palestinian political forum. Although first unpopular among the majority of the Palestinian people, suicide bombing attacks became increasingly accepted, and seen as necessary to offset the imbalance of power between Israeli military forces and technology vis-à-vis a vastly unarmed Palestinian civilian population. As Tamimi writes, “Palestinians have generally approved of and admired the heroism and altruism of men and women who have volunteered their bodies and souls to go on sacrificial missions on behalf of the cause of Palestine” (Tamimi 2007, 161). Despite the fact that the act of suicide itself is forbidden in Islam, the Hamas leadership found a politically expedient way to honor an act of self-sacrifice in the name of the Palestinian cause. Accordingly, Islam and its politicization became truly integral to the politics of Palestine, and volunteers for suicide bombing missions flocked to Hamas and the other Islamist groups in record numbers. For those who supported suicide bomber missions, “the suicide bomb was the only means available to the Palestinians to deter those who might emulate the likes of Baruch Goldstein from launching further attacks on the defenseless Palestinian population” (Tamimi 2007, 161).

As support for Hamas grew, so, too, did the heterogeneity of its support. In particular, a younger generation of Palestinians was especially attracted to the

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19 In Chapter Six, it will be more fully discussed that suicide bombing was alien to the Sunni Palestinian community until the early 1990s. Until then, it was more commonly associated with the Shi’ites in Iran. The Iranians are believed to be the first Muslims to employ it against Iraq in the 1980s. In Lebanon, the Shi’ite Lebanese used suicide attacks against the Israeli invasion in 1982. After this, suicide bombing became a routinely used tactic of Lebanese resistance against Israeli forces. Also discussed later, the Lebanese resistance also produced the first female suicide bomber, Sana’ Mhaidli. The secular Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party claimed Mhaidli’s car bombing attack on 9 April 1985.

20 Fatah leadership opposed suicide bombing campaigns on the grounds of the Oslo Accords. With the “peace process” ongoing, it was clear that suicide bombings would compromise negotiations for statehood. Tamimi (2007, 161) indicates that public support for suicide bombing operations has varied. He writes, “Polls conducted at different times have given different results, but rarely has support for these operations dropped below fifty percent.” He goes on to cite various polls taken at times after the start of Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000.
integration of Islam and nationalism that Hamas typified (Lybarger 2007, 85). As Lybarger notes, “The Islamist and secular-nationalist factions drew from, and competed for, the same kinds of constituencies” (Lybarger 2007, 85). However, as the 1990s stretched on, the failure of the secular-nationalist leadership to achieve a substantive framework for Palestinian statehood vis-à-vis Israel in the Oslo peace process can only be described as massively destabilizing to the already fragile infrastructure of internal Palestinian politics. This was not helped by Fatah’s growing reputation for “mismanagement, nepotism and corruption over its stewardship of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank and Gaza” (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010, 2). It was this instability and chronic disunity that fostered an ever more profound popular wariness toward secular nationalism in general, which created the opportunity for Hamas to permanently secure its place in the story of Palestinian nationalism.

Exerting itself as the alternative to the PLO, Hamas issued its own leaflets, organized its own strikes and carried out its own actions against Israeli military (Lybarger 2007, 85). In time, it came to represent a very heterogeneous body politic, ranging from a wide segment of the disenfranchised refugee population to urban classes in Gaza Strip and West Bank, respectively. In particular, Lybarger’s analysis of the shifts and mobilization of political identities in light of the competition between the secular nationalist and Islamists in Palestinian accounts for the idea that Islam—as infused in every aspect of existence—came to be seen by some as a complete and rational way of life (Lybarger 2007, 90). Lybarger observes that for many Palestinians who grew up in “traditionally Muslim” but not wholly observant homes, the Islamist
turn for them was facilitated by “the growth of institutions (the mosque, principally) that lay outside the family” (Lybarger 2007, 90).

From here, the story follows that the transition between “traditional thinking” to “Islamic consciousness” lay in a re-appropriation of religion as a holistic and rational outlook that reoriented the Palestinian self-perception and way of life. Islamism infused everything from the micro level of science and education and professional life to the macro level of national identity. In doing so, Islamism reoriented followers toward the embrace of divinely established legal-moral principles adherent to Islam as not just a political system in itself, but a divinely inspired way of life. For believers, this reorientation was not so much a “return” to traditional thinking, but also the emergence of a new identity. For some, Islamism meant a break with the limitations of the parent’s traditional ways of thinking. For others, Islamism represented a distinct continuity with the peasant past as “an ideal period in which daily life was itself an expression of Islamic values” (Lybarger 2007, 91). In all, the embrace of specifically Islamist thought entailed the idea of an individual accepting elements of “essential Islam” in a deliberate, conscious, and rational way. As Lybarger writes, “The result was a new unity, a new sense of wholeness that replaced…traditionalism with a seemingly more authentic alternative: Islamic nationalism” (Lybarger 2007, 91). The ethos of Islamic nationalism placed the idea of “nation” firmly at the center of everyday life. In the embrace of this ethic, “Palestinians would regain the moral unity and purpose they required if they were ever to achieve the liberation they so intensely desired” (Lybarger 2007, 108).

Here, Hamas’ domestic focus became particularly attuned to women and the promotion of the Palestinian family. By focusing on the traditional Palestinian family
unit that had been subjected to intense stress over the years of dislocation and occupation, the Hamas leadership offered Islam as a solution to the seemingly porous family security structure. Patriarchal and intensely conservative in this focus on the family, Hamas entreated Palestinian women to “return” to their homes as a way of embracing the Palestinian struggle in the name of Islam. As Sara Roy notes in 1991, the Islamist movement has been “particularly successful inside Gaza in exploiting the women’s issue to promote its own political agenda” (Roy 1991, 66). Yet, over time new loyalties became invested in the new structure of Hamas’ authority, assuring its ideological acceptance and success as a political movement. In more recent years, the huge female turnout in support of Hamas in the 2006 elections testifies to the fact that Hamas has “comprehensively outmaneuvered its secular opponents in the battle for the hearts, souls and votes of Palestinian women” (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010, 183).

Between the genuine offer of authenticity in the face of profound ideological disillusionment and the tangible financial assistance and social networks it provided, support for Hamas grew. With this, the mantle of Islam provided “the requisite symbols and language for reigniting the Palestinian struggle on a much wider level” (Lybarger 2007, 99). However, while the merging of nationalist and religious values produced a new political orientation, this is not to say that Hamas’ path to political participation was as deliberate or linear as its party platform appeared. Noting the combination of violence with Hamas’ new approach to politics, Ziad Abu-Amr writes:

Hamas’s spectacular suicidal attacks inside Israel and its other resistance tactics capture the imagination and admiration of large sectors of Palestinians. Scores of Palestinian youths joined the movement to become martyrs. In light of an excessive Israeli use of military power against a
civillian population under occupation, which included the use of advanced jet fighters, Apache helicopters, and rockets, there was the risk of shaking the will and determination of the Palestinians. With its lethal suicidal attacks inside Israel, Hamas may have provided Palestinians with a national projection of force to restore their psychological balance or equilibrium. In additions, these attacks satisfied a desire for revenge for the heavy human losses the Palestinians sustained (Abu-Amr 2007, 169-170).

Indeed, much of Hamas’ initial popularity among hard liners was due to its intransigent stance toward the PLO for openly advocating a two-state solution in the Oslo Accords. Negotiating with Israel on the basis of a two-state solution was touted as a treasonous betrayal to the Palestinian people, and, as such, Hamas countered the PLO with the “revival of the original, maximalist objectives of national liberation” which did not involve recognizing or reconciling with the State of Israel (Lybarger 2007, 101). Moreover, Hamas won part of its legitimacy through the use of armed revolt. Marking the path of Hezbollah in Lebanon, armed struggle appeared to be the only direct means available to force Israel out of the zones it had militarily occupied. As the strength of the Islamist political approach gained ground in the Palestinian territories, so, too, did the message that political violence was becoming an increasingly viable option for the Palestinian nationalist struggle.

However, as political circumstances changed, so, too, did the methods of Hamas’ political expression as the Palestinian Authority came to exist through the Oslo Accords. Hamas’ ultimate metamorphosis from a religious, social and voluntary movement into a democratically-elected political party ensured its survival and growth, in addition to
access to power and resources inside the PA (Mishal and Sela 2000, 118). As Mishal and Sela note, that although Hamas leadership “refused to veer from its dogmatic doctrine of armed struggle toward social and political action, they occasionally demonstrated openness, flexibility, and willingness to adopt new option in accordance with the changing political circumstances” (Mishal and Sela 2000, 120). Thus, without alienating its support base in the Gaza Strip, Hamas managed to replace the PLO as the sole symbol of Palestinian national identity. While it certainly co-opted the language of secular-nationalism, Hamas also carefully adapted its platform to echo the more violent ideological themes of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, all of the while insisting that its zero-sum approach to the Palestinian question was in the name of Palestine and its people. In its charter, Hamas defined its goal as the “retrieval of “Muslim Palestine” through the overthrow of the Israeli state and the establishment of an Islamic one” (Lybarger 2007, 85). Yet, as Gunning also notes Hamas cannot be reduced to its use of violence, but can be better understood through a nuanced look at its evolution as a product of its changing environment (Gunning 2009, 25).

Still today, the central feature of Hamas’ political platform is the establishment of Islamic rule in Mandatory Palestine. In January 2006, the forty-year dominance of Fatah came to a surprising halt when Hamas party candidates won an overwhelming majority in the Palestinian Legislative Council (Lybarger 2007, 74). Despite a commitment to violence in defense of Palestine, Hamas’ sparkling reputation and image of integrity in the eyes of many Palestinian voters against the backdrop of political corruption and inefficiency that tarnished the Palestinian Authority is what inevitable

21 Although Hamas is yet to gain a firm political stronghold in the West Bank, it remains in power of the Gaza Strip since its overthrow of the PLO in 2007.
brought its leaders to power in Gaza. In the end, Hamas’ “austerity was usually compared to stories of extravagance and corruption of PA leaders and officials. It is suggested in this regard that the deep desire for change and reform was the primary factor for Hamas’ wide popularity” (Abu-Amr 2007, 171).

Conclusion

Particular to the Palestinian case as opposed to Islamist movements elsewhere is the fact that the struggle for statehood remains an unfinished project for Palestine and its people. The perpetuation of the Israeli-Palestinian political impasse and the lack of resolution for real Palestinian sovereignty have “imposed on Islamist politics in the Palestinian setting the necessity of framing issues in terms of the collective effort to achieve independence” (Lybarger 2007, 9). Adding to the uniqueness of the Palestinian case, Milton-Edwards adds that the political Islam of the Palestinian Islamists today should be seen in its historical context. Milton-Edwards contends that the present state of affairs is “shaped by the British colonization of Palestine in 1917, Zionist immigration, the refugee experience of 1948, the heritage of Jordanian and Egyptian rule from 1948-67, the Israeli occupation in 1967, and the Palestinian nationalist experience of the 1970s and 1980s” (Milton-Edwards 1996, 4). The 1987 intifada and the failure of the Oslo Accords to procure peace for the establishment of a Palestine state equally shaped the current state of Palestinian Islamism. Indeed, the Islamist rise in the Palestinian case represents a very important shift in the story of the Palestinian national struggle. In light of the strong social hold that Islamists now maintain in Palestinian society, Hamas, as “the most important Palestinian Islamist organization in the occupied West Bank and
Gaza Strip” (Esposito 1995, 94) has emerged as the political force in Palestine whose social presence and communal activities certainly cannot be ignored. Yet, as Denoeux states, “Politics lies at the heart of Islamism, which ultimately has far more to do with power than with religion” (Denoeux 2002, 63). With this, it is vital to see the rise of Islamism in the Palestinian Territories for what it is—a rational political choice made amidst an unstable and uncertain atmosphere of longstanding corruption, abuse, exhaustion and seemingly unabated military occupation. The Palestinian Islamist movement is both a call to the restructuring of Palestinian nationalism and a response to the pressures surrounding and contained within the national struggle.

Demonstrating the inherent political elements contained within the regional and historical underpinnings of the Palestinian Islamist movement, the primary purpose of this chapter has been to outline the contemporary political landscape in which Palestinian women operated as citizens between 1987 and 2007. The relationship between women and the Islamist ideology in Palestine will be explored in the following chapters on Palestinian political motherhood, political representation, the rise of female suicide martyrs, and Palestinian women as non-violent political activists in a new era of nationalist struggle and political contestation. The chapter that follows begins with an exploration in the changes in the expression of political motherhood among Palestinian women as activists working within the pendulum of opportunity structures existing between the secular-nationalist to Islamo-nationalist political ideologies.
CHAPTER FOUR

POLITICAL MOTHERS

The tire burns in an empty square.
One child, pockets filled with
Carefully collected stones,
Stares at the army patrol.

At his funeral we chanted
“Mother of the martyr rejoice,
All youths are your children.

-Dr. Hanan Ashrawi, “Demonstration”

“Woman make up half of society and gives birth to the other half.”

-International Women’s Day (1999) slogan inscribed on
a banner in several West Bank cities

Combining the politics of gender, identity, nationalism and religion, the “demographic race” between Israel and the Palestinians is one of the most interesting and multifaceted manifestations of the conflict. Within the first ten days of the establishment of the state of Israel, David Ben-Gurion established the precedent for the absolute need for a Jewish demographic majority by awarding the title of “Heroine Mothers” to Jewish women who bore more than ten children in Israel. In response to a long history of horrific pogroms and the genocide of six million Jews in Europe under the Nazi regime, the “populate or perish” ideology of Israel is deeply rooted to this day. As a pro-natalist
country, Israel provides strong incentives for Jewish immigration and reproduction. Israeli legislation encourages Jewish women to have large numbers of children through a variety of state policies, including child allowances, first-rate maternal care, generous maternity leave policies, subsidies for assisted reproduction methods such as in-vitro fertilization and cheaper housing for large families.

For its part, the Palestinian response—to what is seen as the driving force behind Zionist expansionism—is to depict Palestinian women as both the “metaphorical ‘mothers of the nation’ and the literal vessels through which the nation is reproduced (Collins 2004, 57). Going as far back as the Arab rebellion of 1936-1939, Palestinian women’s fertility is a celebrated element of the Palestinian nationalist discourse. For example, a recurring phrase in Palestinian newspapers in the 1930s is the expression, “the woman who rocks the baby’s cradle with one hand, rocks the nation with the other” (Greenberg 2002, 61). From the Palestinian standpoint in the decades since 1948, the act of having many children represents a political act of defiance to their situation of continued statelessness. In effect, bearing children a raw affirmation of their existence.  

As a nation born of refugees, the act of bearing children for the perpetuation of the Palestinian identity signals an affirmation of the actual existence of the Palestinian people. The emphasis on female maternity and fecundity nationalizes the body of every Palestinian woman, man and child. As John Collins writes of the demographic struggle within these two conflicting nationalisms, “To be a child is to be, through the simple fact

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22 In 2007, an elderly female resident of Azzeh Refugee Camp in Bethlehem with eight children and thirty-two grandchildren told me that her desire to have many children (she gave birth to ten children—one died at birth and the other died from injuries received by IDF forces in 1988) stemmed from her ability to, “Show that Israeli woman—Golda Meir—that we Palestinians are here, but not that we are just here, but that we EXIST.” The elderly woman said that having many children was her personal way of demonstrating her commitment to the Palestinian struggle, adding, “[They] will carry on our work and our memories after we are gone.”
of one’s birth and existence, a small but important addition to a statistical category with national importance” (Collins 2004, 58).

Within the Palestinian nationalist discourse, women are the symbolic vessels of Palestinian identity. Their fertility is central to this discourse and seen as a crucial natural resource of the nation in light of the demographic struggle for land and national sovereignty vis-à-vis Israel. Exogenous to the Palestinian struggle is the Israeli fear of high levels of Palestinian reproduction, a political interest in limiting it, and the often-violent steps undertaken to do so. Endogenous to the Palestinian struggle is the internal battle for hegemonic power between political factions, and particularly between the Islamists and the PLO. In these external and internal frameworks of Palestinian nationalism, the female body is often the terrain upon which there is a battle for control. Moreover, a distinct shift in the internal discourse of the struggle has taken place in light of the internecine competition and rise of Islamist political power in recent decades. The rise of the Islamists in the post-intifada years demonstrates how the Islamist reaction to

23 This point was most recently illustrated in Martin Kramer’s highly controversial remarks on February 3, 2010 at the 2010 Herzliya Conference on the radicalization of the Arab/Muslim world. See Martin Kramer, Video: “What Drives Radicalization?”, February 3, 2010, http://www.martinkramer.org/sandbox/gallery/video/ (accessed October 10, 2010). Drawing a connection between high birth rates, younger populations and radical Islam, Kramer’s very ideologically slanted speech implores the West to stop providing “pro-natal subsidies for Palestinians with refugee status.” In the online video of these remarks, Kramer continues, “Those subsidies are one reason why in the ten years 1997-2007 Gaza’s population grew by an astonishing forty percent. At that rate Gaza’s population will double by 2030 to three million. Israel’s present sanctions on Gaza have a political aim: undermine the Hamas regime, but they also brake Gaza’s runaway population growth and there is some evidence that they have. That might begin to crack the culture of martyrdom, which demands a constant supply of superfluous young men. That is rising to the real challenge of radical indoctrination and treating it at its root.” With Kramer’s unabashed ideological support of Israeli policies of sanction and closure of Gaza clear, he later uses his on-line blog on February 22, 2010 to rebuff attacks that his remarks at the Herzliya Conference advocated the genocide of the Palestinian people of Gaza. According to Kramer’s rebuttal, these “pro-natal subsidies” are assured by the UNWRA, in which every child with “refugee” status is fed and schooled regardless of the parents’ own resources. Kramer points to the fact that the “refugee” status is passed from generation to generation in perpetuity, adds, “Anywhere in the world, that would be called a deliberate pro-natal policy.” For more on Martin Kramer’s openly racist attacks on the Palestinian people, see Smear Intifada, February 22, 2010, http://www.martinkramer.org/sandbox/2010/02/smear-intifada/ (accessed October 10, 2010).
the Oslo Accords and the consolidation of the Palestinian Authority first took place in the name of women’s wombs and continued to shape the Palestinian nationalist discourse in a highly gendered approach with its focus on Palestinian women-as-mothers.

As Nira Yuval-Davis argues, to understand the gendered character of nations and nationalist struggles, it is important to understand their contextualization. She states, “Nations are situated in specific historical moments and are constructed by shifting nationalist discourses promoted by different groupings competing for hegemony” (Yuval-Davis 1997, 4). Here, the question becomes if, as Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres has stated—“politics is a matter of demography not geography” (Yuval-Davis 1997, 30)—has the conservative Islamist shift in the Palestinian nationalist discourse also brought with it a conservative transformation in the meaning of female citizenship and political participation in terms of political motherhood? Palestinian feminist scholars, Penny Johnson and Eileen Kuttab observe that in both intifada periods, “informal women’s activism has taken the form of an extension of women’s roles, particularly ‘mother activism’” (Johnson and Kuttab 2001, 37). The long term economic effects of the Israeli military occupation added to the heightened levels of violence against Palestinian civilians in the second intifada causing an acute and pervasive sense of vulnerability, wherein male roles as heads of households were marginalized and radically destabilized (Johnson and Kuttab 2001, 33-34). This “crisis in paternity” can be seen as the point of origination for the Islamist response, where the Hamas movement, in particular, turned a point of crisis into political capital.

Since 1948, the unique circumstances of statelessness and military occupation reinforced the significance of women-as-mothers to the Palestinian struggle. As such, the
depiction of women as “mothers of the nation” gained particular importance during the first intifada. Nahla Abdo writes,

The construction of motherhood equals nationhood within the Palestinian context emerged as an expression of Palestinian lived reality. Expulsion from the homeland and refugeeism in foreign territories provided the impetus for the mother-nation relationship (Abdo 1991, 25).

However, in the Islamization of the Palestinian political struggle, the focus of the Islamists rested on forging an uncompromising stance on the link between governable norms of female modesty (through specific interpretations of Islamic law) and national honor, with particular attention paid to the fusing together of the biological, social and political implications of Palestinian women-as-mothers and motherhood. As Massad writes, “The new gender norms are modern inventions dressed up in traditional garb to satisfy nationalism’s claim of a national culture for which it states. These ideals are not so much traditional as they are traditionalized” (Massad 1995, 468). This point is especially pertinent in the examination of secular and Islamist approaches to the use of biological motherhood as a tool for female political activism and engagement, especially when considering Amal Amireh’s statement: “This brand of nationalism, where men bear arms and women bear children, is currently openly advocated by the Islamic movement in Palestine” (Amireh 2003, 757).

Certainly, a discussion of how women are socially constituted as mothers is nothing new in feminist research. Nira Yuval-Davis has written extensively on this matter and how women in nationalist movements and pro-natalist countries are not only seen as reproducers of “the labor force and/or the future subjects of the state, but also as the
reproducers, biologically and ideologically of the national collective and its boundaries” (Yuval-Davis 1980, 15). Yuval-Davis is joined in this research by feminist scholars such as Enloe (1989), Jayawardena (1986), Kandiyoti (1991), Pateman (1988) and Yuval-Davis and Anthias (1989) in the production of gendered understandings of nations, nationalisms and wars. In the Palestinian case, however, seeing the ‘naturalized’ roles of women as biological reproducers of the nation is especially useful in this investigation into the Islamization of the Palestinian struggle and its impact on the modes of female political participation as well as the gendered constructions of Palestinian citizenship in recent years.

**The Nationalist Weapon of Wombs**

On both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, gendered imagery has long defined the physical land for which these two nationalist movements struggle. Similarly, each side heralds its female citizens for their biological, cultural and symbolic ability to perpetuate their respective ethnic and national collectivities. Long before the creation of Israel, the early Zionist idea of Jewish settlement and expansionism was filled with gendered images of fertilizing the virgin land of Palestine. For the early Zionists, the imagery of Palestine was simultaneously held as the “motherland” to which Jews needed to return and the virgin-land the Zionists needed to fertilize and make fruitful (Massad 2006, 44). This view borrowed closely from the European colonial discourse of civilizing the untouched “New World.” In addition to borrowing from the European colonial discourse, the gendered Zionist narrative of Palestine also echoes European Orientalist inclinations in which the Orient is described as “feminine, its riches as fertile, its main
symbols the sensual woman, the harem, and the despotic—but curiously attractive—ruler” (Massad 2006, 44).

Of course, the portrayal of the Orient as female is not unique to the Zionist discourse, nor is the image of the contested land of Palestine as an iconic female/mother figure. Just as in the European tradition, Palestinian nationalism is expressed through gendered narratives. In addition, Nahla Abdo writes, “elements of the Palestinian national culture were formed in response to the Israeli political culture” (Abdo 1994). Here, the metaphor of nation as mother is a central and extremely important one for the creation of a national identity posited against the Israeli “other”, especially in terms of defense against encroachment and aggression. According to Massad, “the gendered strategies of reproducing not only the national and its nationalist agents but also the very culture defining it, were all constitutive of nationalist discourse” (Massad 2006, 40). For example, in 1974, then-PLO Chairman Arafat delivered a speech to the UN General Assembly in which the discussion of the 1947 UN Partition Plan was framed in gendered terms, and particularly in terms of Palestine being the “natural mother” of the land in question. Arafat stated that when the Palestinians rejected the UN Partition Plan at the same time that the Israelis embraced it, the Palestinian position “corresponded to that of the ‘natural mother’ who refused to permit King Solomon to cut her son in two when the ‘unnatural mother’ claimed the child for herself and agreed to his dismemberment” (Arafat 2008, 173).

Beginning in the early 1950s Israel’s first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion made the issue of Israeli fertility a national priority. Ben-Gurion connected the idea of Israel’s existence, not necessarily to its unwelcoming neighbors, but to its internal
reproductive fecundity with the argument that “increasing the Jewish birthrate is a vital need for the existence of Israel” (Hazleton 1977, 63). He added, “a Jewish woman who does not bring at least four children into the world is defrauding the Jewish mission” (Hazleton 1977, 63). Ben-Gurion’s act of honoring Jewish women as “Heroine Mothers” for giving birth to ten or more children became incorporated in the national discourse of Israel, along with an unequivocal message that abortion amounted to act of treason (Sharoni 1995, 120). Of course, turning the biological capacity of Israeli-Jewish women into national heroines for bearing more children for the national collective meant that Palestinian women were demonized in the Israeli public mind for their historically large broods. As Prime Minister Golda Meir once reportedly said, “Peace will come when the Arabs start to love their children more than they hate us” (Levy 2004).24 Meir’s statement highlights the most insidious elements of racism in the Israeli portrayal of the Palestinian people through the crude allegation that Palestinian mothers send their children to die at checkpoints.

Where children are the most basic and irrefutable constituents of the nation, Meir’s politics and blatant racism toward Palestinian mothers was undeniable. With this, however, Meir also reinforced the fundamental fear of the Palestinian “demographic bomb” among the Israeli constituency. For example, during a speech given on October 25, 1972, Meir conceded her inability to sleep at night knowing that Arab babies were being born during the course of the same evening (Knopf-Newman 2006, 72). As one Israeli academic opined in 1986, “Sovereignty over the land of Israel will not be settled by guns and hand-grenades, but rather in two domains: the bedroom and the

24 Although this quote is disputed, it is sometimes cited as a statement to the National Press Club in Washington, D. C. in 1957.
universities—and it will not be long before the Palestinians surpass us in both” (Collins 2004, 60).

Since the Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967, human rights groups have recorded extensive cases of abuse of Palestinian civilians by Israeli soldiers. During periods of heightened tensions in the first and second intifada years, some of the most horrific incidents arise from the cases of mothers and infants dying from exposure to tear gas, statistics of gas-related miscarriages and preventable maternal and infant deaths at military checkpoints. These statistics are produced alongside the numbers of deaths among the Palestinian civilian population caused by various forms of militarized violence, including gunshots and beatings. The correlation of infant and maternal deaths to the extreme levels of militarized violence reinforces the perception among Palestinians that Israel is “reaching into the womb to prevent the production of more Palestinian nationals” (Collins 2004, 60). This point is especially relevant when considering the high rates of preventable infant and maternal deaths when Palestinian women are forced to give birth at Israeli military checkpoints (B’tselem 2007, 21). Despite these humanitarian tragedies, however, the Palestinian response to Israel’s longstanding aversion to its natural growth is to reinforce Israel’s greatest existential fear by boasting one of the highest birth rates in the world. Where reproduction is propagated


26 Since the Oslo Accords, Israel’s policy of closure and complete control of the Palestinian Territories leaves not only women, but also the general population extremely vulnerable in cases of medical emergency and when in need of treatment for long term illness. In particular, the human rights group, Amnesty International has called on both sides of the conflict to take steps to alleviate the suffering of women.
as a patriotic political tool available to every person of childbearing age, one popular Palestinian expression that captures the irony and darkness of the situation is, “The Israelis beat us at the borders but we beat them in the bedrooms” (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1983, 70).

**Political Motherhood, the PLO-UNLU, and the First Intifada**

When it came to investing national resources into making “their” woman as fertile as possible, Israeli leaders were joined by Yasser Arafat and the official communiqués issued by the PLO by way of the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising in the Occupied Territories (UNLU) during the first intifada. By the 1980s, an Israeli demographer and political consultant named Arnon Soffer (whose nickname was “Arnon the Arab Counter”) reputedly made the statement that the “Palestinian womb is a biological weapon” (Joyce 2009, 33). Arafat picked up this statement and used it to formulate his famous proclamation that “the womb of the Palestinian woman” was his greatest weapon in winning the war against Israel (Joyce 2009, 33). However, this was not the first or only time that Palestinian women were revered for their reproductive roles in the progressive-nationalist movement. The November 1988 Palestinian National

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27 During the 1980s, the leadership of the PLO operated outside of the Palestinian Territories, but its organizational influence in the Palestinian Territories rested in the UNLU, on the “inside”. Since political organizing was banned under Israeli authority, the UNLU operated clandestinely as a direct conduit of communication between the PLO and the Palestinian citizens living in the Territories. In doing so, the UNLU secretly printed and distributed a series of public announcements, or communiqués, beginning in 1988. The communiqués were also read on radio stations from Baghdad and Damascus, and signed by the “Palestinian Liberation Organization—Unified Leadership of the Palestinian Uprising in the Occupied Territories”, which indicates that these organizations were largely one in the same. The primary source for nearly all of the communiqués comes from the Foreign Broadcast Service, an arm of the Central Intelligence Agency, which monitors radio stations worldwide and publishes these broadcasts in translation. They are reprinted in Lockman and Beinin, eds. (1989), and are also translated and employed extensively by Joseph Massad (1995, 2006) in his research on the elements of gendered politics in the Palestinian struggle. My research draws from Massad’s translations.
Council Declaration of Independence states, “We render special tribute to that brave Palestinian woman, guardian of sustenance of life, keeper of our people’s perennial flame” (Palestinian National Council 2008, 357). Celebrating the Palestinian Declaration of Independence, UNLU Communiqué No. 29, entitled, “The Call of the Wedding of the Palestinian Independent State,” congratulated Palestinian women in their roles as mothers in the nationalist movement. However, the celebratory tone of the communiqué takes the role of Palestinian political motherhood one step further by specifically highlighting the mother of sons who fell in the name of Palestinian nationalism. The communiqué honors “the mother of the martyr and her celebratory ululations, for she has ululated twice, the day her son when to fight and was martyred, and the day the state was declared” (Massad 2006, 46).

Another important citation referring to Palestinian women’s biological contributions to Palestinian nationalism during the first intifada is found in UNLU Communiqué No. 5, which describes Palestinian women, sisters and daughters as “manabit”, which, in Arabic literally means plant nurseries, or places that encourage the proper soil, light and water for plant growth. The communiqué describes the Palestinian female as the soil for producing manhood, or the social place from which manhood, respect and dignity form and grow. This imagery also harkens back to the Palestinian Declaration of Independence, insofar as Palestinian women are seen as the “guardians” of Palestinian lives and survival (Massad 1995, 474). Issued during the first years of the 1987 intifada, the UNLU communiqué(s) continually highlight Palestinian women’s reproductive roles, and also describe female suffering at the hands of the Israeli occupier.

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28 This communiqué and translation of the term “manabit” is taken from Massad (1995).
in terms of pregnancy miscarriages. UNLU Communiqué No. 12, states that when pregnant Palestinian women miscarry their babies at the hands of poison gas and tear gas grenades, their suffering is likened to “those women whose sons and husbands were thrown in the Nazi prisons” (Massad 1995, 475). The implication of this phrase is that Palestinian women suffer for their failure to produce more nationalist (male) fighters due to the human rights violations incurred by the Israeli occupation.

Adding to the emphasis on female nurturing and biological reproduction seen in the official speeches and political communiqués of the PLO-UNLU, various legends surrounding Palestinian motherhood became well known during this time. Among them is the tale of a young Palestinian mother with a baby in her arms who rushed up to a young man in a jeep as Israeli soldiers were arresting him. She threw her baby into the arms of the young man while screaming at him for neglecting her as his wife and his fatherly responsibilities to their infant. Then, she ran away. Dumbfounded by the infant that remained in the young man’s arms, the Israeli soldiers promptly released the man on the street. The young mother reappeared from a nearby hiding spot, reclaimed her infant from the released man, and carried on with her day (Amireh 2003). As legend from the time of the first intifada, this story anecdotally emphasizes the Palestinian female’s unique social and political positioning as a young mother. It also highlights her role as a presumed “equal” to her male counterpart in the nationalist struggle, even if this translates into utilizing her biological and social position as a mother in this context. As it is told, this narrative of the first intifada highlights a political parity between male and female activists, in spite of the social differences that are sustained in their society to separate them. Important to note is that the story would not seem as “natural” or effective
if the female was being arrested for her political activism and the male appeared in the story to save her from a potentially long imprisonment by virtue of his biological and social duties as a father.

The story also demonstrates that women regularly used their social and biological positions as mothers as a tool for confronting the Israeli army. Some women even referred to their confrontations with Israeli soldiers as “a profession” in the sense of being ready at all times to confront the Israeli military in the street (Giacaman and Johnson 1989, 161). Another familiar account of celebrated Palestinian “mother activism” during this time is the common refrain “He’s my son!” used by women as they attempted to snatch youths from the clutches of Israeli soldiers (Giacaman and Johnson 1989, 161). From this comes an account of a middle-aged woman named Jamila who struggled to free her son from a group Israeli soldiers who surrounded him and were kicking him with their boots and pounding him with the butts of their rifles. Suddenly, an elderly woman in peasant dress appeared and got hold of Jamila’s son, whereupon she smothered him in a motherly embrace. When the elderly woman told the soldiers that the young man was her son, and they responded by calling her a liar, the elderly woman retorted, “They are all my children, not like you motherless lot!” (Giacaman and Johnson 1989, 161).

However anecdotal, these stories bring to light the social and political geography of the Palestinian people during the first intifada, when Palestinian women were fighting the collective enemy, the Israeli “other”, and patriotically using their biology as a political weapon to do so. As a result of this, one of the most universal and enduring images of the 1987 intifada was that of the “mother” saving young boys and men from
the blows of Israeli soldiers (Peteet 1994). This classic image is typically represented as a middle-aged to elderly woman, dressed in traditional Palestinian garb, evoking her status as an uneducated refugee.29 This is held in contrast to the alternative image of the intifada of the celebrated young boy or man, dressed in Western-style blue jeans and a t-shirt, his face shrouded in a scarf, suspended in the active motion of symbolically throwing a rock at the occupation. These images in contrast illustrate the fact that the intifada mobilized all sectors of Palestinian society against a common enemy. Meanwhile, however, the secular and progressive discourse coming from the leadership of the intifada was contradicted by a traditional view of women and their role in the nationalist struggle. Where aspects of leadership were concerned, Palestinian women and girls were held as passive rather than active subjects of the struggle. In effect, this contradictory approach predetermined the continuation of the traditional duties of Palestinian women as giving birth to, caring for, and educating children. Ultimately, this excluded women “from what was considered the loftiest possible contribution to the national struggle: participation in military activities against the enemy, which sometimes ended in the sacrifice of one’s life” (Tzoreff 2006, 14). For example, the danger that a Palestinian woman might die in a military action in the name of Palestinian self-determination meant that, “her womb would no longer be able to serve the nation’s need” (Tzoreff 2006, 14). Thus, Palestinian women were “equal” to men in their collective

29 Loren Lybarger gives a similar account of the images of the intifada captured in poster art of the “peasant woman dressed in a thawb (embroidered dress) holding on to her children as she remained rooted to the land” (Lybarger 2007, 24). He adds, “Such symbols tapped into patriarchal notions of honor and the necessity to redeem it when it became violated. These ideas had been part of the ethos of village and small-town life and continued as values within the refugee communities” (Lybarger 2007, 24).
struggle against Israeli oppression, insofar as they produced more fighting men for the revolution.

In the context of the first intifada, the central feature of Palestinian womanhood was sacrifice, yet the ultimate sacrifice was not the life of the individual female fighter, but that of her (male) child in the name of the nationalist cause. Between the rhetoric and social traditions of the Palestinian struggle, the mainstream secular nationalism of the PLO promoted a pro-natalist policy wherein population growth and demographic pressure was seen as an instrument through which to achieve liberation (Giacaman and Johnson 1989, 153). On the one hand, in the secular-nationalist discourse, Palestinian women were seen as equals to men, despite the prevailing pro-natalist bent of the movement. One the other hand, feminist political platforms seeking greater political representation and equality for Palestinian women were regularly dismissed as inherently selfish and detracting from the idea of Palestinian freedom (Peteet 1991, 96-99). As Peteet writes, “Women’s position is conceptualized as inextricably embedded in the larger national question” (Peteet 1991, 97). In a 1969 interview, Yasser Arafat elaborates on the emphasis of gender equality within the nationalist struggle. He states:

As a progressive revolution, we consider that all members of our society, whether men or women, should enjoy equal rights. We therefore encourage the total emancipation of all our women and we endeavor to give them every opportunity to participate actively in our struggle. The Palestinian woman has since the days of the Mandate fought side by side with our men. In the occupied territories at present, it is our valiant sisters who are leading the civilian resistance against the occupying forces (Arafat 2008, 135).
Yet, Arafat’s statement above, and the advancement of a women’s agenda within the inner machinations of the PLO was not seen as a “contribution to national liberation but as a threat to it” (Hammami and Kuttab 1999, 1). Moreover, as Arafat’s regime became consolidated through the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, observers have noted a profound lack of democratic space and rise of male-centric, authoritarian rule within the new governing structure. At a minimum, Palestinian women were praised for their contributions in the 1987 intifada, yet in the name of the sacrifices made across society for the intifada to succeed, even the secularist organizations of the intifada cautioned Palestinian women against “excess” and derided them for ‘excessive vanity’ or the use of ‘cosmetics’ while the Palestinian population suffered in poverty (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010, 191). Even with the establishment of the PA, female leaders of the 1987 intifada were met with strong opposition from PA officials for seeking to secure women’s social rights through the creation of new state institutions (Hammami and Kuttab 1997, 4).

Certainly, the most effective way to undermine the potentially disruptive social implications of a feminist movement within Palestinian society was to conflate female activism and motherhood and a feminist struggle for gender equality with the continued struggle for Palestinian statehood. This is illustrated in the 1990 UNLU Communiqué named “The Woman’s Call”, issued on International Women’s Day (March 8th):

> Progressive nations celebrate International Women’s Day on 8 March as a day of struggle for the world’s women’s masses. While celebrating this great day, in the name of all the sons of our people, we congratulate the world’s women’s masses and the masses of the Palestinian women’s
movement and its vanguard organizations, hailing every working woman, woman struggler, and housewife, especially of our imprisoned strugglers. We also pay tribute to the struggle role of the Palestinian uprising’s women’s movement, to every mother who has lost a son, daughter, husband, or brother, and to every woman who meets with a struggling daughter or a heroic son from behind the Bastille of the Zionist enemy (Massad 1995).

By recognizing and saluting Palestinian women for their heroism in the nationalist struggle, and then proceeding to praise the Palestinian people for making history “through the blood of their sons” (Massad 1995) the UNLU communiqué adroitly circumvents the discussion of female subjugation in the first intifada. Ultimately, the praise of sacrificial motherhood proves adversarial to the development of gender-based equality initiatives later undertaken by the secular female leaders of the first intifada. These female political activists recognized that the small window in which Palestinian women could challenge the discourses of Palestinian nationalism and female agency during the first intifada was swiftly coming to a close. As Massad writes in 1995, “Unfortunately, however, the strength and resilience of the masculinist axioms buttressing Palestinian nationalist thought are yet to be dented in any major way” (Massad 1995, 481).

Even at the time and in the language of secular nationalism, mother-activist political participation and mobilization in support of the 1987 Palestinian uprising

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30 In the aftermath of the 1987 intifada—particularly at the time of the signing of the Declaration of Principles—Giacaman and Johnson (1994) write of the concern among the female leaders of the Palestinian women’s movement “that any gains by women in general, or as political leaders, will be ignored by the patriarchal character of the coming authority” (23-24). They add, “The atmosphere of diminishing hopes and anxiety over the future deeply affects both activists and ordinary women.” When authority was transferred to the male leadership in Tunis during the Olso years, Palestinian women more imminently saw their social gains during the first intifada threatened.
produced no clear vision or policy for the elevation of Palestinian women’s rights in the discourse of Palestinian nationalism. On the one hand, the nationalist project held women’s political mobilization as mothers as an indispensible element of the Palestinian struggle against Israel. On the other, this particular form of participation exacerbated the deep contradictions between Palestinian society and the secular-nationalist leadership concerning gender relations.

During the Oslo years that followed, specific recommendations were made to amend existing aspects of Islamic (shar’ia) law (Barron 2002, 74-79). Within the framework of creating norms and institutions in support of gender equality, members of the Palestinian women’s movement reviewed and proposed amendments to existing and new legislation in the Palestinian Authority as a way of encouraging stronger democratic practices to include women at the decision-making level of Palestinian self-governance. However, given that even the most progressive male leaders of the newly forming PA felt pressured to acquiesce to conservative Islamist political pressure, advocacy for gender equality for Palestinian women fell into a state of limbo (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010, 191, Hammami 1990). As the struggle between secular nationalism and feminism unfolded, Islamist groups, including Hamas, “excoriated secular Palestinian women’s movements, denigrating them as anti-nationalist and pro-Western” (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010, 185). These women, including Dr. Hanan Ashrawi, a highly prominent Palestinian woman from Ramallah who served as the “face of the PLO” during the peace talks in the early 1990s, were seen as “part of a liberal feminist plot to undermine the

31 Milton-Edwards and Farrell (2010, 191) add that the secular mainstream in the PLO was slow to realize and respond to Islamist pressures on women due to its overall lack of an agenda for women. To this the Islamist focus on women dovetailed perfectly with a political and religious platform that emphasized traditional patriarchal values.
Muslim family” (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010, 189). Given the fact that Islamic law had a “legally defined model of family and gender relations based on complementary male and female roles rather than equality” (Giacaman and Johnson 1989, 148), even the strongest advocates of gender equality under a secular legal system were stymied. By this point in the nationalist struggle, Hammami and Kuttab argue that the Palestinian women’s movement had paid a heavy price for its part in enabling the secular nationalist movement to prioritize the objective of Palestinian statehood over concerns for gender. According to Hammami and Kuttab, the secular-nationalist movement depoliticized gender, marginalized women’s social rights and considered “women’s political activism not as a contribution to national liberation but as a threat to it” (Hammami and Kuttab 1999).

Political Motherhood and the Islamist Response

Against the gendered underpinnings of Palestinian nationalist discourse, the post-1987 intifada experience of Palestinian women became that of increasing social restrictions on female freedom of movement, dress and behavior due to the rise of Hamas’ social and political pressure, particularly in the streets. Milton-Edwards and Farrell write that one factor that aided Hamas’ campaign was “the tardiness of the secular political establishment to realize the significance of the new drive to social conformity, the targeting and attacks on women, and its unwillingness to stand against it” (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010, 19). Gluck writes that Palestinian women who “engaged in the range of intifada activities felt that they had a stake in a future Palestinian state and assumed their roles would continue” (Gluck 1995, 9). At the same time while many were
hopeful that the post-intifada era of peace negotiations would bring the space to freely address women’s issues, others doubted that the consolidation of the Palestinian Authority would transfer the leaders of women’s committees into well-earned positions of influence and power in the state building project (Giacaman and Johnson 1994). Even though a heightened social and political consciousness was the legacy of the 1987 intifada, the struggle for hegemonic power between the sharpening political factions in the Palestinian Territories set a new stage of internal struggle for power and control. In particular, the Hamas movement focused on the uncompromising link between the norms of feminine modesty and the honor of fallen martyrs as a way of asserting its place in the nationalist discourse. Originally published on 18 August 1988, the primacy and immediacy of the connection between women-as-mothers and the Palestinian struggle was focused on in Article 17 of the Hamas charter, which states, “The Muslim woman has a role in the battle for liberation which is no less than the role of the man, for she is the factory of men. Her role in direction generations and training this is a big role.” (Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) 2003, 127). Additionally, Article 18 of the Hamas Charter enumerates the domestic role of women as a continuing duty of the Palestinian struggle:

The women in the house of the Mujahid (and the striving family), be she a mother or sister, has the most important role in taking care of the home and raising the children of ethical character and understanding that comes from Islam, and training her children to perform the religious obligations to prepare them for the Jihadic role that awaits them. From this perspective it is necessary to take care of schools and the curricula that educate the Muslim girl to become a righteous mother aware of her role in
the battle of liberation (Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) 1993, 128).

Not unlike the PLO, the leadership of Hamas continued to politically frame Palestinian gender relations in terms where women would contribute to the nationalist cause as domestic warriors, rather than militants in the streets.

Even before the end of the 1987 intifada, the Hamas *hijab* campaign swept the streets of Gaza. Utilizing the “crises of paternity”—or the destabilized male roles that emerged from the constellation of effects of the Israeli occupation mentioned earlier—Hamas found a strong support base of religious conservatives among a weak and fragmented opposition. Uncovered women were portrayed as symbols of corruption and national betrayal (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010, 189). Hamas issued communiqués and leaflets into the streets, warning that “beauty salons, hairdressing salons and dress shops were dens of inequity where Israeli intelligence operatives ensnared Palestinian women, then used their sexuality to lure Palestinian men into becoming collaborators” (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010, 189). As Hammami writes, “Social acquiescence, political inaction, family pressure and a concurrent ideological transformation created a situation in which only a few committed women in Gaza, one year into the intifada, continued not to wear the headscarf” (Hammami 1990, 24). Moreover, as uncovered women were harassed and attacked on the streets by self-appointed groups of young boys and men as a way to demonstrate their nationalist affiliation with the Islamist movement, progressive men and the PLO-UNLU remained silent.

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32 The threat of women (and men) being turned by Israeli forces and becoming spies or collaborators bordered on hysteria during the time of the 1987 intifada and since. Milton-Edwards and Farrell (2010, 189) add that Hamas propagated the image of the Palestinian collaborator as “bare-headed, loose and morally bankrupt woman tricked into submitting to Israel for the thrill of illicit sex, alcohol or drugs.”
The fundamental purpose of the campaign was to demonstrate Hamas’s power by disciplining women’s bodies and physical comportment. Yet what began as random acts of violence against women developed into a comprehensive campaign of cultural dominance. The wearing of the hijab signified Hamas’ power insofar as modest female attire became synonymous with women’s political commitment to the continuation of the Palestinian struggle in Islamist terms. As Hammami writes, “By this logic, “bare-headed” women became considered vain and frivolous or, at worst, anti-nationalist” (Hammami 1990, 26). Importantly, in seeking to “nationalize” the hijab, the most prominent definition put forth by Hamas was that wearing a headscarf was a sign of cultural struggle, an assertion of nationalist heritage, and above all else, a symbol of respect for fallen martyr-sons. In the span of a year, Hammami writes that it was “almost impossible for women to walk around Gaza without wearing some form of head cover” (Hammami 1990, 25). In effect, Hamas successfully infused the call for women to cover their heads and return to modest attire as a sign of identification with the martyrs, or sanctified dead sons, of the Palestinian nationalist movement (Tzoreff 2006, 14-15).

Like so many other contemporary political movements, the Hamas hijab campaign assigned every Palestinian woman with the role of “bearers of cultural values, carriers of tradition, and symbols of the community” (Moghadam 1994). Additionally, the heightened Islamist focus on women-as-mothers was another way to undermine the momentum of the women’s movement in establishing secular-based gender equality laws within the new system of Palestinian self-governance (Hammami 1990). In this period, the Islamist organizations made it clear that the preservation of Islamic law was a “redline” in their relations with the Palestinian Authority (Jad, Johnson and Giacaman
In addition to organizing attacks in mosques and public meetings, the Islamists targeted the Palestinian women’s organizations for their commitment to amend Islamic law in the interest of a secular code of gender equality. Interestingly, while the Islamists denounced secular Palestinian feminism and the women’s organizations of the intifada movement, there was an unequivocal defense of Palestinian “womanhood” (albeit as motherhood) launched from a conservative platform from which Islamist women’s organizations proliferated.

In two cases, the attack against secular women came directly from Islamist women themselves, who claimed to more authentically represent Palestinian women for their social and political interests as Muslim women and as mothers. Despite a few obvious contradictions in application, these organizations held that “Islam gives women her full rights but may be open to dialogue on issues where these rights are not implemented in society” (Jad, Johnson and Giacaman 2000, 150). One Islamic women’s organization—Al-Hoda Women’s Society—was formed in 1997 with the aim of providing an Islamic counterweight to the Palestinian women’s movement and its secular programs (Jad, Johnson and Giacaman 2000, 150). A year after its creation, Al-Hoda sponsored its first publication entitled, “The Palestinian Women and the Conspiracy of Secular Feminists”, which cited the immorality of the West as corrupting and treasonous elements of the secular Palestinian women’s movement (Jad, Johnson and Giacaman 2000, 150). The following year, another Islamic women’s organization formed by the name of Al-Khansa Islamic Association, and also stressed women’s rights and participation from an Islamic perspective. Importantly, the namesake “Al-Khansa” recalls the 7th century Arabian female poet, Tumadir bint Amr—a very famous historical female
figure in the Islamic tradition for her well-known encouragement of “war in the name of Islam in the battle of the Qadisiyya, and for articulating the a desire to be congratulated rather than consoled at the death of her sons, since she became the mother of martyrs for Islam” (Hasso 2005, 23). The choice of the name “Al-Khansa” for the Palestinian Islamist women’s organization was to connect female political participation to traditional female roles within family and society in order to most effectively bridge the Islamist standpoint that women participate as mothers and nurturers of Palestinian society within the larger framework of political jihad—now formed against the secular elements of the Palestinian political realm and Israel itself.

As an aside, “Khansa” is a popular name for Muslim girls as a symbol of female heroism and maternal sacrifice. More recently, however it has also become the name given to an on-line women’s magazine, “Al-Khansa”, sponsored by Al Qaeda and hosted by several extremist Islamist websites. The magazine itself is reportedly published by an Al Qaeda organization known as the Women’s Information Bureau of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and serves Islamist women throughout the Muslim world, including Palestine. Additionally, the magazine claims to be founded by Al Qaeda founders, Abdul Aziz-al-Muqrin and Issa Saad Mohammed bin Oushan (Ramachandran 2004). A more direct link between Al-Qaeda and the Palestinian Islamist movement is regularly suspected. The on-line magazine addresses the politicization of motherhood in the context of jihad, which is one commonality between the groups. For example, the editorial in the magazine’s first issue states that the goal of women should be “martyrdom for the sake of Allah” and states:

33 In his 2009 article, “Islamization or Secularization of the Palestinian case, Jonathan Fighel cites Muhammad Dahlan, a Fatah leader and the former head of the Palestinian Preventative Security Force in the Gaza Strip as saying, “There is no difference between Al-Qaeda and Hamas” (Fighel 2009). Although this may be an overstatement driven by Dahlan’s political motivations, Fighel makes the connection to the idea that Hamas represents a direct threat to political moderation both locally and globally, and notes the influence of Al-Qaeda, particularly in the Gaza Strip. I find this a riveting area for future research.
We will stand covered by our veils and wrapped in our robes, weapons in hand, our children in our laps, with the Koran and the Sunna of the Prophet of Allah directing and guiding us. The blood of our husbands and the body parts of our children are the sacrifice by means of which we draw closer to Allah, so that through us, Allah will cause the martyrdom for His sake to succeed (Ramachandran 2004).

The magazine’s rhetorical use of the female traditional role in the family and society serves as an operating tool in the broader Islamist framework. In the Palestinian case, Hamas’ backing of the Islamic women’s organizations reflects the Al-Qaeda-backed women’s movement abroad in its use the same rhetorical device for generating female participation in the larger movement in the nationalized “jihad” against Israel and other “infidels”. In both cases, women-as-mothers are simultaneously the symbols of this political jihad and the social-structural lynchpins of the campaign itself.

Also germane to both cases, is that female participants see themselves as the co-constructors of the Islamist movement and emancipated in their participation. In the Palestinian case, Caron Gentry focuses on how this represents both an “active” and “passive” maternalist politics, where the passive act of “raising” or giving birth to future martyrs is no less politically engaged than the active act of “defending the nation” (Gentry 2009). As Jad more recently writes, “Islamist women have created space for the actions and activities of groups of women, mostly well-educated from displaced and poor families, who are thus bestowed with an air of moral legitimacy in all spheres of public life” (Jad 2010, 11). Inter alia, in the historical and socially driven context of the Palestinian struggle, there is no higher claim to moral legitimacy and superiority than that of a pious and sacrificial mother. Peteet adds that in the Palestinian case—particularly
among the refugee community—the “mother of the martyr” represents a “supreme political act that translates into respect and prominent community stature. She is often invited to attend resistance events in the camp with the leadership, and they visit her” (Peteet 1986, 24).

In a striking contrast to the iconic mother figure of the secular-nationalist Palestinian movement from the late 1960s through 1980s, which evokes Palestinian women dressed in traditional garb as symbolic of their refugee status and lack of formal education, the iconic mother figure of the Islamist movement is no less maternal in design, but now dressed in traditionalized “Islamic” wear and heralded for her emblematic status as a pious, highly-educated and a refined woman of Islam. A moral and political role model for other Palestinian women, this “new” Palestinian woman represents the migration of younger Palestinians to more self-consciously religio-nationalist Islamist groups, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. By virtue of her dress and comportment, she represents a continuation of traditional social values, even while this mother-woman-activist serves her family and her community in a public and highly political functions. The emergence of this new compatibility between tradition and modernity cannot be more evident than in the Islamist female political candidates in the 2006 Palestinian Legislative Elections. As Jad stated in an interview at the time of the elections, “Before, the women were glorifying martyrs and martyrdom; now, they speak about their power themselves as women” (McCarthy 2006).

Lybarger argues that the Islamist refusal to be subordinated by the PLO or the UNLU gave way to a fundamental cultural and political divide within Palestinian society. As the Palestinian Authority failed at either “integrating or isolating” the Islamists, the
secular-Islamist division became manifest in the “Intifada Generation” and deepened during the Oslo Process from 1993 to 2000 (Lybarger 2007). However, as Lybarger also argues, the Islamists did not escape the Oslo process unchanged. The 1996 elections that came after the establishment of the PA encouraged Islamist leaders to consider a political transformation in order to be more in tune with the generational shift of allegiances. As Gunning writes, for Hamas, “the process of election appears to be central to the acquisition of legitimate authority” (Gunning 2009, 137). More recently, the evolution of the new Palestinian female figure has been central to the growth of Hamas’s political legitimacy, and evidenced by the fact that women’s votes contributed decisively to Hamas’s 2006 electoral victory in Gaza.

Several of the most high-profile woman figures in contemporary Palestinian society are highly educated, mothers, and female leaders of the Islamist movement. For example, Mariam Farhat, (“Umm Nidal”) was elected as Hamas MP after three of her sons died as suicide bombers. Sameer Al-Halayka, another elected member of the Palestinian Legislative Council in the 2006 elections, is widely respected as a journalist, scholar of Islamic Jurisprudence and as a mother of seven children. Huda Naim is another leading activist in Hamas’ Islamic Women’s Department and is the Head of the Board of Trustees of the Thorayya Multimedia Center in Gaza. As a mother with five sons, she was also elected in 2006 as the representative of the Bureij Refugee Camp, where she lives. Finally, Jamila Shanti is a former head of the Women’s Department in Hamas, is widely considered to be one of the most influential women in the Hamas movement today and widely considered a “pioneer” in Muslim women’s activism. In the 2006 election, Shanti’s popularity put her in the third slate on Hamas’ electoral list, meaning that her
votes fell just short of high profile Hamas leaders, Ismael Haniyya and Muhammed Abu Tir. In addition to being a former lecturer at the Islamic University in Gaza, Shanti represents a break from the image of revered mother-woman, as she is unmarried (and childless), despite rumors that she was the wife of the co-founder of Hamas, Abed Aziz al-Rantissi. Nevertheless, at 51 years old at the time of the 2006 elections, it can be said that Shanti’s age, piety and considerable organizing experience as a leading female figure in Hamas patterned her in the same maternalist tradition of reverence and respect for the politically engaged, mother-women of the Islamist movement.

Impressively, the 2006 Palestinian Legislative election brought more Islamist women to the forefront of political influence than ever before on the basis of their maternity, piety and embrace of gender equality in the name of Islam and Islamic law. While secular Palestinian feminists would point to the fact that this was largely due to their years of campaigning to change the quota system in the Palestinian Legislature to bring more female representatives into the system of representation itself, the fact remains that fundamentally more mothers were elected to serve in the Palestinian political arena than ever before, and on the Islamist ticket, no less. For this, Hamas MP Shanti credits the “advanced standing” of women in Hamas to a central philosophy in Islam, which “gives women their rights and dignity” (Shanti 2010). Ironically, despite maintaining an openly Islamist stance and staunch support of Islamic law that is criticized for compromising women’s rights, Shanti embraces the longstanding sentiment among feminists alike, that education is the key to female empowerment and equality. In her explanation of why Palestinian women are more socially and politically progressive compared to other women throughout the Arab world, Shanti says:

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34 PA elections law guaranteed women twenty percent of seats on the national list. Of the 314 candidates running in the election, the number of female candidates amounted to 71, which comprised 22.6 percent of the overall number of candidates. In the district elections, only 15 female candidates ran in the total of 414 candidates overall, comprising only 3.6 percent of those running for election. The Hamas “Change and Reform” Party had 13 female candidates on the ballot, and Fatah had 12 female candidates overall (Rahman 2006, 3).
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 (Shanti 2010).

Shanti boasts that Hamas gives more representation to women than any other Palestinian political movement, and, despite Hamas’ open aversion to secular feminism, she makes a strong argument for Hamas’ apparent openness to Palestinian women, insofar as they ideologically conform to Islamist gender norms. Shanti adds, “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” (Shanti 2010).

The social acceptability of Hamas women today cannot be better summed by a statement made by a young woman named Intisar, who expressed her admiration for the female activists of Hamas because “their adherence to religious strictures, as the Islamist defined them, did not seem to interfere with taking on public roles and responsibilities” (Lybarger 2007). Intisar, who first became politically active in the 1987 intifada adds a personal account of the rise of Hamas female role models among younger Palestinian women. She says:

I have a lot of respect for people who conform to all aspects of religion because they are genuinely convinced of the principles set down in the Qur’an and sunna. I admired the Hamas and Jihad girls at the university. There were well organized and together. There was no contradiction between their political work and religious principles. There were limits. Women and men had separate roles, they organized themselves in separate
units, but they worked toward the same end. Girls in Fatah and the other blocs, on the other hand, were still taking refuge in the traditional ideas about what women’s roles were. These ideas blocked them in their political work. But, the Hamas girls were free of these blocks (Lybarger 2007).

One important inference that can be taken from Intisar’s statement is the idea that unlike the secular-nationalist movement, which utilized the nationalist struggle itself as a mode of female political mobilization the Islamist movement has successfully used Islam as a tool for nationalist struggle, thereby enabling Palestinian females to also use religion as a tool for gender equality within the national struggle. Once inside this reconstructed approach to Palestinian nationalism, Islamist women resolve the social crisis in gender norms (as previously experienced by their secular counterparts) through an understanding of freedom that is found in the conflation of piety and politics as a central element of Islamist ideology. Ultimately, it is within this framework that Islamist women-as-mothers continue to negotiate their full participation as citizens in the Palestinian struggle.

**Conclusion**

As Lybarger writes, “By the 1980s, to identify as Palestinian was to be a supporter, passive or active, of the P.L.O.” (Lybarger 2007). Since the 1990s, however, this sentiment has dramatically changed, illustrating the rise of the Islamist alternative in Palestinian politics. Where what I refer to as the “exogenous” element of the Palestinian struggle vis-à-vis Israel remains as ever before a political and existential struggle for recognition and existence, the politically gendered elements of Palestinian nationalism remain unchanged. Thus, despite the Islamization of the Palestinian struggle, the
emphasis on traditional female roles on mothers of the Israeli-coined, “demographic bomb” persists as a central element in the Palestinian nationalist discourse. However, within what I call the “endogenous” struggle, i.e. the battle for hegemonic control and influence between the secular-nationalists and Islamists within the Palestinian society, a comparable evolution in the imagery of the Palestinian activist mother has taken place. Where participation in the national struggle remains for Palestinian women a basis for demanding gender equality in a range of institutional settings, Islamist women have worked to create a space where they are heard for their unique contributions to the Palestinian struggle, in spite of how naturalized this may appear. Using the tools of religion and the highly respected social element of political motherhood, it seems that these women are beyond social and political reproach, unlike their secular and feminist counterparts who have been historically stymied by the contradictions between progressive political agendas and misogynistic social traditions concerning women’s roles. As Hammami and Kuttab demonstrate, “motherhood as a symbolic force can sometimes be very effective in challenging voices of oppression” (Hammami and Kuttab 1999, 9). They cite the example of the Argentine mothers of political prisoners who were capable of openly demonstrating and challenging the Pinochet regime due to the social and political liability in traditional societies that comes with violently targeting women. As Hammami and Kuttab state, “no one wants to be seen attacking mothers” (Hammami and Kuttab 1999, 9).

The politicization of Palestinian mothers during the 1987 intifada attracted the attention of feminist scholars who looked to Palestinian women as being more actively engaged in the process of reconstituting the meaning of motherhood itself. For example,
rather than seeing women as passive recipients and mere reproductive wombs of the Palestinian struggle, Peteet’s approach to “Palestinian activist mothering” sees a potentially transformative element for women within the paradox of agency and complicity in the Palestinian woman-mother icon. Peteet writes:

When they engaged in the defense of their communities as mothers they acted in reference to culturally dominant and highly charged symbols of maternal sentiment and behavior. Yet a transformation in meaning was occasioned by a praxis that, while culturally sanctioned, subverted the space and meaning traditionally associated with maternal practice (Peteet 1997, 104).

Adding to Peteet’s view that an emancipatory space for women is created through the act of Palestinian maternal activism is Abdo’s simple yet elegant observation that “national culture produced in the course of struggle has the potential to be emancipatory and progressive” where women are concerned (Abdo 1994). Of course, as Abdo points out, emancipation largely depends on the extent of women’s involvement and their success in pushing women’s issues to the forefront of the national agenda (Abdo 1994). Finally, Sharoni, another expert of Palestinian motherhood writes, the political discourse surrounding Palestinian motherhood “embodied both the steadfastness and cultural continuity associated with Palestinian national liberation and the warmth, care and compassion associated with traditional womanhood” (Sharoni 1995, 120). Writing before the rise of Islamist politics in Palestine, it is likely that these scholars did not anticipate the likes of contemporary Islamist female leaders, Jamila Shanti and Umm Nidal, who have found social and political acceptance within the Islamist leadership. However,
before the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000, Palestinian feminist scholars Hammami and Kuttab argued that the then-stagnant Palestinian women’s movement needed to exploit the moral symbolism of Palestinian mothers as a way to mobilize a broader base Palestinian women, including the Islamists (Hammami and Kuttab 1999). Indeed, whether secular or Islamist in origin, certainly the ongoing effects and experiences of Israeli occupation on women-as-mothers can potentially serve as a unifying platform for all Palestinian women regardless of class, religious or political affiliation. Finally, if—as Abdo’s work indicates—nationalism can as easily become a mechanism of domination and oppression as it can be a potential force for gender and social liberation, Palestinian mother-activism remains a vital conduit for representing and serving the political demands of Palestinian women (Abdo 1994).

The primary conclusion of this chapter is that the moral symbolism of Palestinian motherhood is among the foremost defining features of female political activism. However essentialized this role may be, it is a resilient and enduringly powerful feature of Palestinian female political identity. In light of the strength and popularity of mother-candidates of the political process in the Palestinian Authority, it is unlikely that this political role for women will be eclipsed. At the same time, however, the rise to power of women-as-mothers in the Islamist movement bears on the important ways in which the role of Palestinian women as political mothers (and mother-candidates) has perceptible changed by way of directing women to act in accordance with Islamic law. By embracing the Islamo-nationalist platform for women’s roles in accordance with Islamic law, the question becomes one of whether these women are being co-opted or rigorously engaging Islamist ideology to further the social and political rights of Palestinian women in such a
highly conservative political setting. Building upon this question, the following chapter explores the prevailing ideological shifts in female political organization in light of the Palestinian Islamization.
CHAPTER FIVE

NATIONAL ORGANIZERS

Palestinian women developed the sharp fierceness of a denied but not broken spirit. Subjected to the dual discrimination of gender and national identity, those who did not lash out in defiance adopted the deceptive demeanor of the subdued. Beneath that lay the smoldering embers of a guarded fire. Nourished in secret in its dormant state, it would flare up at the first signs of interference. Since the early days of the occupation, it was the women who took to the streets and challenged the army. The women also had taken the initiative of establishing popular committees and alternative structures. They were the ones who would wrestle with the soldiers to rescue their offspring or the children of other women.

–Dr. Hanan Ashrawi

Palestinian women have long played an important role as political activists and organizers on behalf of the nationalist struggle. In the initial development of Palestinian nationalism in the 1920s, upper class urban women and kinswomen of prominent male leaders emerged as the first advocates for Palestinian independence under British colonial rule. These women formed local charitable organizations and women’s associations as a way of assisting in the national endeavor. But the Palestinian women’s organizations at this time lacked any discussion and demands for improvements to women’s positions or women’s rights (Peteet 1986, 20). Instead the primary goal of the Palestinian women’s organizations of the 1920s was to support the realization of Palestinian self-determination.

35 For a complete history on the Palestinian women’s movement in the 1920s, see Ellen L. Fleischmann (2003).
under the British Mandate. Questions of women’s domestic roles or subordinate legal status under Ottoman and Islamic law were not linked with a Palestinian notion of statehood more broadly. As Peteet writes, “Palestinian women were aware of the organic links binding their movement to the national movement and made little attempt to extract their own problems and prospects from those of the larger social body” (Peteet 1986, 20). While women did not presume to act upon the principles of gender equality per se, organizing and rallying Palestinian women in the name of Palestinian self-determination presented a non-traditional activity for women in an otherwise very traditional society, governed by patriarchal structures resting on principles of family honor and female modesty. Thus, female participation in the nationalist struggle opened the way for greater opportunities for Palestinian women to operate in public spaces as political activists alongside men. Beyond the boundaries of their traditional home life, Palestinian women increasingly appeared at protests and rallies as public advocates of the Palestinian cause. Marching alongside and in front of their men, Palestinian women played a significant role in physically protecting them from coming under fire from British authorities hesitant to fire upon women in a crowd.

As a consequence of Palestinian women’s activism in the earliest days of the Palestinian nationalist struggle, a common theme of engaged activism through the generations of Palestinian women produces a spirit of continuity that unites Palestinian women. Yet, the historic rise of Palestinian Islamist groups in the late 1980s complicates this story. In effect, the emergence of female Islamic organizations tied to the Islamist political factions directly challenges and confronts the secular-nationalist character of female participation. Analyzing the evolution of the Palestinian struggle from its
longstanding secular-nationalist ideology to the rise of alternative Islamist groups, this chapter tells the story of Palestinian women’s organizations and in the rise of Islamo-nationalist politics between 1987 and 2007.

**Reflections on Palestinian Women and the First Intifada**

When speaking with Palestinian women today who remember the era of the 1987 intifada, personal insights into a forgone sense of hope and communalism are roundly offered with more regularity than cups of mint-infused tea. It is said that the common theme of “shaking off” the oppressive policies of the Israeli military created a common bond for the Palestinian community that was remarkably coherent and cohesive in comparison to Palestinian society today. Johnson and Kuttab note, “…the site of struggle was the community, its stress, neighborhoods and homes, the ‘stone’ was the main weapon in defending the dignity of the community” (Johnson and Kuttab 2001, 31). During this time, women from every sector of society spontaneously participated in confrontations with the Israeli army. In these activities, Palestinian women marched as demonstrators, colluded as stone-throwers, and were often seen as impromptu rescuers of young men from the hands of the Israeli forces (Johnson and Kuttab 2001, 31).

According to Jad, Palestinian women’s actions were sometimes violent, and they were often involved in more extreme confrontations with the Israeli military forces (Jad 1999, 224). Meanwhile, against the abnormal backdrop of military occupation, Palestinian women were responsible for maintaining a sense of conventional normalcy in daily life. A 64-year-old retired school teacher from Beit Jala said, “Every day of the intifada, I felt

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36 Notes from fieldwork 2009.
alive with hope, even if teaching the children at school and protecting them as we tried to walk home under the Israelis with their guns meant that I could face my death.” In these infamous years of struggle, the nationalist slogan, “To exist is to resist” inspired the whole of Palestinian society to shoulder the task of living through extremely harsh conditions of Israeli military incursions into towns and homes, as well as closures of schools and businesses. Since the establishment of Israel and the catastrophic dispersion of the Palestinian people after 1948, the Palestinian people continued to hope that their fundamental struggle “to exist” would eventually lead to the establishment of a Palestinian state. Even without a state in hand, the climate of Palestinian nationalist efforts was one of mass-based organizations, which were rigorously fueled by collective, grassroots endeavors.

Organized at the grassroots level, the collective frustrations of the Palestinian people erupted in the 1987 intifada after more than a decade of democratic activism in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Influenced by post-colonial struggles elsewhere, Palestinian mass-based organizations under the PLO dominated the political landscape at the time, and each organization included an array of auxiliary political women’s committees, constituting an extensive mobilization of the Palestinian population. Palestinian women of all ages and social classes became the major actors in mobilizing and sustaining the 1987 intifada (Johnson and Kuttab 2001, 26). According to Hammami, this made the West Bank and Gaza Strip “among the few areas in the Middle East where a political space was available for the emergence of a strong, pluralistic infrastructure” (Hammami 2000, 17).

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37 Notes from fieldwork, 2007.
The female activists of the 1987 intifada were the second and third generations of Palestinian women to participate in the Palestinian struggle. Those hailing from refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza Strip were the daughters and granddaughters of women who were permanently dislocated from their homes and villages upon the establishment of Israel 1948, and through the traumatic events of the Nakba. The Palestinian refugee camps had also become home to more Palestinian refugees of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Also, in non-refugee and elite circles of Palestinian society, the female participants of the first intifada were the women who came of age watching their mothers and grandmothers mobilize on behalf of the Palestinian cause. By the start of the 1987 intifada, every Palestinian woman had an intimate and personal connection to the collective Palestinian experience of living through war, physical dislocation, economic disenfranchisement, and military occupation. More than a wife or a mother, these women were “fighters, leaders, workers, students, activists, cadres and martyrs” (Peteet 1986, 21). Comprising the newest generation of Palestinian struggle, younger activist females of the 1987 intifada were a product of a proud and protracted nationalist struggle for existence and self-determination.

Importantly, Palestinian women’s participation in the intifada rapidly became more than a means to rally for the sake of the nationalist struggle. Under the direction of the women’s mass-based organizations, Palestinian women began to organize locally. They formed more intimate neighborhood committees, which were specifically able to respond to the needs of their communities under siege by Israeli forces. Among these efforts were the organization of food supplies, education and child-care, all of which came to be seen as the extension of women’s domestic labor. More widely, these
activities coincided with the vibrant sector of women’s committees, which served as “vehicles to promote social and political consciousness to sustain the intifada” (Johnson and Kuttab 2001, 27).

Through their participation in these endeavors, the evolution of Palestinian women’s social and political consciousness led to a demand for social and political equality in their own right. As it rapidly became apparent that Palestinian women were defying the constructs of traditional society in a revolutionary way, Manar Hassan, cofounder of Al Fanar, a Palestinian feminist organization writes:

In its beginning, the Intifada was not only a political issue; a social revolution was taking place. Women began to get out of the house, from their cocoon, from the kitchen and washing dishes, and go out and participate with men. As if she has forgotten the whole history of patriarchal oppression. She could now lead popular committees, build other committees, and participate in decision-making. This was not only nationalism. Here the linkage was being made unconsciously (Abdulhadi 1998, 656-657).

In these local contexts, decentralized forms of organization such as women’s neighborhood and popular committees were led by women to meet the needs of the community. Day care centers and income-generating projects for women became the most popular tool for female mobilization. Other activities included teaching children when all Palestinian schools were closed by Israeli military order. Alongside men, Palestinian women were also responsible for guarding neighborhoods, but they were especially encouraged to develop their own home economies and help to organize food supplies for others in need (Johnson and Kuttab 2001, 27). While Palestinian women’s
responsibilities in and outside of the home grew, the consciousness of their place in traditional society led to the desire to work for women’s rights by way of Palestinian self-determination.

**Palestinian Women’s Organizations in the First Intifada**

Prior to and during the 1987 intifada, the organization and proliferation of the Palestinian secular-nationalist women’s committees led to an entrenched involvement of Palestinian women in the national struggle. In fact, nearly a decade before the events leading to the 1987 intifada, International Women’s Day on the March 8, 1978 marked the solid presence of the Palestinian women’s organizations and their activities in the Palestinian resistance. Noting the importance of this day, Jad writes that some activist women held a meeting, which resulted in the creation of the Women’s Work Committee (*lajnet al-‘amal al-nissaei*). The membership of the committee was composed of a generation of secular-nationalist women who had become politically active through their affiliation to the left-wing parties, most notably the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Communist Party and Fatah (Jad 2008, 34). The Palestinian women’s movement consisted of an array of different types of women’s organizations, including a “general union, committees affiliated to political parties, independent women’s NGOs, charitable societies and women’s studies and research centres” (Allabadi 2008, 181). But the Palestinian Federation of Women's Action Committees (PFWAC)—whose parent party was the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) —eventually grew to become the largest and most powerful women’s mass-based organization during the 1987
intifada years. With an combined nationalist and feminist agenda, PFWAC was “committed to the mass mobilization of women in the Occupied Palestinian Territories for the dual purposes of gaining national liberation and improving women’s gender status nationalist-feminist organization with an agenda to attain equal rights for women with men in the public sphere” (Hasso 2001, 590). The PFWAC was not only responsible for providing a place for women to organize politically for the Palestinian movement, but also a forum to build upon the issues of social and political matters impacting gender equality. According to Hasso, female involvement in the organizational aspects of the PFWAC during the 1987 intifada can largely be seen as contributing to the creation of a wider, “feminist generation” of Palestinian women that persisted for years after the end of the first intifada (Hasso 2001, 588).

Palestinian women’s deep political engagement as citizens and participants in the secular-nationalist movement prompted many women to embrace an ideological point of view that linked female social and political liberation to the liberation of the Palestinian people. In contrast to the Palestinian women’s charitable societies which were limited in membership to elite circles, the mass-based organizations of the women’s movement focused on involving the greatest number of women in the nationalist movement, and therefore welcomed Palestinian women from every sector of society (Taraki 1983, 62, Jad 2008, 34). As Jad writes, “All projects undertaken by the women’s committees provided a permanent pool of recruits, whether in the villages, refugee camps or cities. The process in itself helped many women cadres to develop an understanding of the needs and demands of women with whom they worked” (Jad 2008, 34). From this, the goal of recognizing and furthering the rights of Palestinian women as participants in the
national struggle evolved to mobilize the mass of Palestinian women around the dual issues of national rights and women’s rights (Allabadi 2008, 182). As a result, the women of these committees came to strongly believe that the Palestinian leadership could not ignore the role of Palestinian women in the resistance and the need to address social change in the new laws of the future Palestinian state.

The first Palestinian’s women’s committee was established nearly a decade before the outbreak of the 1987 intifada. The Union of Women’s Work Committee (PUWWC) was established in 1978 in an initiative undertaken by the Palestinian left. The PUWWC soon split into three separate committees: the Union of Palestinian Working Women’s Committees (UPWWC), the Union of Palestinian Women’s Committees (UPWC) and the Federation of Palestinian Women’s Action Committees (FPWAC) (Connell 2002, 140). In 1983, the Women’s Committee for Social Work (WCSW) was established under Fatah. These four organizations became the predominant secular-nationalist women’s organizations of the 1980s.

The split of the PUWWC into the separate women’s committees came as a result of acute and seemingly insurmountable ideological divisions from within the mainstream secular-nationalist factions of the Palestinian struggle. Each of the women’s committees was affiliated with the most active and predominant political parties of the West Bank and Gaza Strip at the time. Unlike women’s charitable societies, the new Palestinian

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38 The PUWWC has also been referred to simply as the Women’s Work Committee (WWC). According to Hiltermann, in 1989 it was re-named the Federation of Palestinian Women’s Action Committees (FPWAC). The founders of this organization were primarily women from petit-bourgeois families. They sought to break with past charitable work performed by women of upper classes and addressed the problems of working women, such as village women working in the agricultural sector, students and housewives. See Hiltermann (1991).
women’s committees derived their cadres and membership from across the spectrum of Palestinian society. They were as follows:

1. **Federation of Palestinian Women’s Action Committees (FPWAC)**, affiliated with the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP)—initially the Union of Women’s Work Committees until 1989.

2. **Union of Palestinian Working Women’s Committees (UPWWC)**, affiliated with the former Communist Party, now called the “People’s Party”, and associated initially with women from Bethlehem.

3. **Union of Palestinian Women’s Committees (UPWC)**, affiliated with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).

4. **Women’s Committee for Social Work (WCSW)**, affiliated with Fatah, the largest mainstream political group at the time.\(^\text{39}\)

Additionally, the **General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW)**, which was established with the founding of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964, sought to represent the interests of women in the Palestinian refugee camps outside of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and also in the international arena (Holt 1996, 191).

Independently, each committee focused on a targeted demographic of Palestinian women to mobilize and support. For example, the Fatah-based, Women’s Committee for Social Work (WCSW) maintained an ideological commitment to charitable services, most closely in line with earlier women’s charitable societies. The WCSW broadly provided social services to women rather than mobilized them (Hiltermann 1991, 50).

The other three women’s committees were similar to the WCSW in their organizing and charitable work, while also trying to focus on the specific needs of Palestinian women. Specifically, the Union of Palestinian Women’s Committees (UPWC) was organized

around supporting the needs of working women, where the Federation of Palestinian Women’s Action Committees (PFWAC) developed a clear feminist orientation while primarily focusing on women in the home. Finally, the Union of Palestinian Women’s Committees (UPWC) focused on its more educated, urban middle-class membership and young female students coming out of the student movement (Hiltermann 1991, 52).

Despite the factionalism that prevailed in the broader Palestinian movement, what was vitally common to each of these approaches was an overriding commitment to the realization of a leftist, politically secular, democratic state called Palestine. In the spirit of democratic socialism associated with the secular-nationalist movement of the time, each committee drafted its own internal bylaws with an eye to maintaining and promoting a rigorous atmosphere of pluralism and debate.

However, to the extent that political factionalism threatened the cohesion of the Palestinian nationalist movement, the same is true of nearly all efforts to organize Palestinian women beyond their local committee engagement. Each of the women’s committees sought to represent a specific population of women according to various ideological frameworks and approaches to the Palestinian question. While they tended to focus on different locations and demographic categories of women for recruitment, their overall activities—in terms of mobilizing and supporting women—were similar, overlapping and complementary (Hiltermann 1998, 43). For example, every committee sought ways to support women through the creation of childcare centers to accommodate activist women. Kindergartens, training programs for girls, sewing centers, and other means of “self-help” work was provided for women (Connell 2002, 141). Moreover, the women’s committees turned to focus on health education classes for women as primary
caregivers, especially as “casualties mounted in the neighborhoods, as a result of beatings and tear gas” administered by the IDF (Hiltermann 1998, 43). According to a Christian woman from Beit Sahour who independently founded a private, Fatah-based women’s non-profit organization, the Palestinian women’s committees have always done much of the same work. “We are all women. We all have the same problems with family and no money. But we are divided by ideology,” she said.40

Although structurally disjointed and unevenly coordinated, the Palestinian women’s movement was nevertheless a nationwide endeavor, and the women involved in it were primarily motivated by national interest (Kamal 1998, 88). However, unlike the ideology of women’s organizational efforts before it, the women’s committees of the Palestinian women’s movement of the 1987 intifada were emboldened by specific elements of feminist ideology that attached the struggle for gender liberation to the national question. The leadership of the women’s committees saw the goal of national liberation as a means to achieving social and political equality for women, and widely promoted the idea that women were also the co-builders of a future democratic Palestinian state (Kamal 1998, 87). Holt adds that in the first two years of the 1987 intifada, “the four women’s committees changed the focus of their activities, which had previously concentrated on the provision of such basic services as nurseries, literacy classes and training centres” (Holt 1996, 194). As the initial enthusiasm of the intifada progressed into years of struggle and hardship, the women’s committees began to shift their organizational emphasis and subsequently swelled in numbers (Holt 1996, 194).

40 Notes from fieldwork 2007.
In 1988, a fleeting moment of formal cooperation between the four main women’s committees led to the establishment of the Higher Women’s Council (HWC). The HWC’s aim was to unite the four main women’s groups into one forum in order to enhance the political legitimacy of women’s work on behalf of the nationalist struggle. The HWC’s unifying message was to promote “the women’s movement around the twin themes of women’s social struggle and the struggle for national liberation” (Hiltermann 1998, 47). The goal of the HWC was the consolidation of scarce human and financial resources and to avoid competition among women’s groups within the struggle for gender equality. The HWC had two strategic missions: 1) to address the issue of gender and equality, and 2) to address the issue of national liberation. In this forum, the crucial issues of female education and their legal situation under pre-existing religious laws were central concerns of the HWC (Kamal 1998). Importantly, however, the consolidation of women’s organizational efforts did not mean that factional differences between the women’s committees were resolved. The HWC was later renamed the Unified Women’s Council (UWC), and remained plagued by the factional political differences that emanated from the committee representatives’ ideological approaches to the Palestinian question (Afshar 1996, 181).

Regardless of social and political affiliation, Palestinian women were equally affected by military occupation as they poured into the streets in protest. Particularly during the first two years of the 1987 intifada, Palestinian women entered the public sphere in protest and defiance of both Israeli troops and traditional gender roles. Due to this prevailing trend, worldwide observers noted women’s participation in these highly visible confrontations and even touted this as “evidence that the Palestinian national
movement had made great strides in the liberation of women” (Connell 2002, 141).

Described as “heady and exuberant” times, the first two years of the 1987 intifada attracted the attention of women activists and commentators around the world who wrote of “a transformation within Palestinian society in general and women’s role and position within it” (Glavanis-Grantham 1996, 175). At home and within the broader international community, Palestinian women of the first intifada years were heralded for breaking traditional patriarchal barriers and “challenging the predominant stereotype of the domesticated and repressed Arab woman” (Glavanis-Grantham 1996, 175).

Strategically and ideologically, the social and political agenda framed by Palestinian women’s committees explicitly linked sexual liberation to political liberation for Palestinian women and Palestinian people more broadly. This resulted in an immediate outpouring of enthusiastic scholarly articles and accounts of Palestinian women that attested to the social and political space more or less “claimed” by women in Palestinian society at this time. Yet, almost as soon as the 1987 intifada and the women’s agenda within it began to build in speed and popularity, the goal of establishing a secular state attentive to social and political equality for women was sharply contested by the growth of the Islamist opposition. Here, it appears that despite the great strides made by secularist women in the nationalist movement, a general survey of women’s political views taken by the Women’s Action Committee in 1988 showed that a majority of Palestinian women favored the establishment of an Islamic state based on the principles of religious Islam as a traditional and, hence, favorable means to restore the rights of all Palestinian people (Connell 2002, 141). The rise to power of Islamist political groups confronted the strides made by the secular women. Only later would it appear that for all
of the applause given to the conscious-raising agenda of the female leaders of the
Palestinian women’s movement in the international community, these initiatives grew
increasingly unpopular as Islamists gained a wide base of support as an alternative to the
secular-nationalist political framework of the Palestinian struggle.

**The Disintegration of the Women’s Movement in the Rise of Islamo-Nationalism**

From the start of the 1987 intifada, the women’s committees in the Gaza Strip
faced harsher repression by local Islamist forces, which began to gain ground in 1988.
Analysts have noted that during this time, Palestinian women’s political participation
dwindled as the intifada began to lose its spontaneous nature and became institutionalized
(Sabbagh 1998, 3). The declining participation of Palestinian women came at a time
when all of the Palestinian political committees were declared illegal under the Israeli
military authority in 1988. This occurred as the Islamist factional groups, Hamas and
Palestinian Islamic Jihad, began to organize and influence local politics. By September
1989, mass involvement in the intifada was beginning to recede due to the Israeli
repression of the main political parties. Within a few months, the mass protests against
the Israeli occupation began to be systemized through tightly controlled all-male units
that ran the streets, and specifically excluded women from their ranks (Connell 2002,
142). Left out of the process, the mass coordination of Palestinian woman declined.

According to Sabbagh, there were two main reasons for the decline of women’s
participation in the leftist women’s committees. First, a male-led (Islamist) backlash
against the progress made by women in the political sphere made it increasingly difficult
for women and sympathetic Palestinian men to rally behind issues of women’s rights and
gender equality. Second, the related failure of the 1987 intifada to achieve a political solution to occupation led to the disintegration of the nationalist movement more broadly (Sabbagh 1998, 11). In light of these issues, the decline of the secular-nationalist women’s movement as a whole led to the inability of the women’s committees to “articulate a specific program for women beyond participation in production projects and cooperatives” (Strum 1998, 73). Illustrating this point is a 1989 letter to its membership, in which the Union of Palestinian Working Women’s Committees (UPWWC), states:

Has the intifada changed the perception of women’s role in Palestinian society? Has it changed the way women themselves perceive their roles? These questions have to be reckoned with by the Palestinian women’s movement to enable it to keep pace with the fast-moving events of the intifada….What assurances do women have that they will not be asked to return to their traditional, domestic roles if and when independence is achieved? (Hiltermann 1998, 49).

By 1989, the previously heady and optimistic moment of the first intifada had since passed into what Holt describes as a final phase of the intifada period, when hope for a successful outcome had been destroyed (Holt 1996, 195). More precisely, a broader loss of confidence in the leftist, secular-national parties and their abilities to effectively bring the hopes for Palestinian statehood to its realization was imminent. Ultimately, the feelings of frustration caused by this realization that the intifada had produced nothing resembling peace or political autonomy, prompted many Palestinians, including women, to see political action inspired by Islamist groups as an alternative, and possibly a more effective approach to the nationalist struggle (Holt 1996, 195).
By 1991, the spirit the Palestinian struggle was replaced by a psychologically exhausted and shattered social and political culture. This mood was deepened in the Madrid phase of the 1990s Oslo peace process, which further marginalized the mass mobilization of the intifada. Palestinian academic and feminist activist, Eileen Kuttab says that the initiation of the peace process began to shift the Palestinian struggle away from grassroots mobilization, where the vast majority of female political activity was located towards diplomacy, which marginalized it.\textsuperscript{41} Kuttab is quoted in Giacaman and Johnson (1995) as saying that with the advent of the 1990s peace process, “Women’s skills, developed in informal settings, were not utilizable. The political conditions became confusing and women could not get back into action” (Giacaman and Johnson 1994, 24).

Added to this is the fact that the Oslo peace process elicited a sharp outcry from many of the political groups that once supported the 1987 intifada. From the standpoint of the Islamists, the Oslo peace process (which only engaged the PLO in Tunis with the representatives of Israel) represented the continued imposition of a Western form of “modernization” on the sanctity of Palestinian cultural life. From this Islamist perspective, the Oslo Accords compromised and muddied the purity of Palestinian political demands. Among the most ardent responses from the groups opposed to Palestinian reconciliation with Israel was that of Hamas, which staged a series of suicide attacks against Israeli civilian and military targets so as to undermine the peace process (Gunning 2009, 195). At a time when Palestinian women were already on the margins of the secular-nationalist peace negotiations with Israel, Hamas’ strong revisionist version

\textsuperscript{41} Discussion with Eileen Kuttab at the YWCA in East Jerusalem, notes from fieldwork 8/21/2009.
of the Palestinian struggle included an intense focus on the role of women and their incorporation into the Islamist national vision of Palestine.

By 1995, assessments of the strength of the leftist, secular-nationalist base of the women’s movement varied substantially due to the fact that data on committee membership and participation levels was unreliable or non-existent (Giacaman and Johnson 1994, 24). However, a survey conducted by Palestinian and Norwegian social scientists in 1993 revealed a consistently more socially and politically conservative stance among younger Palestinian women aged 15-19 compared to women in the their twenties (Heiberg and Overnsen 1993). Importantly, the findings of this survey suggest that particularly among the youngest age group of Palestinians in the early 1990s, the gender divisions in society were under a process of an Islamist redefinition and reinforcement, and this phenomenon was most present in the Gaza Strip (Heiberg and Overnsen 1993). In light of the rise of Islamist forces in the Palestinian political terrain, Abdulhadi notes, "because communist and nationalist groups had championed the cause of women's liberation, their gender programs, grounded as they were in "Western" and "modernist" notions, could not be salvaged from the blow dealt to their political platforms" (Abdulhadi 1998, 659). Within the Gaza Strip, the secular and Marxist ideology of the left came to be seen as a liability in the nationalist project, which was weakened by the rise and increasing credibility of Islamist forces.

As an alternative to the mainstream leftist parties, the Islamic vision of Palestinian nationalism produced by Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, was both empowering and exciting to a population losing hope. Central to this approach was a sharpened focus on women and family honor through a nostalgic return to an “authentic” way of Palestinian
life. The Islamists focused on the issue of restoration of Palestinian honor through a “return” to traditional Palestinian social structures. These social structures are especially reliant on family honor as a symbol of Palestinian pride. Similar to religious revivalists and cultural revisionist movements elsewhere, the Hamas leadership quickly capitalized on the opportunity to preserve women’s traditional roles as a way of portraying Hamas itself as the sole defender of cultural authenticity (Connell 2002, 142). In doing so, Hamas’ first step was to challenge the authority of the secular-nationalist women’s committees and their emphasis on Western-inspired notions of gender equality by inciting a sweeping campaign to impose the hijab (headscarf) on all women in the Gaza Strip (Abdulhadi 1998, Hammami 1990).

Highlighted in the previous chapter, the hijab campaign was a way to directly reprivatize women and the gains they had made as visible participants in the Palestinian struggle. More broadly, it was a way to discipline women’s bodies for Hamas’ political goal of increasing the local credibility on the Palestinian street. Through intimidation and threats, small, semi-military bands of young men attacked uncovered women with acid, stones, tomatoes and eggs to enforce women’s compliance (Abdulhadi 1998, 657). Specifically the Hamas directive was aimed at the women of Gaza who hailed from educated, urban and petit bourgeois backgrounds and occupied leadership roles as secular-leaning women in the nationalist struggle (Hammami 1990, 25). As a result, women who did not comply with the order to wear the hijab were portrayed as “symbols of corruption and national betrayal” (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010, 189). By cultivating the image of the Palestinian collaborator as “the bareheaded, loose and morally bankrupt woman” (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010, 189), Hamas attempted to
extract women away from the public realm of Palestinian politics, and nearly succeeded through the support of social acquiescence, political inaction and local family pressure.

As a result of this violence against Palestinian women, Hammami writes that one year into the intifada, only a few committed women in Gaza remained openly opposed the Hamas campaign (Hammami 1990, 24). Yet, even the most politically active women of the leftist movement were increasingly disillusioned by the male leadership of the leftist political parties who remained silent in an effort not to alienate their individual party platforms from the Islamists and their leadership. Hammami adds that as increasing numbers of women in Gaza were attacked in the streets, the leftist male leadership stood by in silence out of fear of further disrupting their conservative support base.

As Hammami suggests, very little was said or done by the male leadership of the left to stop the violence against women in Gaza until it was far too late. Once women began to cover out of fear for their safety, it seemed that there was “no going back.” Unlike the revolutionary spirit of the early days of the first intifada, Palestinian women began increasingly to confront the Islamist agenda to circumscribe Palestinian feminist activism and beliefs. Concurrently, it was difficult to argue against Hamas’ attacks on women, especially as it appealed to the least rational of Palestinian fears: the corruption of female honor by the Israeli enemy. The appeal to this fear was clearly told in Article 17 of the Hamas Charter:

The enemies have realized her role: they think that if they are able to direct her and raise her the way they want, far from Islam, then they have won the battle…The Islamist should play his role in confronting the plans of those destroyers. When the day comes and Islam has its way in
directing life, it shall eliminate [those organizations] which are opposed to humanity and Islam (Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) 1993, 128).

In effect, Hamas’ order for the veiling of Palestine’s women was seen as not only protecting Palestinian women from social corruption from within society, but the Palestinian people from the dangers of the greater struggle for self-determination vis-à-vis Israel.

As Milton-Edwards and Farrell write, “The propagation of the canard that women are weak and vulnerable to exploitation by Israel through seduction…provided Hamas with yet another rationalization to exert greater control (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010, 189). Ultimately, in the state of despair that prevailed as the leadership of the first intifada failed to achieve a political solution with Israel, the emergence of the Islamist movement was powerful enough to put many of Palestinians into a state of reactionary defensiveness and inward looking reproach against the leftist political establishment. Similarly, where the leftist Palestinian women’s movement was concerned, the failures of the 1987 intifada “put the most optimistic advocate of women’s rights in a state of despair that sometimes translated into self-reproach” (Sabbagh 1998, 12).

**Significance of the Hamas Hijab Campaign in Gaza**

Both symbolically and literally, the Hamas *hijab* campaign can be largely attributed to a reactionary ideology of women’s role in society, no doubt buttressed by the transcendence of Palestinian women from their traditional roles in the private sphere into the public realm of political demonstration and rigorously engaged activism prior to and during the 1987 intifada. As a reinforced symbol of Islamist nationalism, the *hijab*
became both a symbol of Islamic values and nationalist sentiment as well as a visible indicator of the strength of Hamas. The campaign became most effective through the actions of young Palestinian men in Gaza, who found violent ways to express their frustrations with the Israeli occupation and the seeming failures of the intifada to achieve a clear end, by attacking and harassing uncovered women. As Hammami states, "If there were no soldiers to throw stones at, women without headscarves made good targets" (Hammami 1990, 26).

Taken as a whole, however, the Hamas campaign to cover the heads of the women of Gaza explicitly placed women within a tightly circumscribed social artifice of cultural struggle (between the openly-Western, secular-nationalist elements of Palestinian nationalist and regressive politics of the Islamist groups) by conflating long-standing traditional values of family honor and Palestinian femininity with an explicitly political Islamist agenda. Where uncovered women were considered vain, frivolous and, at best, onerous to the nationalist cause, wearing the hijab became a Palestinian woman’s only public way of expressing her piety and political commitment, and therefore ensuring her physical security in the street (Hammami 1990, 26). Of course, even as a mere symbol of piety and tradition, enforced “hijabization” was not widely accepted by all Palestinian women in Gaza or the Palestinian Territories more generally. Former Palestinian spokeswoman, Dr. Hanan Ashrawi is quoted in Abdulhadi (1998) as saying:

The most visible aspect of this victimization is the Hijab. To me, this sums up the way you view a woman: as a sex object, as shameful, so you cover her up; as a commodity, the possession of the man; as a secondary member of society--she is supposed to stay at home and support the

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42 The hijab campaign is also discussed again in relation to issues of political motherhood in Chapter Four.
master...The dress code reinforces the invisibility of women (Abdulhadi 1998, 657).

As one woman noted, the problem of hijab was not the issue of covering for the sake of cultural or social modesty, but due to the fact that young men were given license to threaten, harm and mistreat women who chose not to cover in the name of Palestinian pride (Hammami 1990, 26). To the degree that Palestinian women were forced to cover under the tenets of Hamas’ de facto Islamist jurisdiction, the “intifada hijab” was not about modesty, piety or nationalism. As Hammami states, the hijab was about “the power of religious groups to impose themselves by attacking secularism and nationalism at their most vulnerable points: over issues of women's liberation" (Hammami 1990, 26).

By conflating Palestinian culture and traditional religious convictions with a nationalist political agenda, Hamas leadership successfully cultivated its ‘indigenous’ support base in the Palestinian Territories. Contrary to the secular-nationalist organizations of the Palestinian nationalist movement, Hamas seemingly offered an alternative, ‘authentic’ space for women who could organize politically without having to worry about violating social norms such as family honor and female docility through a nostalgic conception of the passive Palestinian woman (Abdulhadi 1998, 659, Connell 2002, 143). Rhetorically and through prominent social welfare programs, Hamas was even seen to support, protect and value Palestinian women. Moreover, the Islamist imperative for women to wear the hijab was defended by Hamas as not only a religious injunction of Islam, but a way of enabling women to “operate more freely in a male-dominated public space, while at the same time averting social corruption” (Gunning 2009, 79). In the interplay between religious and nationalist discourse, women are upheld
as the basis of the organic (‘natural’) relationship between the home and the nation. Here, the rhetoric of Islam is used to serve as the conceptual basis of Palestinian women’s separate-but-equal status to men. In this, women are invited to identify as political by wearing the costume of piety as a “good” Islamic woman of Palestine. They symbolically cover their bodies and modestly conduct themselves in public space so that a sense of order can be delivered/restored to the Palestinian public space to prevail over the disorder that Islamists associate with secular-nationalism and Israeli military control.

**Emergence of the Palestinian Women’s Islamist Movement**

The rise of a “new brand of feminism” in the early 1990s predated the recent evolution of Palestinian women’s political behavior, which it is not without impact and influence in the Palestinian context (Allabadi 2008, 183). Islamic feminism emerged from the streets of post-Khomeini Iran, when Iranian women recognized that their rights as citizens in the Islamic Republic were being infringed upon or rolled back (Badran 2006). As Mir-Hosseini explains, the Islamic Republic’s failure to deliver on its promise to honor and protect is female constituents incited Iranian women. Their response represented “an indigenous, locally produced, feminist consciousness” (Mir-Hosseini 1996). From this, Iranian women began to ground their arguments for social and political rights in readings of the Qur'an, which stands as the “virtual constitution” of the republic (Badran 2006).

According to Badran, Islamic feminism contains two principle tasks. First, it seeks to expose and eradicate patriarchal ideas and practices that are commonly “naturalized” and, thus, falsely portrayed as “Islamic.” Second, from the perspective that
gender equality is indivisible with human equality, Islamic feminism attempts to recuperate core ideas of gender equality contained in Islam (Badran 2006). Central to the movement is an adherence to strict religious beliefs. As Tohidi writes, the phenomenon consists of a movement of women who “have maintained their religious beliefs while trying to promote egalitarian ethics of Islam by using the female supportive verses of the Qur’an in their fight for women’s right” (Tohidi 1998). Tohidi also adds that while some women join the movement on behalf of furthering the right for female education, others “actively join Islamist/fundamentalist movements despite the latter’s patriarchal and sexist views and practices” (Tohidi 1998).

In this context, the most paradoxical and perplexing aspect of this movement is the brand of “Islamic feminism” that emerges from participation in Islamist movements. Tohidi adds that many women, “even among those initially standing by the Islamists in their protests, have not succumbed to all aspects of their leader’s patriarchal agenda” (Tohidi 1998). For example, even in Iran where Islamists effectively control the state and violently enforce a patriarchal mandate over women, they have also not “succeeded in subjugating all women or completing eliminating women’s social agency” (Tohidi 1998). The women in Iran serve as an example of remarkable resilience in maintaining their social presence and agency. Their active participation in the 1979 Islamic Revolution made their “re-domestication” impossible in the decades since, which perhaps now serves as a mirror to the Palestinian case.

Similarly confounding secular feminists and scholars alike the rise the number of Islamic women’s organizations in the Palestinian Territories proliferated through an

affiliation with Hamas and to a lesser extent Islamic Jihad in the 1990s. Unlike the secular-nationalist women’s committees before them, these organizations attracted massive numbers of devout female followers of Islam who more closely identified with the brand of politics offered up by the Islamist organizations. Like the secular-nationalist women’s organizations at their peak, Palestinian female recruits of the Islamist groups were encouraged to finish school and attend university, and were also introduced to job-training programs (Allabadi 2008, 183). Indeed, the contemporary Palestinian Islamist women’s movement first gained ground among young female students at conservative Palestinian universities and expanded from there.

Prior to the emergence of Hamas in 1987, its predecessor, the Muslim Brotherhood focused on the development of educational, social and welfare activities in otherwise neglected areas of Palestinian civil society, which were found in poor urban quarters and refugee camps (Gunning 2009, 30). In 1978, the Muslim Brother (Mujama) took over the Islamic University in Gaza from Egyptian control following the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty. This was a first important step in spreading the influence of Islamist ideals, especially as the faculty and student body of the Islamic University became a “hotbed of Hamas support in Gaza” (Robinson 2004, 127). Next, in 1981, the Muslim Brotherhood helped to create the first Islamic women’s organization in the Palestinian Territories, the Young Women’s Islamic Association (al-Jam’iyyah al-Jam’iyyat al-Shabbat al Muslimat). As Gunning writes, the creation of the Young Women’s Islamic Association effectively laid “the foundations for the popularity Hamas was later to enjoy among women” (Gunning 2009, 30). While Hamas denounced secular Palestinian women’s organizations as being “part of a liberal feminist plot to undermine the Muslim
family” (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010, 189), it focused on a return to Islamic values through the hearts and minds of the coming-of-age women of Palestine.

Throughout the 1980s, the Islamist movement widened through a growing presence of Islamic students on university campuses. Like the hijab campaign in Gaza, Milton-Edwards and Farrell write that Palestinian women were pressured to abandon their short skirts and bare heads in “favour of what became known as shari’a dress—the hijabs and jilbabs which became ubiquitous symbols at educational institutions such as the Islamic University of Gaza (IUG) and Hebron Polytechnic in the West Bank” (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010, 186). Gender segregation between students was enforced by generous donations from patrons in the Gulf, by way of providing poorer female students with free clothing coupons that could be redeemed at local shops for clothing that followed the strict forms of Islamic dress (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010, 186). Subsequently, the Islamist student political parties or “Islamic blocs” at Palestinian universities attracted significant support among the student body (Robinson 2004, 128). As Robinson writes, in many ways the Palestinian universities came to be more important than mosques to the Islamist movement for their atmosphere of greater autonomy under the Israeli occupation (Robinson 2004, 128).

By the late 1990s, Ahmed Atawneh, the head of the Islamic Student bloc at Bir Zeit University, attracted the attention of the Islamists with his call for “the importance of the women’s vote and how crucial the recruitment of female students is to the support of the Islamic blocs” (Jad 2005, 176). Seeking to organize younger female students was an unprecedented move, never before done under the name of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas or the Salvation Party. According to Jad, these groups historically “celebrated the
banner of conservative gender ideology, especially when it came to the exclusion of young, unmarried women” (Jad 2005, 183). However, with the greater inclusion of women, the Islamist movement also could not ignore the powerful elements of the younger female constituency. Ironically, in their competition with secular and nationalist political groups, the Islamists learned to adjust their appeal to a wider constituency by emulating them (Jad 2005, 173). As Jad writes, “By emulating the secular and leftist political groups and in relation to them, the Islamists learned to ‘adjust’ their appeal to attract a wider constituency” (Jad 2004, 200). This expanded constituency came with the direct appeal to women.

Demonstrating Hamas’ flexibility in its ability to gradually reinvent itself as a mainstream nationalist movement, the subtle integration of more liberal Islamic themes in the realm of university students is what drew young people, including women, to the movement. For some young people, the Islamic Bloc represented the “new, more militant Islamist movements”, which seemed—in sharp contrast to the widespread corruption of the secularist factions—to be more genuinely and altruistically concerned with people’s needs (Lybarger 2005, 151). For example, Lybarger’s interview of a young woman named Amal demonstrates the migration of young women to the Islamist movement. Lybarger writes that Amal discarded her mini-skirt for the scarf and long coat of the Islamic Bloc women during the course of her university studies, and she considers the Islamist movement both progressive and female-friendly (Lybarger 2005, 151). As a young female who once supported Fatah, Amal’s migration to the Islamic Bloc women’s groups coincided with her view that Hamas espoused an “authentic Islam”, which
progressively “empowered young women to decide on marriage partners, propose marriage themselves, and seek an education and career” (Lybarger 2005, 151).

**Evolution of Hamas and Its Women**

As early as 1992, the leadership of Hamas considered establishing an independent political party as a way of participating indirectly in the elections to the PA council (Mishal and Sela 2000, 140). However, it was not until the signing of the Oslo agreement that Hamas began to seriously reconsider a new political strategy in which “a legal party could better serve the Islamic movement’s interests and preserve its achievements” (Mishal and Sela 2000, 141). With this, the creation of the Islamic Salvation Party was not intended to replace Hamas, but rather “to serve as its instrument, just like the Islamic University in education and charity associations in the welfare sphere” (Mishal and Sela 2000, 141). By 1995, the National Islamic Salvation Party was established, and with it came the establishment of the Women’s Action Department. As an auxiliary organization to the National Islamic Salvation Party, the Women’s Action Department represented the Islamist way of “incorporating women into politics with the aim of creating the image of the ‘new Islamic woman’” (Jad 2005, 177). According to Jad, the “new Islamic woman” of Hamas is “highly educated, outspoken, moltazemah (veiled), and modern (a new form of veiling)” (Jad 2005, 177). Against the idea that the veil is a symbol of repression (associated with the 1988 hijab campaign in Gaza), among the Islamist movement and the women now wearing it, the veil was a new signifier of modernity, especially since it was also a departure from the thawb, or traditional peasant woman’s dress used by previous generations of Palestinian women. As Jad writes, the new Islamic dress was
seen as a “uniform of conviction” of Islamist female political activists, who paradoxically challenged the previous image of the Palestinian Islamist female as model mothers and obedient wives (Jad 2005, 177). As Keddie suggests, the actual veiling of women may be a way of asserting communal identity rather than religious creed or code (Keddie 1988, 696-723). However, this in no way diminishes the more recent phenomenon of Palestinian women’s veiling as a “tool in the Islamists’ rivalry with secular, non-veiled groups” (Jad 2005, 181).

Thus, as the status quo of Hamas’ political strategy and relationship to the Palestinian Authority began to evolve, so did female participation in the Islamist movement. Hamas’ political participation in the 2003 elections indicated a growing popular will to continue the Palestinian struggle, as well as a consensus that Hamas was able to reform itself while also preventing further corruption in the Palestinian political arena (Kuttab 2008, 106). Moving beyond university campuses, the Salvation Party began to “widen its popular support base more systematically by recruiting women” (Jad 2005, 178). This came at a time when Palestinian women’s NGOs emerged as a quasi-replacement for the secular-nationalist women’s movement that formed the backbone of the 1987 intifada. The growth of professional women’s NGOs effectively transformed the structural landscape of female political activism, which not only detached women’s issues from broader national issues, but further alienated Palestinian women from the secular feminist platform of the Palestinian women’s organizations (Kuttab 2008, 106). Notably however, the migration of Palestinian women to the Women’s Action Department of the National Islamic Salvation Party meant that Hamas felt the pressure to deal with women’s issues. While the movement strenuously attacked their opposition (in
the form of nationalist and secularist women’s organizations), it was also forced to reconcile feminist demands and the discourse on gender equality with the Islamist vision and agenda. Like other national and secular organizations, Hamas was forced to tackle the legal political struggle in the Palestinian Authority. In doing so, Hamas could not “ignore the conditions in which women lived or prevent them from joining political life” (Jad 2005, 184).

The growing attraction of Palestinian women to the Islamist movement brought their migration to the movement. With this came an energetic and engaged atmosphere and the emergence of a newly defined gender ideology within the movement. Specifically, the development of more Islamic women’s organizations in the late 1990s, such as Al Hoda Women’s Society and Al Khansa Islamic Action brought with it the need to clearly develop a platform on women’s rights from the Islamic perspective. A large component of the Islamic women’s organizations engagement in contemporary politics translated into slandering secular women’s organizations as part of an international conspiracy and releasing publications to the Palestinian public with a focus on the ideological emptiness of the feminist ideals of the organizations of the Palestinian women’s movement (Jad, Johnson and Giacaman 2000, 150). As Jad writes, this charged atmosphere of contestation between Islamist women and secular women’s groups led to a series of workshops and conferences initiated to bring Palestinian female leaders together and diffuse their emerging polarities. According to Jad, the proceedings of the first conference broadly focused on “one women’s group delegitimizing others to present itself as the “true” and “authentic” voices for women’s interests” (Jad 2005, 184-185). The second conference led to an admission that the Islamists had no vision or agenda for
women’s issues, with attempts made to reinterpret religious texts as a way of incorporating female achievements and interests in the Islamist modernization process (Jad 2005, 185). Taken as a whole, Jad writes that these conferences were “landmarks” for the evolution of Hamas’ gender ideology, from its utter rejection of the principles of feminism to “borrowing and selectively incorporating positions advocated by feminists” (Jad 2005, 185).

Beyond the ugly denigration of non-Islamic women’s groups, the women of the Islamist movement increasingly came to see their role as Palestinian women as a distinguished position in which they worked side by side with Palestinian men in the nationalist struggle (Jad 2005, 185). In doing so, the Islamist women’s organizations formulated a political platform that appropriated the secular feminists’ demands for gender equality and presented them according to the commandments and laws of Islam (Tzoreff 2006, 17). Jad cites the example of a paper presented by an Islamist woman named Khitam Abu Musa, who inverses the gender vision of the Hamas Chapter by interpreting Islam as “the religion that gives the woman all her rights: education, free choice of husband, inheritance (widely denied by custom), mobility (to participate in the call for the rule of God in Jihad), proselytizing, and social or professional work” (Jad 2005, 186). In this direct confrontation with the voices of feminism and secularism, the growing influence of scholarly and religious experts of Islam in the swelling ranks of the Islamist women’s movement began to shift the formal gender ideology of the Islamists. It was through direct female involvement in the Islamist movement that women were able to change the Islamist vision and “make a space” for women within the same political terrain that otherwise shunned the involvement of secular Palestinian feminists (Jad 2005,
As a result of the dialogue occurring between Islamist and secular women regarding gender equality, it was the increasing number of Islamist women who successfully pressured Hamas to integrate gender issues into its political platform.

Simultaneously, the power and influence of the Islamist women’s movement expanded Hamas’s ideological platform on gender equality through a rigorous reinterpretation of women’s rights within Islamic law. Where the secular women’s committees of the 1980s failed to develop a strategic vision and legal framework for gender equality in the post-Oslo era, Hammami asserts that if anything created a women’s identity in the post-Oslo era, it was the Islamists (Connell 2002, 143). Most significantly, Islamist women can be seen as “empowered by their skills, their education, and the newly acquired legitimacy opened by reinterpreting the Qur’an” (Jad 2005, 188).

In effect, the staunchly conservative approach to confining women to the domestic sphere as the reproducers of a “moral” nation evolved in many respects, giving way to “more open-ended interpretations of texts, enabling women to occupy a wider space in the public arena” (Jad 2005, 174). In contrast to the secular movement, the Islamist feminists of the Palestinian Islamist movement developed a coherent gender platform, reliant on scholarly interpretations in the text of the Qu’ran for more concrete evidence of women’s equality in the Islamic religious tradition. For example, the phrase “the text does not prohibit” is a recurrent theme in Islamist feminists’ use of the Qu’ran to legitimize the rights of women in local contexts, and the breaking with social customs of female subjugation is done so with the observation that “religious texts are open-ended, making it possible to forge a wider legitimate space for women in the public arenas” (Jad 2005, 184).
By the time of the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections, a growing number of Palestinian women saw the benefit of supporting Hamas as a means of not only engaging in a democratic process in the Palestinian Territories, but also as a way of bringing the benevolent aspects of Islam into the nationalist question. By this point, an Islamic stance on Palestinian self-governance under Hamas came to be seen as the homegrown alternative to corrupt governance of the Palestinian Authority and the continued Israeli military occupation. While Hamas prepared for a sweeping electoral victory, thousands of women were “repeatedly canvassed and huge amounts were spent organizing women-only Hamas rallies and festivals” (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010, 202). With a Hamas-backed female candidate pool of 13 women on the party’s “Change and Reform” ballot (Rahman 2006, 3), Milton-Edwards and Farrell write that the “women candidates were a mixture of seasoned politicians, technocrats and cult figures” (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010, 202). The two most prominent of these candidates was a well-known academic and administrator who had worked for years as a female leader of Hamas, Jamila al-Shanti, and Mariam Farhat, known as *Umm Nidal* (Mother of Struggle) who had no political experience, but was a local “folk heroine” after her three sons died as martyrs in actions against Israel (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010, 202).

On January 25, 2006, Hamas won a landslide victory over Fatah in the Palestinian legislative elections. As a result, the rise of the Islamist party to legislative political power is emblematic of the changing composition of the Palestinian national struggle in the post-Oslo period, and the women within it. That day, voters heading to the polls were reportedly confronted with “droves of Hamas women activists, all wearing green sashes and green and white headbands, chanting and carrying posters and leaflets” (Milton-
Edwards and Farrell 2010, 202-203). Observing the emergence of the Hamas women in green, Dr. Hanan Ashrawi, who also won a seat as an independent in the “Third Way” party, commented, “At every polling station the Hamas women were there, dressed almost in uniform. All of them! And not shy or demure—out there lobbying, asking you to vote, vote for Hamas, and so on. And they went from house to house to bring out the votes” (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010, 203).

Ultimately, scores of Palestinian women come to relate to their citizenship in the Palestinian Authority through the Islamist orientation of Hamas, and, most important, the female Palestinian vote in the 2006 elections dramatically altered the political composition of the Palestinian National Authority by voting Hamas party members into the Palestinian Parliament. Under the quota system of the Palestinian elections, the race for Parliament required a minimum of two women candidates per local constituency. As such, Hamas was compelled to promote female political candidates. However, in an overt effort not to be seen as straying from the conservative Islamist agenda with regard to gender, female candidates for Hamas were notably treated far differently than their male counterparts. For example, the images of female candidates were not permitted by Hamas leadership to be pictured in campaign posters or party advertisements. Instead, Hamas women were represented on election posters by the image of a red rose alongside the portraits of the male candidates (Milton-Edwards 2005, 324). Additionally, Hamas female representatives did not attend mixed election campaign meetings or political rallies, but specialized in more effective ways of gaining local support. To this end, they visited women privately, going from home to home. As one candidate related: “We have
a good reputation as Muslim sisters so we went from house to house to speak to the women” (Milton-Edwards 2005, 324).

For the female supporters of Hamas, the 2006 electoral victory seemingly brought them closer to their desired goal of ending the Israeli occupation, establishing a true Muslim society, and Palestinian statehood (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010, 206). In the fatal rise of internecine violence that ensued between the rival parties of Fatah and Hamas, and Hamas’ ultimate takeover of the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2007, it remains to be discovered whether the Hamas government and officials now in power in Gaza will continue to address the issues of gender equality on behalf of the female voters who supported their rise. By the summer of 2007, a group of female supporters of Hamas who I met in Hebron categorically denied that Hamas would repeal the rights of women as the Islamic Republic of Iran had done to women after the rise of Khomeini.44 Yet, as of International Women’s Day in 2007, the Hamas government in Gaza made no statement on gender equality, and the Hamas head of the Palestinian Legislative Council “refused to meet the annual delegation of women handing in their petition for equal rights” (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010, 204).

Like the secular-nationalist forms of feminist political activism that arose as a product of the leftist Palestinian politics of the 1970s, the ideological vision of Islamist female political activists has evolved out from the rise of revolutionary Islamist politics in the Palestinian political arena since the mid-1980s. Unlike the female activists of the secular-nationalist era, the female advocates of the Islamist movement are now a generation of women born in the aftermath of the first intifada and raised in the

44 Notes from fieldwork 2007.
increasingly religious and politically unstable years since. One of Hamas’ leading female representatives is Jamila Al-Shanti, credits the Palestinian Islamist movement with using Islam to unblock social boundaries for women in Palestinian society, and effectively provide them with employment and social opportunities. Referring to Hamas’ ability to improve Palestinian society for women, she said, "There are traditions here that say that a woman should take a secondary role—that she should be at the back…but that is not Islam. Hamas will scrap many of these traditions. You will find women going out and participating” (Johnston 2006). Carefully, Al-Shanti adds that a Hamas-governed Palestinian state will not depart from Islamic law. Al-Shanti’s words appear very similar to the female political activists of Iran, and they echo the main tenets of Islamic feminism.

**Conclusion**

The main point of this chapter is to explore how the paradox of the widespread popularity of the Islamist agenda through the prevailing changes in Palestinian women’s relationship to their citizenship in the Palestinian Authority. At the root of this paradox are conventional understandings of female honor, which lie at the heart of Palestinian culture. Honor is a central theme in the loss of Palestinian land due to Israeli invasion and subsequent occupation. Historically, the theme of restoring Palestinian honor has been transmitted through the bodies of its women by way of their biological ability to reproduce and nourish young nationalists for the cause. More recently, the *hijab* campaign in Gaza was popularized as a direct (and easy) way for Islamists to their claims to Palestinian nationalism. Islamically dressed women were symbols of strength for the
factionalized Palestinian community that had long suffered under outside influences. This reconfiguration of women as representing a return to more authentic Islamic tradition polarized Palestinian society and politics. Most importantly, through the use of Islamic symbols and rhetoric, Hamas became a primary and guiding alternative to secular nationalist regimes, international NGOs and secular women’s organization, which were exposed for their political ineffectiveness and corruption or their inability to be responsive to the local agenda.

While the outward changes in the appearance of Palestinian women is indicative of the changes taking place at the societal level, what is more important is that the emerging “culture of modesty” for women prevented them from being able to seriously challenge threats to their honor, let alone their feminist or even nationalist aspirations. The imperative of resisting the Israeli military occupation and the lack of social and political cohesion within the West Bank and Gaza Strip strengthened Islamist forces, which, in turn, pressured Palestinian women to return to traditional roles. At the same time, however, it is important not to overlook the achievements of Islamist women and what has more recently been called the “Islamist women’s movement” in Palestine (Jad 2009, 1). Jad contends that the Islamist women's movement has critically added to a transformation of Hamas' ideology concerning women and gender equality. In this, Islamist women work to bring their demands to light in the local context. Like the women of the leftist movement before them, they continue to mobilize Palestinian women in the name of the national struggle. In this, it is important to note that these women do not perceive themselves as victims of Islamization, but rather as fully endowed agents in disseminating its principles (Jad 2005, 180). Much of the popularity of the Islamist way
of organizing was based in the precedent of strong Muslim women in the Qur’an and the teachings of Muhammad. At the same time, the Palestinian women who form the Islamist women’s organizations do not consider themselves a part of the secular Palestinian women’s movement, even if they may be involved in several of the remaining programs for women that were built by the secular women’s organizations, such as those related to women’s education, health and poverty (Allabadi 2008, 181-201).

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, the growing cultural strength and political popularity of the Islamist leadership of the Hamas movement can no longer be denied or overlooked as a fringe, extremist group that is incapable of motivating or captivating widespread support in the Palestinian Territories. To the contrary, the Islamist leadership has come to be regarded by an ever-expanding number of Palestinians as the only true and effective representative of the Palestinian people and the nationalist cause. As an alternative to the secular-nationalist leadership of the PLO, Hamas’ strength grew in its ability to bolster the grassroots by providing welfare to the poor and criticizing the corruption of the Palestinian Authority. In doing so, the Hamas leadership has sought to silence the traditionally secular and leftist approaches to Palestinian nationalism, including the cadres of women in its ranks. This chapter has focused on the historical emergence of a new generation of politically mobilized Palestinian women within the cultural and political rise of the Palestinian Islamist movement, which has paradoxically promoted women’s education and job training opportunities on one hand, while insisting on the subordination of women’s legal status on the other. Active in an array of governmental activities and grass-roots endeavors, the new Islamist Palestinian woman has evolved along with Hamas as political activists and party candidates no less engaged
in the unfolding of the nationalist struggle, albeit in a markedly less secular, prescriptively “feminist” and politically “leftist” way.

Where Islam is the unifying force for the people in an otherwise extremely repressive social and political situation, the development of the Islamo-nationalist agenda continues to ask Palestinian women “to serve the nation, à la Islamism this time” (Jad 2005, 188). Beyond the long history of grassroots organizing, one emergent example of female service to the Palestinian nation now appears in the form of female suicide bombing of Israeli targets. This political role for Palestinian women is the subject of inquiry in Chapter Six.
CHAPTER SIX
VIOLENT ACTIVISTS

Oh my homeland! My love, my only love! I shall revolt against thine enemies, all enemies. I shall make bombs from the atoms of my body and weave a new Palestine from the fabric of my soul. With all my power and the power of my sisters, we shall convert our existence into bombs to redeem the land, the coast, the mountain. We shall fight and fight...

-Leila Khaled

On 27 January 2002, an educated, professional 28-year-old Palestinian woman named Wafa Idris permanently changed the face of the Palestinian national struggle and the political role of women in it by becoming the first female Palestinian suicide bomber in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Years after her act, speculations persist that the cause of Idris’ death may have been unintended because there was no official letter or video message of intent left behind in the wake of her death (Brunner 2005). One prevailing assumption is that Idris, like many Palestinian female militants before her, may have been working as a transporter of the bomb for a male suicide bomber, and not actually dispatched to detonate the bomb herself. Undetected, Idris blew herself up on Yaffa Road, a busy pedestrian street in downtown Jerusalem, killing herself, an elderly Israeli man and wounding scores of others in front of a shoe store.45

45 Wafa Idris’ death occurred the day after Yasser Arafat reportedly addressed a large group of women from his compound in Ramallah. This speech is central and titular to Barbara Victor’s (2003) claim that Arafat invited Palestinian women to join the ranks of men in undertaking suicide missions against Israel.
As a hallmark of the Al-Aqsa intifada, the rise of the Palestinian female suicide bomber casts light on the changes in Palestinian women’s political involvement in the national struggle since well before 1987. At the heart of this story is the rise of Islamist political extremism and its impact on the secular leadership that responded to street pressure to remain in control of political events by creating the previously unthinkable: the mobilization of female Palestinian civilians as suicide bombers. This move by the political affiliates of the secular Fatah leadership, effectively cast asunder masculinist preconceptions of Palestinian women as facile, nonviolent and obedient to patriarchal norms. In doing so, the images of Palestinian females willing and able to kill themselves while butchering others in cold blood imposed an extremely cost-effective pale of terror in the hearts and minds of the Israeli people and their leadership. However, the key to understanding the social legitimacy of the female suicide bomber directly stems from the

46 Claudia Brunner notes: “Suicide bombers is the most common term applied for those who would never call themselves such” (Brunner 2005). Widely recognized in the West as “suicide bomber”, the term connotes an individual willing to blow oneself up in order to destroy property and/or kill people for a political cause. The world has seen a wide range of suicide bombing tactics used by terrorist organizations involving the use of vehicles to create lethal explosions. The infamous September 11th hijackers flew planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Critics add that “suicide bombing” should be called "homicide bombing" in order to emphasize the fact that the human bombers themselves are killing others. Equally, the use of this low-cost tactic for mass destruction and murder has been described as “human missiles”, “human bombs”, “suicide killers”, “Palestinian H-bombs”, and “suicide terrorism” (See Laqueur 1987; Luft 2002; Pape 2003, 2010). Suicide bombers may be motivated by religious beliefs that they will be rewarded in heaven for sacrificing their lives for their beliefs, while other religions consider it suicide, which is not allowed under their beliefs. Used here, “suicide bombing” is seen as political term used to describe the use of individuals by secular and Islamist political organizations (in this case Palestinian) for the purpose of ending the Israeli military occupation and establishing a Palestinian state.
competition for political legitimacy between leaders of the Islamist movement and their rival secular-nationalist parties. In fact, to the surprise of many, it was the secular-nationalist military wing of Fatah, Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, which dispatched the most female suicide bombers between 2001 and 2007.

This chapter examines the complex phenomenon of female suicide bombers by first exploring the history of this form of political terrorism in Palestine and the often overlooked political tensions between the secularists and Islamists, which provided the opportunity structure for this emergence of female militarism and violence. The evolution of the Islamist commentary on the role of Palestinian women in the national struggle will also be explored. Finally, a look into the voices of Palestinian women themselves will demonstrate how this widely recognized shift in the political behavior of Palestinian women in the Al-Aqsa intifada was—for the female suicide bombers and their collective group of sisters—just as much political as it was personal. Was the rise of Palestinian female suicide bombers a new resistance strategy for those challenging the gender norms of the national struggle itself, an inevitable aspect of the all-consuming political violence, produced from within the prevailing rivalry between secularists and Islamists, or simply a new strategy to fight the Israeli occupation?

**Suicide Bombing in the Palestinian Struggle**

The willingness to sacrifice one’s life in the name of a political cause is nothing new in the history of warfare. Perhaps the most famous wartime image of soldiers deliberately sacrificing their lives for their cause appears in Japanese kamikaze soldiers during the Second World War. Suicide as a political tool or tactic of war is also not
unique to the Middle East, nor is it a recent phenomenon specific to the post-Oslo years.\footnote{The Human Security Report (2005) indicates that conflict as a whole is on the decline in every sector of the world with terrorism being the only exception. In particular, suicide bombing is the most utilized tactic for non-state actors and terrorist organizations. The report states that since 1985, suicide bombing has become the modus operandi of these organizations in locations as diverse as Iraq, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Iran, Israel/Palestine, Sri Lanka, Russia, United Kingdom, United States, Spain, India and Turkey. Human Security Report 2005, “Human Security Report: War and Peace in the 21st Century,” Human Security Report Project, Human Security Research Group, 2005, http://www.humansecurityreport.info/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=28&Itemid=63 (accessed February 1, 2010).}
The suicide bomber as a "modern" expression of political struggle emerged in Lebanon in 1983, when two separate attacks on US diplomatic and military targets left over 300 people dead and many more wounded. The attacks heralded the rise in the Middle East of a deadly tool in the arsenal of political radicals and non-state actors. While gaining international attention, successful suicide bombing campaigns engendered considerable prestige for the individuals who perished while committing such acts as well as for the organizations supporting them (Schweitzer 2004). Hizbollah, a militant Islamist Shi’ite group backed by Iran was later indicted in court for having a role in the American embassy and Marine barracks bombing attacks, while Islamic Jihad (a previously unknown entity) also claimed responsibility in the embassy attack (Daragahi 2008, Macaron 2008). In the years that followed, these Islamist organizations specifically cultivated the image of the male suicide bomber as a symbol of spiritual martyrdom in a context of social and political struggle specifically against Israel. Ever since, the “poor man’s smart bomb” became a source of inspiration for individuals and worldwide terror organizations alike.

As Pape and Feldman write in their recent book, \textit{Cutting the Fuse: The Explosion of Global Suicide Terrorism and How to Stop It}, one of the most critical elements in the rise of suicide terrorism around the world is the military occupation of one country (or
people) by an outside power (Pape and Feldman 2010, 19-42). This is especially true when the occupying power’s control depends on coercive means, such as deploying troops, police and security forces. At issue is the fact that these coercive means of control often exact collateral damage on local civilians, but are not held accountable for their actions, and therefore, seemingly impervious to the law (Pape and Feldman 2010, 21). As a result, the people of the local community feel as though they are under a constant state of threat from the occupying power, which has the military strength to invade their territory and coercively subdue the local population. Pape and Feldman write, “Among members of the local community, foreign occupation can create fear that they would lose the ability to perpetuate their political, social, economic, and religious institutions, leading some members to make extreme sacrifices to prevent the loss of their community’s way of life” (Pape and Feldman 2010, 21). Pape and Feldman’s description could not more aptly assess the state of affairs from which Palestinian suicide attacks emerged in the 1990s. As a state of dissent and opposition to the 1993 Oslo Accords, male suicide bombers became the modus operandi of the Islamist movement of the 1990s. During this time, the secular PLO leadership under Yasser Arafat formally recognized Israel’s right to exist as a sovereign state in the Oslo Accords. Meanwhile, the Islamist groups radically opposed any formal or informal diplomatic recognition of the existence of the Israeli occupier, and denounced the Oslo Accords as “a betrayal of God’s will” (Eager 2008, 181).  

48 At the time of its founding, Hamas called for the establishment of an Islamic Palestinian state to territorially cover all of Mandatory Palestine, where much of present-day Israel now exists. As an alternative to the PLO’s acceptance of a two-state solution with the State of Israel, Hamas called for an all-or-nothing solution to the Palestinian problem by way of armed struggle against Israel. However, it has been noted that Hamas’ position vis-à-vis Israel has evolved through the years from initially protesting the
male suicide bombing attacks on Israeli military and civilian targets became the strategic weapon with two simultaneous political goals in mind. First, suicide attacks were the cheapest way to gain international attention while inflicting the most direct damage on Israeli authorities. Second, the success of the attacks against Israel immediately bolstered Islamist popularity within the Palestinian Territories. Despite the fact that the Fatah leadership was the only internationally recognized representative voice of the Palestinian people, the success of the Islamist suicide campaigns led to a fundamental questioning of Fatah’s bankruptcy as an effective representative of the Palestinian people. The rise in local popularity of the Islamist organizations further deepened the bitter, longstanding rivalry for social and political control between the secularists and Islamists that remain to the present day. Despite that fact that Fatah leadership was (and remains) the only internationally recognized political representative of the Palestinian people, local opinions and support proved far more divisive.

Even as the Palestinian Authority (PA) came into existence through the Oslo Accords, Yasser Arafat and the leadership of the PA struggled to maintain control over an increasingly disenfranchised and disillusioned population.49 On one hand, the PA was obliged by the Oslo Accords to suppress anti-Israeli terrorism stemming from areas under Oslo peace process and the establishment of the PA, to participating in the electoral politics of the PA and gaining the “votes among those who support the peace process and are willing to recognize Israel alongside a Palestinian state” (Gunning 2009, 269). Between the early and mid-1990s, unemployment in the West Bank and Gaza Strip jumped from under 5% to over 20%. Yet from 1997 until 2000, the economic situation generally improved. However, the outbreak of the second intifada drastically worsened the economic situation for the over 3 million Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza (See Moghadam 2003). Given this severe state of economic distress, Assaf Moghadam notes that this may have been a cause of the increase interest in suicide bombing campaigns as a way of seeking revenge against those that the Palestinians held responsible for their economic situation. While economics is certainly one important factor of this story, I argue that the increase popularity in suicide bombing campaigns led by the Islamists was both a reaction to Israeli military and economic aggression as well as the secularist Fatah party being seen unable to safeguard Palestinian safety (and dignity) as a result.
Palestinian control. This included suppressing the political activities of Hamas and Islamic Jihad to the extent possible (Hafez 2006, 18). On the other hand, the leadership of the PA found it difficult to take drastic and unpopular measures against the Islamist groups, especially when they appeared to be defending the Palestinian people (Hafez 2006, 19). Arafat struggled to effectively govern the PA while navigating between external political pressure from abroad and internal pressure from within the secular and Islamist groups of the Palestinian Territories. The horrific scenes and specter of the militant, Islamist—and, importantly, male—Palestinian suicide bomber garnered a newfound level of admiration among Palestinians for the daring achievements of their “martyrs” and the Islamist organizations that supported them as emblematic heroes of the Palestinian struggle. To many Palestinians, these young men were seen as proud and patriotic soldiers of the nation. They were the champions and heroes of the Palestinian cause, willing to stand up to the Israeli occupation, even if this meant dying a horrific death. Meanwhile, however, Hamas and Islamic Jihad instrumentally framed the suicide attacks as acts in accordance with religious and national revival. Religiously and politically, Palestinian “salvation” depended on these men.\(^5\) As Milton-Edwards and Farrell quote Hamas leader Khaled Meshal, “There is no path except that of martyrdom—armed resistance and martyrdom operations. This is what will support Gaza. This is what will lift the oppression on you” (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010, 135). With this, suicide martyrdom was seen as the ultimate form of personal sacrifice and resistance against the Israeli occupation.

\(^5\) Islamic Jihad was the first of the Islamist organizations to dispatch a (male) suicide attack in Gaza in April 1993 after the Oslo Peace Accord.
While Arafat was increasingly losing power and popularity at home, the United States and Israel continued to pressure the PA to internally suppress and publically reject Islamist extremism and the anti-Israeli terrorist organizational networks that were not firmly entrenched within the Palestinian Territories. At the same time, wealthy benefactors beyond the Palestinian Territories and throughout the Muslim world lent powerful economic incentives to the Islamist groups for the continuation of the Palestinian struggle against Israel. Among the most famous proponents of male Palestinian suicide bombers was Saddam Hussein. By 2003, it was reported that Hussein distributed $260,000 to 26 families of Palestinians killed in 29 months of fighting with Israel, including a $10,000 check to the family of a Hamas suicide bomber (Murphy 2003). According to the report, the families of male suicide bombers individually received their $10,000 checks at a large banquet hall in the Gaza Strip under a large banner, which read: "The Arab Baath Party Welcomes the Families of the Martyrs for the Distribution of Blessings of Saddam Hussein" (Murphy 2003). Among the families receiving checks from the Iraqi leader's charity were those whose children and relatives were killed in PIJ and Hamas attacks. Other families receiving money had relatives killed during Israeli raids on Palestinian towns and refugee camps (Murphy 2003). Not coincidentally, Saddam Hussein once declared his intent to build a monument to memorialize Wafa Idris as a symbol of all Palestinian freedom fighters as martyrs in the name of Islam (Beyler 2003).

Hillel Frisch (2005) notes that support for Arafat declined from 40 percent before the outbreak of the second intifada in 2000 to 24.5 percent in June 2002. He adds, “the very emergence of Fatah’s major fighting arm, called the Al-Aqsa Martyr’s Brigades, has suggested that not only has the arena as a whole become Islamized but the very organization that bore the banner of Palestinian nationalism itself is conforming to the winds of change".
With the backing of the United States, Israel maintained that Saddam Hussein was financing Palestinian terror as it became well established that the direct financial support that Palestinian families received for their deceased sons and brothers led to an even greater “hero status” on the Palestinian street. Male suicide bombers were seen as committing acts of unparalleled heroism, and their families directly benefitted both financially and socially from these acts. Terri Toles Patkin writes that as the Palestinian point of view “shifted from negotiation about specific tracts of land to a no-compromise drive toward a final victory, the psychology of terrorism shifted from martyrdom as a means to martyrdom as an end... and a way to make the cost of conflict unbearable” (Patkin 2004, 79). Adding to this, Mohommad Hafez reflects that acts of suicide martyrdom in the Palestinian context became “opportunities for empowerment, vengeance, and in doing so they foster the myth of the “heroic martyr,” which inspires future volunteers for suicide attacks” (Hafez 2006, 7). Even unsuccessful male “martyrs”, who were deterred by Israeli forces during their missions and jailed for these actions, became heroic local figures. In a context where families of suicide bombers would receive more than twice the financial allowance than families of those killed by other means, the status symbol of the male suicide bomber rapidly ascended to the highest place of honor a emblematic of courage through personal sacrifice in the name of a just national cause (Luft 2002).

From 1993 to August 2002, more than 135 male Palestinian suicide bombers launched attacks on Israeli civilians and soldiers, making suicide terrorism one of Israel’s gravest security threats (Moghadam 2003, 65). The Hamas leadership claimed responsibility for the majority of the attacks during this time period, with Palestinian
Islamic Jihad closely behind (Yom 2008). The local popularity of the Islamist groups rose sharply with the numbers of successfully dispatched suicide bombings. Specifically, Hamas and PIJ rose in local esteem for being seen as more in tune with the Palestinians and representative of their plight. With the Islamist organizations setting the agenda on innovative military tactics against the Israeli occupation, it was not until after the breakdown in the Camp David negotiations and outbreak of the second intifada in September 2000 that Fatah’s military wing, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, first initiated suicide bombing missions on its own behalf as a tactical military method against Israel.

Writing in 2002, Gal Luft, a former Lieutenant Colonel in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) notes, “The more enchanted Palestinians have become with the achievements of their “martyrs” the more Fatah has found itself under pressure to adopt the suicide weapon” (Luft 2002, 4). Luft explains that Arafat’s initial inclination in the 1990s was to show solidarity with the United States and avoid any association with terror against civilians (Luft 2002, 4). In light of the endemic violence of the second intifada, the substantive loss of “street” popularity at home deeply affected the support for Arafat and his leadership cadre. As Luft notes, “Arafat inevitably succumbed to the anti-Israel rage and political calculations of his lieutenants” (Luft 2002, 4).  

When two young Palestinian males blew themselves up on a bus near the Israeli city of Hadera on 29 November 2001 on behalf of Fatah’s Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades, the secular political leadership of the Palestinian people formally joined the ranks of

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52 As previously mentioned, all Palestinian suicide bombing missions against Israel to this point were committed by Palestinian men active in the militias of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Incidentally, Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades had not undertaken any violent attacks in the pre-1967 borders of Israel. Also, these attacks against Israeli settlers and soldiers in the Palestinian Territories where largely drive-by shootings rather than suicide missions (Hasso 2005).
Hamas and PIJ in suicide campaigns against Israeli targets.\textsuperscript{53} However, rather than inspiring a communal “bond of blood” between the groups, Fatah’s Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades and the Islamist groups soon found themselves engaged in an ever more entrenched rivalry through their competition for street popularity. More precisely, Fatah, Hamas and PIJ competed over “which group could perfect the use of the suicide weapon and be viewed as most valuable to the war effort” (Luft 2002, 4-5). Thus, despite of the fact that Wafa Idris’ bombing may have been initially more serendipitous than planned on Fatah’s behalf, what is more profound is that it was claimed by the Fatah-associated, Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades in order to directly compete with the Islamists. Until the moment of Wafa Idris’ attack, the unchallenged monopoly of suicide bombings was both male and Islamist. The move by Al-Aqsa Martyr’s Brigades to dispatch three more female suicide bombers in the aftermath of Idris’ mission was aimed at reinvigorating Fatah’s political significance on the Palestinian street. Equally, the unprecedented dispatching of young females demonstrated the long frustrations and deep hatreds of the Palestinian people for Israel and its military occupation of Palestinian land. In doing so, the secular-nationalist leadership further invigorated the cult of martyrdom and the popularity of suicide bombings among the Palestinian people. As Mia Bloom writes, the use of female bombers drew “propaganda mileage” for Fatah and the Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades: “The image of women defying tradition to sacrifice their lives for the Palestinian cause has drawn more attention to the despair of the Palestinian people” (Bloom 2007, 100). In the dispatch of female bombers, Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades effectively placed even greater political pressure on Hamas and PIJ to keep up the

\textsuperscript{53} The Hadera bus attack on Thursday on 29 November 2001 killed three Israelis and wounded ten.
political pace or “lose influence over the course of political events” (Ness 2008, 5). Ultimately, the combination of providing a violent outlet for the hatred of the policies of the Israeli occupation and the internal political competition between the secularists and Islamists, gave birth to a new kind of Palestinian woman: the female suicide bomber (Beyler 2003).

Islamist Reactions to Female Suicide Bombers

In the wake Wafa Idris’ act, the topic of female martyrdom ignited a flurry of debates and commentaries concerning the role of women in armed struggle, and most particularly in the Islamic context. Bloom states, “The advent of woman suicide bombers has thus transformed the revolutionary womb into an exploding one” (Bloom 2007, 95). She adds that for the secular militant groups, the involvement of women in this fashion signaled the fact that they were “waging a political war, not a religious one” (Bloom 2007, 101). To this end, female suicide bombers were a part of a carefully planned and orchestrated political strategy. Yet, from within and beyond the borders of the Palestinian Territories, Islamist leaders publically grappled with the issue. The most imminent concern was allowing females to actively participate in armed struggle in an Islamically-justified fashion. As the face of Wafa Idris made international headlines and brought even greater global attention to the Palestinian struggle, it became clear to the Islamist leaders

It is important to note is that the Palestinians were not the first to deploy female suicide bombers. The phenomenon itself can be traced to the Syrian Socialist National Party (SSNP), a secular Lebanese organization also known as the “Communist Party”, which was pro-Syrian. The SSNP is responsible for sending the first female suicide bomber in 1985, a 17-year-old Lebanese girl named Sana’a Mehaydali. Mehaydali’s target was an Israeli military convoy in Lebanon. Pape and Feldman (2010) write that Sana explained her motive in the attack was to “liberate the south from the occupation of the Zionist terrorist” (Pape and Feldman 2010, 201). Subsequently, women played a role in five out of the twelve suicide attacks dispatched by the SSNP in Lebanon. See also Mia Bloom (2005, 54-62).
that they were confronted with a dilemma in which their tactics for armed struggle needed to be re-examined.

As Ness describes, the two centrally defining qualities of religious terrorism from the early 1980s until the second Palestinian intifada were a clear lack of female participation and the specific ideology that deterred it (Ness 2008, 18). Ness notes the introduction of modern suicide terrorism by Hezbollah in 1983 as the standard set for other radical Islamic groups elsewhere. The model of Hezbollah’s resistance to repelling Israeli aggression in southern Lebanon was celebrated widely in the Arab world. Hezbollah’s trademark for suicide terrorism emboldened the wave of religious terrorism led by the Palestinian Islamists in the years between the first and second intifada (Ness 2008, 18). As Tamimi writes, “It is very likely that Hamas was persuaded to use suicide bombers when it became clear that the tactic was delivering results in Lebanon” (Tamimi 2007, 163). Throughout these years of activity, however, the Islamist leadership held to a strict gender separation of the public and private sphere. Here, it was given that “the resort to violence by women and girls, rather than constituting a restorative act, amounted to a sign of cultural fragmentation” (Ness 2008, 19). Yet, after Wafa Idris and the three other female suicide bombers dispatched by Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades in the early months of 2002, the surprised Islamist leaders and clerics began to “take control of the phenomenon by announcing fatwas in order to justify events they had not planned” (Beyler 2003).

One year into the second intifada—and nearly 80 years after Palestinian women marched alongside men in protest of the British Mandate—the unequivocal Islamist interpretation of the Islamic religious and legal canon on the topic of warfare was that
females were unsuited for the social and political arena, let alone for combat missions (Cook 2008). Even while gaining popularity as a homegrown alternative to the PLO, the Islamist groups widely ignored the long history of Palestinian women and their very prominent violent (and nonviolent) involvement in the Palestinian campaign. The Islamization of the struggle focused on a return to a sense of social and spiritual “purity” of the Palestinian people as a whole, and the piety and re-privatization of women was the central aim of Hamas in demonstrating its power, popularity and control the Palestinian street. The Islamists made Palestinian women’s bodies the representative domain of cultural and political contestation emblematic of the secular-Islamist divide. The extreme focus on the affective role of Palestinian females as mothers and their modest deportment in public spaces represented an immediately recognizable “return” to Islam on the part of the Islamist leadership, and this reinforced the greater sense of moral polarization that affected every aspect of Palestinian identity in the national struggle. In this way, the Islamization of the Palestinian struggle translated into more than the building of mosques, the closure of film theaters, and greater religious observance of individuals. The visibly “pious” comportment of Palestinian women was the visible marker of Islamist influence and political success, especially where the proponents of Islamization of the struggle regarded Hamas as the true representative of the Palestinian people (Mishal and Sela 2000, 98).

The “return” to Islam in the Islamist political agenda was a means of imposing a patriarchal power structure, wherein aspects of Palestinian masculinity were celebrated and female bodies were brought under Islamist control. Female veiling became synonymous with support for national liberation and male martyrdom, lending itself to
the overall privatization of Palestinian women. One clear example of this privatization in the name of the national struggle is found in the 1988 Hamas Charter. Specifically, Chapter 3, Article 17 articulates the role of the Muslim woman as having an equal role with men in the struggle for Palestinian freedom as “the manufacturer of men”. The article states:

The Muslim woman has a no lesser role than that of the Muslim man in the war of liberation; she is the manufacturer of men and plays a major role in guiding and educating the [new] generations (Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) 2000).

Not a warrior in arms, but highly privatized by religious and political sanction, the Hamas Charter considers Palestinian females as demographic weapons in the quest for Palestinian sovereignty. Women are thus social and biological instruments for reproduction in order to maintain the monopoly of militants willing to die in armed struggle. According to this logic of “separate-but-equal”, the Palestinian female is therefore considered “equal” to her male counterparts for her ability to biologically create and educate future male fighters. Importantly, however, what is missing from the Hamas Charter is any suggestion or justification for female suicide bombers for the liberation of Palestine, although the broadly used term shahid (to indicate a male Islamic witness or martyr) is peppered throughout.55

Unlike the encompassing nature of the 1987 intifada, female organization and participation in public demonstrations by the 2000 intifada was scaled back and more tightly controlled once Hamas and PIJ began to gain political popularity and advance

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their military power. As Claudia Brunner indicates, “in contrast to the First Intifada, when women played a major role in maintaining its steadfastness at various levels, the second one is a very masculine undertaking, rendering women invisible again for various reasons” (Brunner 2005, 31). One of these reasons was the dramatic increase in violent confrontations with Israeli military forces and the spike in casualties among Palestinian civilians in comparison to the first intifada years. Yet, even as the Palestinian street became even more distinctly radicalized as a result of the loss of life in local communities, the Islamist leadership only slowly lumbered toward a religious justification for more open female participation in the struggle. The problem for the Islamists was twofold. First, the Islamists needed to keep pace with the sudden turn in the political events as their secular enemy, Fatah, dispatched female suicide bombing campaigns. Second, the Islamists needed to quickly incorporate new roles of female militancy in a manner that did not contradict the strict cultural norms and religious sanctions of Palestinian Islamism (Bloom 2007, 97-99).

Certainly, the Islamists dominated the industry of dispatching male suicide bombers prior to the start of the second intifada, but the concept of isteshhad (martyrdom) was accepted as a male-only enterprise. Conventionally forbidden from taking up arms themselves, women were excluded from the religious and political status of isteshhad. The same Qur’anic references and public messages used for male suicide bombers were unavailable to females by the Islamists prior to Idris. Of course, before Fatah claimed responsibility for Idris’ suicide attack and successfully dispatched three more female suicide bombers in her name, Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, the founder of Hamas, publically stated that women were not needed for martyrdom operations since Hamas was
already unable to absorb the growing number of applications from *shebab* (male youths) who wanted to undertake them. On 31 January 2002, Yassin is quoted by the London newspaper, *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*:

> At the present stage, we do not need women to bear this burden of jihad and martyrdom. The Islamic Movement cannot accept all the Palestinian males demanding to participate in jihad and in martyrdom operations, because they are so numerous. Our means are limited, and we cannot absorb all those who desire to confront the enemy. (Al-Sharq Al-Awsat 2002)

Yassin also stated that women’s place was in the home and that their bodies should not be used for this reason (Al-Sharq Al-Awsat 2002, Isa 2002). In line with the reference to women in the Hamas Charter, Yassin held firm to the notion that Palestinian women were better suited for activities related to maternity, sheltering and grieving in the Palestinian national struggle. He added, “The woman is the second defense line in the resistance to occupation. She shelters the fugitive, loses the son, husband and brother, bears the consequence of this, and faces starvation and blockade” (Isa 2002).

Within the Islamist approach to the national struggle, a Palestinian female could only hope to attain the honor associated with martyrdom on the battlefield through the bravery of her sons, husband or male family members according to the prevailing interpretation of *jihad* (Ness 2008, 19). Yet, as the shock value of the female suicide bomber hit the world and was intensified in the media, it became clear that “the operational advantages that a female suicide bomber could offer made it impossible for Islamic religious groups to ignore and continue to deny the right for female participation” (Ness 2008, 5). In the weeks following his initial statements against the use of female
suicide bombers, Yassin took a decidedly different tact regarding “female martyrdom seekers.” Carefully, Yassin re-stated his position that Palestinian females were not needed in suicide bombing missions due to the numbers of Palestinian men early waiting to fill this role, but conceded that females would be allowed to carry out suicide bombing missions under a clear set of restrictions. According to Yassin, due to the social and biological differences between women and men, it was permissible for a woman to join a jihad operation, but under the provision that she was accompanied by a close male relative to serve as her escort. He stated:

The woman has a uniqueness that makes her different from man. Islam gives her some rules. If she goes out to jihad and fight, then she must be accompanied by a mahram (a close male relative she is forbidden to marry by the law of consanguinity) if she will be absent from home for more than a day and a night (Isa 2002).

Important to Yassin was the issue of the proper comportment of Palestinian women and conventional of issues of modesty. For example, in March 2002, after the second Fatah female suicide bombing, Yassin stated that Hamas remained far from enthusiastic about the inclusion of women in warfare, for “reasons of modesty” (Zedalis 2004, 13).

Sheikh Yassin of Gaza was not alone among other Islamist leaders weighing in on the newfound subject of female martyrdom in early 2002. The debate also ignited an interesting split among leading Islamist voices elsewhere. For example, two weeks after Idris’ act, Sheikh Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar University in Cairo, was interviewed by a reporter from the London-based Arabic-language Al-Sharq al-Awsat newspaper. In light of Yassin’s remarks about a female suicide bomber needing to be escorted by a male relative for the sake of religious appropriateness,
Tantawi was asked if unaccompanied women bombers like Wafa Idris were disobedient and their operations not therefore considered martyrdom. Tantawi’s response contradicted Yassin’s remarks. Condoming all levels of female suicide martyrdom, Tantawi replied:

If a woman leaves her house for *jihad* and in order to uphold right and justice, then she is not a disobedient woman. If she is killed she will be considered a martyr, winning God’s acceptance, even if she left without a *mahram* (Al-Husayni 2002).

Meanwhile, another Hamas leader conveniently noted that there was no specific Islamic religious ruling (*fatwa*) against a female becoming a martyr (Cunningham 2008, 90). Sheikh Hassan Yusef, along with another leader of Hamas, Isma’eel Abu Shanab were also among those who reportedly stated that where is no *fatwa* that prohibited women from undertaking suicide attacks, ostensibly against Israeli occupation in the Palestinian territories (Cunningham 2008, 90). Similarly, it was noted that the Hamas Charter delineates certain activities for women such as motherhood and caretaking, but also does not specifically elide female participation in the armed struggle in the form of female suicide bombings. Elsewhere in the Islamic world, Muslim clerics grappled with the concept. Just as in the Palestinian Hamas context, Muslim leaders originally refused the legitimacy of female suicide bombings as martyrdom. In August 2001, the High Islamic Council in Saudi Arabia announced in a new *fatwa* that Palestinian women could become suicide bombers (Beyler 2003). Back in the Gaza Strip, Sheik Yassin issued a second statement on 2 February 2002, which granted a woman’s right to carry out a suicide
attack alone, under the condition that the mission does not take her away from home for more than twenty-four hours (Beyler 2003).

The combination of the lack of a specific *fatwa* in the Islamic world regarding female suicide martyrdom, the silence in the Hamas Charter and the lack of any specific Islamic religious decrees to rule against these activities, enabled the Islamist leadership to increasingly distance itself from its highly religious support base. In this manner, the increasingly liberal statements made by Islamists appear to be far less spiritually ordained and more politically expedient. This demonstrates that Hamas’ gender ideology did not shape its political imperatives in any strict sense, but that emerging political imperatives (i.e. competing with Fatah-backed militancy against Israel) shaped Hamas’ gender ideology.

More recently, Dr. Yunis al-Astal, a Hamas MP, discussed the Islamic precedent for female participation in jihad on Al-Rafidein TV, an Iraqi news program. In the interview dated 17 June 2007, Al-Astal’s statement demonstrates the evolution of Islamists leadership’s justifications for female suicide bombers as martyrs of the national struggle. Al-Astal states:

The most exalted form of *jihad* is fighting for the sake of Allah, which means sacrificing one's soul by fighting the enemies head-on, even if it leads to martyrdom. Martyrdom means life next to Allah.[...] When jihad becomes an individual duty, it applies to women too, because women do not differ from men when it comes to individual duties (Al-Astal 2007).

In the next part of the interview, Dr. Al-Astal is asked about female suicide martyrdom seekers who embark on their operations without the permission of a husband or father or without wearing an Islamic head covering. Al-Astal replies:
When *jihad* becomes an individual duty, the husband's permission or consent is not required, because *jihad* becomes like prayer. Just like a woman does not have to ask for permission to pray, to fast during Ramadhan, or to give charity, she does not need to ask for permission when *jihad* becomes an individual duty. In my opinion, in places invaded by the enemy, *jihad* becomes an individual duty…With regard to your question about the veil, especially when it comes to martyrdom-seekers who had to go into the Zionist cities deep in Palestine – *jihad* is a duty, and so is wearing a veil, but the duty of *jihad* is ten times great than the duty of wearing a veil (Al-Astal 2007).

Throughout this interview, Al-Astal is careful to strategically frame the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in accordance with a dichotomous religious struggle between Jew and Muslim. In doing so, he creates an equally accessible and distinctly Islamist means of engagement for Palestinians—as both Muslims and citizens of Palestine—in the struggle that is territorially and religiously specific while seemingly gender-neutral. According to Al-Astal, the most important message concerning the topics of *jihad* and martyrdom in the context of the protracted struggle between Israelis and Palestinians is that it sends a message to the “Zionist enemies” that there is no place for both communities to simultaneously occupy in the land of Palestine. From this point of view, the message sent by male and female members of the Islamist armed resistance is the same:

The most important message is that our enemies should know that there is no place for them on the land of Palestine. Each and every boy and man, and each and every girl and woman, is a potential martyrdom-seeker. The enemy should know that we are prepared to wear explosive belts, and to throw ourselves in the midst of the enemy, in order to make them taste the evil consequences of their deeds. They should know that they have no
other choice – either they leave or they will die, even if it takes a long time (Al-Astal 2007).

Like male martyrdom seekers, Al-Astal states that the political message of the female martyrdom-seekers is to communicate equally an imperative to their enemies to “go back to where they came from, or else our jihad will continue until this land regains its holiness – from the [Mediterranean] Sea to the [Jordan] River" (Al-Astal 2007).

Al-Astal’s interview reflects the Islamist, zero-sum approach to the Palestinian national struggle. This approach was known for its unconditional rendering of a future Palestinian state, which some Islamists still seek to establish within the combined, present-day borders of the Palestinian Territories and Israel. In clinging to established national values, the Islamist leadership (particularly Hamas) confers an Islamic religious significance on its version of Palestinian nationalism. That is, “the Palestinian state envisioned by Hamas would come into being through a holy war (jihad), encompass all of Palestine, and implement the Islamic law (shari’a)” throughout the land (Mishal and Sela 2000, 15). At the same time, the careful evolution of this zero sum approach to the Palestinian struggle has also evolved and expanded into a more meticulously executed, and now (seemingly) gender-neutral vision of jihad—in which the entirety of the Palestinian population can and therefore must participate.

However, it is important to note that even with the official Islamist stamp of approval for female suicide bombers, Hamas ultimately dispatched significantly fewer female suicide bombers than the secular Al-Aqsa Martyr’s Brigades. In fact, despite the fact that Sheik Yassin issued a public statement condoning women as potential shaheedas in 2002, not a single female suicide attack had been organized or claimed by Hamas at
that time (Beyler 2003). This was poignantly illustrated by the case of 21-year-old, Dareen Abu Aisheh, who reportedly first sought out Hamas to volunteer for her suicide mission, and was turned down on the basis of her gender (Beyler 2003). Soon after, Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades claimed responsibility for Dareen Abu Aisheh’s attack.

Throughout the Al-Aqsa intifada the relationship between the Islamist leadership and female martyrdom seekers remained tenuous. In the case of Hamas, there appeared to be two equally important elements in the reluctance to dispatch female suicide bombers against Israeli targets. The first aspect was the already established conventional gender norms that the Hamas leadership specifically cultivated and maintained as a way of building its social and political credibility. There was also Hamas’ need for political survival. It was vital to be embraced on the Palestinian street as a powerful organization capable of representing the Palestinian people as a whole, while also (and perhaps most importantly) being seen as markedly different from the secular leadership of Fatah as the governing entity of the PLO. Perhaps these reasons account for why the only female suicide bombers dispatched by Hamas during the course of the second intifada was so dramatically different than the other female operatives sent by Fatah and PIJ. Unlike the other successful female suicide bombers known to the Palestinian conflict, 22-year-old Reem al-Riyashi became not only the first female Hamas bomber, and the first female bomber from Gaza, but also, significantly, the first mother to leave behind a husband, a 3-year-old son, and a 1-year-old daughter in her suicide attack (Zedalis 2004, 8). Hamas leader Yassin defended the attack in the most dramatic shift in Islamist rhetoric concerning the use of females as suicide bombers. On 14 January 2004, within thirty minutes of the reports of Reem al-Reyashi’s attack at the Erez border crossing in Gaza,
Yassin defended the change in the approach to female martyrdom by telling reporters that, “jihad is an imperative for Muslim men and women” (Regular 2004). Yassin stated:

The fact that a woman took part for the first time in a Hamas operation marks a significant evolution for the Izz a Din al-Kassam brigades. The male fighters face many obstacles on their way to operations, and this is a new development in our fight against the enemy. The holy war is an imperative for all Muslim men and women; and this operation proves that the armed resistance will continue until the enemy is driven from our land. This is revenge for all the fatalities sustained by the armed resistance (Regular 2004).

Yassin’s statement again demonstrates that the evolution in Hamas’ use of females as potential weapons against the enemy became adamantly more tactical than spiritually ordained. Indeed, female bodies serve Islamist political ends as effective weapons against overwhelming Israeli military prowess. This fact of political necessity is supported by the claim of Mohammed, a veteran member of Hamas’ military wing in Gaza, who said that Riyashi was accepted as the first female Hamas suicide bomber due to the fact that the Israeli occupation was so heightened at the time that it allowed for very little movement of men (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010, 198). As Mohammed says, Riyashi’s attack came “during a very tight security atmosphere which meant no man could get close to the Israelis at Erez” (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010, 198).

To this end, it is also interesting to note that out of the numerous female suicide bombers dispatched by Fatah, PIJ and Hamas throughout the Al-Aqsa intifada, Hamas only dispatched two women with very distinctive social attributes. While both women were mothers, the second female suicide bomber dispatched by Hamas was also a
grandmother and a woman of considerable age in comparison to all of the women dispatched by the secular and Islamist forces alike. On 23 November 2006, Fatima Omar Mahmud al-Najjar became the second female suicide bomber to be dispatched by Hamas. Like al-Riyashi, Fatima al-Najjar was also from Gaza, but gained attention and notoriety as a “first” for Hamas as well as in the history of female militancy in the Palestinian context. At 57-years-old, al-Najjar became the oldest female suicide bomber in the history of the Palestinian struggle. She was also the first grandmother in the history of the struggle to seek out and successfully deploy a suicide-bombing mission. The blast killed al-Najjar and wounded five Israeli soldiers.

Although Hamas, as the dominant Islamist group in the Palestinian Territories, only deployed two female suicide bombers in the course of the second intifada, support for this particular form of female political militancy remains intact. Evidence of this is given in Hamas MP, Yunis Al-Astal’s 2007 interview where he highlights the “exemplary cases of girls who were martyred for the sake of Allah” (Al-Astal 2007). However, the central reason for the emergence of the Palestinian female suicide bomber had little or nothing to do with those seeking gender equality or the elevation of the status of women in Palestinian society more generally. More directly, the emergence of the female suicide bomber shortly into the Al-Aqsa intifada came as a result of the fierce political competition between the Islamists and the secular authorities for dominance and popularity as vanguards of the Palestinian people and their cause. As Ness observes, the increasingly liberal position taken by Islamic terrorist groups regarding the right and obligation of females to engage in jihad against the enemy has little to do with Palestinian women as having the same rights as citizens during times of peace as they
have in times of war (Ness 2008, 4). Nevertheless, at the point in which the Islamist leadership began to condone the use of female suicide martyrdom as a political tool for the Islamist resistance, it became increasingly more common to see powerful political posters and propaganda depicting images of Palestinian women cradling guns in their hands while wearing full Islamic garb. Even today, the images of these women allude to their Islamic piety and simultaneous devotion to an armed struggle as members of the Islamist regime. In light of these inconsistencies, the question becomes, what were the Palestinian women themselves saying and doing while the Islamists and secular authorities battled more strategically for political control?

“A Fatal Equality”⁵⁶: Female Voices on Suicide Bombing, Female Martyrdom

Between February 2002 and May 2007, roughly 88 Palestinian women attempted acts of suicide bombing, although only ten were successful (McGirk 2007).⁵⁷ Compared to the years of the first intifada, the emergence of the female suicide bomber is a phenomenon that can be directly associated with the Islamization of the Palestinian struggle, as a result of the battle for political control between secularists and Islamists within the Palestinian Territories and the PA. Yet Cindy Ness writes, “While radical Islam emerged as more of a home-grown phenomenon in the Palestinian conflict, even in this context religion does not appear to be the central catalyst motivating females to kill”

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⁵⁶ The title “A Fatal Equality” is borrowed from Dr. Islah Jad’s doctoral dissertation in which she explores the impact of nationalism, secularism and Islamism Palestinian Women’s Movement. Discussing female suicide bombings, Jad states that Palestinian women are not seeking total equality with men. Instead, their aim is to directly encourage men to return to their masculinized role as female protectors. As Jad eloquently explains, the women establish a “fatal equality”, in which they “rise above the male order and gain power over all structures of power, whether patriarchy, despotism or Occupation”(See Jad 2004).

⁵⁷ The numerical breakdown of successful female suicide bombers sent to attack Israeli targets is: 4 from Fatah, 2 from Islamic Jihad, and 2 from Hamas.
Illustrating this point, Jad indicates in her analysis of Palestinian women between nationalism, secularism and Islamism, “Even though isteshhadeyyat, like their counterparts, are very much linked to Islamism and fundamentalism, Hamas was late to begin recruiting women for this kind of action” (Jad 2004, 189). If Fatah was the first to recruit women and Hamas was last (and dispatched the fewest number female bombers), then where were the women themselves in the process?

In the small field of research that already exists on this topic, there is very little agreement as to whether Palestinian females undertaking suicide missions are fully victims of political circumstances or active agents in their own right. For example, Barbara Victor’s work on Palestinian female suicide bombers focuses exclusively on the hypothesis that the central motivating factor for Palestinian women in becoming suicide bombers is due to their gendered status as second-class citizens (Victor 2003). Meanwhile, Jad contradicts Victor’s claim through her contention that the acts of female suicide bombing were “committed out of a sense of empowerment and uniqueness”, and that the women undertaking these deadly missions “were in full control of their actions and their agency” (Jad 2004, 190). While it is important to note the ways in which the Islamist male leadership openly grappled with the terms and conditions of female suicide missions in the second intifada, it is even more compelling to discover what Palestinian women were saying and thinking during this time.

In 2007, 27-year-old Thawiya Hamour, an unmarried Palestinian woman, was interviewed on film in Israel’s HaSharon Prison for Arab Women regarding her involvement, arrest and detention in a failed suicide bombing attack. Hamour was the sixth potential female suicide bomber dispatched by Fatah on 20 May 2002 (IDF-
Spokesperson 2002). When the interviewer, Abigail Levy, the bereaved Israeli mother of a suicide attack victim, asked Hamour if someone “pushed” her to undertake her failed suicide mission, Hamour replied: “Of course not. It was my own will. I wanted to do it. Neither Hamas, nor PIJ would ever go seek a girl at her father’s house. That’s just not possible. I went to the guys on my own and told them that I wanted to carry out an operation” (Hamour 2007). As the emotional interviewer continues, Hamour sits in full Islamic dress, and calmly testifies on her own behalf. When asked if she regrets her actions, she replies: “I told you in the beginning. I did that for the sake of Allah, the Almighty. I understand what I did. I am here holding out. I did something that I believe to be for the good of Palestine” (Hamour 2007).

In addition to Hamour’s claims that she believed her actions were for the good of Palestine, reports indicate that Hamour backed out of her suicide-bombing mission at the last minute. She claimed that her handlers directed her to dress immodestly, in the fashion of an Israeli woman, in order to avoid detection. In the media interviews that followed, Hamour stated, "I wasn't afraid. I'm not afraid to die. I went for personal reasons. However, I did not want to arrive 'upstairs' for impure reasons. I did not want to dress that way, because it is against my religion" (Hamour 2003). Here, it appears that Hamour had very strong personal convictions in affirming her goal in undertaking a suicide-bombing mission. However, with her goal in mind, Hamour was also deliberate in her vision of completing the mission to her own set of personal standards. For example, reports indicate a dispute between Hamour and her operators due to their command that she detonate the explosive belt affixed to her body even if she did not reach the target site. Hamour refused to do this—even as Israeli security forces in Tulkarm caught her—before
reaching her targeted destination in a densely populated area in West Jerusalem. When asked why she did not detonate her explosives at the moment she was discovered by the Israeli security forces, Hamour rhetorically replied, "To blow myself up for nothing, what for? To die just so that my operators can brag about carrying out a terrorist attack?" (Hamour 2003).

The theme of independent thinking on behalf of the women carried out the suicide-bombing campaigns is also articulated by the family members of Fatima al-Najjar, the 57-year-old woman who was sent by Hamas in November 2006 to carry out a mission against an Israeli raid in Gaza. According to Najjar’s family, she became radicalized after Israeli troops destroyed her home in 1990 during the 1987 intifada (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010, 199). Weeks before her death, she participated in a woman’s protest march in Beit Hanoun where Israeli forces laid siege to a group of Hamas fighters trapped inside a mosque. During the protest, the Israeli forces opened fire on the crowd of women, who were helping the male fighters flee the mosque. Sixteen Palestinians were killed, including some of the female protesters (BBC News 2006). Najjar’s son, Saber, said that his mother was hoping to be martyred that day, and was disappointed when other women were killed by Israeli fire and she survived (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010, 199). Other family members added in an interview that, “having raised such a large family, Najjar believed she had fulfilled her wifely and maternal duties and wanted to contribute in a more direct way to the ‘resistance’” (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010, 199-200). According to Hamas, it was Najjar who approached Hamas fighters who were unable to get near enough to Israeli soldiers during
the raid, and told them, “If you can’t do something I can, because my house is close to the Israeli position” (Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010, 199).

Hamour and Najjar’s cases illustrate the number of public displays of ready-and-willing female volunteers that fostered the growth of female suicide attacks as a political weapon unique to the second intifada. Certainly, it cannot be overlooked that the very public legitimization of female suicide martyrdom on behalf of the Islamists and secularist groups alike empowered these women. For the first time in the history of the Palestinian struggle, Palestinian women of all ages were now encouraged to participate in the Palestinian resistance in a military role and not just as passive citizens forced by circumstance to stoically bear the array of traumas inflicted by violent military action directed against them and their communities. To this end, Hamour and Najjar’s cases demonstrate that they did not see themselves as either a passive victim of social and political circumstances or the malleable pawn of their handlers. Rather, their words and actions indicate that they considered themselves in control of undertaking and executing their own suicide missions against Israeli targets with the assistance of male support.

In addition to an array of male voices of leading clerics throughout the Islamic world, female suicide bombers were widely heralded by Palestinian women as well. Most especially, a number of female voices emerged in support of the idea that Wafa Idris served as a role model for women engaged in the national struggle on behalf of their gender. As Clara Beyler, a researcher for the International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism in Israel observes, “When women become human bombs, their intent is to make a statement not only in the name of a country, a religion, a leader, but also in the name of their gender” (Beyler 2003). For example, during the Ramallah-based public
funeral for Wafa Idris held by Fatah, one Palestinian woman from Tulkarm referred to Idris as the precedent for future female suicide bombing missions against Israeli targets. She said, "This woman will not be the last. We will all booby-trap our bodies and blow ourselves up in the Jews' faces" (Israeli Security Sources 2003).

During the same funeral proceedings, a female member of Fatah’s Revolutionary Council eulogized Idris by praising her as a female martyr, following the path of female militants before her and restoring a sense of honor to the role of Palestinian women in struggle. Similarly, the mothers of the deceased female bombers darkly expressed pride and support for their daughter’s missions as a way of encouraging other Palestinian woman and girls to follow. In an interview with reporters after her daughter’s death, the mother of Wafa Idris tearfully described her daughter as a both martyr and “daughter of Palestine” (Idris 2002). Idris’ mother stated that she was proud of her daughter and hoped that more women would follow Wafa’s example. Similarly, the mother of Ayat Al-Akhras, the third female suicide bomber sent by Al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades, stated that she did not personally encourage her daughter to blow herself up in the name of Palestinian nationalism, but believed that her daughter “intended her action to be an example to other girls” (Al-Akhras 2007). Finally, the mother of Dalal Al-Mughrabi, a 20-year-old woman who was killed during her participation in an attack on the Coastal Road of Israel in 1978, has maintained since the time of her daughter’s death: “Dalal will never be forgotten as she will remain an admirable symbol of the Palestinian women's

58 Specifically, it was stated, "Wafa's martyrdom restored honor to the national role of the Palestinian woman, who sketched the most wonderful pictures of heroism in the long battle for national liberation. Wafa came today to complete the path of the martyr Dalal Al-Mughrabi and her comrades…” MEMRI, Wafa Idris: The Celebration of the First Female Suicide Bomber—Part III, February 14, 2002, http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/0/611.htm#_edn1 (accessed February 28, 2010).
struggle and an example to be emulated by young Palestinian men and women who will pursue the armed struggle until the liberation of Palestine" (Al-Amir 2008).

As Palestinian women came to occupy a decisively more violent role in the struggle for nationhood, what did this mean for gender equality? Looking back to the history of the Palestinian struggle, Leila Khaled, one of the most famous female militants for her brash activities of the 1970s wrote in her autobiography that violence, in general, was a way of “leveling the patriarchal society through revolutionary zeal” (Khaled 1973). An advocate of gender equality and full female participation in the Palestinian struggle, Khaled wrote in her 1973 autobiography that Palestinian women would one day “demonstrate that their commitment was no less than those of their brothers, sons, or husbands” (Khaled 1973). On a personal note, she adds, “As a Palestinian, I had to believe in the gun as the embodiment of my humanity and my determination to liberate myself and my fellow men” (Khaled 1973, 8). Khaled argues that military training and violent participation was the way for women to achieve social and political equality in the national struggle (Khaled 1973). However, Khalid is careful to note in her writing that the Palestinian national struggle is first and foremost the concern of all Palestinian people, including women. Similar to the tensions between feminism and nationalism in other struggles for political liberation, Khaled demonstrates that political liberation precedes gender liberation on all counts.

59 Leila Khalid was the first “poster girl” of Palestinian militancy. Khalid was born in Haifa in 1944 under the British Mandate, and came of age in Southern Lebanon. She is most famously known for her participation in the 1969 hijackings of TWA Flight 840, which was blown up after passengers had disembarked. Khalid acted on behalf of the Marxist-Socialist party, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).
Nevertheless, after the first year of female suicide bombings, Dr. Samiya Sa'ad Al-Din, a Palestinian women living in Egypt, reflected on the role of female suicide bombers as the vanguards for gender equality. In her column in the Egyptian government daily *Al-Akhbar*, Al-Din wrote that Palestinian women were “tearing apart the gender classification of their birth certificates and declaring that sacrifice for the Palestinian homeland would not be for men alone” (Al-Din 2002). She adds, "... all Palestinian women will write the history of the liberation with their blood, and will become time bombs in the face of the Israeli enemy. They will not settle for being mothers of martyrs" (Al-Din 2002). In a similar vein, a columnist in the Jordanian newspaper *Al-Dustour* reflected on female suicide bombing as a means to security gender equality for women:

The Arab woman has taken her place and her dignity. It is the women’s rights activists in the West who robbed women of their right to be human, and viewed them as bodies without souls. Wafa [Idris] did not carry makeup in her suitcase, but enough explosives to fill the enemies with horror...Wasn’t it the West that kept demanding that the Eastern woman become equal to the man? Well, this is how we understand equality--this is how the martyr Wafa understood equality (Al-Dustour 2002).

With the emergence of female suicide bombers, the question of gender equality in the act came to be seen as inherent in the process of promoting Palestinian liberation through heroic, self-sacrificing acts. In an editorial entitled, “It’s a Woman!” the Egyptian Islamist periodical, *Al-Sha’ab*, enthusiastically endorsed female suicide bombing as a means to shock the enemy while simultaneously “exploding” myths of women’s weakness, submissiveness and enslavement. Darkly, the editorial adds that women’s liberation comes in the form of “liberation of the body from the trials and
tribulations of this world…and the acceptance of death with a powerful, courageous
embrace”(Al-Sha'ab 2002).60

More often than not, the idea of achieving gender equality through female
militancy is a rhetorical tool used on behalf of the many public commentators who came
to support female suicide bombing as a violent means to a still undetermined end in the
Palestinian struggle. However, despite the fact that several dozen Palestinian females
willingly volunteered for suicide bombing missions, these individuals were still operating
under archaic patriarchal notions of gender rather than “exploding” these myths from
within (Bloom 2007). According to Bloom, there is a well-scripted set of gender-based
rules around which Palestinian society operates. Within this framework, women are
regularly seen as self-sacrificial. For example, the patriarchal conception of motherhood
is one of self-denial and self-effacement. As Bloom writes, “In a sense, martyrdom is the
ultimate and twisted fulfillment of these ideas. So the spectacle of female suicide
bombers doesn’t challenge the patriarchy as much as provide evidence of its power”
(Bloom 2007, 102). Here, it seems contradictory that female suicide bombers of the
second intifada are seen as the vanguards of gender equality in their time, when the
message translated to women seeking to emulate the paths of female resistance fighters is
that females are more valuable to their society dead than alive, especially in the state of
protracted war against Israel (Bloom 2007, 102).

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60 From the 2002 article: “It is a woman who teaches you today a lesson in heroism, who teacher you the
meaning of Jihad, and the way to die a martyr’s death. It is a woman who has shocked the enemy, with her
thin, meager and weak body…It is a woman who blew herself up, and with her exploded all the myths
about women’s weaknesses, submissiveness, and enslavement…It is a woman who has proven that the
meaning of [women’s] liberation is the liberation of the body from the trials and tribulations of this
world…and the acceptance of death with a powerful, courageous embrace” (Al-Sha’ab 2002).
Meanwhile, some contend that the distinction between female and male Palestinian suicide bombers of the second intifada is that the actions of females are more personal than political (Berko 2007). For example, it is argued that female suicide bombers undertake their mission out of a feeling of personal emptiness and desperation (Victor 2003). Departing from this perspective, Jad argues that the motive of Palestinian females seeking suicide martyrdom has less to do with personal desperation or the general desire for gender equality. In her highly nuanced account, Jad contends that female suicide bombers are not seeking equality on a par with Palestinian males, but aim to publically shame Palestinian manhood and Arab male leadership. The actual act of shaming is not related to the pursuit of gender equality, but to a conscious desire to motivate Palestinian men and the Arab male leadership to return to their positions as protectors of women (Jad 2004, 278). Clearly, the decision to invite or reinvigorate the return of patriarchal, masculinist protectionism by directly confronting and challenging it flies in the face of gender equality. Nevertheless, Jad’s account is consistent with prevailing statements made by female suicide bombers themselves. For example, in her videotaped farewell message, Ayat Al-Akhras said, “Enough torpor, enough relinquishing your duties in defending Palestine, I scorn your armies that watch Palestinian girls who fight in your time while you watch them on your TVs. This is my call to you and let each proud Arab Muslim hear me” (Jad 2004, 280). After Ayat’s death, her sister Sammar Al-Akhras, stated in anguish that Ayat went on her own suicide mission because “others have no courage” (S. Al-Akhras 2007). Echoing Ayat, Andalib

\[\text{61 Mia Bloom (2007) illustrates this point elsewhere in the style of right-wing Hindu women who goad men into action by saying, “Don’t be a bunch of eunuchs” (Bloom 2007, 99).}\]
Taqatqa sharply added in her farewell testament, “I said with my body what Arab rulers could not say with their tongues” (Jad 2004, 280).

By taking the words of these Palestinian women in context, we can begin to see that the female approach to suicide bombing was far more dark and complex than previously considered, where the acts of female suicide bombers can be seen to carry a multiplicity of meanings. Where feminist ideals for gender equality are concerned, female suicide bombers represent a celebration of female ability in contrast to male impotency. At the same time, however, the bombers themselves are not seeking to imitate or become their male leaders’ counterparts. Where national sacrifice is concerned, the meaning of sacrifice is expanded in new ways to explain and account for the emergence of a new form of female political behavior and political citizenship. Moreover, the challenge and confrontation to Palestinian males and male Arab leadership on the grounds of patriarchy and principles of masculinist protectionism, forges a new political voice for Palestinian women while in the process of yearning for—if not further manifesting—the masculinist power structure that perpetuates armed struggle on an almost exclusively male political terrain. Nevertheless, Palestinian women have always seen their participation in the national struggle as a matter of personal and political right. In this manner, some Palestinian women see female participation in suicide bombing campaigns as an individual right to invoke the personal and collective right self-defense (Jad 2004, 278). Jad’s work subtly maintains that this decidedly feminist ideology of “The personal is political”, enables Palestinian women to seek out suicide bombing missions through a sense of “over empowerment and uniqueness”. These women are not only in full control of their act, but of their individual agency (Jad 2004, 278).
Certainly, the use of female agency and the femininity of female suicide bombers as a means for shaming masculinity and the failed protective abilities of Palestinian men and Arab rulers alike is a bold and understudied calculus in the study of female suicide bombers. With the strategic support of the Al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades, Wafa Idris and her immediate followers forever changed the face of the Palestinian national struggle. However, in line with Pape’s research on suicide terrorism more broadly, the participation of Palestinian women in female suicide bombing campaigns demonstrates that the acts of suicide bombing were neither erratic nor religious. “Instead,” as Pape writes more generally of suicide terrorism, “they are primarily political—i.e.: nationalistic—and operate at strategic social and individual levels that are complex and independent (Pape 2005, 21-22). Indeed, Hamas and PIJ may have eventually changed their position on the recruitment of women into their military operations to keep up the political pace with the propaganda mileage drawn by the Al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades from their own use of female bombers (Bloom 2007, 100). Yet from this point of view, the deliberations of the Islamist leadership had very little impact on the complex and interdependent reasons why Palestinian females actively sought out their own suicide bombing missions. Insightfully, Ness adds, “While radical Islam has emerged as more of a home-grown phenomenon in the Palestinian conflict, even in this context religion does not appear to be the central catalyst motivating females to kill” (Ness 2008, 5).

Conclusion

The main point of this chapter is to demonstrate the less than coherent framework, which lent itself to the emergence of the political role of Palestinian women as suicide
bombers. In examining the female Palestinian suicide bombers of the Al-Aqsa intifada, religious arguments run short whereas political calculations seem to triumph. Debunking the false assumption that religious motivations are directly correlated to the rise of female suicide bombers, it becomes apparent that the individual motivations of the female suicide bombers of the second intifada were more nationalist than religious. Moreover, illustrative of the feminist mantra, “The personal is political”, female Palestinian suicide bombers themselves saw suicide bombing as an opportunity both to express their nationalist outrage against Israel and their frustrations with Palestinian males and Arab male leaders. Yet, at the very heart of the female bombers’ own aspirations, was a vicious struggle for power between the Islamists and the secular Fatah leadership of the PA.

While Yasser Arafat publically entreated Palestinian women to join the military ranks of their fathers and brothers in the national struggle, the invitation sent a direct message to the Islamists, who had held a monopoly on male suicide bombers since 1993. The message was that Fatah was able and willing to respond to the needs of the Palestinian people, even if it meant sending women volunteers on suicide bombing missions. In rapid succession, Fatah’s Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades dispatched the first four female suicide bombers, knowing that the conservative Islamist leadership would refuse the idea of female suicide bombers due to custom and social traditions of female modesty. Subsequent to the first female bombing attacks, the Islamist leadership made an ideological adjustment for women on the basis of carefully calibrated, yet questionably “official” Islamic rulings on the matter.

Although ironic, it becomes clear that the rise of the Islamist political power in the interim period between the end of the 1987 intifada and the beginning of Al-Aqsa
intifada in 2000 is responsible—although indirectly—for the emergence of the female suicide bombers in 2002. In causal terms, a classic ‘security dilemma’ between the two Palestinian arbiters of power created an opportunity structure that afforded Palestinian females a new role in the Palestinian struggle. Thus, to recall Thucydides, the growth of Islamist popularity in the Palestinian Territories ignited a fear in the hearts of the secularists to maintain their own power and popularity in the Palestinian Territories and PA. Initially, the secular Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades provided the necessary infrastructure for female suicide bombers. Then, with reluctance, the Islamist groups followed. In doing so, however, religious sanctioning by way of rhetorical gymnastics was used to swath the Islamist leadership in an air of religious authority while Palestinian females blew themselves up at Israeli checkpoints and on crowded pedestrian streets. Yet, as Brunner notes, “As to the bombings of 2003 and 2004, claimed by PIJ and Hamas, the few religious arguments cited can easily be deconstructed as part of their political public relations efforts” (Brunner 2005, 40). With this, the evolution of gender norms within the Islamist camp can be seen as clearly political rather than religious in nature.

In a dually tragic fashion, female suicide bombing missions eventually came to be condoned by the Islamist leadership. However, this did not equate with any attempt to make a place for women within the hierarchy of the organizations. Moreover, the same is true for the secular leadership, which condoned female suicide bombings without the baggage of religious permissibility, even as female representation and gender equality remained a low priority under Fatah’s command. Indeed, there has always been a clear ambivalence about the leadership capacity of women and the role that women should play in the Palestinian national movement, and this has been buttressed by the social
norms appropriate to females more generally. Yet, more than victims of patriarchy and misogyny, Palestinian female suicide bombers stand out as the deadliest of active agents in their own right. They emerged from diverse demographic corners of the social, religious and political spectrum of Palestinian society, and their morally questionable, political behavior dramatically and permanently altered the face and character of the Palestinian national struggle.

Throughout this discussion of the political role of Palestinian female suicide bombers, the alternative of nonviolent political engagement is underlying theme and alternative to the former. The focus of the next chapter will be devoted to a detailed examination of this topic.
CHAPTER SEVEN

NONVIOLENT ACTIVISTS

We are under occupation because we choose to be under occupation... just as a beaten wife has the choice to stay or leave.

–Dr. Mubarak Awad, Founder of the Palestinian Center for the Study of Nonviolence

Contained in the story of Palestinian nonviolence are two important issues. First is the fact that a discussion of nonviolence and peace building from within this predominantly Muslim community threatens to “derail those scholars and policymakers accustomed to traditional frameworks—apologetic, defensive, or orientalist—in the study of Islam” (Abu-Nimer and Groves 2003, 2). Second, within the story of nonviolent activism in the Palestinian Territories is the contextualization of female empowerment in practices inherent to Palestinian Islamic culture and society. In a departure from previous chapters, which explore the evolution of Palestinian women’s political behavior through the popularly known roles of mother, political activist and violent suicide bomber, this chapter endeavors to show the enduring significance of Palestinian women to the Palestinian struggle from the understudied perspective of their participation and mobilization as nonviolent activists. Since the rise of the Islamist movement in the early 1990s, internecine politics between the Islamists and secular-nationalist groups have silenced the grassroots campaigns of the 1987 intifada that once united the Palestinian
community against the Israeli occupation. Yet, in addition to the rise of internecine tensions and violence within Palestinian society since that time, the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and people also remains entrenched, if not formalized through the Oslo Accords. This is exemplified by the perpetuation of Israeli control over the people living in the Gaza Strip, West Bank and East Jerusalem. Added to this realm of Israeli control is the construction of the Israeli West Bank Barrier Wall, which has affected the lives and livelihoods of an estimated 411,000 Palestinian residents of the West Bank and East Jerusalem (B’tselem 2009). Moreover, the continued growth of Israeli settlements and their encroachment on Palestinian lands has continued to circumscribe and oppress the rights of average Palestinians. Through all of this, Palestinian women have continued to quietly work in nonviolent ways on behalf of their families and communities, and against the illegal usurping of Palestinian human rights by Israeli forces. By exploring the contemporary Palestinian nonviolence movement, this chapter locates where Palestinian women are and where they stand on the issue of nonviolence in the light of the rise of the Islamist political alternative, which often also presents itself as an alternative framework to do the bidding of the people. While the Islamist campaign for hearts and minds is cultivated among and by the new Islamic female activists of the Palestinian struggle, the question becomes, ‘Where and who are the women of nonviolent activism after the Oslo Accords?’

**Nonviolence and Islam in the Palestinian Context**

A compelling story of the 1987 intifada was told to Mohammed Abu-Nimer and Joe Groves during an interview they conducted with a group of Palestinian men from
Hebron about nonviolence in the 1987 intifada (Abu-Nimer and Groves 2003, 128-129). One man from the interview group conveyed the tale of a group of *shebab* (Palestinian boys and older male teenagers) who were throwing rocks at an Israeli patrol in Hebron in February 1989. The Israeli patrol gave chase to the boys, and one was shot and killed. In the course of the chase, one of the Israeli soldiers became cut off from his patrol and became surrounded by the group of angry Palestinian *shebab*. Fearing for his life, the soldier ran to the door of a nearby Palestinian home and began pounding on it for help. According to the story, a Palestinian woman appeared at the doorway. Seeing what was happening between the Israeli soldier and the *shebab*, she quickly admitted the soldier to her home, refusing to allow the *shebab* to attack him. The woman led the soldier into her home and served him coffee while they waited until it was safe for him to return to his patrol. As Abu-Nimer and Groves reveal, “The woman was the mother of the boy whom the Israeli patrol had just killed” (Abu-Nimer and Groves 2003, 128).

Using this anecdote of the Palestinian woman’s nonviolent behavior toward her unexpected Israeli guest, Abu-Nimer and Groves illustrate a “microcosm of the complex intertwining of violence and nonviolence that characterizes the Intifada” (Abu-Nimer and Groves 2003, 128). In this story is an attempt to demonstrate the political implications of nonviolence on the Palestinian side of the struggle against Israel. These illustrations are tied to a subtle yet foundational theme of cultural and religious values and principles of Arab-Muslims that foster nonviolent and peace-building campaigns in their communities. Focusing on the Palestinian situation, Abu-Nimer and Groves’ work demonstrates that the use of nonviolence in the name of freedom from Israeli military occupation is relevant to the Palestinian people as Muslims. This work adds to the scholarship concerning the
decades of the Palestinian struggle, where nonviolent acts of civil disobedience largely typified the political tactics used by the unarmed Palestinians against the organized and disproportionate force used against them by their occupiers. For example, Gene Sharp, a leading scholar of nonviolence, identifies roughly 85 percent of all Palestinian activities pertaining to the 1987 uprising as nonviolent (Sharp 1989, 3). Identifying nonviolence as “a technique of conducting conflicts using psychological, social, economic, and political weapons”, Sharp describes three methodological approaches to nonviolent resistance. These methods include: 1) symbolic forms of nonviolent protest--such as vigils, marches, and flying flags, 2) noncooperation--including social boycotts, labor strikes, and many forms of disobedience and mutiny, and 3) nonviolent intervention--ranging from hunger strikes to nonviolent occupations and blockades, the creation of self-reliant institutions, and the establishment of a rival parallel government (Sharp 1989, 4).

Sharp states that Palestinians “have already grasped and practiced some of the fundamentals of this technique”, and describes this rich history of Palestinian insubordination wherein, “People have simply refused to comply with something the Israelis wanted” (Sharp 1987, 48).

Adding to Sharp’s analysis, Mubarak Awad maintains that Palestinians have used nonviolent methods since the beginning of the 1930s in their attempts to achieve their goals against Zionism (Awad 1984, 22). In 1984, Awad’s article “Non-Violent Resistance: A Strategy for the Occupied Territories” cited the consistencies in Palestinian nonviolent political activism against Israeli aggression. Awad also posits nonviolent resistance.

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62 Sharp identifies commercial shutdown, economic boycotts, labor strikes, demonstrative funerals, and many types of political noncooperation as evidence of nonviolent resistance. To this list, he also adds the development of alternative educational, social, economic and political institutions as evidence of nonviolent resistance and important to the perpetuation of the Palestinian struggle.
resistance as the only political tool available to the Palestinians to bring about their liberation from Israeli occupation (Awad 1984). Ultimately, however, it is Abu-Nimer and Groves work, which goes beyond the history of Palestinian nonviolent activism to portray key cultural and religious values and principles within Palestinian society that have historically animated nonviolent campaigns in the Palestinian struggle. Despite the fact that the 1987 intifada became one of the “most thoroughly studied examples of political resistance in history,” Abu-Nimer and Groves attest that the cultural and religious connection between nonviolence and Islam remains relatively understudied in the Palestinian case. Unfortunately, however, without more deeply investigating the significance of the Palestinian woman and her interaction with Israeli soldier, Abu-Nimer and Groves miss the opportunity to explore the gendered elements of nonviolent activism in the Palestinian struggle, especially where Palestinian women can be seen as the source of fostering and transmitting the key social and religious principles of nonviolence to which Abu-Nimer and Groves’ work lays claim.

Historically, Palestinian women have not only served as the organizing force of nonviolent campaigns against the Israeli occupation, but also remain bastions of cultural and religious values within their communities, and attuned to nonviolent conflict mediation and resolution among their fellow Palestinians. These values include a kindness to one’s neighbor, a hospitality to strangers and upholding one’s personal faith through a recognition of the importance of humanity and its preservation. Taking Abu-Nimer and Groves analysis a bit deeper into the fabric of societies in conflict, feminist political thinkers and advocates of conflict resolution see female involvement in peacemaking as a vital component for nonviolently constructing, creating and
perpetuating peace. According to this perspective, placing peacemaking efforts in the hands of women is a preliminary step in creating “inclusive security”, a citizen-driven approach to global stability, which emphasizes women’s agency, and not their vulnerability (Hunt 2001, 38). An example of this lies in Swanee Hunt’s celebrated account, “Women Waging Peace”, in which she provocatively writes, “Allowing men who plan wars to plan peace is a bad habit” (Hunt 2001).

Hunt’s work is broadly representative of a community of scholars and political activists committed to conflict resolution, who consider women—regardless of class, country or creed—as agents of nonviolent political change. From this point of view, women are seen as suffering the most from violence in homes, communities and nations, and so war, state militarism and violence against women are held as inextricably linked. Unlike men, it is argued that women more easily conceptualize violence through their own vulnerability and see violence as not just an individual act, but as a structured event that emerges from social institutions and organizations (Bahdi 2003). Ostensibly, this is where a certain unity against violence brings women together as agents of social and political change despite their disparate political contexts and social traditions. Furthering this perspective is UN Resolution 1325, which calls for the incorporation of women in peacemaking efforts. The resolution demands a more active role for women in the prevention and reconciliation of conflicts through the “equal participation and full involvement of women in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution” (United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325). Where the idea of women working for peace rests on the theoretical tenants of nonviolent
struggle, the springing up of local and international nonviolent organizations and
techniques used by female activists only enriches the hypothesis that women are the true
architects of peace the modern age. Still, however, the question remains, where are the
female activists of nonviolence, peace and conflict resolution in the Palestinian struggle?

The NGO-ization of the Women’s Movement and Nonviolence Movement

Abu-Nimer and Groves write that efforts to apply peace-building approaches to
the Middle East and other Muslim communities, have been hampered by the widespread
assumption that Islamic religion and culture are inimical to the principles of peace
building and conflict resolution” (Abu-Nimer and Groves 2003, 1). Yet, in contradiction
to this, it is widely recognized that the early years of the 1987 intifada were carried out at
the grassroots level by nonviolent means, where boycotts and civil disobedience against
the Israeli authorities were used more regularly and with greater coordination than acts of
violence (Nassar and Heacock 1990, 8-10, Dajani 1995, 95). Within this setting, what
most characterized the 1987 intifada (in comparison to the many local uprisings
preceding it) was the mass mobilization of women. As Suha Sabbagh characterizes
female participation in the Palestinian struggle, “Rural women, camp dwellers, and camp
refugee women poured into the streets, marched in demonstrations, and organized sit-ins
in front of blown-up homes” (Sabbagh 1998, 2). In these nonviolent demonstrations in
the streets, the women were not only challenging the Israeli military occupation, but also
confronting the deeply rooted patriarchal traditions of Palestinian society (Hasso 2001).
Transgressing these traditions brought Palestinian women into a discussion of their social
and political rights not only as Palestinians, but also as female citizens of a future Palestinian state.63

However, female participation in the 1987 intifada dwindled as the movement began to lose its spontaneous nature and became institutionalized (Sabbagh 1998, 3). According to Sabbagh, the reason for this decline is hotly debated.64 The democratic culture and responsive agenda of grass roots women’s organizations was once seen as responsible and relevant to Palestinian women’s lives, but this began to erode in the absence of internal democracy and growing hegemony of the Palestinian Authority after its establishment in 1994 (2008104). As the decade of the 1990s progressed, the leftist oppositional parties of the Palestinian struggle became increasingly fragmented, leaving the secular-nationalist parties unable to maintain their activity and viability due to the fragility of their own internal politics. Again, the heavy hand of the secular-nationalist leadership governing the Palestinian Authority did not help this situation. Despite the fact that the women’s organizations were the groups that fought the hardest to bring the Palestinian self-governance into existence, they were the first to be eclipsed as the Palestinian Authority and its security forces monopolized the public space.

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63 As noted in previous chapters, much of the literature produced as a result of the first intifada attests to Palestinian’s women’s active political participation as indicative of a transformation of consciousness. Here, the most significant effect of the first intifada on women was the evolution that took place in the transformation of their roles of women-as-citizens in the struggle for Palestinian statehood. For example, Sabbagh writes, “Through the spontaneous act of participating in the confrontation with Israeli soldiers, women have challenged their traditional role, which requires their exclusion from the public sphere” (Sabbagh 1998, 3).

64 Sabbagh notes that Dr. Islah Jad considers the reason for the decline of female participation is because the UNLU failed to take women’s issues into consideration, and therefore failed to attract women as it continued to give direction in the first intifada. At the same time, Hiltermann argues that women in general were afraid to support a political program. Perhaps it can be said that while many women joined the ranks of the women’s organization during the first intifada, they did not remain within them as the intifada became increasingly dictated by the UNLU (1998, 3).
Eileen Kuttab writes that as a consequence of the development of a nascent ‘state’ by way of Palestinian self-governance, the avenue of informal grassroots participation in Palestinian politics collapsed and was replaced by a formal political setting that largely excluded female participation. As a result of the collapse of civil society, the fragmented women’s organizations lost their organic structural ties with the grassroots and the national movement as they transformed from small, shoestring organizations into formalized and internationally funded NGOs with an agenda created and endorsed by their benefactors abroad. In this “NGO-ization” of the women’s movement, Kuttab asserts that the genuine dynamism of the women’s movement as a whole became a movement, which is now “keener to reproduce an alienating international agenda rather than a responsive relevant local agenda” (Kuttab 2008, 105). Added to this is the sense that the professionalization of the women’s movement since the Oslo years transformed what was once a voluntary endeavor of a community into an occupation for local elites, which has further isolated the revolutionary spirit of the movement from the masses. According to Kuttab, women’s NGOs “divided and fragmented the women’s sector into different professional groups according to the agenda of the organizations and the nature of the services that they make available” (Kuttab 2008, 111). This resulted in an inconsistent provision of services to Palestinian women, and compartmentalized the Palestinian women’s struggle for equality and its effectiveness.

65 “NGO-ization” is a term recently used in the Palestinian context to describe the process through which issues affecting the Palestinian population have been transformed into projects funding by NGOs. Jad writes that such projects occur in “isolation from the general context in which they are applied and without due consideration of the economic, social and political factors affecting these projects” (Jad 2007, 623). Joining Jad, Kuttab (2008) adds that this process had failed to empower Palestinian women due to the fact that this process has transformed the cause for social change (promoting gender equality) into a “project” that is alien to the local context. Accordingly, creating a project out of a social movement places the ownership of the project into the hands of a group of small professional elite for “the purpose of accountability vis-à-vis foreign funders” (Jad 2007, 628).
Evidence of the disconnection of the Palestinian women’s organizations from the local agenda as the Palestinian Authority became formalized and consolidated its power has tremendous bearing on the disconnection and seeming more recent irrelevance of the organizations promoting nonviolence in the Palestinian Territories. As Kuttab explains, “the most serious internal challenge of all those which have faced the women’s movement over the past fifteen years has been the movement’s transformation from a grass-roots struggle to an elite movement” (Kuttab 2008, 106). Similar to the social and political flailing of women’s NGOs in their quest for local legitimacy, are the struggles of the (presumably) gender-neutral NGOs in the Palestinian Territories, which seek to promote nonviolence. Like the Palestinian women’s NGOs, the NGOs that developed in the Palestinian Territories to promote nonviolence and conflict resolution are internationally backed, run by local elites and not directly accountable to the people. As Hatem Bazian explains, the growth of the NGO sector in the Palestinian Territories is alienating to local groups in their efforts to normalize Israeli-Palestinian relations (Bazian 2007, 174). As a result the Palestinian people view foreign-backed NGOs in a negative light. Elucidating this perspective, Bazian says:

Without exception, every foundation that funds work on Palestine (from the most conservative to the most ‘progressive’) does so from the understanding that Israel, as it currently exists, should stay intact, and the solution is to change Palestinians so that they will adapt to their colonial situation (Bazian 2007, 174).

According to Bazian, the perception of NGOs among Palestinians is that the NGOs operate from the assumption that “Palestinians need to be trained to develop ‘civil society’ and learn to cooperate with Israel” (Bazian 2007, 174). Bazian concludes that
this approach promotes the development of an economic elite that is invested in the wellbeing of Israel, while failing to address the central issue of Palestinian hardship, which is the problem of Israeli colonization and occupation.

It is from this perspective that the NGO-ization of the Palestinian nonviolence movement is as problematic as the NGO-ization of the Palestinian women’s movement. The central criticism of the handful of functioning NGOs in Palestine committed to nonviolence is similar to that of women’s NGOs, in that they only seek to promote and protect the rights of people who adhere to an agenda set by the outsiders who fund these organizations. Therefore, they are illegitimate entities in the Palestinian political landscape today. For example, while the existing nonviolence organizations, such as Holy Land Trust, offers free “Leadership Training” under the auspices of promoting community and social justice among Palestinians, it is still widely regarded as a foreign entity among the local people. This is not helped by the fact that this organization annually provides interested internationals (largely from the Christian community) with the opportunity to come to Palestine and participate in nonviolent protests against the Israeli construction of the separation barrier wall that now effectively divides Israel from the West Bank. Not mutually exclusive, both forms of political organization and activism against the Israeli occupation—the Palestinian women’s organizations and nonviolent protests—were once empowering platforms for female participants in the grassroots endeavors of the first intifada. Yet, in effect the institutionalization of both entities has come to serve local elites and international interests, thus alienating the direct participation of Palestinian woman as would-be political activists.
Nonviolent political activities long characterized the Palestinian struggle. However, Mubarak Awad is credited with his attempt for formalize the Palestinian nonviolent movement with the establishment of the Palestinian Centre for the Study of Nonviolence (PSCN) in the early 1980s. Following Awad’s deportation by the Israeli authorities in 1988, the work of the Palestinian Centre for the Study of Nonviolence was carried on by several local advocates, including Nafez Assaily who moved on to independently direct one of the PCSN projects, the Library on Wheels for Nonviolence and Peace, and Lucy Nusseibeh, who later founded the Middle East for Nonviolence and Democracy (MEND). In 1988, the office of the PCSN moved from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, and continued to grow under the leadership of Mubarak Awad’s nephew, Sami Awad, who completed his studies in International Peace and Conflict Resolution at the American University in Washington, DC. In the early 1990s, the Palestinian Centre for the Study of Nonviolence became the Holy Land Trust, which came to fruition in a joint venture with an American Christian organization known as the Journey of the Magi (JOM). Internationally diffused and led by an unquestionably Christian orientation, one of the major objections to the work of Holy Land Trust as one of the main organizations in Palestine that promotes nonviolence is that it is an elitist organization funded by outsiders in the interest of preserving the Christian community in Bethlehem under the banner of peacemaking.

Local criticism of these organizations is that these NGOs are composed of internationals and local elites with a political agenda that is alien to the actual needs and interests of the people.66 This perspective is worsened by the fact that the local elites of

these organizations are secular, Western-educated, English-speaking, (and usually coming from the Christian minority in East Jerusalem and the West Bank) and are viewed as attempting to “represent all of Palestine while they drive designer cars, shop for their wives in Paris and New York, travel the world, eat in the finest restaurants, sleep in the finest beds, and are paid handsomely for talking about the Palestinian hardships.”

Specifically, these organizations attract Western media attention by inviting citizens from around the world to actively participate in nonviolent community protests against the Israeli occupation. For example, beginning in December 2004, groups of pro-Palestinian internationals began making their way to the West Bank village of Bil’in. Often outnumbering local protestors, the internationals nonviolently demonstrate against the construction of the West Bank Barrier Wall, which illegally expropriates Palestinian land for the “protection” of a nearby Israeli West Bank settlement called Modi’in.

Certainly, the presence and sight of non-Palestinian citizens from around the world joining in solidarity with the Palestinian struggle is a compelling one for news cameras. For example, Rajmohan Gandhi, the grandson of the Indian independence leader, Mahatma Gandhi, recently made his way to Bil’in to applaud this form of nonviolent activism against the Israeli occupation. Gandhi duly remarked on the need to call international attention to the Palestinian people and the justness of their cause. On public record, he said, "It is our duty to awaken the international community, and to call attention to what is going on in Palestine, and seek support for the Palestinian people and their just cause" (Al-Jazeerah 2010). Despite these noble intentions, however, the institutionalized and internationally infused approach to Palestinian nonviolence rids

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67 Fieldwork notes, Ramallah 2009.
local communities of the spontaneous protest known to them in the 1980s. In doing so, the presence of internationals and camera crews effectively quells the involvement of local Palestinian women in their attempt to locally mobilize and take to the streets in protest of the Israeli occupation. While the (still ongoing) weekly Bil’ìn protests in the West Bank replace violence with nonviolence, they unfortunately also replace local Palestinian activists (especially women) with internationals.  

Whereas in the past, native Palestinians—with a large contingency of women—designed and led their own political demonstrations, the nonviolent demonstrations of today are designed by the governing bodies of nonviolence NGOs and carried out by an ever-changing group of international volunteers who act as “human shields” to the Palestinian locals. As a result of this, the International Solidarity Movement (ISM), one of the most well known international organizations committed to the promotion of peace and nonviolence in the Palestinian Territories, has been criticized for not being Palestinian-led or run locally at a more organic level. As Charmaine Seitz writes, the public relations effort launched by the ISM must be “handled delicately to avoid perpetuating the view that internationals are trying to “teach” Palestinians nonviolence, inadvertently affirming the already pervasive stereotype that Palestinians are inherently violent” (Seitz 2003, 61).

While small numbers of Palestinian women can be counted in the internationally headlined stories of Bil’in, their presence at these sights of protest is seemingly peripheral to the predominantly male voice of the Palestinian nonviolence movement led by the NGO sector. Moreover, while these protests are widely held as non-religious and open to

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68 Having personally attended several of these wall protests in Bil’in 2007 and 2009, I was consistently amazed by the paucity of Palestinian females present for the weekly event.
individuals of all faiths, the question becomes, where is the connection between local faith, Palestinian women and the politics of nonviolence? Like the Israeli soldier mentioned at the start of this chapter who fortuitously encountered the Palestinian women willing to do her part in saving his life, it would appear that encounters with Palestinian female nonviolent activists occur behind the scenes of the international media fray and beyond the purposeful sound bites internationally-back NGOs. As this dissertation has shown, the rise of the Islamist political platform and its appeal presents a departure from the long history of secular nationalism. Within the Islamist infusion of the tenets of Islamic faith inside the struggle for a Palestinian nation, something new and relatively understudied has since emerged in connection with Islamic nonviolent activism: the da’iyyat, or female Islamic religious mediator.

**Nonviolent Islamist Female Mediators**

Quietly existing in a place within Palestinian society that exists beyond the formalized realm of women’s and nonviolence-promoting NGOs is the understudied case of nonviolent female social activism of the da’iyyat, or female religious mediators in the Gaza Strip. Dating back to the Ottoman Era, Palestinian society has long employed a customary tradition of conflict resolution. This extra-judicial tradition is based on lineage or tribal councils, collective land administration assemblies, and public reconciliation committees, and has withstood nearly a century of external control, military rule and community dislocations (Shehada 2006, 34). Since the consolidation and systemic weakening the Palestinian Authority since 1993, in combination with the eruption of the Al-Aqsa intifada in 2000, Palestinian society has witnessed an ever more debilitating
process of social and spatial fragmentation, which is especially evident in moments of conflict between groups and families. Thus, within the splintering of leftist political factions and the rise of Islamist political parties, a group of new actors has emerged in the form of male and female religious mediators. As Nadha Sheheda highlights in a brief yet pivotal account of conflict mediation in the Palestinian Territories, today these female mediators “have stepped in to fill the breach in conciliatory mechanisms and save the now isolated communities that form the nation from total chaos by appealing to the only remaining connecting principle, name the common reference to ‘Islamic values’” (Shehada 2006, 34).

Whereas male religious leaders have long acted as mediators in extra-formal settings in Palestine, the emergence of the female religious mediator is a new phenomenon enshrined by the rise of the Islamist movements in the 1990s. Outside of the Palestinian Territories, Saba Mahmood documents a similar phenomenon in Egypt with her account of urban women’s mosque movement as a part of larger Islamic revival (Mahmood 2005). Mahmood writes that the work of the women’s piety movement in Egypt is in large part attributed to the Islamization of the socio-cultural landscape of Egyptian society (Mahmood 2005, 3). However, within this vast proliferation of mosques and outlets for the proliferation of Islamic learning is not simply a religious ethos, but a religious ethos attached to social welfare. Mahmood’s work details the movement that began as women’s weekly religious lessons and became a mass movement of religious piety largely directed under the helm of its enthusiastic female supporters.

Similarly, Sherine Hafez’s recent work on Islamic women activists in Egypt focuses on da’iyyat as “women preachers”. Like Mahmood, Hafez also looks at the
journey of Islamic activists women in Egypt. For example, she traces the development of one woman activist named Doctora Zeinab, who sees her role as a da’iyah as shaped by both Islamic historical traditions and liberal secular ideals and principles (Hafez 2011, 108). As Hafez writes, Doctora Zeinab’s work focuses on the development of “a contemporary dialogue with Islamic teachings, namely, a dialogue based on knowledge of Islam but going beyond traditional or rigid interpretations” (Hafez 2011, 84). Like her male counterparts, Doctora Zeinab is well versed in the text of the Qu’ran and the technicalities of religious law. She is also equipped with a certificate allowing her to preach. She sees her role as a da’iyah as peacefully creating space in Egyptian society for an Islamic way of life that upholds and respects the rights of all people, including women. For her, acting as a political being in society is an expression of her personal and spiritual convictions as a devout Muslim. Noting this she says, “Religion is a behavior and is not just about knowledge. Because I teach about Islam, I can’t act differently from what I preach” (Hafez 2011).

Turning back to of Gaza, Sheheda writes that the role of the da’iyyat has significantly transformed over time. The role of these women preachers has gone from “that of educators advocating Islamic values in mosques and charity centres to active involvement in various issues related to community and social life, including interventions in public and private conflicts” (Shehada 2006, 35). Importantly, the appeal of “Islamic values” from inside the Palestinian experience is what drives these female volunteers and simultaneously protects them as political activists. They are largely members of Hamas (and to a lesser extent the PIJ), and their community-driven work underscores the importance of the Islamist movement in lending order to chaos in the
atomized Palestinian political landscape. The *da’iyyat* largely come from a middle class background and have attained higher levels of education in a variety of specializations including medicine, agriculture, architecture and Islamic studies (Shehada 2006, 35). Although the central element of their activism operates within the realm of Palestinian social networking, this has the political potential for not only fostering the growth of the Islamist movement, but also in bringing nonviolent conflict resolution as an acceptable strategy for struggle against the Israeli occupation. The *da’iyyat* meet and visit with hundreds of women from various regions, generations, statuses and classes, and are available to their female “clients” in moments of personal crisis and celebration (Shehada 2006, 35). Where the *da’iyyat* are advocates of women’s rights within the family and community, their Islamic religious training and respected backgrounds ensure them a large degree of respect in their communities. As Shehada writes, “The male leaders of the community do not seem to feel threatened by [their] activism, unlike their reaction to other outspoken feminist activists” (Shehada 2006, 35). Most importantly, the Palestinian *da’iyyat* rely on their femininity and their Islamic religious training to put forth a very clear political program of conflict resolution that promotes personal patience, endurance, and faith. Although the *da’iyyat* perspective is that of a moral agency framed within an Islamic perspective, the approach to personal agency and conflict resolution has very strong overlaps with the foundational principles of nonviolence.

The nature of the work of the *da’iyyat* within the Palestinian Islamist movement is associated with such terms as fundamentalism, the subjugation of women, social conservatism, and above all else, terrorism and violence, yet their political connection with social justice and nonviolence is resoundingly clear. As Shehada writes, the *da’iyyat*
work within the framework of Islam to “teach their followers to work hard to improve their living conditions, but at the same time they train them to accept the hardships of being truly pious” (Shehada 2006, 35). Meanwhile, nonviolence is a form of assertiveness and empowerment that enables the activist to retain her humanity, sometimes in the face of overwhelming violence. In both cases, the concept of self and moral agency is attributed to the individual who lives her life for the greater good.

However, in the former case, the da’iyyat work to promote the Islamist movement, which, at its core is an illiberal project that aims to use all means possible to destroy the state and the people of Israel. Nevertheless, the link between nonviolence and Islamic teaching is clear, even if the politics of the Islamist movement radically blur this connection.

Although underexplored in its potential relationship to Palestinian nonviolent struggle more broadly, the Palestinian da’iyyat is a salient example of the ways in which studying religion in its social context may help to better understand the interaction between nonviolence and religion in the Palestinian struggle against Israeli occupation. Indeed, there are often overlooked ways in which nonviolence manifests itself within Palestinian society, how it can facilitate nonviolent resistance and foster peace-building campaigns. Complementary to this is the fact that the female da’iyyat continue to defy traditional gender barriers on the basis of their community work despite some criticism in the mediate that they might be naïve and misled “mouthpieces” for conservative Islamist groups (Hafez 2011, 2). This can even be seen as yet another embodiment of the long history of female participation in the political arena, where female activism in the
Palestinian political struggle has always been seen as a direct extension of traditional domestic duties, although still a challenge to gender norms.

The story of the involvement of Palestinian women in nonviolent actions within the Palestinian struggle is nearly as old as the struggle itself and continues today. Yet the political implication of the Palestinian da’iyyat is an understudied subject of the Palestinian struggle and the growing role of Islamist women within it. The lack of serious attention given to the da’iyyat movement especially highlights the dilemma for feminist analysts, many of who are unconvinced of the latent liberating potential for women within Islamist movements. Moreover, the international supporters of a nonviolence movement within the Palestinian territories increasingly seek to link nonviolence training and nonviolence activism to the Palestinian elite. As outsiders to the growing chasm between secularists and Islamists in the Palestinian political landscape, these generous donors conflate the participation of secular, male activists from elite circles as an indication that a nonviolent movement in Palestine is taking shape. Thus, the course of action following the good intentions of well-meaning donors, local elites and the Western-educated administrative bodies of nonviolent organizations only exacerbates the tremendous political rift in Palestinian society. The exclusion of men and women who are not secular elites means that the naïve sense of incompatibility between Islam and nonviolence is not given a chance to evolve. Islamists (and particularly, Islamist females) have no voice in the secular NGOs that promote nonviolence in the Palestinian Territories. At the same time, this growing population of Palestinians does not seek to participate in the secular political efforts of NGOs, which appear to stray from the
centrality of Islamic teachings and the role of Islam in their personal lives and political struggle against Israel.

**Budrus: Another Account of Palestinian Woman as Nonviolent Activists**

While it can be argued that the institutionalized model of the Palestinian nonviolence movement is in many ways similar to the NGO-ization of the women’s movement, there are other emergent examples of Palestinian females employing nonviolent political tactics outside of the realm of organized protests led by the peace and nonviolence NGOs. For example, the West Bank village of Budrus is a recent place where a nonviolent and politically unaligned protest movement has emerged in protest at the construction of the Israeli separation wall. Grassroots and locally organized, what is exceptional about the Budrus protest is that is led by a father and daughter team. The father, Abd al-Nasser Marrar, is a Palestinian community organizer, and head of the Popular Committee Against the Wall in Budrus. His daughter Iltezam Morrar, a devout Muslim, was fifteen years old at the time that she helped to launch the women’s contingent of the unarmed movement. Through nonviolent protest, the members of this small village of 1300 effectively changed the course of construction of the West Bank barrier wall. Despite mass arrests by the Israeli authorities and the numerous injuries inflicted on the protestors by live ammunition fired upon them by the Israeli army, the village of Budrus eventually procured a legal victory in Israeli courts. In doing so, they safeguarded their own and other village lands from destruction in the name of Israeli security measures.
Inherent in the protest movement was the extensive presence of Palestinian women. As one witness attests:

In Budrus, female participation was several times more than men's. People describe rural and peasant women as being conservative and unwilling to leave their homes, but what I saw was exactly the opposite. All they need is someone to encourage their participation. In the first march that was called for, I went to the mosque loudspeaker and announced a march of women and asked that women join, and I didn't notice a single woman who was absent. No one objected to my call; on the contrary, the women who participated were convinced that they were doing the right thing. We have photos of the first demos here, and it was the women who were stopping the bulldozers. And this happened more than once in Budrus, and they succeeded in getting to the bulldozers before the men did. They were lying down in front of the bulldozers. I haven't seen similar participation by women in any other location (Audeh 2007).

Perhaps tellingly, the protests in Budrus that brought about a decided change to the path of the Israeli-built wall were largely composed of the actual villagers—and especially, the majority of the female population. Compared with this is the protest the Bi’lin village wall site mentioned previously, which is well attended by internationals and brings international media attention to the Palestinian plight, the Budrus protests are under populated by internationals and, hence, allow for greater female participation. Also, despite the good intentions of the NGOs, which organized the demonstrations in Bi’lin, nothing has been done to change the building plan of the wall itself as in the case of Budrus. While the NGOs may tirelessly work to promote the rights of the Palestinian population, what is largely absent in these noble attempts is the actual will of the local population and its women.
Indeed, the spontaneous outpouring of the local population in the case of Budrus can be seen as a resurrection of the successful organizational aspects of the 1987 intifada, before civil society became emptied by the profound instability and lack of peace brought by the Oslo Accords. Here, the story of Budrus is noteworthy not only for its effective nonviolent strategy and inclusion of female participants, but also for being a movement that united local actors from the rival Palestinian factions in the common cause of preserving Palestinian lands.

**Conclusion**

Beyond of the daily lives of the Palestinian people, and largely removed to the realities of those who live (and die) in the midst of the political impasse of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the international community insists that peace is possible. Against this, some Palestinians would argue that along with the death of the Oslo peace process, so, too, is any prospect for peace. Those in the community of international peacemakers attest that women are the gatekeepers of conflict resolution and bearers of “inclusive security” more broadly. Meanwhile, as the massive cost of the Israeli occupation continues to assault the human rights of the Palestinian people, the use of nonviolent political tactics has managed to mobilize international support for the Palestinian struggle. Within all of these areas, a paradigm shift is occurring. Yet, where grassroots efforts from within the Palestinian struggle and international efforts combine, a greater scholarly interest in the role of Islamic (and Islamist) women in the areas of nonviolence and conflict resolution remains to be fully developed and explored.
Notable in this chapter is the observation that at the heart of the Palestinian struggle is a struggle for national identity, the foundation of which is a strong and overriding affiliation with Islamic religious values and social customs. This is seen in Mubarak Awad’s formal attempt in the early 1980s to link Islamic religious values to nonviolent Palestinian action against the Israeli military occupation. Certainly, Awad’s work was an early attempt to actively promote peace building and nonviolent strategies and values based on an indigenous Islamic religious context. However, Awad’s work was prematurely disrupted due to his deportation from the Palestinian Territories by the Israeli authorities in 1988. While the legacy of Awad’s work persisted in the development of internationally backed NGOs working to promote nonviolence education, these organizations also fell into the trap of Palestinian NGO-ization that disrupted the identification between nonviolence and Islamic values among the local people. The reason for this is simple: like the well-known NGO-ization of the Palestinian women’s organizations, the NGO-ization of the nonviolence organizations effectively placed local elites in a formalized structure that is more accountable to its donors than the local people it seeks to serve.

While the nonviolence NGOs formally coordinate and organize nonviolent protests against the Israeli occupation, two important and vastly understudied developments have evolved in the Palestinian Territories that involve women in advocate roles as esteemed conflict mediators and nonviolent activists. The first is seen in the rise of extremely respected and revered female religious mediators in the Gaza Strip. Yet, because of their Islamist political affiliation, these activists for peace and conflict resolution largely remain outside of secular and internationalist initiatives to incorporate.
Islamist women into a liberal, nonviolent agenda for the Palestinian struggle. Second, the case of the West Bank village of Budrus serves as a model for inclusive nonviolent efforts that involve women from all sectors of Palestinian society. The success of the Budrus initiative—as opposed to nonviolent movements elsewhere in the Palestinian Territories—is its locally grown model of nonviolence and the close involvement of village women at the grassroots level. The Budrus initiative was neither created nor directed by a Palestinian NGO, but developed organically from the people. Especially relevant to this case is that the Palestinian female protesters in Budrus were organized and led by a devout Muslim girl, who also happened to be only a teenager in the earliest days of the protests. Most importantly, the nonviolent protest at Budrus effectively changed the course of the construction of the Israeli barrier wall—a major symbol of Israeli occupation.

These examples of the use of nonviolence as a political tool of the Palestinian struggle are now seen as directly providing the people with tangible results. The case of Budrus serves as a working model for the development of a purely nonviolent Palestinian struggle, one that is held together by a common political experience rather than gender-based, and religious and internecine differences. In parallel, the work of the dai’yyat in Gaza in areas of local conflict resolution demonstrates the strong potential for the political involvement of the Islamic female religious mediator in a grassroots effort that will inevitably combine the tenets of Islam with that of nonviolence. Certainly, these areas remain to be explored in further research. It is argued that women’s political efforts are often invisible, remaining hidden behind and within cultural constraints (Gnanadason 2005); yet what remains clear is the centrality of Palestinian women to the political
processes within Palestine and their continuously evolving role in the nationalist struggle. Where a nonviolent struggle operates in the “extralegal or extra parliamentary realm, often when institutionalized political channels have failed or no longer function” (King 2007, x), so, too, do Palestinian women.
CONCLUSION

How could I be free?
I am a Palestinian living under occupation.
I am a woman living in a male-dominated reactionary society.
I am a wife in a society that has made men into gods and women into submissive dolls. My home arrest has ended. My enslavement persists. My battle for emancipation has only begun.

-Raimonda Hawa Tawil, *My Home, My Prison*

This dissertation has attempted to examine and rethink the role of women and their political behavior in the rise of the Palestinian Islamist movement between 1987 and 2007. Focusing on the historic rise of the Islamist movement in the Palestinian case, this work has traced the political engagement of Palestinian women through four ascribed roles in the struggle for nationhood, such as mothers, political organizers, violent activists and nonviolent activists. The central problematic of this inquiry is to understand these prevailing roles in light of the rise of Islamo-nationalist politics, especially as this ideology appears antithetical to feminist conceptions of social and political equality. Emerging from this paradox is a demonstration of the fact that Palestinian women in these roles in spite of prevailing social and political odds against them. In light of the Islamo-nationalist rise, secular as well as Islamist women are also committed as ever to maintaining a place for women in the political process.
Central to nationalist ideology in the Palestinian case is the emphasis on the ‘Islamic essence’ of the Palestinian struggle (*Islamiyat al-qadiyya al Filastiniyya*). At the heart of this ‘essence’ is the role that women play in the family life of society. Thus, from the unique historical Islamist reconfiguration of society and politics of the Palestinian case, it is important to see how Palestinian women are continuously re-appropriating, negotiating, re-interpreting their own political voice at the heart of this unique and lasting struggle for self-determination. However, against the false impression that Palestinian female supporters of Islamist movement are simultaneous pawns of patriarchal oppression and victims of a local and international battle for and against Palestinian statehood, this dissertation looks beyond such caricatures of Islamic women to recognize the ways in which they, like their secularist female counterparts, continue to place gender equality on par with national self-determination. In effect, this project enables the actions and voices of Palestinian Islamist women to speak for themselves.

Intrinsic to this study is the problem of conflating the use of word “agency” as synonymous with female resistance to patriarchal structures. This study has explored the social and political forces behind Islamist movement and the relationship between this movement and Palestinian women. As such, this dissertation has not sought to solely analyze Palestinian women’s political behavior as “agency” solely in terms of feminist resistance to the subordination of patriarchal power. Instead, it has explored the relevance and importance of Islamist ideology in the evolution of Palestinian women’s relationship to their role as citizens in the quasi-state of the Palestinian Authority. While not ignoring the question or implication of power in this interplay, this dissertation looks to the history of Palestinian women’s political activism and fight for gender equality within the
Palestinian struggle. It sees their power and political agency as obvious, if not simply given.

Comprising the foundation of this project, Chapter One framed the history of Palestinian female political activism. It also presented the problematic and method to this study. The method consisted of a historical and ethnographical approach that inductively seeks to understand the complexities of female roles in the Palestinian struggle by tracing the shift in the political expression and political identity of Palestinian women in the Islamo-nationalist rise.

Chapter Two presented a review of literature pertaining to the four scholarly areas where this project makes its greatest contributions. These areas are nationalist and post-colonial studies, social movements, identity studies and feminist political research in the Middle East. Overall, this dissertation makes its mark by way of an interdisciplinary approach to these areas. Adding to each of these fields, its greatest contribution is that it makes for a more robust account for understanding of the details and nuances of the relationship between female political identity and the emergence of the Islamo-nationalist movement in Palestine.

Moving more deeply into the case, Chapter Three posited a new way of seeing Islamization in the Middle East as this issue frames recent Palestinian history. This chapter presented a streamlined historical account of Palestinian Islamism within the rise of Islamist politics in the Muslim world. This chapter also grounded the chapters that follow in the vocabulary of Islamist politics and the specific elements of Islamo-nationalism in the Palestinian case.
Moving next to the in-depth study of Palestinian women, Chapter Four examined of the nature of political motherhood in the Islamo-nationalist rise. First, it explored the maternal imagery used the secular-nationalist discourse, and the similar usage of this imagery in the Islamist platform. Next, it compared the political characteristics of female leaders as “mothers” of the first intifada and second intifada periods. The role of political mother is also used to illustrate how the Islamization of the Palestinian struggle has led to the increased popularity of mother-candidates in the 2006 Palestinian elections.

Looking at other organizational aspects of female political activism, Chapter Five explored the changing opportunity structures concerning Palestinian women’s political mobilization and organization in the 1987 and 2000 intifada periods. Specifically, it examined the causes and consequences of the demobilization of the secular-nationalist women’s organizations and the rise of Islamist women’s groups. Particular scrutiny is paid to the ways in which the rhetoric of Palestinian women’s contributions to the nationalist movement changed, and with this, how rhetoric used to justify the mobilizing effort of women by the women themselves also evolved.

Moving next to the violent aspects of female political engagement, Chapter Six examined the rise of female Palestinian suicide martyrs and the deadly role that women played in the Palestinian resistance during the Al Aqsa intifada. This chapter presented an in depth look at the politics of the female suicide bombing phenomenon from the paucity of female suicide bombers in the 1987 intifada and to their emergence in the Al Aqsa intifada in 2002. This chapter specifically sought to highlight the often-overlooked story of the entrenched fractionalization of Palestinian politics and its impact on Palestinian women. It found that the changes in the secular and Islamist stance concerning female
suicide campaigns resulted from political rivalry between the nationalist factions and their leadership. However, this chapter also presented accounts from Palestinian women themselves, who see the act of suicide bombing as a fatalistic way of engaging in an act pursuant to national liberation and gender equality.

Looking to nonviolent aspects of female political participation, Chapter Seven sought to reveal the role of women as nonviolent political activists across the secular-nationalist and Islamo-nationalist spectrum. It searched for women beyond the media-driven spotlight of organized violence, and discovered how some have continued to work in nonviolent ways on behalf of their families and communities. In particular, this chapter looks to the understudied case of nonviolent female social activism associated with female religious mediators, or da’iyyat, in the Gaza Strip. The Palestinian da’iyyat serve as a salient example of the ways in which a focus on women and religion in this context may help to better understand the interaction between nonviolence and religion in the Palestinian struggle against Israeli occupation. Additionally, the role of women in the nonviolent protests in Budrus is highlighted as a working example of the continued success of the Palestinian nonviolent movement, especially with women actively involved in the protests and collective undertaking of the community.

Two observations inductively emerge from this study. The first observation is admittedly optimistic, while the second is far darker. First is the observation that the Palestinian Islamo-nationalist movement is not a coherent entity. As such, its political interpretations, laws and institutions can be seen as fluid and continuing to evolve. Like any socio-political movement, globalization, media, international events and internal pressures influence its evolution. Along with this, the social and political power of
Palestine’s Islamist women is to be taken seriously as an integral component in the
evolution of the Islamist movement. It would be all too easy to dismiss female Islamists
as misguided and contradictory to feminist ideas of secular equality for all. For example,
doing so naively promotes an arrogance that fails to account for how secular ideology
concerning egalitarian ethics with respect to marriage, divorce, child custody, veiling,
inheritance and court witnessing are adopted into the voice of Palestinian Islamist women
today. Importantly, the specific law for a quota-driven system of representation that
favors women in the Palestinian Authority and enables them to serve as political
candidates has also directly benefited Islamist women in maintaining their active role in
the evolving political discourse to date.

Moreover, just like their secular and Islamist sisters elsewhere, the Islamist
activist women of Palestine are “living, breathing, human subjects who are unbounded,
temporal and desirous and thus defy notions of unitary, fixed essences” (Hafez 2011, 6).
To extend this observation further, in light of growing political extremism in the
Palestinian Territories and polarizing effects in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it may
very well be the voice of Islamist women that ultimately reigns in the extremist elements
of Islamic radicalism in the long run. As this study shows, across the political spectrum,
Palestinian women have steadily contributed to the feminization of their society and its
political processes despite the pull from polarizing forces. From this, it is possible that
while Islamist women continue to focus on the rights of women (as rights for all) in this
context, their voices may also inevitably demand a negotiated end to the Israeli-
Palestinian crisis as well as the full democratization of Palestinian society.
Building from the first observation, however, is a darker observation concerning what may lie in the immediate future for Palestinian women and their social and political rights, especially in the Gaza Strip today. This project has highlighted the many instances in which secular-nationalist and Islamo-nationalist women respectively forced the hand of Palestinian leadership to adapt to and accommodate female voices in the political process. However, one critique of the women of the secular-nationalist movement in the years of the 1987 intifada and its aftermath is that they made the fatal mistake of prioritizing nationalism as antecedent to women’s rights. One criticism of this is that the secular-nationalist women’s movement mistakenly gambled on national liberation as a correlate to women’s liberation, but subsequently lost all grounding for gender equality in the establishment of the Palestinian Authority. Similarly, a new concern for the women of the Islamo-nationalist movement emerges. So long Palestinian female Islamists remain focused on conservative theological arguments for women’s rights and gender equality in the political arena rather than demanding an end to the systemic socioeconomic and political problems that plague the Palestinian people, then their impact will be limited at best.

With this observation, concern stems from a myopic look at Islamic law at the expense of universal standards for women’s rights and gender equality. For example, the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) delineates a universal standard for women’s rights as an international bill of rights for women. This is a standard that the Hamas government has chosen to ignore. In fact, upon taking control of Gaza in 2007, the Hamas government immediately amended the Personal Status Law and the Penal Code to impose a strict and
discriminatory version of Islamic law on all of its citizens, but this most distinctly affected women and their rights. Among other repressive laws forwarded by the Hamas government, women are not allowed to walk on the beach alone or smoke in public. Another element of these “reforms” entailed that female lawyers are mandated to appear in court wearing the *hijab*, regardless of their personal religious observance. These issues specifically bring to mind the lessons learned from the disappointment suffered by many secular-nationalist feminists in the establishment of the Palestinian Authority. To date, women remain widely underrepresented in the political process and only a small few achieve high positions of power and influence. In the case of the Hamas take-over in Gaza, history seems to be repeating itself, especially as the repeal of universal laws concerning women’s rights harkens to the attempt to re-domesticate women. As the women of Iran and the secular-nationalist women of Palestine have learned, a narrow focus on the legitimacy of the Islamic system of governance to the exclusion of universal alternatives may ultimately help reproduce and enforce the very parochial legal codes Islamist female activists wish to see reserved to the dustbin of history.

Without a doubt, the risk of reinforcing the subjugation of women in the name of local patriarchal conventions and extreme interpretations of Islamic law is already prevalent under Hamas rule in the Gaza Strip today. Added to this is the fact that the Hamas authority in Gaza is now responsible for governing even more extremist groups within it. One group in particular is *Tawhid wa-al-Jihad* (Monotheism and Holy War). *Tawhid wa-al-Jihad* recently claimed responsibility for murder of an Italian peace activist in Gaza named Vittorio Arrigoni, and it is widely speculated that this group has direct ties to Al Qaeda (The Associated Press 2011). Arrigoni’s brutal death serves as a pertinent
reminder of more extreme forces other than Hamas reside in the Gaza Strip today. These forces stem from a militant and aggressive movement known as Jihadi Salafism. In Gaza, the movement has generated a number of smaller groups in addition to Tawhid wa-al-Jihad, including Jaysh al-Islam (Army of Islam) and Jaysh al-Umma (Army of the Nation). While their ranks may be modest in number, their ability to shape events inside Gaza and beyond is on the rise (Buck 2011). At the time of this writing, it remains to be seen if Hamas has the capacity to reign in these forces or if it will succumb to their demands. Regarding the centrality of women’s rights to this debate, the immediate change in the Personal Status Law and Penal Code in 2007 suggests that Hamas currently relies on these extremist factions to maintain its power in the Gaza Strip, even at the expense of its female supporters. Certainly the fate of Gaza and its women is yet to be written.

Where there is a looming sense of darkness in the Gaza Strip with regard women and their rights, there is a ray of hope in the Palestinian Authority governed West Bank. Emerging just beyond the scope of this study, two Palestinian women, Khuloud Faqih and Asmahan Wuheidi, made history in February 2009 when they were appointed as the first female Islamic judges in the West Bank city of Ramallah. Although their jurisdiction only pertains to the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, their appointment to this extremely high position of authority no doubt serves as a model to their sisters in Gaza and a sign of progress made towards gender equality in the West Bank under the Palestinian Authority. For example, in the Palestinian Authority today, Islamic courts

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69 Gilles Kepel (2003) coins the term Jihadi-Salafism, explaining that the movement originated in Saudi Arabia in the aftermath of the arrival of foreign troops on Saudi soil in 1990. He writes, “The movement attracted some preachers, generally young, locally well-educated who were also in contact with Syrian and Palestinian Muslim Brother migrants in Kuwait and well-established there” (Kepel 2003, 98).
preside over family affairs such as marriage, divorce, inheritance and child custody. These courts continue to rely on Islamic jurisprudence rather than secular rule of law. As representatives of women in the legal framework, the female judges claim that they will help their sisters to obtain and uphold their rights under Islamic law. Despite the clear political obstacles and physical barriers to direct dialogue and collaboration among women in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank to today, the outcome and effects of the appointment of female Islamic judges on women’s rights and gender equality strongly merits future study.

Finally, to reflect back to the beginning of this study, I will add that as my limited time in Palestine came to an end, I regularly wondered what would come of the future generation of Palestinian girls and women, especially the ones whom I had come to know so well. These questions began in the earliest phases of my research in a refugee camp in Bethlehem, and remained with me through the end of my fieldwork, which took place in a neighborhood in East Jerusalem known as Sheikh Jarrah. By 2009, the Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah became the scene of many home demolitions and forcible evictions of Palestinian families from Jerusalem. That year, I spent much of my time at the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), working as a volunteer for community-based programs on female education and empowerment. Next door to the YWCA was the home of the Hanoun family, who were forcibly removed from their home by Israeli court order that August.

Although the Great Catastrophe of 1948—or the Nakba, as it is known among Palestinians—happened decades ago, the events in Sheikh Jarrah in the summer of 2009 demonstrated to me that the catastrophe did not end with establishment of the Israeli state.
in the spring of 1948. Rather, the widespread devastation of 1948 was only the precursor for decades of catastrophes to come. Less than twenty-four hours after the Hanoun family became homeless in the streets of Jerusalem, I watched as a Jewish family moved directly into the same home under Israeli police protection. Every day for a week, I sat in solidarity with the Hanoun family under the scant shade of an olive tree across the street from their former home. I watched as the adults silently and bitterly bore witness to yet another layer of their historic victimization—simply for being born Palestinian. I also watched as the Hanoun family’s eight-year-old twin daughters sat at their mother’s feet, clinging to her as she inconsolably wept for days. Watching these girls, I wondered how this crisis would inevitably impact their personal and political choices as they come of age. In what manner will these girls become mothers, political activists, martyrs, conflict mediators or even female Islamic judges?

When each day ended, the family kept their vigil by sleeping on mats in the open air of the street of their former home. They huddled together under blankets to shut out the cold wind of the sunless desert while the new Jewish family inside their home also bedded down for the night. At one point, I saw a woman inside the home unlatch and open the front window. She stood there letting in the breeze while the Hanoun family lay huddled in the street. Witnessing this agonizing and traumatic scene, I wondered what kind of demonization it takes for any woman of a young family to look across the street and see another mother huddled in the cold with her children and choose not to interpret this interaction as a crisis of conscience, much less a catastrophe of humanity. Again, I considered this as point of return for future study.
Carrying these considerations with me, I returned to Bethlehem at the end of September 2009 for a last visit and a final farewell to my host family in Azzeh Camp. The weekend coincided with a wedding celebration, and the women of the family outfitted me for the party in a traditional Palestinian dress, known as *thawb*. Between the festive dancing and singing in the women’s tent, I was able to note how much the community changed since my arrival in 2007. The passage of time was apparent. Young women were now married and new babies were born. Two chairs once reserved for the most elderly matriarchs of the camp now stood empty.

Not a minute after I sat down from dancing, I felt a tap on my shoulder from little Amal. Now a lanky eight-year-old, Amal took me by the hand and excitedly pulled me through the crowded tent until we stood in front of her third grade teacher. Amal proudly introduced me to the women as her “American sister who teaches English to girls.” Upon this introduction, the teacher asked if I would come to Amal’s class to give an English lesson.

The following day, I accompanied Amal to the nearby Deheishe Refugee Camp where she was enrolled in the UNRWA Girl’s School. As we made our way through the squalid conditions of the camp, we came upon the entrance of the school where a famous mural of its most celebrated alumna, Ayat al-Akhras (the third female suicide bomber of 2002) invited us to come inside. Looking over her right shoulder, I noted how Ayat’s hair was draped in a checkered Palestinian scarf. Her right arm was cocked at the elbow, her hand held a black handgun and her finger lingered on the gun’s trigger. Between the piercing look in her eyes and warm smile, she resembled something of a movie star to
me, a militant icon of Palestinian girlhood. Pausing for one last stare at the mural, I asked Amal if she knew its significance.

“Amal, who is this girl?” I asked.

“That is a beautiful shaheeda,” Amal diligently informed me. “Her name is Ayat.”

“Why is Ayat on the wall?” I persisted.

“Because she is very beautiful…and brave…and good. She died doing an important mission against the Israelis,” Amal explained.

“Do you like her,” I persisted.

“I love her,” she said with a smile. “I love her like I love you—like she is my sister.”

Amal clasped my hand again. Giving it a shake, she reminded me that we were late for class.

Walking in the footsteps of Ayat al-Akhras’ former girlhood routine, I followed behind Amal through the threshold of the Deheishe Refugee Camp Girl’s School. For the next hour, I delivered a special English lesson to the third grade class. The lesson began with a translation of each student’s name from Arabic to English and back to Arabic again. While Amal’s future is yet to be written, it is perhaps fitting that the English translation of her name is: “Hope”.

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