

# The Women's Path: Feminism, militarism and nonviolence in Palestinian society<sup>1</sup>

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Today, the televised battles between Jewish-Israelis and Palestinians have largely been framed as an ongoing battle of angry men locked in a deadly and senseless spiral of armed conflict. But in the beginning, it was women who were the first to take to the streets. All throughout the West Bank [and Gaza], they demonstrated loudly and non-violently.<sup>1</sup>

AS WRITER SILJA TALVI points out, the world has effectively forgotten the active, nonviolent role that Palestinian women have played in their society since before World War I. Politicians, academics, the public, and media continue to ignore these Arab women despite their remarkable efforts and accomplishments. In the face of colonialism, traditional patriarchy, and many bloody wars, Palestinian women have developed one of the most unique and dynamic women's movements in modern history. Since the turn of the twentieth century, women have fought to become an integral part of the Palestinian nationalist movement. In doing so, they have challenged the traditional, marginalized roles they hold within their society. Because of this dual struggle against internal and external oppression, the Palestinian women's movement has become inextricably linked with issues of social justice and political freedom.

The Palestinian women's movement reached its pinnacle during the first *intifada*. During this uprising, thousands of women, united across religious and socioeconomic lines, flooded the streets to protest Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. They set up cooperatives, raised money for prisoners, stood before tanks, shielded men from Israeli soldiers, and organized mass demonstrations. Unfortunately, while the *intifada* represented the greatest strength of the women's nonviolent movement, it also revealed

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<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to the brave women of *Isha l'Isha* and to Zoughbi Zoughbi of the Wi'am Conflict Resolution Center in Bethlehem.

its greatest vulnerabilities. Palestinian women increasingly became targets of violence as Islamist groups gained popular support throughout the West Bank and Gaza. The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) also used women to strengthen its own position in the society. As a result, the *intifada* failed to bring about a significant improvement in women's lives, despite its earlier promises.

The period from the end of the first *intifada* through the current *al-Aqsa Intifada* represents one of the most trying periods in recent history for Palestinian women. Not only did the experiences of the *intifada* leave women disillusioned with mass mobilization and grassroots action, but it also isolated many women from the conflict, especially those from refugee camps and villages. These changes paralleled the rise of Islamic groups, who further challenged the women's movement by stressing traditional, strictly defined values and roles for women such as motherhood and honor. Throughout this time, women have faced these challenges in many different ways. Some have been able to find a niche within the developing, yet weak political system, while others have ironically turned to militant Islamic groups. Despite being ignored by Palestinians and the international community, a large number of women have also continued their nonviolent work by joining and forming various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) throughout the West Bank, Gaza and abroad.

Palestinian women represent half of their society, and therefore their concerns must be given equal attention in any discussion of the conflict. By examining the changing trends and challenges facing the Palestinian women's movement, we gain valuable insight into the complex path towards peace in this region.

## THE POLITICAL PATH

As the *intifada* came to an end in the early 1990s, the women's movement shifted from grassroots activism to political activities. Street protests, sit-ins and cooperative development programs were quickly replaced by high-level discussions among educated, mainly upper-class women, who held powerful positions in political parties, universities, and businesses. This shift paralleled the changes occurring in the larger nationalist movement, which was becoming more of a political rather than revolutionary struggle.

With the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, many women felt that they had found the political opportunity to challenge the status quo. Along with other Palestinians, they supported Yasser Arafat, in the hope that the Oslo path would lead to the creation of a viable and legitimate state. Those

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women who were “loyalists”, and thus supported the Oslo Accords, began presenting their feminist agenda to the newly formed Palestinian Authority. They drafted the Women’s Charter, which was based on the UN Convention to End Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).<sup>2</sup> Several groups even proposed the idea of a Women’s Secretariat Office, which would oversee women’s rights and

would be attached to the presidency.<sup>3</sup> Some experts have called the post-Oslo years the “autonomous women’s movement”, whereby women created their own niche within the developing political system. As prospects of an autonomous Palestine began to seem realistic, women no longer felt that they had to put their own cause behind that of the nationalist cause. Rabab Abdulhabi notes:

The women cadres of the four major PLO groups... began to publicly question and criticize their organizations’ positions and practices on women’s liberation. Publications such as the *Ishtar*, *Woman*, *Women’s Voice*, and *Women’s Affairs* began to publish studies on divorce, early marriages, women’s professions, and women’s roles in the informal economy. The content of women’s writing in major Palestinian newspapers shifted from a focus on cooking, proper housekeeping, and caring for children to include discussions of political affairs and women’s rights.<sup>4</sup>

Women who were actively involved in politics found this period of time to be extremely fulfilling, as women’s rights and women’s issues could be discussed openly, without undermining the nationalist struggle. They developed the legal and political codes that would protect women’s rights in a future Palestinian state. Whereas the early part of the *intifada* was significant in that it mobilized large numbers of women, the subsequent period was marked by the rise of a few prominent women into the Palestinian political arena.

### HANAN ASHRAWI

Few Palestinian women rival Dr. Hanan Ashrawi in political prowess, international notoriety, and personal courage. Ashrawi served as Dean of the

Faculty of Arts at Birzeit University and as a professor of English literature. During the *intifada* and the period leading up to the Oslo Accords, she was the spokeswoman for the PLO, attending the Madrid Conference and helping to negotiate the Oslo Accords. According to Barbara Victor, author of *A Voice of Reason*, “[Ashrawi] had been appointed spokesperson for the PLO, to change the image of the PLO from that of a terrorist organization to a heart wrenching political cause.”<sup>5</sup> During this time, Ashrawi did what few Palestinian men could do: change the world’s view about the PLO, convince people to support the Palestinian cause, and raise a family. For Palestinian women, she represented a powerful female voice in their developing government. Although she would eventually leave the world of politics to start her own human rights NGO, the Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy, or MIFTAH, Ashrawi’s political career had a lasting impact on young Palestinian and Arab women.

#### UMM JIHAD

Intisar Wazir, or Umm Jihad, was another important and influential woman during the early interim years of the Palestinian Authority (PA). She was the widow of Abu Jihad, the founding member of Fatah, whose assassination she witnessed in Tunis. As the head of the Ministry of Social Affairs for the PA, Umm Jihad was the only female minister in Arafat’s government and the only other woman besides Ashrawi to hold a leadership position in the PLO.<sup>6</sup> Her *nom de guerre*, which means “mother of the struggle”, reflects her personality as a powerful fighter and activist. She was less compromising than Ashrawi, advocating for more violent activism such as martyrdom rather than diplomacy and negotiation.<sup>7</sup> In terms of her impact on the women’s movement, Jihad promoted feminist ideals while still maintaining legitimacy among the male-dominated groups. Although she was not as internationally recognized as Ashrawi, her tough fighter spirit won her the admiration of many female and male followers.

#### MARGINALIZING OF CAMP AND RURAL WOMEN

As the women’s movement became increasingly politicized, many women were marginalized from the movement. Women who had no political experience or high levels of education struggled to maintain their involvement. Unfortunately, this division within the movement was not a new phenomenon; it was a reality that had deep historical roots. From the very beginning of the women’s movement, there had been two separate groups

organizing and fighting as part of the nationalist movement. Although there were individuals who crossed socioeconomic lines in both groups, the first group was predominantly comprised of urban and upper-class women, who tended to be highly educated and ran the women's groups in a structured and organized fashion. The second group was comprised mostly of women from rural communities and refugee camps. It is important to note that the latter group was much less involved in the struggle, despite their larger representation in society.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these lower class women were only involved in the movement sporadically and often tended to be more militant.

The first *intifada* was remarkable in that it bridged this divide, albeit temporarily. Wealthy, foreign educated women such as Hanan Ashrawi stood alongside poor, illiterate women from refugee camps. Upper-class women, who had traditionally held the positions of power in the women's organizations, were reaching out to refugee camps and rural women.<sup>9</sup> Kindergartens were built so that mothers in the camps and in the rural communities could go to work. They often hired women from local communities to be the teachers. "Employment in the income-generating projects and preschools was...an avenue for mobilizing these women into the PFWAC [the women's committees] because it provided needed money, it occurred in a unisex associational space that did not require supervision from male bosses... and the work was with a politically and socially respected organization."<sup>10</sup>

The end of the *intifada* witnessed the dissipation of this cohesion among the various women. For the most part, the women who had been involved in underground, political groups prior to the *intifada* simply continued their work under the new Palestinian Authority. Poorer women from villages and camps were marginalized and subsequently returned back to "the kitchen" they had symbolically left during the *intifada*. "At the village level, many of the cooperative projects had dried up or had become privatized; most of the women's committee centers as well as the kindergartens they ran had closed down; village literacy programs and had been curtailed..."<sup>11</sup> Subsequently, the largest segment of women were cut out of the political sphere and forced back into their homes, where their rights were restricted and they were susceptible to abuse from men in their families. What these women needed most during this time were powerful female allies who had connections to the PA and who could provide them with opportunities to be involved in the women's movement. Instead, they were left behind and ignored as the urban and upper class women fought for legal and political abstractions such as "women's rights" and feminist agendas in a government that was not proving to be very capable.

## FAILURES OF OSLO: THE SHORTCOMINGS OF THE POLITICAL PATH

As the decade continued, it became apparent that the Palestinian Authority was unable to address the numerous hardships facing the Palestinian people. Ashrawi left in 1998 because she could not tolerate the corruption among the PA leaders. At the same time, many of the main principles of the Oslo Accords had still not been carried out by either side. Five years after Oslo, Israeli troops had not yet moved out of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and Israeli settlements continued to expand in these areas. As a result, the political and diplomatic path lost its strength and credibility. Palestinians could not rely on politicians for education, security or civil liberties. Women, who had hoped to gain power and rights through a political process, suddenly lost the mechanisms formerly available to them. Furthermore, without a legitimate state within which to work and with no enforcement of legislation, laws concerning non-discrimination or early marriages became essentially meaningless. The failure of Oslo also corresponded with the rise of Islamist groups, which were determined to reverse the political, social, and economic advances that women had achieved through years of struggle.

## THE RISE OF HAMAS AND THE ISLAMIST PATH

Palestinians have historically been a secular people who have struggled internally with an extreme religious minority. In the Arab-Israeli conflict, the fracture between the religious minority of society and the secular majority has only been made worse by external war and oppression. As the conflict continues, more Palestinians turn to Islam as a means of organizing against injustice. Hamas, which was created in 1987, is now one of the largest and most influential Islamist group in the territories. The group, soon after its creation, turned towards Islamic militancy with the outbreak of the first *intifada* and quickly gained power and popularity in the territories. Hamas came to symbolize virility and competence for the Palestinians, as compared to the PLO.

Almost immediately, Hamas began attacking the women's movement and the women who were active in it. There were four main issues that Hamas and other Islamic parties were concerned with regarding women: the wearing of *hijab*, women's activism, Islamic law, and honor. Hamas maintains a very strict interpretation of Islamic Law concerning women's dress and the wearing of the *hijab*. They have utilized very violent tactics to enforce these expectations, reportedly throwing battery acid on the legs

of women who would not adhere to the Islamic dress codes. Other times, members of the group have physically assaulted women who were non-compliant, even Christians who are not mandated to wear *hijab*. This has prompted a recent increase in the number of women who now wear *hijab*. For a society that has been secular for years, this is a dramatic change that has been violently forced upon women.

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## In a single day, Wafa Idris and Yasser Arafat created a third alternative for women within the conservative Palestinian society: female martyrdom.

Along with the issue of Islamic dress, women's involvement in street protests and political activity has become a major cause of concern for Islamic groups. Domestic violence, forced marriages, and the curtailment of education have become widespread practices meant to counter the threat of "feminist activism." According to Dr. Ashrawi, "Families started to marry their daughters at a very early age because schools are closed

and the girls are likely to take part in demonstrations and other political activities."<sup>12</sup> Many men feel that women who are involved in public demonstrations ignore their socially assigned gender roles as domesticated individuals. Therefore, as women go out to protect the men in their society, they subsequently become targets of violence by the very men they seek to protect. In a society where patriarchy is deeply embedded in the social norms, strict Islamic interpretations concerning the treatment of women simply exacerbate the violence and oppression of women. As men feel increasingly humiliated and emasculated by the conflict, domestic abuse continues to increase against both Christian and Muslim women.<sup>1</sup> According to Nadera Shalhoub-Kavorkian, a professor of Law and Social Work at the Hebrew University, "Women are supposed to tolerate violence; they should be clever and know how to manage their families. If there is any kind of violence practiced on them, they should ask themselves why and not seek the help of external parties."<sup>13</sup> Men are thus teaching their wives and daughters that violence is the best means towards an end.

Hamas has also focused on institutionalizing *sharia*, or Islamic Law. In an effort to appease the growing Islamic movement in the territories, the Palestinian Authority has had to allow Islam to play a slightly larger role in the governance of the state. Subsequently, the *sharia* became the basis

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<sup>1</sup>As with their Muslim counterparts, Palestinian Christian women are subject to abuse within their own community, thus reflecting deeper cultural sources of oppression that transcend specific religions.

of the “Basic Laws” of the interim government, which relate to domestic affairs and marriage.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, the home was the exact place where women were the most vulnerable and needed the most amount of secular, legal protection. “This consolidation of the *sharia*, religious law, over the private sphere of Palestinian civil society offers Hamas the prize it most wants in return for playing a part in self-rule.”<sup>15</sup> Women paid the higher price for this political trade off between Arafat and Hamas. Ultimately, in the political and legal sphere, women could not find a voice to protect themselves against the aggressions of the Islamist groups.

### A WOMAN’S HONOR

One of the most important concerns for Hamas and the other Islamic groups in the West Bank and Gaza was the issue of female honor. All other women’s issues directly relate to this highly subjective concept. In their book *Islam, Gender and Social Change*, John L. Esposito and Yvonne Haddad argue that, “Muslims have always believed that female sexuality is potent with a predilection to create havoc and chaos in men. Thus it is necessary to control the woman in order to preserve order and well-being in society.”<sup>16</sup> Women are obliged to maintain their “honor” for the sake of their family. If a woman does something that in some way undermines her personal honor, her entire family could feel the negative consequences of her actions. In highly populated refugee camps, where families are spatially very close to one another, there are few secrets. Premarital sex, illegitimate children, adultery, and refusal to marry are the worst crimes a woman can perpetrate. Beyond these major offenses, there are also minor ones that would question a woman’s value and virtue. For example, going out in public with a man who is not one’s family relation, actively protesting, or abandoning the home for a career are all viewed negatively by extreme conservative elements of Palestinian society.

### LAND BEFORE HONOR

As Islamic groups gained popularity in the Palestinian territories, women increasingly became the victims of violence, abuse, and oppression. Although Palestinian society has always been misogynistic and patriarchal, the rise of Islamic groups has reinforced and legitimized these narrow-minded views of women. The first *intifada* had allowed women to work as equals with men on the issue of the national struggle. However, in this post-*intifada* environment, the future role of Palestinian women in the national

struggle was being decided by Palestinian men. According to conservative groups such as Hamas, there were two roles that women could play in the national struggle. Women could either be the embodiment of “national honor” or “national mothers.”

The former role developed as an extension of the well-known and well-understood concept of personal honor for the family. If women wanted to help their nation, they would have to protect their honor for both their families’ sakes and also for their nation. “The nation, Palestine, was imagined as a vulnerable beloved woman, whose victimization by Zionist settlers was to be vindicated by Shabab Al-Tha’r, or young men of revenge.”<sup>17</sup> This “sexualization” of the conflict made it difficult for women to escape their oppressed roles. The concept extended to the men as well. Hamas presented men with the image of the virile “warriors” of jihad as an alternative to the impotency of Fatah, with its allegedly meaningless talk and compromise with the Israelis. Despite the prevalence of these images and concepts, however, most people inevitably fell short of these ideals.

Furthermore, there are inevitable contradictions in these gender roles, which needed to be reconciled. For example, women taken prisoner by the Israeli army were often threatened with rape or sexual humiliation. In most cases, “Palestinian women prisoners opted to confess rather than soil their honor and disgrace their families.”<sup>18</sup> The national cause was thus being sacrificed for the personal dignity and honor idolized by the religious groups. Subsequently, Palestinian activists adopted the slogan “land before honor” to clarify the role-confusion. “This change in attitude has worked to the detriment of the Israeli occupation authorities who routinely employ sexual humiliation... to demoralize a female detainee.”<sup>19</sup> While these changes may have been advantageous for Palestinian men, women were being put in a horrifying position. Women suffering abuse rarely spoke out in fear that they would dishonor their family.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, both the Israeli army and Palestinian men have exploited Palestinian women’s bodies for their own political purposes.

## NATIONAL MOTHERS

For Islamic groups and other conservative men, the only other acceptable role for Palestinian women within the national movement is the role of “national mother.” Women are expected to produce as many children as possible either for the “demographic race” or martyrdom. “The demographic race, [is] a race in which the Israeli government, unable to force Jewish women to bear equally large numbers of children, scrambles

to encourage the maximum amount of Jewish immigration.”<sup>21</sup> This “threat” has gained considerable attention in recent years. Many Israelis fear that they will simply be outnumbered by the Palestinians, ending the character of Israel as a Jewish state. Israeli leaders note that “The average number of children [Palestinian women] bear is over six in the West Bank and seven in Gaza... Both politics and conservative attitudes keep reproductive decisions largely out of the hands of the women involved, and are seldom discussed.”<sup>22</sup>

The second reason women are expected to produce as many children as possible is to produce a large number of soldiers to fight in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The “national mother” ideal is best embodied by Umm Nidal, the self appointed “Mother of the Martyrs.” “Umm Nidal Farhat came to public attention for the first time when she was filmed helping her son Muhammad Farhat leave home to carry out the March 20, 2002 attack during which he was killed. About a year later her second son, Nidal, was killed by Israeli forces.”<sup>23</sup> Umm Nidal has also become famous because of her apparent lack of sadness or remorse for the death of her sons. This ostensibly abnormal sentiment is nonetheless the example other Palestinian women are expected to follow. A mother should have many children, encourage them to become a *shahid*, or martyr, and never mourn for their loss.

## EXPECTATIONS AND CLASS

Given the dramatic shifts occurring in Palestinian society regarding women’s roles, women have found it extremely difficult to meet the unreasonable expectations placed on them by conservative elements. Very few women fit into these idealized, oppressive roles.

For wealthy, educated, upper-class women who have careers, these unrealistic, restrictive expectations are generally ignored and condemned. These women have the physical distance, political power, and economic freedom to remove themselves from the conservative male population. Women such as Hanan Ashrawi are less likely to be the victims of domestic abuse. While they are not completely immune from abuse, the violence is not as systematic or widespread as it is for lower-class women, for whom violence is a daily reality. Abusive fathers, uncles, brothers and husbands pervade their lives. Without much formal education (nine years, on average) they have little with which to sustain themselves.<sup>24</sup> Even those women who had been part of the women’s unions during the first *intifada* were abandoned by the upper-class women after Oslo. They had no choice after the end of the *intifada* but to return to their traditional roles as housewives.

## ARMY OF ROSES: THE MILITANT PATH

The situation dramatically changed with the outbreak of the second *intifada*, or the *al-Aqsa Intifada*. On January 27, 2002, Yasser Arafat spoke to a crowd of 1,000 Palestinian women who had gathered in his compound. “‘Women and men are equal’, he proclaimed with his hands raised above his head and his fingers forked in a sign of victory. ‘You are my army of roses that will crush Israeli tanks.’”<sup>25</sup> During this speech, Yasser Arafat dramatically changed the nature of the conflict for Palestinian women. That same day, Wafa Idris became the first Palestinian woman *shahida*, when she walked into a store in Jerusalem and blew herself up, killing one person and wounding thirty-one.<sup>26</sup> In a single day, Wafa Idris and Yasser Arafat created a third alternative for women within the conservative Palestinian society: female martyrdom.

Barbara Victor examines Palestinian female suicide bombers in her book, *Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers*. Victor argues that Wafa Idris, Darine Abu Aisha, Ayat al-Akhras, Anadalib Suleiman, Hiba Daraghmeh, Hanadi Jaradat, and Reem Raiyshi, the seven female suicide bombers, were all women with no alternatives. Wafa Idris could bear no children and watched as her husband took a second wife. Darine Abu Aisha, a student of English literature, was being forced to marry. She was quoted as saying “she had no intention of ever marrying because she had no intention of becoming a slave.”<sup>27</sup> In Ayat’s case, her father was working “for the Jews” and the entire Dheisheh refugee camp was turning against her family. Anadalib Suleiman had a relatively good life compared to the other women. However, she had suffered the loss of her home, the capture of her cousin by Israelis, and the humiliation of her father and brothers by Israeli troops. Reem Raiyshi, the only suicide bomber to be openly trained and endorsed by Hamas, as well as the only mother of the group, was said to have left her children to become a suicide bomber to repent for her adultery.<sup>28</sup> Each of these women suffered from the same lack of opportunity and lack of alternatives to violence. Even for those such as Anadalib who were better off economically, or Darine who was studying at the university, life under occupation combined with the misogyny and patriarchy in their own society became unbearable. But what drove them to become suicide bombers?

The standard response that groups like Hamas give after each suicide bombing is, “When Muslims are attacked in their own homes and their land is robbed, the Jihad for Allah turns into an individual duty, for men and for women equally. In those cases, operations of martyrdom become

a primary obligation and Islam's highest form of Jihad."<sup>29</sup> The standard Western response is that the women and men who commit these acts are psychologically ill, since normal, sane people would not kill themselves or others. However, the situation is much more complicated than either explanation allows. Palestinian men and women are under intense strain because of the horrifying realities of the occupation that challenge everyone's courage, patience, honor, and personal integrity. Dr. Shalfic Maslaqa, a psychologist and professor at Hebrew University, argues that during a time of war, "Mental health of the population usually gets better. In our society, [however] in this time of war, the general atmosphere is full of hopelessness, and I think it is because of the occupation, which is different than a classic war, which brings people to have ideas of death rather than ideas of life."<sup>30</sup> For women, these strains and pressures are compounded by the internal oppression in their own society, which is becoming increasingly dominated by religious groups who use violence to dictate women's role in the national struggle. One must also look at the idolization of suicide bombers in the Arab and Muslim world as another factor pushing these women to make such a deadly decision. After every bombing, the bomber's face is posted everywhere, in the streets, in stores, and on walls. Anyone who goes to the West Bank or Gaza can see this for themselves in a dramatic way. Families of suicide bombers are also given money and held in high honor for their sacrifices. Therefore, women might also be induced to become a *shahida* for economic reasons.

The Israeli occupation has created a hopeless situation for most Palestinians; at the same time, the patriarchal system of the Palestinian society has made this situation even more unbearable for women. When men such as Sheikh Yassin, the former spiritual leader of Hamas, praise women as equals of men in terms of martyrdom, the incredibly high status of suicide bombers in this society is reinforced.<sup>31</sup> In no other way would such a conservative man have praised women as equals. Ironically, it is only through their death that women can attain equality in the most conservative segments of their society. These factors create a situation in which killing oneself for the "Palestinian cause" seems reasonable for young, bright women with passionate, nationalist sentiments.

## THE ALTERNATIVE PATH: NONVIOLENCE AND FEMINISM

Amidst this world of violence and seeming hopelessness, it is important to acknowledge that there are alternative models for Palestinian women to follow. The alternative to the violent, male-driven "warrior" model is the

nonviolent, feminist model, developed by Palestinian women eighty years ago. Although one could argue that female suicide bombers are feminists in their own rights, their actions are driven and manipulated by men. Any woman who wants to become a *shahida*, needs the assistance of men to help her prepare physically and mentally for the attack. In other words, she is still under their control and leadership.

On the surface, it appears that nonviolent feminist groups have exited the Palestinian political and social landscape; however, they are still working hard throughout the West Bank and Gaza. Their work today is not as obvious as it was during the first *intifada*, when they were mobilized in grassroots activism, but they still work actively in sectors of the Palestinian civil society to provide services for women and to promote the nationalist cause.

There are three types of NGO groups that deal with the nationalist struggle and women's rights: Palestinian feminist groups, coexistence feminist groups, and nonviolent groups made up of both men and women. The Palestinian feminist groups are different from feminist organizations in other parts of the world, in that they openly embrace politics as part of their mission, since their status as Palestinians cannot be separated from their status as women. Leading groups include the Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling (WCLAC), a small group based in the West Bank, which works for the legal protection of women. There is also El Fanar, a group dedicated to feminism and human rights and led by long time activist, Manar Hassan.<sup>32</sup> Women such as Amneh Badran, the director of the Jerusalem Center for Women, a Palestinian women's group, and Sumaya Farhat-Naser, work in women's groups throughout the West Bank, Gaza, and abroad.<sup>33</sup> Other groups include the Women's Affair Center in Gaza and the Palestinian Family Planning and Protection Association (PFPPA), which helps women with issues of birth control and abortion.<sup>34</sup> There are also job training and economic development programs that deal with the economic problems facing the women in Palestinian society.

In addition to these groups, there are organizations throughout the West Bank, Gaza, and Jerusalem devoted to nonviolent resistance and conflict mediation. The Palestinian Center for Peace and Democracy, whose mission is to "enhance the practice of democracy and promote the culture of just and equitable peace within the Palestinian society,"<sup>35</sup> provides an important platform for women activists. Many Palestinian women have joined the Center and have been thoroughly trained in conflict resolution, community building initiatives, and other forms of nonviolent activism. Another important group is the Wi'am Conflict Resolution Center in Bethlehem.

Led by Zoughbi Zoughbi, Wi'am is an organization dedicated to "bringing the enemy to its senses, rather than its knees."<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Ashrawi's group, MIFTAH, deals with human rights issues on a broad level and puts women's rights and issues under its scope. These groups all work to teach conflict resolution and provide alternatives to a people whose lives are ridden with conflict.

Finally, women can be a part of Arab-Israeli coexistence groups. In her book *Our Sisters' Promised Land: Women, Politics, and Israeli-Palestinian Coexistence*, Ayala Ammett discusses the various methods in which women are bridging the divide in ways that men are unable to do. The most famous group is the Women in Black, which started in 1988 by a group of Palestinian and Israeli women. Donning black clothing, they meet "once a week at the same hour and place, a major traffic intersection, where they raise a black sign in the shape of a hand with white lettering that reads 'Stop the Occupation.'"<sup>37</sup> The importance of groups such as the Women in Black is that they reject violence from all sides and demand justice for all. "The Women in Black question the warrior image, which is linked to a wide range of social entitlements, and insert instead one with women as protectors of the social good."<sup>38</sup> After meeting with several members of Women in Black in Haifa, it becomes apparent that their biggest threat is male-driven violence; they do not support it on the Israeli or Palestinian side. As one woman in the Israeli feminist group, *Isha l'Isha* candidly asked our group, "what if it were up to the women?"<sup>39</sup>

## THE RIGHT PATH?

There is of course no proven "right" path for Palestinian women to follow in this conflict. Women from different circumstances and different life situations make varying decisions that reflect their social class, upbringing and political orientation. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the strength of nonviolent, feminist activism. Palestinian women have been organizing according to the doctrines of nonviolence for over eighty years. They have faced tremendous difficulties and have often been unsuccessful. Some argue that it is completely understandable that women turn to violence, as their lives are continuously filled with it. However, there are incredible examples of women who are defying all forms of violence in their lives. At the same time, these women do not simply assign themselves a passive role in the greater nationalist cause. Wafa Idris and her "Army of Roses" stand out as one model for young Palestinian women. They are the face that the world now sees of Palestinian women. However there are many others,

below the public's radar, who vehemently oppose violence on all sides of the conflict.

Nonviolent forms of resistance bring about the greatest benefits for Palestinian women, for who honor is an essential part of their lives. In this way, women help the national struggle, they elevate their own status in society, and they bring honor to themselves and their family on their own terms and with their own actions.

## CONCLUSION

Palestinian women have been fighting and struggling for decades. They have been marginalized by most experts of this conflict, just as they are marginalized in their own society. The past ten years of the conflict represent a long and tragic period for women, filled with few moments of triumph and many moments of defeat. One of the main results of this trying time has been the rise of female suicide bombers, who are dramatically gaining the world's attention. Unfortunately, women engaged in nonviolence continue to be ignored, despite their profound work for their society. While promoting the nationalist struggle, they are also advancing the cause of democracy, social justice, and women's rights.

Remaining at the center of society and the family, women will have a tremendous impact on the future of this conflict. As the female suicide bombers have shown us, this future could be extremely violent if their path finds greater acceptance throughout their society. Many Palestinian women are also offering realistic paths towards reconciliation and peace. It becomes imperative, therefore, that we support them in their efforts. As Gandhi stated most eloquently, "Woman is more fitted than man to make exploration and take bolder action in nonviolence... If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior.... If nonviolence is the law of our being, the future is with women."

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<sup>1</sup> Talvi, Silja, "Women of the Promised Land." *LiP Magazine*. (November 2002.) Report in AlterNet. [www.alternet.org/story/14545](http://www.alternet.org/story/14545).

<sup>2</sup> Gluck, Sherna Berger. "Shifting Sands: The Feminist-Nationalist Connection in the Palestinian Movement." *Feminist Nationalism*. Ed, Lois West. New York: Routledge Publishing, 1997. p 119.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 118.

<sup>4</sup> Abdulhadi, Rabab. "The Palestinian Women's Autonomous Movement: Emergence, Dynamics and Challenges." *Gender and Society*. (Dec 1998 v12 i6 p649). [Lexis Nexis]

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