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# Islamist Women of Hamas: Between Feminism and Nationalism

**Abstract.** In December, 1995,when Hamas announced the establishment of the Islamic National Salvation Party, a political organisation separate from its military wing, it opened the way for involvement of the Islamic movement in the political processes brought about in the West Bank and Gaza with the signing of the Oslo Accords and the arrival of the Palestinian National Authority. In speaking of the rights of different groups, including women, in its founding statement, and in setting up in Gaza a Women's Action Department, the new Party opened its doors to the 'new Islamic woman' and to a significant evolution in Islamist gender ideology in Gaza, if not in the West Bank -- where, due to Hamas' policy there of targeting only males, there exists no parallel to the Salvation Party or organisational support for women like that represented by the Women's Action Department in Gaza. Hamas' gender ideology, like that of the secularist parties, remains contradictory, and doors to women's equality only partly open; nevertheless, Islamist women have managed to build impressive, well-organised women's constituencies among highly educated and professional women coming from poor and refugee backgrounds; and the Salvation Party shows an increasing tendency to foster gender equality and more egalitarian social ideals, while holding fast to the agenda of national liberation. These advances have been achieved both through alternative interpretations of Islamic legal and religious texts, and through positive engagement with the discourses of other groups, whether secular feminists or nationalists. In contrast, secularists are losing ground by advocating a discourse of rights in isolation from the national agenda and in the absence of a mobilising organisation. These developments suggest possibilities for mutual accommodation between Islamist and other Palestinian groups. They suggest also that the nature of the state proposed by Islamists will depend to a large extent on the visions and challenges posed by other nationalist and secularist groups.

**Keywords:** Islamism, Islamic feminism, empowerment, dialogic engagement, feminist interpretation of religion's texts (feminist *ijtihad*)

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**Résumé**. *Les femmes islamistes de Hamas : entre le Féminisme et le Nationalisme*
En décembre 1995, lorsque le Hamas a annoncé la création du Parti islamique du salut national, une organisation politique distincte de son aile militaire, il a ouvert la voie à une participation du mouvement islamiste au processus politique engagé en Cisjordanie et à Gaza par la signature des Accords d'Oslo et par l'installation de l'Autorité nationale palestinienne. En évoquant dans son texte fondateur les droits des différents groupes, y compris les femmes, et en instaurant un Département de la femme à Gaza, le nouveau parti a ouvert ses portes à la « nouvelle femme islamique » et à une évolution significative de l'idéologie islamiste du genre à Gaza. Il n'existe pas d'équivalent à ces instances en Cisjordanie, où le Hamas a concentré son action sur les hommes.
La réflexion sur le genre au Hamas, comme au sein des partis laïques, reste contradictoire, et l'ouverture vers l'égalité des femmes très partielle. Pourtant, les femmes islamistes ont remarquablement réussi à organiser un électorat féminin au sein de milieux instruits et professionnels issus de milieux réfugiés pauvres. Pour sa part, le Parti du Salut tend à promouvoir l'égalité entre les sexes ainsi que des idéaux sociaux plus égalitaire, tout en affirmant l'ordre du jour de la libération nationale. Ces progrès ont été réalisés sur la base de la réinterprétation des textes juridiques et religieux islamiques et par une appropriation du discours d'autres groupes, qu'ils soient féministes laïques ou nationalistes.
En revanche, les mouvements laïques perdent du terrain en prônant un discours sur les droits indépendamment de l'impératif national et en l'absence de mobilisation organisée. Ces développements suggèrent des possibilités de compromis entre les islamistes et d'autres groupes palestiniens. Ils suggèrent également que la nature de l'État proposé par les islamistes dépendra dans une large mesure des conceptions et des défis posés par les autres groupes, nationaliste et laïques.

**Mots-clés** : Islamisme, féminisme islamique, autonomisation, engagement dialogique, interprétation féministe des textes religieux (*ijtihâd* féministe)

Conflict over the construction of gender and the ideal woman is neither a neutral nor a primarily religious concern. Islamists, just like nationalists, seek to establish an ideal society which depends upon a particular conception of the ideal woman (Papanek 1994; Kandiyoti 1991, 1996; Moghadam 1994). The 'traditional' Islamist ideal woman has come to be represented as opposed to the 'modern' ideal woman constructed in nationalist secularist discourse (ibid: 30; White 2002). Indeed, in the eyes of those who do not share this vision, the ideal society that Islamists strive to build is reactionary and anti-modern (Roy 1999; Al-Azmeh 1996; Zubaida 1997). The ongoing debate between secularists and Islamists in the Middle East reinforces the dichotomy. Secularism, for Islamists, is a colonial imposition, a world view that gives precedence to the material over the spiritual and results in a culture of alienation and unrestrained hedonism. Secularism, for secularists, is central to universal humanism, a rational principle that calls for the suppression, or at least the restraint, of religious passion so that a dangerous source of intolerance and delusion can be controlled, and political unity, peace and progress secured (ElMessiri and Al-Azmeh 2000, cited in Asad 2003: 21).

I aim to problematise this exclusionary dichotomy between Islamists and nationalist secularists. By focusing on the Women's Action Department in the Salvation Party, the party established by Hamas as its political wing in the post-Oslo period, I examine the formal gender ideology of the Islamic movement Hamas and show how this formal ideology is reconstructed, re-narrated and practiced by Islamist women. As I argue throughout this paper, the formal ideology of Palestinian Islamists largely stems not from religious texts but from accommodation to contending positions. The 'traditions' that the Islamist, like the modernist nationalist, seeks to revive are 'invented'; and they are, like those of the nationalist, modern constructs (Hobsbawm, 1983: 2-3).

In this paper, I refrain from using the term 'feminist' to denote all forms of women's activism, as does Badran (Badran 1994: 204). I agree that women's activism opens up new spaces for women that might contradict prevailing gender roles. I shall also refrain from using the label 'feminist' to refer to Islamist women, since many of the women whom the term might seek to represent refuse to identify with it. The changes that these women seek to implement are contingent upon various circumstances which might not always challenge gender imbalances. At times, they may even support patriarchal structures. Islamist women regard feminism as superfluous (Badran, 1994: 203), anti-male, and even indicative of some sort of 'genetic deformation'[1]. Furthermore, in the course of my interviews, I realised that Islamists attentively read and follow what feminists write about them. A similar controversy arises over the term 'fundamentalist'.[2] Women in Islamic movements see this term as alien, politically loaded, Western, irrelevant and integral to colonialist strategies to undermine the indigenous social and religious culture (Karam, 1998: 6; Al-Huda 1998). Throughout this paper I refer to 'Islamists' as they would to themselves and to their movement as the Islamic movement.

Hamas was formed during the first *intifada*, when, on 9 December 1987, the Muslim Brothers in Palestine reincarnated themselves as the Islamic Resistance Movement, or Hamas, thereby creating a resistance force separate from and outside the Palestine Liberation Organisation. The new force was able to compete with the national movement led by Yasser Arafat and his Fateh Party. During the *intifada*, Hamas employed peaceful means, only adopting military tactics from 1992 onwards, after Yasser Arafat signed the Oslo Accords (Hroub, 2000; El-Hamad and Al-Bargothi, 1977). Soon afterward, in order to function as a political, as well as an ideological and military movement in the post-Oslo period, Hamas separated its military wing from its political organisation. On 11 December 1995, Hamas announced the establishment of the *Hizb al-Khalas al-Watani al-Islami*

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1  Bassam Jarrar, one of the outspoken leaders in Hamas, has hurled this accusation at feminists, maintaining publications, for example, feminists were depicted as part of "a secular, feminist octopus which seeks to strangle the body of our ruined homeland" (Al-Huda 1998: 3).

2  Since the early 1980s, a growing number of scholars have objected to this term in relation to modern Islamic movements and their ideologies.

– the Islamic National Salvation Party, or Salvation Party, with the Arabic acronym "*Khalas*."[3] This was a significant development. It allowed Hamas to participate in the debates and political processes brought about by the arrival of the Palestinian National Authority, to play a part in the development of (what was hoped would be) a new state, and to give these efforts priority along with the national struggle for freedom from Israeli colonial rule and military occupation. This party, the political arm of Hamas, is no longer in existence today but it functioned in Gaza as a legal opposition party. Despite plans to establish its headquarters in Jerusalem, it operated in Gaza only; it was not active in the West Bank or East Jerusalem.

In its founding statement, the Party used, for the first time in the history of the Muslim Brothers Movement in Palestine, the language of 'rights' for different social groups and, in particular for women and other disadvantaged groups, such as labourers, which had rarely been targeted by the Brothers' activism. The Party statement stressed the need for participation in political-cultural activity and social-economic construction, including the need to protect religious values and civil rights – including those of labourers, cultural societies, and women. In what follows, I examine the position of women within the Salvation Party and the ways in which their roles differed from those played by nationalist and secularist women within the structure of the national movement. Throughout this paper, I reserve the term 'Islamist women' for those who belong to the Islamic movement and who are actively engaged through their activism in the public sphere in promoting what Keddie has called an "Islamic state that would enforce at least some Islamic laws and customs" (Keddie, 1988 in Karam, 1998: 16).

## Demobilisation in Mobilisation: Hamas' Gendered Structure in the West Bank

In this section I analyse the contradiction between the marginalisation of women in Hamas' organisational structure and their mobilisation in civil society in the West Bank. Islamist women were a crucial force in broadening Hamas constituencies in the student movement, but their activism was not recognised within the movement structure in the West Bank, as Hamas' structure for the inclusion of women differs in the West Bank from that in Gaza. I argue that this gendered form of structure might have been an important factor in de-mobilising women outside Gaza, especially when Hamas became a hegemonic political power in the Palestinian polity during and in the aftermath of the first Palestinian *intifada*. The Salvation Party established in Gaza has no parallel body in the West Bank, nor does Hamas have in the West Bank any mobilising and organising structures for other social groups, such as students or workers. Islamist organisations in the West

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**3** *The Primary Statement of the Islamic National Salvation Party* (INSP), The Political Bureau INSP/ Palestine on 11/12/1995.

Bank target only males. Thus, while male party members participated in the different activities of the *intifada* (organising strikes, funeral processions, confrontations with the Israeli army...etc), female Hamas members at the time were not visible as participants. (Veiled women participants were not necessarily Islamists.) I found no indication in documents or interviews that women have been participants or were targeted for recruitment either as voters or as candidates. Nor did the activism shown by Islamist women in universities flow from the organisational structure of Hamas; it was due, rather, to the efforts of the female students themselves, competing for votes in university elections. In the West Bank, once a female student leaves the university, she has no place to go in the structure of the movement. Originally, the same situation applied to Gaza, where the growing number of female students at the Islamic University, and later, from *Al-Azhar* University or other colleges, had no place to go except to work in the social institutions belonging to the Muslim Brothers. It was in late 2003 that the Hamas leaders announced their intention to form an Islamic women's movement, and female students joined forces with mainstream political organisations like the Salvation Party. But this occurred only in Gaza.

Organising students and linking them to political parties is crucial in Palestine where youth in general, and students in particular, play an important role in boosting the national movement and the struggle against the Occupation. An attempt to answer why Islamists in the West Bank did not seek to organise female students in their mainstream political parties – whether under the name of the Muslim Brothers, Hamas or the Salvation Party – must acknowledge that these institutions carried the imprint of the conservative gender ideology familiar to the Islamist movement from its inception. This was especially true when it came to young unmarried females. According to activists in the Islamic student movement: 'We can ask for a big mixed meeting in the universities for both sexes when we have a common goal to achieve, such as a major protest against the university administration or a flagrant violation of our right as an Islamic bloc to organise our activities, but we don't have a mixed structure for students' (Ahmed, Amira, Youssra, Interviews (1-10-2000-30-4-2004, Gaza)

The lack of such structures affects female graduates severely in the West Bank, where the number of Islamist institutions is more limited and scattered than in Gaza. In the West Bank, women have available to them only a few charitable societies. Typical examples are the al-Huda Islamic society, Al-Khansa'a society (both in al-Bireh and in Ramallah), Hanieen in Nablus, the Muslim Woman's Society in Jerusalem and a similar one in Hebron. These organisations are very similar to the old type of women's charitable society which existed during the British Mandate. Like the old charitable societies, their focus is not on organising women but on providing a limited number of work opportunities in home economies, such as embroidery and catering. In providing catering, these societies proved serious competition for the many women's societies, old and new, which had managed to establish a "web of relations with the PA ministries, banks and many private

enterprises" (Samira, Interview,1-10-2000, Gaza). According to the directors of these societies, the financial revenues of their activities cover their expenses. In addition, they manage to attract important donations from Islamist businessmen who see their activities as in line with the Islamic imperative to support the poor, orphans, prisoners' and martyrs' families, and the needy in general. These societies receive no foreign funding, a fact which gives them legitimacy when they attack and de-legitimise other women's organisations, in particular those working with women's NGOs.

The Islamist women's charitable societies also organise alternative cultural activities, separate from those of nationalist and feminist women's groups. Women's Day, an international festival celebrated on March 8 every year, is replaced by the Festival of the Muslim Woman (*mahrajan al-marah al-moslema*). The day is picked for a 'pragmatic' reason, before the end of the academic school and university year. These festivals usually attract a huge number of women and their children -- around 2000-2500 women. These rallies are an extension of the usual proselytising of the Muslim Brothers (*nashr al-d'awa*) when they urge women to comply with the rules of their religion and encourage them to be good committed Muslims (*moltazema*). Again, as in the old type of women's charitable societies, women who attend these rallies are not asked to undertake any political activity in a party organisation.

The view of the Brothers in the West Bank that women's role is mainly in the domestic sphere prevents their organising women after graduation; and the resulting absence of mobilising structures for women Islamists there contrasts with the coordination among male Islamists in the militant – and all-male – underground Hamas structure in different regions of the West Bank. Islamist women are not part of the underground structure. In fact, all Islamist women interviewed claimed to have no connection to Hamas. In the West Bank there is no legal, official unifying Islamist structure, as there is in the case of the Salvation Party in Gaza. It was, however, difficult to determine whether the lack of any unifying body for Islamist women is a result of the organisation's other overriding internal priorities, or whether it stems from an utter lack of interest in organising Islamist women in the West Bank (in contrast to Gaza). When Islamist women in the West Bank were asked if they co-ordinated their activities or programmes, the answers were negative. However the women asserted that 'when possible, we attend each others' rallies and conferences' (Maysoon, Interview,11-1-2003, Ramallah).

## Gaza: Mainstreaming Gender *'a la* Islamism'

A thorough analysis of the Women's Action Department, which belongs to and was established right along with the Salvation Party, is necessary for understanding the ways in which Islamists incorporate women into politics as they create the image of the 'new Islamic woman' (White, 2002). Islamist women are presented with two paradoxical expectations: to live as model mothers and obedient wives,

on the one hand, and to live as model political activists, on the other. It is the same dilemma that nationalist and secularist women are still struggling to solve. Hamas' contradictory gender ideology, like that of the nationalists, stresses the accepted role of women in reproducing the nation. While the movement is keen to present the 'new Islamic woman,' it is apparent that this image potentially contradicts the usual conception of the Palestinian woman as the fertile 'womb'.

The Party and its Women's Department opened their doors to the 'new Islamic woman', who is highly educated, outspoken, *moltazemah* and modern. Modernity is reflected in the fact that these women are educated, professional and politically active. The veil is seen as a signifier of modernity since it is different from 'traditional dress'. The 'new Islamic dress' (a long robe of plain colour and a white or black head scarf) is seen as:

> different from the *thub* (traditional peasant woman's dress) which is used by our mothers and grandmothers. It is different in its meanings; it is a unifying symbol to our followers and members If I see a woman wearing it, I will immediately realise that she is *ukhot*[4] (a sister). It indicates that we are educated and not like our mothers, who are mostly illiterate. It gives us *heiba* (respect) like the dress of our *ulama* (religious clergy). It is economic, simple and modest (Amira, Youssra (1-10-2000, Gaza), Maysoon, Kholod, Interviews (11-1-2003, Ramallah).

In this view, Islamist dress is regarded as superior to the *thub* because it is a uniform donned with conviction, not the blind adherence to tradition that is presumed to explain clothing practices among the masses. Implicit in the Islamist veiling style is participation in a national social movement that lends the wearer a heightened sense of status, both moral (vis-à-vis secularists) and social (vis-à-vis women who merely cover, but do not veil). However, despite its political cachet, behind the social force of veiling, "one can discern the familiar principle of *himaya*, (guidance and protection) by (and from) men" (White, 2002: 223).

The Salvation Party and its Women's Action Department make available an important venue for a category of women who are highly educated (BA and higher degrees) but who at the same time have limited access to the restricted, male-dominated labour market. While education is an important facilitator of class mobility, the fact that the majority of Islamist women are refugees, educated in universities in Gaza or in other Arab countries and possessing a 'conservative' outlook, limits their chances of employment. For example, the NGO sector, which functions as an important employer of educated women, requires proficiency in foreign languages, as well as managerial and administrative skills. In Gaza, the Salvation Party takes upon itself the role of a 'developmental party' to 'mainstream' gender in the Party structure at all levels. The Women's Action Department, *'da'erat al 'amal al-nissaei',* is one of thirteen departments in the Party managing all aspects

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**4** It is also worth noting that Fateh also used to call a woman member *ukhot* (sister) while in the leftist parties she is called *rafiqa* (comrade).

of activities and administration, ranging from public relations and cultural and political affairs to women's affairs. The Women's Action Department of Hamas has been able to integrate women, not into a separate section, but fully into its political organs, whether in the leadership or in its popular base, which is represented in the General Conference, which is elected from amongst the Party members in the different regions. The General Conference elects the central *majlis al-shoura* (Consultative Council), consisting of men and women. The *majlis al-shoura* decides the general policy of the Party and is not merely consultative to the politbureau, *al-maktab al-seyyassi,* which is also elected, but is a decision-making body. The *majlis al-shoura* (Consultative Council) of the Salvation Party is composed of 52 members. Of these, eight (15.3%) are women (elected by men and women in the General Conference) and of the eight, five are refugees, three are from Gaza City, five are married with children, and three are single. The elected women are highly educated graduates of universities in Jordan, Egypt, Syria and Gaza in physics, chemistry, medical science, education and English. None of them had belonged to an organised political party before they joined the Salvation Party. At the time of writing, only one woman in the *majlis al-shoura* and *al-maktab al-seyyassi* had male relatives in the Party, suggesting that women in the Women's Department mostly win the jobs on their own merit as educated activists.

In each region of Gaza, there is a five-member *hayaa ideareyya* (administrative committee). In each '*hayaa* there are two heads – one for men and the other for women – who organise contacts and events. The women in these committees are not there to enforce segregation but rather are fully incorporated members of Party bodies. As Amira Haroun, head of the Women's Department, puts it, 'It is not about segregation; we've discussed this issue in the Party several times. It is because women previously didn't know the male candidates and vice versa. So at this level, women members vote for women and male members vote for men. Once all reach the General Conference, they all (males and females together) choose the male and female members for the *majlis al-shoura* and then the politbureau' (Amira Haroun, Interview,1-10-2000, Gaza).

In the politbureau, two women out of 13 (15.3%) are unmarried and were elected by men and women in the *majlis al-shura*. These percentages are much higher than those found in all political bodies in the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) or in the Palestinian National Authority (PA), whether achieved through nomination or election. In the Palestinian National Council, for example, which is formed by nomination according to a party quota (in which Fateh holds the majority according to a formula in which it has to control more than half of the seats, or 50+ 1), women represent 7.5% (56 out of 744). There are no women representatives on the Executive Committee, the highest level of the PLO[5]. In contrast, the primary task of the

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5 The same could be said about women's representation in the leadership of the secular political parties, which is relatively low despite the impressive activism of many women's organisations. Women are sharply underrepresented in the Central Committees of the political parties: they comprise 10% of

Women's Action Department of the Salvation Party is to include women in public life through their involvement in Party activities. As the head of the Department put it: 'We have a yearly plan to *damj* (integrate) women, politically and culturally, into the society' (Amira Haroun, Interview, 1-10-2000, Gaza). The Department is keen to increase women's membership in the Party, which, according to Amira Haroun and Youssra, constitutes about 27% of the General Conference.

In order to facilitate the integration process, the Party and its satellite societies run a massive web of kindergartens at minimal charge; and poorer women and wives of political prisoners are exempted from paying any fees. Running kindergartens was a common task during the first *intifada*, originally undertaken by nationalist and secularist women's organisations and later abandoned. The vacuum left by these organisations was not filled by the PA when it was established in 1993 but by Islamist organisations. By running a web of kindergartens, the Islamists solved a major problem for working mothers and women activists. However, it is important to note that the two women who managed to make it to the top level of the Party were both unmarried. Work in the politbureau, according to Youssra and Amira, "is intense and diversified, and needs lots of time and strong character". The times set for political meetings, usually arranged for the convenience of men rather than women, were identified by many feminists as a hindrance to women's participation in political parties (Waylen 1996). However, when asked whether meeting times were suitable for women, the women cited the veil as a facilitator of their involvement, even during late hours. As they clarified:

> We have certain days to discuss our general plans within the Party in these meetings, and we choose collectively the best time for all of us, men and women. But even if we have to be late sometimes, this does not pose a problem for us: since we are *moltazemat* no one approaches us to do any harm. It is known that we work for the benefit of our people, and we are well respected for that (Youssra and Amira, Interview, 3-10-2000, Gaza).

In this case, the veil facilitates mobility for politically committed women, giving them the required validation for transcending the social taboos which ordinarily restrict unmarried women from moving during late hours. If the impetus to maintain one's virtue is located in behaviour, then behavioural signals, such as choice of dress, become important markers of the inapproachability and inviolability of Islamist women.

The Women's Action Department employs various strategies and methods for reaching and recruiting women. They work face-to-face with other women, building cells in refugee camps as entry points. Their task is facilitated by the presence of large numbers of political prisoners and the prisoners' families, to whom they give special attention in their activities. The Department organises a yearly

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the Central Committee of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, newly 19% of Fida's, 19.5% of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine and only 5% in the Central Committee of Fateh (Sida 1999: 21).

campaign on behalf of political prisoners (now forgotten by almost all nationalist and secular women's organisations), in the form of demonstrations against Israel and the continuous harassment against the Party by the Palestinian Authority.[6]

While Islamist ideology and activism does open doors for women, these tend to be revolving doors for the less educated women, who are often unable to sustain an activist or professional life or to support themselves or their families. Many of these women are wives of political prisoners. (A large majority of Palestinian political prisoners are from the Islamic movements, for example out of 19 Parliamentarians detainees in Israeli prisons 14 are from the Islamic movement of Hamas, Ministry of Detainee's Affairs 2010). When asked what the Department does for these women, leaders answered:

> We try our best to attract these women to our activities. We organise workshops for them, to train them in different professions to sustain themselves. But in many cases these women withdraw. They are pressured by their imprisoned husbands not to enrol in the courses or to leave their homes, especially if the men have been sentenced for long periods. We could not do anything to help; this is a sensitive family matter (Youssra, Interview, 2-10-2000, Gaza).

Asked if they use their power within the party to pressure their husbands to change their minds about women's participation, the women replied in the negative. This reaction can be attributed to the contradictory values promoted by the Islamists' Party – political and social involvement versus motherhood, family unity, and obedience to husbands.

To deal with specific women's issues, the Department annually organises a one-day women's conference, in which men and women participate by presenting papers on subjects relating to gender. The papers either cover 'hot topics' already placed on the national agenda by secular nationalist women's groups, or treat specific problems that women face in their respective fields of activity, such as employment, political life and culture. Some workshops are directed at male members of the Department and focus on topics such as socialisation or involve thorough discussion of *shari'a,* or family law. According to Amira: 'Some topics elicit fierce resistance from men, as in the discussion of *shari'a,* while other topics, like mixing (male and female), are contested and some male members are provoked by the separation between the sexes in our activities' (Amira Haroun, Interview1-10-2000, Gaza). As one male member of the Party put it, 'As a Party keen for the development of women, we should abolish segregation in the Party' (Zeyyad, Interview, 3-10-2000, Gaza).

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6  In 2001, the PA raided local Party offices to confiscate all its equipment, documents and computers and issued a rule to ban it from all activities as well as the banning of its journal '*al-Rissala'*. According to Amira, the Party functions at a very low level only from its headquarters in Gaza city. At this moment, even though the Party managed to obtain a ruling on the 21/3/2003 from the Highest Court cancelling the PA ruling 113/2003 which allowed the PA to put its hand on the budgets of 39 Islamic societies, the PA refuses to implement the ruling and renewed its own budget-taking powers with ruling 40/2004 Palestine Information Centre, [www.Palestine-info.net].

The attitude of the Salvation Party and Islamist women concerning *shari'a* will be dealt with more fully later, but it is important to note here that the motivation behind the call to reform *shari'a* is in essence an effort to change internal power relations between males and females within the family structure. Male members are receptive to change and support 'mixing', which enhances the image of the Party and its women as 'modern', while at the same time they continue to object to significantly deeper and less 'visible' changes within the family. Support for mixing is not shared by all Islamists, many of whom encourage segregation among students in the university, suggesting that they believe that even veiling is insufficient to allow women to transcend sex barriers.

Since the conferences are a vehicle for presenting Islamist ideology on gender, it is noteworthy that the highest level of Hamas leadership is keen to attend the women's conferences "to show their support" for what women do. Sheikh Ahmed Yassine (one of the founders of the old generation of Muslim Brothers in Palestine and a founder and the spiritual head of Hamas, assassinated by Israel in 2004) was keen to attend and gave a speech at the first women's conference in 1998. At the second women's conference in 1999, Mahmoud al-Zahhar, a prominent Hamas leader, attended and gave a paper -- a precedent, as far as I know, in the history of the Palestinian women's movement to date[7]. At the fifth conference (2003), Sheikh Ahmed Yassine was present, as was Dr. Abdel Aziz Rantissi. The establishment of the 'Islamic Women's Movement in Palestine' was announced in the presence of more than 1500 men and women. With this 'Movement', the Islamists intended to link all Islamist women's institutions and thus coordinate and channel their efforts into representing the Islamic vision for women. The movement included eight women's organs: the Muslim Women's Association, The Women's Action Party in the Salvation Party, the Women's Action Department in *Al-mojam'a Al-Islami*, the Islamic bloc (female students), Female Student's Council in the Islamic University, the Palestinian Mothers' Society, Family Care Society, the Women's Unit in the Arab Institute for Study and Research, and the Mothers of Martyrs Society. It is important to note that while the presence of the top leadership at the Islamist women's conference could be interpreted as encouraging women's public role and activism, their presence could also be interpreted as a potential for closure, a hardening of positions and a retreat into interpretations of Islam that might affect women negatively. The fifth conference, for example, was used to launch a massive attack on the proposed draft to reform the 'Penal Code' in favour of a more egalitarian approach in the penalties applied for adultery and the use of violence against women in the family. The old law discriminated against women by imposing harsher punishment on adulteresses in comparison to men and was more tolerant in the case of domestic violence. In attacking the proposed draft, the leadership emphasised that the proposed reforms were not based on *shari'a*. This posi-

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7  The usual presence of political leaders is that of attending the inaugurations of women's conferences for some time and then leaving, but without presenting theoretical papers which show more involvement in the event.

tion represented an escalation in the male Islamists' demands, in its insistence that not only family law, but also the Penal Code, should be based on *shari'a*. Under their attack, the Palestinian parliament, the Legislative Council, halted discussion of the proposed reform ([www.Palestine-info.net], 16/7/2003). At the same conference and with the support of the Islamist women, the Islamist leadership exercised its power to stall an open and critical discussion on the proposed changes in the penal law, making it clear that the formal stand of the party followed the common view that *shari'a* is fixed and derived from sacred sources (Zubaida 2003: 1).

The Women's Department proved extremely successful in mobilising a large number of women to defend the party against PA harassment, support the Party line in preserving *shari'a*, and discredit secularist and feminist women's groups also calling for legal reforms. In their activism, they borrowed a great deal from the secular women's organisations' modes of activism, employing similar types of projects, programmes and organisational forms. The new participants brought into the Islamic movements by the Party included university graduates, professional women and future intellectuals, thus consolidating a new category that moved Hamas from a military, underground male-dominated organisation into a more popular political movement. The move to create an Islamic women's movement with the support of the top leadership was a significant marker in the history of the Palestinian women's movements. For the first time, women became a strategic concern for the Palestinian national movement, this time under the banner of Islam. However, the birth of the Islamic women's movement occurred at a time when *shari'a* was seen as fixed, an attitude which effectively undermined women's call for more egalitarian treatment under the law.

## The Gender Ideology of Hamas

Socio-economic and political factors have been invoked by many scholars to explain the spread of politicisation and mobilisation of women by national secular movements in the seventies and the eighties which led to the massive participation of women in the first Palestinian *intifada* (Taraki, 1989; Jad, 1990; Hasso, 1997; Hammami, 1997; Kuttab, 1993). The growing influence of Islamists, on the other hand, can only be explained with reference to a series of interrelated factors: the failure of the peace process, the decline of the Palestinian national movement, accompanied by the withdrawal of grassroots organizations from service provision; the 'NGOisation' of women's organisations[8], which ruptured their organic links with the grassroots; the 'nationalisation' of Islam; and the 'Islamisation' of the Palestinian national identity by the Muslim Brothers in Palestine. Further, while Hamas' gender ideology rests on religious tenets, it has nonetheless shown itself to be both contradictory and in continuous flux.

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**8** See: Jad, Islah The 'NGOisation' of the Arab Women's Movement, IDS Bulletin, Vol. 35, No. 4, October 2004, Sussex University Press.

Central to the Islamisation of Palestinian identity was the Islamisation of gender. Hamas, unlike Fateh, spelt out its gender agenda at an early stage. This is a common feature of religious movements which place a great deal of emphasis on the family unit. In order to understand the gender agenda of Hamas, it is necessary to consider factors which link gender and nationalism. The gender ideology of Hamas cannot be separated from the colonial 'use' of gender, rivalry with 'other' nationalist groups and, to a lesser extent, scriptural texts. Other factors, including conservative elements of Palestinian nationalism in its secular form, can be invoked to elucidate the slide into Hamas' gender ideology (Jad, 1990; Massad, 1995; Hammami, 1997; Budeiri, 1995). Hamas' early strict gender agenda and moral system softened as the movement grew and became more popular. The Party's gender agenda also evolved in relation to the pressure exercised by Islamist women on their leaders. The women's pressure was heightened by the level of 'empowerment' these women achieved through their activism within the movement.

## The Moral Nation Needs Moral Women

Hammami showed that the spread of veiling in the course of the first *intifada* was linked to a national meaning -- that in the face of the calamity, death and destruction inflicted by the Israeli Occupation, women had to show respect to the martyrs. This campaign showed the ability of Hamas to conflate its social ideology with Palestinian nationalism, wielding the threat and use of violence against women to impose the veil. In this struggle, women had little support from the national leadership of the *intifada*, which failed to confront the veiling campaign in time (Hammami, 1997, 194). Mohanty, however, warns against making the analytical leap of seeing the widespread practice of veiling as indicative of the sexual oppression and control of women. Such a "homogenisation of women, irrespective of their class, race, religious and daily material practices, might create a false sense of the commonality of oppressions, interests, and struggles between and among women" (Mohanty, 1991: 68). This 'homogenising' stance has resulted in the denial of agency and voice for Islamist women. I problematise the assumption by analysing how the old 'orthodoxy' of the Islamists is different from the 'new' one. Contrary to claims made by various authors, the intimidation of women is an artefact of the Occupation rather than the result of a fixed conservative culture which 'oppresses women'. Hamas' focus on military activism should be highlighted to better explain its position vis-à-vis women's piety and veiling at any particular moment. Secondly, the veil has different meanings for different women according to their self-perception, class and ideology. In short, a more nuanced approach to the meaning of veiling is important in the elaboration of an oppositional political strategy.

During the first *intifada*, a new formulation of the issue of women's piety and modesty was deemed essential in order to 'protect' the nation. In fact, this formulation had been spelled out clearly a few years before the *intifada*, in secret book-

lets Hamas distributed to its male members warning them of the interrogation and torture practices widely used in Israeli prisons. Hamas believed that the detailed confessions extracted from PLO prisoners, as weak secularists lacking faith, had brought disaster down on the armed struggle against Israel. It was feared that the Islamic endeavour would suffer a similar fate unless its disciples were taught to steel themselves against the worst physical and psychological pressure the Israelis could apply. Resistance, unyielding inner strength, and empowerment were vital for withstanding torture and interrogation[9]. Between 1986 and 1987[10] the Brothers founded two military organisations in preparation for a military resistance: the Palestinian *mujahedeen* and *al-jihad wal da'wa* – with the acronym '*majd*' (glory). The latter was a highly secret organisation concerned with 'intelligence and pre-emption' ('*istikhbarat wa rad'e'*).

Before the *intifada*, this organisation took on the 'liquidation' of collaborators. In clear rivalry with other nationalist organisations, the movement sought to be more solid, moral, faithful, and empowered by God and religion. In this context, confessions under Israeli torture would present the organisation as weak and infiltrated which will deter new candidates from joining the military wing and fail to distinguish Hamas from 'other less faithful' groups. It could not be claimed that Islam was superior to secularism unless the Hamas people were known to "spit out their blood and teeth under the whip" (Schiff and Ya'ari 1989: 232). An iron will, the handbook preached, was all one needed to withstand deprivation, whippings, electric shocks, and threats: "We must remember that the enemy's strength is naught compared with Allah's grace" (*The Jihad Fighter Facing Interrogation and Torture*, cited in Schiff and Ya'ari, 1989: 232). In an early Hamas handbill, it was mentioned that the Israeli Intelligence Service, the Shin Bet, was trying to trap agents with the aid of hashish and other drugs and that it caught young women in its net by having "stray dogs" (Palestinian collaborators) seduce them. The leaflet said that young girls were being encouraged to frequent hairdressers, boutiques (places young educated women used to run as their private businesses), or even shoe stores without a chaperone (Schiff and Ya'ari 1989 : 231). These tactics became known as the Israeli '*isqat*'[11] policy. In response, young men were warned

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**9** This policy was to be changed later after the crackdown on Hamas in 1989 and 1990 by the Israeli forces with its severe torture of Hamas members. In 1990, when Izz el-Dinn el-Qassam was established as the military wing of Hamas and its members experienced much Israeli torture, it was realised that "the talk about the utmost internal strength and empowerment was demystified by the reality on the ground. Very few people proved able to sustain the violent physical and psychological torture, while the majority collapsed. The new policy held that a member undertaking military operations should realise his target and withdraw safely or resist to the end if he was encircled -- with surrender as no option" (Abul-Omrein 2000: 353). This policy, rather than the 'death culture' explanation propagated by the Israeli and Western media, may underlay suicide bombing.

**10** There are some contradictory accounts on the exact year of these organisations, some give 1982, others give 1984 or 1985 (see Abul-Omrein 2000: 196-7).

**11** *Isqat* in Arabic could have many meanings: 'fall down in a trap' or lowering someone to collaboration. The term could denote the sexual corruption or moral corruption in the case of collaborators, but in the

off alcohol, pornographic magazines, and loose women who tried to flirt with them in the street. Thus strict moral conduct, piety and modesty were elevated to important tools for national resistance and weapons of the underground. Religion in itself has proved a source of great strength in the contest with the Shin Bet, and the Hamas people have been described as "exceedingly tough nuts to crack" (Schiff and Ya'ari, 1989: 230).

This Islamist 'national security policy' has had serious implications for the social order, greatly restricting women's mobility and putting more social pressure on women making 'suspicious' moves. The ways women talk, walk and act all have come under close social scrutiny. In a survey on living conditions in Palestinian society, 56% of women surveyed in Gaza and 47% in the West Bank said that they were unable to move freely within their communities (Heiberg and Ovensen, 1993: 306-7). Another consequence of this policy was the crackdown by the movement on some collaborators, drug dealers and prostitutes. Fateh, in its rivalry with the Islamists, felt it had to take the 'lead' in this policy of 'purification' of society, and actively participated in veiling women in Gaza. According to Na'ima (the head of the Fateh women's organisation in Gaza, who herself took up the veil): 'I cannot tell who is Fateh and who is Hamas in harassing women to 'urge' them to veil, but I can tell you that our own male members in Fateh were pressuring us in the organisation to veil. They used to tell us Hamas people are not more 'moral' than we are' (Naima el-Sheikh, Interview, 11-7-2001, Gaza). Fateh also took the lead in killing more 'loose women'. Between 1988 and 1993, 107 women were killed, 81 of them in Gaza (Be'er and Abdel-Jawad, 1994: 89-90). These women had been 'morally suspect', rather than confirmed collaborators. The military organisation of the Islamists was not the main perpetrator of these crimes; Fateh groups came first, followed by groups related to Fateh, and then groups affiliated to the Popular Front (the Marxist left). The 'morally suspect' women were seen as betraying the honour, not only of their families, but also of their nation; and their elimination became a 'national duty'. Thus, the imperative of upholding the moral order, when facing the colonising power, did not differ much between religious national movements such as Hamas and the secular nationalist groups.

The 'security policy' however, does not fully explain the insistence on veiling as a moral code for women. It is also possible to see it as a tool in the Islamist rivalry with secularist 'non-veiled' groups. Veiling is a unifying cultural marker for the movement and a signifier of its growing strength among Hamas followers. Alternatively, as Keddie suggests, it may be more of a way of asserting communal identity, rather than being such a strong religious marker (Keddie 1998). Veiling can also become an important political symbol employed to forge a new social 'modern' identity, and it can act as a tool in opening new possibilities for women within and outside the movement.

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Palestinian context, it denotes the methods used by the Israelis to use or seduce the victim and force them to work against their people's national interests.

In 1988, Hamas published its *mythaq* (Charter) in which its 'formal' position on gender was spelt out in articles 17 and 18. Article 17 states that "Muslim women have a role in the liberation struggle that is no less important than the role of men: woman is the maker of men, and her role in guiding and educating the generations is a major role" (Hamas Charter, n.d, n.p). In the same article, women were viewed as passive targets for the " 'Masons', 'Rotary Clubs', intelligence networks – all centres of destruction and saboteurs… And the Islamists should play their role in confronting the schemes of those saboteurs i.e. protecting them" (Hamas Charter, article 17). In article 18, it was stressed again that "the woman in the house of the *Mujahed* and the striving family, be she a mother or a sister, has the most important role in caring for the home and raising the children with the ethical character and understanding that comes from Islam" (Hamas Charter, article 18). Women were advised to be economical, to avoid carefree spending. Women were advised to 'give' to their family and nation instead of 'taking', a notion Hamas stresses to differentiate Islamist women from secular activists. In this vision, women are portrayed as dependent on men, confined to their homes and segregated from public space. However, the vision did not match the reality of what Islamist women and female students were actively 'doing' in the student blocs of Hamas or in Islamist associations. Through their own involvement in the movement, these women were able to alter the vision to make a space for themselves.

## The Ever Evolving Gender Vision: 'The Text Does Not Prohibit'

The observation that 'the text does not prohibit' is a theme that kept recurring throughout my interviews with Amira, Maysoon, Samira and many other women militants. What they meant was that religious texts are open-ended, making it possible to forge for women a wider legitimate space in the public arenas. The daily reality of life for women eager for work, education and political participation shaped a gradual and growing critique inside the movement. Islamist women, while fully complicit in disseminating the movement's gender ideology, have also been the first to push its boundaries and stretch their public space.

These evolutions accompanied a change in Hamas strategy after the 'peace process' began and Hamas moved from being a military underground organisation to a political party. During this development, the Salvation Party started to pay more systematic attention to recruiting women, in order to widen its popular base. As the Salvation Party, like other national and secular organisations, began to emphasise the legal political struggle, it became difficult to ignore the conditions in which women lived and to prevent them from joining political life. At the same time, the movement was in full gear attacking the claims for women's rights by other nationalist and secularist women's organisations. Thus, one can say that there were both internal and external factors pressuring Hamas to deal with women's issues,

the latter coming from feminists' demands and the equal rights discourse, which offered serious challenges to Islamist ideology.

What, then, are women's rights from an Islamic perspective? Here the answer will not come from the male leadership of the party but rather from its women. I am drawing here on the contributions of a workshop and three conferences organised by women activists in Gaza between 1997- 2003. Papers presented at these conferences clearly illustrate the shift that has been taking place in Islamist women's positions and priorities, as well as in their daily practices and in their experiences within the Party.

The first conference concentrated on de-legitimising other women's groups in order to present Islamist women themselves as the 'true' and 'authentic' voice for women's interests. In the second conference we find an admission that the Islamists have no vision or agenda for women's issues, but at the same time an attempt is made to reinterpret religious texts in order to allow a new reading incorporating what women have achieved so far in society due to modernisation processes. It is astonishing to note that in the process of formulating a new reading for religious texts, a parallel process of 'de-Islamising' the discourse on women's rights took place. At this point, Islamists adopted new terms (such as 'sustainable development'), which up to then had been used predominantly by donors and by feminist activists. By the time we get to the third conference, the concept of sustainable development is itself brought under scrutiny and the applicability of the concept to Palestinian society is questioned. Also, for the first time, a 'modern' and this time 'feminist' critique of the liberal rights approach was used. These conferences were landmarks in the passage of Hamas gender ideology from utter rejection of feminism to borrowing and selectively incorporating positions advocated by feminists. This resulted in a reconceptualisation of the terminology by the Islamists (i.e. they were Islamised), while at the same time, Islamic discourse was de-Islamised and considered within the contemporary framework.

## From Rejection to Engagement

The Women's Department (*daerat al-'amal al-nissaei*) of the Islamic Salvation Party proved energetic in pushing the boundaries of the Islamist women's space within the Party structure and in society at large. On 24 April 1997, a first booklet was published by the Department as an outcome of a one-day workshop entitled "Palestinian Woman… Where Next?" The booklet, for the first time in the Brothers' history in Palestine, fills the gaps of their gender agenda and inverts some of their previous positions. In its introduction, the booklet clearly states that the *raison d'etre* of the whole discussion was that it "became a preoccupying issue for those many who are keen to see women occupying a distinguished position in the society side by side with men" (WAD-Women's Department "Introduction" 1997: 1). The booklet asserts:

> The waves that have surfaced in our society lately all claim to uplift women as they see fit, but women who stand on their rights in Islam do not accept these claims. We as Muslim sisters, aware of our great religion, have to stand up strongly and courageously to clarify and spread our thoughts in our advancing society. We are the preachers for the true uplifting '*nahda*' for women through the true, deep and correct understanding of our religion. This will be the true victory for women (Women's Department, Introduction, 1997: 1).

Many papers (both men's and women's) were presented throughout the April workshop by prominent cultural leaders in Hamas in a systematic attempt to delegitimise the non-Islamic women's groups. They did this by linking women's NGOs to the West, depicting them as a ploy of the West to weaken the nation and betray it by 'smothering' Israel's existence in the heart of the *umma*. They rejected the call for a gender agenda as unfit when the national agenda was at the fore. In the first paper, delivered by a prominent cultural and political analyst from *al-Rissala* (*The Message*, a weekly Islamist journal), the speaker Nehad Khalil showed his scepticism about the motives and 'the foreign funding' of the different NGOs advocating rights in Palestinian society. He linked the mushrooming of these groups to the West's desire to create a political environment accepting Israel and to the need of some Palestinian party cadres for jobs and money or personal "enrichment, through funding, and fame" (Khalil 1997: 3, 4). As for international conventions, he said that recourse to them was "understandable when we talk about human rights violations by the Israelis" to gain international support, "but, when we dialogue internally as Palestinians about liberties and women, we have to start from our culture, heritage and our daily reality" (ibid: 5).

In my interviews, many Islamist women expressed the same scepticism vis-à-vis universal rights for women. However, the workshop of April 1997 could not reject outright the prevailing discourse on women's rights. There were nuances among activists claiming women's rights. Some secularist feminists called for the prohibition of polygamy and the right to divorce within *shari'a* law; others called for restrictions on polygamy without outright prohibition. After rejecting feminists' calls, Nehad Khalil scorned the position of the PA:

> the Authority has no special agenda for women. It adopts neither a liberal vision, nor a conservative one, let alone a religious one. The PA is keen to talk about women's rights and equality superficially, as window dressing. This is mainly to give the impression to the world that our society is modern and respects women and their rights. This lack of agenda is reflected in the contradictory behaviours of the PA. While we have a woman minister and a woman ambassador in the PA, the Ministry of Interior issued a rule requiring women to get the consent of their guardians before they could be issued passports (Khalil 1997: 7).

And finally, Khalil acknowledged that, after asserting that "Islam dignified women and gave them their rights," Islamists paid little attention to women's interests once the struggle against the Occupation came. In this, he said, the Islamists were like the nationalists before them. Islamists could not ignore the subject: "the

issue is on the table now; there is a debate about family law and its reform, on early marriage and its prohibition… etc." (*ibid:* 7). I would treat this paper as an admission by an Islamist that de-legitimising 'others' is no longer a viable practice. Most importantly, the paper recommended investigating what women's actual situations are, and called for giving more attention to studies, in particular on women in Islamist circles. He appealed not only for the establishment of a study centre on social issues but also for more attention by intellectuals and researchers to the laws, ideas, visions and studies put forth by secularist women (*ibid:* 8).

A paper presented by Khitam Abu Musa inverted the gender vision of the Hamas Charter of 1988. Her paper interprets Islam as the religion which gave woman all her rights: the rights of education, free choice of a husband, inheritance (widely denied by custom), mobility (to participate in the call for the rule of God and *jihad*), proselytisation, and social or professional work (Abu Musa, 1997: 17-21). Raising a more controversial issue – that of 'mixing with men' – the paper concludes, "now we can see that Muslim woman was moved to prove herself in all aspects and fields of life. Islam allows women to meet men ('*abah*'), and to exchange dialogue if she is committed to the '*adab shar'eia* (the conventions of *shari'a*)" (*ibid:* 21). According to Amira Haroun (a leading figure in the Women's Action Department in the Khalas Party), these conventions are to be understood within the framework of a woman's adopting Islamic dress and maintaining respectable manners in line with religious customs.

In her interpretation of religion and *shari'a*, Khitam Abu Musa cities the authority of religious text to emphasise that "the urge of women to develop (*intilaq*, i.e., to flourish) and participate in social life with all that entails, including meeting men, is an approach *decided* [stress added] by the Islamic *shari'a* and prophet's *sunna* (deeds)" (Abu Musa: 17-21). She also addresses the concept of 'public good', emphasing that "Islam *mandates* [stress added] women to go out and participate in social life because the opening up of public work for women is for the good (*al-khayr*) of the spread of a serious, beneficial life for more Muslims. This begins with an education and entails aiding a husband in earning a living and participating in beneficial social work or political activism that supports goodness and fights the trivial" (Abu Musa: 22).

The vision presented by this speaker is not shared by all Islamist women in the Party; it pertains to the needs of educated women who want to abolish the sex segregation code in order to benefit from more opportunities in the labour market. Women with less education don't share this view: 'in the Party they are irritated when we insist on being separate. The Party says that as a developmental party there is no harm in mixing, but this is against our traditions' (Fatmeh, Interview, 3-10-2000, Gaza). Some Party cadres and educated women are more open to change than some of their grassroots constituencies.

As Islamists attempted to 'purify' their new stand, they found it important to detach Islam from the oppression of women and to claim that the older, negative behaviours were due to 'Palestinian mentality' and 'backwardness'. The older ways, they said, represented "ignorance and limited vision characterised by sharp contradictions and imbalances, while the new way recognizes women's value and assigns

them ethical and moral status" (Salah Bardaweel, editor-in-chief of *The Message* (*al-Rissala*), 1997: 28). Bardaweel claims that the newer ways are "less known due to the underdeveloped phases which Palestinian society went through", but says that that study of Islamic revivals during different periods in Islamic history shows that Islamic leaders "gave woman more attention by providing for her education, culture (*tathkifiha*), and the development of her capacities in her house, society and nation" (*ibid:* 28).

A booklet documenting the proceedings of the April workshop included a section on women in international conventions and in 1995 Beijing conference resolutions, as well as recommendations for the Party. The recommendations included some interesting points on 'dissemination and advocacy' of women's issues within the Party. Also recommended were: formation of Palestinian feminist *nassawi* (cadres) through debates and Islamic workshops; study of contemporary universal conventions from a comparative perspective; embodiment of women's rights in practice; and formulation of an education programme for men, to help them become more sensitive to women's roles (WAD-Women's Action Department "Recommendations" 1997: 44).

Mahmoud al-Zahar, a prominent leader in Hamas, argues in a paper he presented at the 1999 women's conference that women in Islam have equal rights to men in all aspects of work, except when the work might lead to a contradiction in *shari'a*, and when the work might not be suitable for women's capabilities and characteristics (*qodorateha and khossosseyateha*) – but he does not specify what these characteristics are (al-Zahar, 1999:4). In the same paper, al-Zahar offers a brilliant formulation of the concepts of the 'public' and 'private' domains around the controversial issue of to men's dominance (*qewama*) in the family – a formulation which flagrantly contradicts the notion of equality advocated by feminists, since it puts women under men's authority. Al-Zahar interprets men's supremacy in terms of the economic and managerial, rather than in political terms. He states that "*qewama* does not mean absolute authority, but means that a man takes the responsibility to provide for the material and emotional needs of the family, to provide protection, care and administer (*yassos*) the family according to principles of justice" (*ibid:* 4). Al-Zahhar links *qewama* with another principle which he sees as applicable not only to the public sphere, or polity, but also to the private sphere. This is the principle of *al-shoura* (consultation or deliberation). As he puts it:

> "Muslims should understand that *al-shoura* and *al-qewama* are not conditions of tyranny or despotism (*halat istebdad*), but are phenomena in which all members of the family participate in their own way (*shorakaa*) as part of family management. Like the state, the family can only be built on *shoura*" (*ibid:* 4).

Al-Zahar sees authoritarianism in the family as a sort of extremism (*tatarof*), the loss of *qewama* as chaos (*ifrat*) and both as reasons for the collapse of family, society and state. Therefore, democratisation *à la* Islamism is not only a concern in the public sphere but is also very relevant to the private sphere – to the relationships

between husband and wife as well as between parents and children. This 'new' interpretation was voiced by one of my interviewees. In Maysoon's words:

> In my family, we are used to discussing and deliberating our daily plan. I encourage my children to choose what they want to eat, to wear, to do, and to study, and of course, we allow my girl to choose who she wants to marry. But the man she wants has to come in the open to ask for her hand and not to meet her secretly. Once everything is in the open, we facilitate all the steps. Our religion is *yosser* (easy going) and not *'ossr* (hard to follow) (Maysoon, Interview, 11-1-2003).

Maysoon refers not only to daily democratic participation in her family but also to what has become a common trend among Islamists – the facilitation of marriage arrangements for young couples. The new arrangements endeavour to minimise marriage expenses and to refrain from 'un-necessary' and extravagant expenditures (wedding parties in hotels, big meals, flowers, etc.). They reduce the dowry and gold presents due the bride.

At the women's conferences held by the Women's Action Department in 1999 and 2000, many other papers were presented formulating more progressive gender visions stemming from *al-shari'a*. The starting point was the 'text', but the call for new interpretations was always linked to the needs of society and the 'spirit of the age' (*roh al-'assr*)[12]. The usual empty, repetitive religious discourse vis-à-vis other women's groups was criticised as 'traditional' Islamic discourse. One paper articulated a well-grounded knowledge of development discourse in Palestine, and in particular of the sustainable development approach. The writer, Nehad al-Sheikh Khalil, attributed the failure of development efforts in Palestinian society to the failure to fully use women's capacities. He cited the need to reform all legislation, especially family law, and to transform values and customs that discriminate against women. He advocated providing women with better health care and with family planning, noting that early marriage and high fertility reduce women to the reproductive role. He raised the issue of women's dependency on men, pointing out that it enhances their subordination. In his analysis, he employed an alternative discourse based not on the 'religious text' but on a different interpretation of economic and social development, involving secular notions of public good and national interest. He focused not on the 'Islamicness' (cultural specificity) of Muslim societies but on the specificity of living under Occupation. Thus, although "reducing fertility will weaken our demographic strength against our enemies ... this should not be at the expense of women's health" (Nehad al-Sheikh Khalil 1999: 4). Focusing on women's individual rights "in isolation from their families and children is dangerous", he asserted, "since we have not yet any alternative institutions to care for them … Work at home does not reduce women's status, and it should be valued, morally … Women's role in society needs her

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12 Papers presented to the second conference on the Palestinian Woman "Between the Actual Challenges and the Future Aspirations" on the 16/8/1999 in particular those of Lamia Abu Jalala and Nehad Khalil.

education and her openness to society and her participation" (*ibid:* 5, 6). In criticising feminist calls for women's rights based on the notion of individual rights, he stated that "the individual self cannot be the measure for development, since this might contradict the public good of the society" (*ibid:* 6). An example, he suggested, would be a Palestinian working in an Israeli settlement or workshop. Such a person, he said, "can gain a lot individually, but this will be at the expense of our agricultural land (on which the settlements are built) and our economy" (*ibid:* 6). He added that "in strong Western economies, the individual can be the focus of development, but not in our case where we are under Occupation and suffer from a lack of democracy. Our context necessitates the collective mobilisation of people in order to resist the Occupation; [we are in] a phase of giving to the nation and not yet taking from it" (*ibid*: 6). This paper manifested awareness of the global debate on the causes of underdevelopment and their relationship to internal factors (i.e. lack of democratisation and lack of good governance), as well as to external factors (i.e., unequal North-South relations) (Tornquist 1999). At the same time, Khalil warned that the call for democracy and women's liberation was being used as "an ideological weapon by neo-colonisers in the age of globalisation, to convince subjugated peoples that their defeats were related to their lack of democracy and their women's status and not to the coloniser's exploitation and the drain of their wealth." (Khalil 1999: 6). This new reading of sustainable development discourse by Islamists will create more difficulties for secularists and nationalists in general, and for nationalist and secularist women's movements in particular. The latter, due to the national struggle, have not taken a clear position on issues related to women's fertility or the philosophy behind the call for sustainable development. This lack of clarity, one can predict, will give more ammunition to articulate Islamist discourse.

At the second and third women's conferences in 1999 and 2000, a rather more 'secure' and less defensive approach, as well as a more rational position, was adopted vis-à-vis international conventions. The total de-legitimisation of the 'other', in particular other feminist women's organisations, was dropped in favour of more engagement. The 1999 conference postulated a distinction between organisations working in good faith and other national actors and their donors, who "are not innocent and who work according to their own agendas" (Documents of the Second Women's Conference "Closing Statement" 1999). Criticising the total rejection manifested in the workshop of 1997, this conference expressed agreement that "our approach to women's liberation is Islam and not the universal conventions; however, we don't reject any of these conventions as long as they don't contradict the rules of Islamic *shari'a* and the specificity of the Palestinian Muslim society" (*ibid*). The conclusions of these conferences can be encapsulated in two main points. First, Islamists should change. They should anticipate Islamic reform and take the lead in the uplifting (*nahda*) of women; otherwise, 'others' will lead. Second, emphasis should be placed on the idea that "the mission to liberate women and activate their role falls primarily on women. Women have to claim their rights and struggle for them in the light of the proper understandin

The third conference, in 2000, was dedicated to outlining more specifically the differences that exist between *shari'a* and international conventions. For the first time, speakers questioned not the viability of rights discourse altogether, but its liberal, utilitarian individualistic Western bias; and in their critiques, the writers employed critical feminist thinking (Phillips 1993). In Amira Haroun's paper, for example, we read: "The concept of rights was established (in the West) on utilitarianism; thus, utilitarian individualism supersedes rationality and engulfs all social relations…this conception is false since the individual was never an abstract being; the individual was always a social being" (Amira Haroun, Introduction: 1). In this way, the discourse of the women's NGOs, based on liberal individual rights, was contested by another 'western', 'feminist' discourse based on the notion of active citizenship[13] used this time by Islamist women. Islamist critiques of liberalism, like socialist feminist ones, question the morality of allowing individual rights to take precedence over social responsibility. Citizenship is usually conceived of as an individual right alone, and in political terms is reduced to the limited practice of voting. Instead, some argue that there is a need for a more substantive version, known as social citizenship, based on participation and social responsibility (Molyneux, 1996: 6). We read in Haroun's paper that "in our Islamic vision, the notion of the individual is seen in its relation to the collective. That is why the notion of individual rights in Islam is formed in the context of duties which help to awake in the individual the incentives to 'give' and not only to 'take' (Amira Haroun, Introduction: 5). The emphasis in Islamic discourse on this 'give-and-take' approach is linked to the 'specific' situation of the Palestinian people, which these Islamists argue is not cultural but national, occurring at a particular historical conjuncture. The emphasis on 'giving to the nation' is missing in the national agenda being offered by secular, feminist women's movements in Palestine. In the absence of a clear national agenda drawn by the nationalist, secularist women's movement, Islamists link women's rights with the national and social needs of the Palestinian people, asking women, as did the old nationalist discourse, to serve the nation, this time à la Islamism (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989).

## From Words to Deeds

Islamist women have managed to build impressive, well-organised women's constituencies among highly educated and professional women, at times using

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**13**  The recent debate on women's rights and citizenship found its way into the Islamist women's discourse. The Islamist thinkers (Al-Ghannouchi, 1992**;** Tamimi 2002; Messiri 2003) follow the critiques of the Enlightenment principles of universality and individualism offered by Marxist feminists and postmodernists. These critiques suggest that, if citizenship could be re-fashioned in a way that divested it from abstract universalism and 'false egalitarianism', it could be a more effective tool in advancing gender justice. Some authors have claimed that sex difference and the female body should be the proper basis of legal and political recognition (Phillips 1987, 1991, 1993; Lister 1997; Voet 1998).

temporal discourses based on sustainable development and women's rights, as well as on new interpretations of religious texts. The question arises as to how these new readings are reflected in daily practices within the Party. I highlight here an increasing tendency to foster gender equality, not merely complementarity, and more egalitarian social ideals.

The efforts of the Women's Action Department in the Salvation Party opened a space for common ground between men and women by 'mainstreaming' gender issues into the dominant politics of an Islamic party. The success of the Department in effecting this important change within the Islamic movement went hand in hand with demands for equal pay. In criticising the Party for privileging men's work over women's, the Department was persistent in calling for equal job opportunities and pay for men and women doing the same work. The two female members of the politbureau[14] recall:

> In our work with women, we need more people. We started to demand the hiring of more women; they accepted reluctantly, but for half the pay[15]. They (the male members) thought that women didn't have the same responsibilities as men, but we refused – how did they know that women have not the same responsibilities? – it is a question of principle – if women do the same work as men, they have to get the same payment… we managed to put an equal number of *motafareghat* (full-time paid women members) in the regional administrative committees before the closure of the Party local branches; and we were also heading towards having the same number of paid women as men in our journal office before its closure by the PA (Youssra and Amira, Interview, 1-3-10-2000, Gaza).

The Department's call for equal treatment by the Party reaches inside the home. Here, the Department eschews the 'rights discourse' of secular feminists in favour of a more pragmatic strategy of 'looking for solutions'. In Amira's words:

> Everybody in the Party claims that he supports woman's work and woman's development, but they don't put effort into supporting her in her work.... We avoid talking about what men 'have' to do but we try to '*involve*' [stress added] them in finding solutions such as supporting her at home, establishing a nursery and kindergarten close to her house. In this respect, we fully support the call of the Women's Affairs Committee[16] in their demand for an hour for working mothers to breast feed their babies, but this also requires nurseries in each workplace for women (Amira, Interview, 1-10-2000, Gaza).

Inside the Party, women leaders rejected the assertion by Hamas leader al-Zahhar that their work should be 'suitable for women's capabilities and characteristics'. They called for total equality in two respects: in their daily work in the Party and in their rejection of the claim that women are not equal to men in military activities.

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[14] In 2000 they were Youssra and Amira. In the third round of elections in 2001, Amira was elected again and Fatemah Saleh replaced Youssra.

[15] It is common in Gaza where the unemployment rate is very high (39%) to pay women less than men in private business and in general women are less well paid (81.3% of male wages in Gaza and 66% in the West Bank) (Sida 1999: 26-7).

[16] A secular, feminist women's coalition.

> In the daily work we have so many activities. One of the most successful events we organise each year is the political prisoners' exhibition in which we establish a big tent to host all sorts of activities: exhibiting their paintings and belongings, displaying their pictures and writings…etc. To build the tent we used to ask the help of our men; this happened only in the first year. When we started to push for hiring more women with equal pay, we decided to build the tent ourselves. We wanted to show them that we are not less powerful and if we want we can do exactly what they do. Now, each year, we build the tent from A to Z by ourselves (Youssra and Amira, Interview, 1-2-10-2000, Gaza).

It is worth noting here, that the two leaders' approach contradicts not only that of some Islamist men but also that of some Islamist women. Maysoon and Samira, Islamist women's leaders in the West Bank, assert that they don't share this vision and instead view women's roles as complementary, rather than equal, to those of men. The case of *istishhadeyyat* (female conscious martyrs) is another example, and highlights the involvement of women in military activities. This suggests that there are differences not only between Islamist men and women but among the women themselves.

## Conclusion

I have argued that it is the political context, rather than the religious text, which determines Islamist discourse. The 'modified', ever-evolving version of *shari'a* adopted by Hamas presents two challenges. On the one hand, it is a challenge to the discourse used by feminist NGOs – a discourse based on a liberal, individualistic notion of rights and one which ignores the plight the nation faces under Occupation. By putting Islam at the centre of a modified notion of Palestinian nationalism, Islamists have managed to de-legitimise feminist women's discourse, portraying it as non-national and alien. At the same time, the Islamist position also poses a challenge to the rather ambivalent Palestinian secularism which uses Islam as a source of its legitimacy. By 'Islamising' Palestine and 'nationalising' Islam, the Islamists have proved successful in forging a brand of nationalism in which Islam is integral and which constitutes a mobilising force for the masses.

*Shari'a,* as a guiding principle for women's rights, has been used by Islamists in contradictory ways -- as a fixed, divine and immutable idiom to de-legitimise and silence non-Islamic women's groups, and to discredit the PA's advocacy of the notion of popular sovereignty as the basis for new legislation. Questions about *shari'a* also triggered debate within the Islamic movement itself. Islamists' search for an alternative to the secular feminist platform ironically brought them into continuous engagement with it. Notions of pluralism, women's rights, the public good, sustainable development, and the social versus the individual self, were all borrowed by Islamists from the secular context, and Islamists have built on women's modern gains in areas such as education and work opportunities. In doing so, Islamist women have forged a space for a category of educated women from poor, mainly refugee backgrounds, in which it is morally correct to be active in

all spheres of public life. They have also managed to establish themselves among other poor women by providing services for them and defending the rights of male prisoners. These are important accomplishments for women's activism in a phase of national struggle. In such a context, secularists, while pressuring and challenging the Islamists, are losing ground by advocating a discourse of rights in isolation from the national agenda and in the absence of a mobilising organisation. NGO activism, based on short-lived projects, does not have the potential to constitute an alternative. By becoming an opposition movement setting itself against all forms of violation of civic and human rights, Islamists have developed a political organisation. In contrast, women working in NGOs have no organised constituency; and the support they do have, when they get it, is derived from a decaying de-legitimised authority.

However, while there are moments of opening and engagement within the Islamist position, there are also many contradictions which might lead to closure and to a retreat into interpretations of Islam that would affect women negatively. Islamists could return to an insistence on the role of women solely as reproducers of the nation. Their stand on polygamy is not yet clear. What sort of 'Islamic' state Islamist activism might lead to depends, to a great extent, on the general context set by secularists. Interaction between the different perspectives could lead to a realisation that the different tendencies share a common ground: Islamists could unite with secularist and nationalist women in pushing for new readings of religious texts, as well as engage in the daily realities of women who are facing the daily oppression of the Israeli occupation in the context of the unsolved national struggle. Such mutual accommodation on the basis of the national agenda (Hudson 1996; Norton 1993; Salame 2001) will require each party to maintain vigilance with regard to the changes occurring in the approaches and discourses of the other, instead of adopting an approach of total rejection like that taken by women's NGOs. The claim that the ongoing conflict between the two rival parties Hamas and Fateh is a struggle between the 'forces of darkness' and the 'modernising forces' has no empirical foundation and is used to cover up real differences over the national agenda and over the best strategies to adopt in order to achieve the Palestinian national goals of liberation and self-determination. The evolution of Islamism in the Palestinian context suggests that the nature of the state Islamists might claim will not depend on a religious blueprint, but will depend to a great extent on what form of state and society they live in and on the visions and challenges posed by other nationalist and secularist groups if these groups are sufficiently supported by a substantial majority and power.

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