

**AN ARMY OF ROSES FOR WAGING PEACE: THE  
TRANSFORMATIVE ROLES OF PALESTINIAN WOMEN IN THE  
ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT**

by

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## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

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Approved: 

**Professor Frederick S. Colby**

This thesis examines the different public roles Palestinian women have assumed during the contemporary history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The thesis uses the problematic juxtaposition between the high public visibility of female militants and relatively low visibility of female political figures as a basis for investigating individual Palestinian women and women's groups that have participated in the Palestinian public sphere from before the first Intifada to the present. The thesis addresses the current state of Palestine's political structure, how international sources of support for enhancing women's political participation might be implemented, and internal barriers Palestinian women face in becoming politically active and gaining leadership roles. It draws the conclusions that while Palestinian women do participate in the political sphere, greater cohesion between existing women's groups and internal support from society and the political system is needed before the number of women in leadership positions can be increased; and that inclusion of women is a necessary component of being able to move forward in peace negotiations.

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## Introduction

One very widely recognized conflict of our time is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This bloody struggle has endured for over a century and involves a complex web of players, alliances, and grudges that have brought about the death of many and disrupted the lives of countless others. According to one source, at least 1,104 Israelis and 6,836 Palestinians have been killed since 2000 alone, and many more have been injured.<sup>1</sup> The same source states that while the number of Israelis who are being killed has decreased since 2002, the number of Palestinians being killed has remained relatively high. The situation is desperate, especially for Palestinians, many of whom are extremely limited in their mobility and ability to provide for themselves and their families. Attempts at peace negotiations and the development of a two-state solution have so far been unsuccessful. Of course, there are Israelis and Palestinians on both sides of the conflict as well as outside influences that do not support a two-state solution, and this diversity of intractable desires has contributed substantially to the problem.

What is probably not at the forefront of most people's consciousness when thinking about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the apparent absence of Palestinian women in the processes of negotiating and solidifying a solution. When I began researching for this project, I was struck by my personal lack of knowledge about the number of Palestinian women who are politically active and who participate in conflict negotiation and resolution, as well as the lack of information that is available to

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<sup>1</sup> "Fatalities," *The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories*, B'Tselem, 2013, Accessed 19 December 2013, <http://www.btselem.org/statistics>.

researchers or the general public on the topic. Even more powerful was the realization that the only Palestinian woman I knew by name was a suicide bomber named Ayat al-Akhras, and that I did not know whether there were in fact any women involved in high-level Palestinian politics. I believe that many other Americans would share my experience, or even be completely unaware of the issue. This made me wonder: Where are all the women? In addition, if women are politically involved, why are they not readily visible except as agents of violence?

We in the United States are perhaps more aware of the Israeli side of the conflict than the Palestinian side. The U.S. sends around \$4 billion in aid to Israel annually and has been its staunch ally even in the face of UN criticism for the continued building of illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank.<sup>2</sup> The U.S. also provides about \$440 million in aid to Palestine, but with the qualifiers that recipient organizations and entities cannot have any connection to Hamas or terrorism and must be firmly committed to peaceful coexistence with the Israeli state.<sup>3</sup> The United States has a big stake in helping Israel achieve its goals, and this coupled with a governmental and media bias may explain the limitation of my personal knowledge of female participants in the conflict as well as the media focus on female militants as terrorists. However, it does not explain the lack of accessible and specific information about Palestinian women who are involved at all levels of politics. One of the purposes of this project is to demonstrate that women's political participation is wider than what is made apparent by mainstream media, and that women are also, and even more often, making an impact

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<sup>2</sup> Jeremy M. Sharp, "U.S. Aid to Israel," Congressional Research Service (11 April 2013), 2, Accessed 19 December 2013, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33222.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Jim Zanotti, "U.S. Foreign Aid to the Palestinians," Congressional Research Service (30 Sep. 2013), 3, Accessed 19 December 2013, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS22967.pdf>.

through peacebuilding instead of militancy. However, there are significant barriers such as a lack of cohesiveness in NGO and grassroots activism and the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism that discourage women from becoming politically active and have impeded their visibility. In contrast, female militants have been celebrated by many within Palestine and the wider Arab community and heavily publicized internationally and within the region. This is a paradigm that needs to change, because the political participation of Palestinian women is a vital part of building a stable Palestinian state. To accomplish this shift, there needs to be a substantial amount of support both internally and externally that will both strengthen existing female participation and encourage its expansion.

This discussion begins with an historical overview of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and an explanation of the main bodies of the Palestinian political system. I then present a contrast between women's involvement in militancy and women's involvement in politics, introducing individual women and organizations who have made an impact on their society, and demonstrating that while women do participate in government and in building up their nation, overall there is a paucity of women in positions of political authority. Finally, I illustrate several sources of international support for integrating women more fully into the political process, as well as the main obstacles that Palestinian women face in becoming more politically active and effective.

## **A brief history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict**

The issue of who has more of a right to the land disputed by Palestine and Israel has roots even as far back as biblical times. This is shown by the idea of God's promise that the children of Abraham would have ownership of the historical site of the Jewish kingdom of Israel, which happens to be situated in an area that has been populated mostly by Arabs and Muslims for hundreds of years.<sup>4</sup> However, I am choosing to focus on the more contemporary developments because they provide an important background for examining the present-day state of Palestinian women's political participation. An overwhelming number of events have occurred in the time stretching from the 1800s until now, which explain the intricacies of the conflict. It is far from simple, and many layers of distrust, hatred, violence, and fear have stacked up on both sides and shaped the trajectory to the present. I have tried to distill some of the most significant events, but it should be noted that there is much more to the narrative.

In 1915 the British government promised the leader of Mecca and Medina that an independent Arab state would be created in exchange for Arab military support against the Ottomans.<sup>5</sup> The next year France, England, and Russia secretly reached the Sykes-Picot agreement which divided up large portions of the Ottoman Empire, leaving most of Palestine under international control and leaving many Arabs feeling misled and distrustful.<sup>6</sup> In 1917 the Balfour Declaration established British support for a Jewish

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<sup>4</sup> Be on our Side Campaign, "Roots of the Conflict," *Two Peoples One Future*, Committee for a Just Peace in Israel and Palestine (2014), Accessed 28 April 2014, <http://www.twopeoplesonefuture.org/background/roots-of-conflict/>.

<sup>5</sup> Joel Peters and David Newman, eds., *The Routledge Handbook on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 367.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

national homeland in Palestine and in 1920 the British Mandate for Palestine was approved, which encompassed the area of present-day Israel/Palestine and Jordan.<sup>7</sup> In the years that followed there was a large influx of Jewish immigrants to the area, land disputes involving both sides, and fear of a Jewish state that led to Arab protest and armed action. The UN partition plan of 1947 called for a division of Palestine into an Israeli and a Palestinian state with Jerusalem under international control. Jewish leaders supported the plan but Palestinian leaders and the Arab League rejected it, resulting in a civil war.<sup>8</sup> In 1948 the British Mandate was set to expire and Jewish leaders declared independence. This prompted forces from Jordan, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq to take up arms against Israel, and the end of the war in 1949 produced armistice agreements that became the boundaries of Israel that would be used for future territorial negotiations.<sup>9</sup>

In 1959 the group Fatah was founded by Yasser Arafat and other activists, with the vision of defeating Israel by force and completely liberating Palestine.<sup>10</sup> This grew into the 1964 creation of the governing body called the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) which at the time declared the establishment of Israel illegal.<sup>11</sup> In 1967 Israel won a decisive victory against Egypt, Jordan, and Syria in the Six Day/June War, which resulted in the capture of the West Bank, The Old City (East) Jerusalem, Sinai Peninsula, and Gaza Strip for Israeli control.<sup>12</sup> In 1973 Egypt and Syria attacked Israel in the Yom Kippur/October War which was initially successful, but then

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 368.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 369.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

diminished in victory as Israel recaptured nearly all of the territory it had lost.<sup>13</sup>

However, this was humbling for Israel and is counted as a symbolic victory by the Arab community.



Figure 1: Division of authority in Israel/Palestine as of 2012<sup>14</sup>

Violent conflict between Israel and Palestine built until the first Intifada (“shaking off”) in 1987, where Israeli efforts to suppress both non-militant civil disobedience and acts of militancy were largely unsuccessful and drew attention to Israel’s limitations in controlling the Occupied Territories.<sup>15</sup> The Intifada also led to the creation of Hamas, a militant Islamist group that at the time was completely dedicated to the destruction of Israel. Between 1991 and 2000 several peace talks between Israeli

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Citation for image here!

<sup>15</sup> Peters, et al., 372.

and Palestinian delegations were held, but nothing decisive came of them beside the 1993 Oslo Accords, which established an interim governing body called the Palestinian Authority that would be allowed to take back control of Gaza and the West Bank.<sup>16</sup> In 1996 Yasser Arafat was elected as president of the Palestinian National Authority.<sup>17</sup> In 2000 the Al-Aqsa (or second) Intifada erupted, where violence on both sides of the conflict reached new heights. In a period of four years, over 1,000 Israelis and 5,000 Palestinians were killed and many more were wounded.<sup>18</sup>

In 2005 Israel began suspending its settlements in Gaza and the area was turned over to Palestinian control, and the next year Hamas was elected to power in the PLO.<sup>19</sup> In 2008 violence intensified again and Israel's aggressive action prompted a UN report alleging Israeli war crimes, but nevertheless in 2010 Israel resumed its establishment of new settlements in the West Bank, an action that has been condemned as illegal by the UN and international law.<sup>20</sup> These settlements and attacks and retaliation from both sides continue to the present, and bitterness has in no way diminished.

There are currently walls erected around the West Bank and Gaza that are guarded by Israeli soldiers and which serve both to protect Israelis and to contain Palestinians. This construction results in poverty and a very restricted life for Palestinians. Rockets are regularly fired back and forth between Israel and the Gaza Strip, causing destruction, injury, and death on both sides. Despite repeated attempts at peace talks, a two-state solution has not been reached. The respective narratives of each

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 373.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 375.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 376.

side of the conflict differ greatly, and the narratives exist as fundamental parts of people's individual and collective identities. Many on both sides distrust one another because of each side's perception of its historical experience. "Thus, it is impossible for many on both sides to see their adversaries as not historically deceptive, and themselves . . . as [anything other than] 'righteous victims.'"<sup>21</sup> This is perhaps the biggest obstacle to peace, and one that has been virtually intractable in the history of negotiations.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 42-3.

## **Palestinian political structure**

In order to understand the relationship between Palestinian women and the Palestinian political system, it is necessary to first break down the basic structure of Palestinian governance. While there are female representatives at all levels of government, decision-making positions within the bodies described below are almost completely allocated for men. This imbalance of power has shaped the political climate of Palestine and made it more difficult for women to participate.

### **The Palestine Liberation Organization**

The PLO was founded in 1964 by Egypt and the Arab League as a coordinating council for Palestinian organizations, and was originally controlled by Egypt.<sup>22</sup> The PLO calls itself the “embodiment of the Palestinian national movement,” and is made up of various organizations of the resistance movement, political parties, popular organizations, and independent figures from all sectors of life.<sup>23</sup> Some of these include the communist groups the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), as well as the smaller Palestinian People’s Party and Palestinian Liberation Front. The largest faction within the PLO is Fatah, which while chaired by Yasser Arafat from 1969 to 2004 established Palestinian control over the whole organization. In October 1974 the General Assembly

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<sup>22</sup> “Palestinian Liberation Organization,” *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (2013) Academic Search Premier, Accessed 24 February 2014, <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.libproxy.uoregon.edu/ehost/detail?sid=661f7655-49cf-47f7-b84d-7e96a225d7ec%40sessionmgr4003&vid=1&hid=4114&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#db=apa&AN=39026358>.

<sup>23</sup> “Palestine Liberation Organization,” *Permanent Observer Mission of The State of Palestine to the United Nations, New York* (2014) Accessed 24 February 2014, <http://palestineun.org/about-palestine/palestine-liberation-organization/>.

of the UN voted to invite a spokesperson from the PLO to take part in its deliberations, a privilege which had never been granted to a non-state actor before. Since then, the PLO has been seen as the main legitimate representative of the Palestinian people in a variety of forums and as the government-in-exile responsible for Palestinian affairs.

Initially, the PLO was committed to the dissolution of Israel, mainly through force. For the first half of its existence the PLO was associated with various acts of militancy against Israel and Israeli citizens, and came to be known at least in the U.S. and Europe as a terrorist organization. In 1993 Israel and the PLO negotiated and signed the Oslo Accords which provided mutual recognition and a transition to an amount of self-rule for Palestine in Gaza and the West Bank.<sup>24</sup> In 1996 the PLO formally revoked all clauses in its charter that called for the dissolution of Israel, and Arafat also pledged to fight against terrorism.<sup>25</sup> Further agreements in the late 1990s increased the amount of territory in the West Bank under Palestinian control.

The Palestinian National Council is the highest decision-making body of the PLO and is responsible for setting PLO policies, making changes to the Palestinian National Charter, and electing members of the Executive Committee and other official positions.<sup>26</sup> The composition of the PNC is supposed to represent “all sectors of the Palestinian community worldwide,” comprising around eight hundred representatives.<sup>27</sup> The secondary leading body of the PLO is the Central Council, which includes members of the Palestinian Legislative Council and serves as the intermediary between the PNC and the Executive Committee. This eighteen-member committee represents the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

PLO at the international level and is elected by members of the PNC. It is responsible for executing policies set by the PNC and Central Council, and adopting a budget and overseeing the various departments of the PLO. Currently the Committee is chaired by Mahmoud Abbas, who is also the president of the PA. The only female member of the Committee is Hanan Ashrawi,<sup>28</sup> an extremely active and internationally well-known woman who serves as the head of the Department of Culture and Information and will be discussed in greater detail below.

### **The Palestinian National Authority**

As mentioned earlier in the brief history of the conflict, the PA was established in 1994 after the 1993 Oslo Accords and subsequent agreements with Israel in order to serve as an interim self-government for the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip and West Bank. Presently the PA is based in Ramallah and consists of a president, prime minister and cabinet, a legislative council, and security forces.<sup>29</sup> In 1996 the first Palestinian Legislative Council was elected. Also at that time, Yasser Arafat was elected as president of the PA in addition to his leadership position within the PLO. After these elections his Fatah party controlled a majority of the seats. Arafat died in 2004 and was replaced the next year by Mahmoud Abbas. In the years following his

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<sup>28</sup> "Hanan Ashrawi," *The Guardian* (2014), Accessed 24 February 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/profile/hanan-ashrawi>.

<sup>29</sup> "Palestinian Authority," *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition* (2013), 1, Academic Search Premier, Accessed 10 February 2014, <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.libproxy.uoregon.edu/ehost/detail?sid=943c37c5-b6f7-4f14-8810-120dedfce8f2%40sessionmgr4004&vid=1&hid=4114&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSdzY29wZT1zaXRl#db=aph&AN=39026359>.

appointment there were attempts and failures at peacemaking with Israel, resulting in temporary withdrawal of some Israeli settlements and violence on both sides.<sup>30</sup>

In the legislative elections of 2006, Hamas won a majority of the seats due in part to the corruption and failures associated with Fatah.<sup>31</sup> Because Hamas refused to recognize Israel's right to exist, both outside aid from the United States and other entities and taxes and duties collected for the PA by Israel were cut off, resulting in a financial crisis within Palestine. There was also conflict within the PA over who would control the security forces between Abbas and Hamas political leaders. In 2007 Hamas and Fatah agreed to form a power-sharing government, but tensions between the two sometimes escalated into violence and Hamas continued to refuse to accept Israel as a state.<sup>32</sup> These violent clashes led to Hamas physically seizing control of the Gaza Strip in the same year, a move which was labeled as a coup by Abbas. He subsequently dismissed the existing government and appointed a new one which did not include Hamas, effectively dividing the PA into two territories and two governments with Hamas in control of the Gaza Strip and Fatah in control of the West Bank. In 2009, the PLO voted to extend Abbas's presidency indefinitely, and attempts to reestablish a unified government had been unsuccessful until very recently, as discussed below.

## **Hamas**

Hamas is the largest and most influential Palestinian militant movement that shares most of the power in the PA alongside Fatah. The name is an acronym that stands for Harakat al-Muqawana al-Islamiya (Islamic Resistance Movement). Sheikh

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

Ahmed Yassin, leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza, helped found Hamas in 1987 during the first Intifada as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood. Hamas has been listed by the U.S. as a terrorist organization since 1997. The organization possesses both military and political wings, but in addition to militant activities it manages a large and mostly Gaza-based network of social services.<sup>33</sup> Hamas funds schools, orphanages, mosques, health clinics, soup kitchens, and sports leagues, expending around 90% of its effort on social, welfare, cultural, and educational activities.<sup>34</sup> The overall policy of Hamas is set by a Shura council that was based in Damascus until late 2011. It has a presence in every major Palestinian city and retains a cadre of leaders and facilitators who conduct political, fundraising, and militant activities throughout the region.<sup>35</sup>

Prior to 2005, Hamas conducted many militant operations against Israel but much of the violence ended in 2006 after it gained control of the PA. The 2007 takeover of Gaza from the PA and Fatah resulted in the closing of Gaza's borders, forcing Hamas to increase its use of tunnels to smuggle weapons into the area. Since then, Hamas "has dedicated the majority of its activity in Gaza to solidifying its control, hardening its defenses, tightening security, and conducting limited operations against Israeli military forces."<sup>36</sup> On January 18<sup>th</sup> 2009, Israel declared a unilateral ceasefire, and ironically the

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<sup>33</sup> Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, "Hamas," *Foreign Terrorist Organizations*, U.S. Department of State (31 July, 2012), Accessed 17 February 2014, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2011/195553.htm#hamas>.

<sup>34</sup> Jonathan Masters, "Hamas," Council on Foreign Relations (27 November 2012), Accessed 17 February 2014, <http://www.cfr.org/israel/hamas/p8968>.

<sup>35</sup> Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

trend since then has been an increased firing of rockets and mortars from Gaza, violence which is returned by Israel in spite of its official disengagement.<sup>37</sup>

In 2011 Hamas and Fatah signed an agreement of reconciliation vowing common cause against the Israeli occupation with the goal of achieving “a Palestinian state with full sovereignty on the 1967 borders with Jerusalem as the capital, no settlers, and [refusing to] give up the right of return.”<sup>38</sup> However, Hamas continues to resist fully accepting the idea of Israel’s right to existence as a state while Fatah has recognized it, and the two factions have often been at odds with each other.

### **The new unity government**

In January 2013, Abbas signed a decree stating that the Palestinian National Authority had been absorbed and replaced by the State of Palestine.<sup>39</sup> The PA had “served its purpose by introducing the institutions of the State of Palestine on the soil of Palestine,” and due to its origin as an interim governing body, it was phased out in conjunction with Palestine being recognized (at least by the UN) as a UN Non-Member Observer State.<sup>40</sup> This decree is a representation of Palestine’s intent to be fully recognized as a sovereign state, even though it is not necessarily recognized as a state by the rest of the world.

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<sup>37</sup> Masters.

<sup>38</sup> Ethan Bronner, “Palestinian factions sign accord to end rift,” *The New York Times* (4 May 2011), Accessed 17 February 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/05/world/middleeast/05palestinians.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/05/world/middleeast/05palestinians.html?_r=0).

<sup>39</sup> John V. Whitbeck, “The state of Palestine’s Decree No. 1 and the two-state solution,” *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, 32.2 (March 2013), 10, Accessed 23 February 2014, [http://go.galegroup.com.libproxy.uoregon.edu/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=RELEVANCE&inPS=trtr&prodId=AONE&userGroupName=s8492775&tabID=T003&searchId=R1&resultListType=RESULT\\_LIST&contentSconten=&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&currentPosition=1&contentSet=GALE|A318902827&&docId=GALE|A318902827&docType=GALE&role=](http://go.galegroup.com.libproxy.uoregon.edu/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=RELEVANCE&inPS=trtr&prodId=AONE&userGroupName=s8492775&tabID=T003&searchId=R1&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSconten=&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&currentPosition=1&contentSet=GALE|A318902827&&docId=GALE|A318902827&docType=GALE&role=).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

Further progression has recently been made under a new agreement announced on Tuesday, April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2014, in which the rival groups of Fatah and Hamas have agreed to form a new unity government under the umbrella of the PLO.<sup>41</sup> The groups plan to form an interim government at the end of May 2014, and hold elections six months later.<sup>42</sup> “At a news conference, leaders of all the groups said the past divisions had taken a toll on the Palestinian goal of establishing an independent state with Jerusalem as its capital.”<sup>43</sup> A representative of Hamas said, “After seven years of enforced division, we are determined to regain the Palestinian democratic process.”<sup>44</sup> The unification of Fatah and Hamas may be an important step in the struggle for self-determination that Palestine faces. “Discussions on Tuesday night in Gaza centered on forming a new national government, while on Wednesday the focus was on the timing and procedures for elections, and how to actually make a political program of negotiation and social reconciliation that will include all factions and independents. Out of necessity at this early stage, the discussions were general, rather than specific in order to allow the factions to consult with their bases before making final decisions.”<sup>45</sup> For now, Abbas is set to lead the technocratic government that will be formed within 5 weeks and is subsequently charged with holding presidential and parliamentary elections.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> “Palestinian factions to form unity government,” Al Jazeera (23 April 2014), Accessed 4 May 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/04/palestinian-factions-form-unity-government-2014423134227518508.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Julie Webb-Pullman, “Challenges await Palestine unity government,” *The Palestine Chronicle* (24 April 2014), Accessed 4 May 2014, <http://www.palestinechronicle.com/challenges-await-palestine-unity-government/#.U2b5xlfN4TA>.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> “Palestinian unity government will reject violence: Abbas,” *Daily News Egypt* (26 April 2014), Accessed 4 May 2014, <http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2014/04/26/palestinian-unity-government-will-reject-violence-abbas/>.

Israel stated that it would not negotiate with a government backed by Hamas, but Abbas has stated that the upcoming government will obey his policy, which recognizes Israel and rejects violence and terrorism.<sup>47</sup> He also stressed that the PLO, not the newly formed government, would be responsible for the ongoing negotiations with Israel because it represents the entire Palestinian people and is internationally recognized.<sup>48</sup> However, Israel may choose to ignore these assurances and reject negotiation with any governing body associated with Hamas. This may be a further detriment to already-faltering peace talks.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

## **Making an impact through violence**

As the conflict has endured over decades, two main avenues of resolution have emerged: violent action and political negotiation. Especially during the second Intifada, violence reached unprecedented levels due in part to an increase in suicide bombings and other militant operations against Israel. While the primary participants in violence have been men, women have made an important and marked contribution as well. In the case of violent action, women have become involved as a way to try and make a difference in a conflict where there are not very many options for effective ways of opposing Israel. Becoming militants is one way women have been encouraged by some in society and positions of authority to contribute to the Palestinian cause, where by contrast they are not similarly encouraged to participate in the political sphere. To understand the impact of women's participation in violence, it is important to understand the concept of jihad and how it applies to the Palestinian situation, as well as how women can at times be more effective than men as agents of violence.

### **Jihad**

The term "jihad" is one which is seen by many as being very loaded because it is often associated with terrorism and events like the 9/11 attacks. Many people would mistakenly think that it stands for "holy war," but in reality it has a spectrum of meanings. Literally, the Arabic word means "exerted effort" or "striving." Jihad is seen by some as being divisible into two categories: the greater jihad and the lesser jihad.<sup>49</sup> The greater jihad is the struggle within each Muslim to adhere to God's path and follow

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<sup>49</sup> John Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 114.

the teachings of the Quran, leading a good life and reflecting inward for self-improvement. The lesser jihad is the defensive and plausibly violent struggle. This interpretation of jihad has become “a clarion call used by resistance, liberation, and terrorist movements alike to legitimate their causes, mobilize support, and motivate their followers.”<sup>50</sup> The term is almost always associated with Islam, but it has been used by nationalist (secular) leaders as well, like Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian National Authority.<sup>51</sup>

Jihad is a powerful idea because it gives people a cause to rally around, one behind which they can rise up and defend their community or country when it is endangered and are justified in using proportionate force in retaliation to threats. The Quran says, “Fight those in the way of God who fight you, but do not be aggressive: God does not like aggressors,” [2:190] and “Fight them till sedition comes to end, and the law of God (prevails). If they desist, then cease to be hostile, except against those who oppress” [2:193].<sup>52</sup> These verses support defending the umma (Muslim community) against attacks in a proportionate manner. Of course, these justifications for a violent (and regulated) struggle can be manipulated to fit a diverse array of situations, and deciding what qualifies as self-defense is also interpreted very differently depending upon who is making the decision.

In the Palestinian context, jihad against Israel is seen by some as a just defense of the Palestinian homeland from an oppressive occupying force that is vastly superior in force. The conflict has thus far been intractable, and Palestinian militants have

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<sup>50</sup> Esposito, 235-6.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>52</sup> Ahmed Ali, trans., *Al-Qur'an* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993), 34- 35.

employed tactics like suicide bombings in an attempt to make an impact against their formidable enemy. Umm Anas, a female eighteen-year-old Islamic Jihad operative in Gaza interviewed by the BBC, believes that suicide bombing (martyrdom in her eyes) allows the Palestinians to level the balance of power between the two sides, helping Palestinians defend their land by using any means at their disposal.<sup>53</sup> Palestinians lack the resources that Israel has, such as tanks, planes, helicopters, missiles, and bombs. In a situation where Palestinian stone-throwing is met with volleys of tear gas and sometimes even live ammunition, the ability to use a weapon that strikes fear into Israelis has become very important to Palestinian militant activists. Umm Anas says, “Jews are scared when we just throw stones. Imagine what happens when body parts fly at them.”<sup>54</sup> Her words are chilling, but they represent the sense of empowerment that some Palestinians have found in carrying out these militant and suicide operations.

### **Women as particularly effective suicide bombers**

Mia Bloom, a Professor of Security Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell, asserts that female suicide bombers are more effective than their male counterparts for a variety of reasons.<sup>55</sup> Chiefly, they have been much less likely to draw the attention of Israeli soldiers or others at checkpoints, or at the entrance to a restaurant or bus or on the street. This enables them to move more deeply into their target, whether it be a building or a part of the city. As the success (degree of destruction) of a bombing mission depends upon how far within a structure a bomb is detonated, the ability to

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<sup>53</sup> Mia Bloom, *Bombshell* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 121. It is important to note that Bloom does argue from a Zionist perspective.

<sup>54</sup> Bloom, 121.

<sup>55</sup> Bloom, 121.

escape attention becomes extremely valuable to would-be bombers. Palestinian women blend into Israeli society by adopting Western styles of dress and physical appearance, or are able to conceal explosives beneath a billowing abaya or other loose clothing. The use of Western styles of dress is much less typical for Muslim women than it is for men, so a woman who appears to be Israeli or foreign is less likely to come under suspicion. Women can also aid the disguise of male accomplices by posing as part of a couple. Even if a woman does appear to be suspicious, physical searches of Palestinian women by soldiers are taboo, especially when performed in public, and generate a great deal of negative reaction within Palestinian society. Consequently, soldiers have often been reluctant to perform these searches. This cultural structure also aids women in gaining access to their target areas.

Additionally, women's action in suicide bombings has had a large impact on the image of Palestinian militant resistance groups and the amount of international attention given to the conflict in general. In complement to the Islam-based idea of jihad, there additionally exists a "cultural terrain that assumes Arab men [in particular] should act in decisive ways when the [Arab or Muslim] community is under attack."<sup>56</sup> Traditionally men are the ones who go to war to defend their land and people, and women are the ones who suffer stoically behind the scenes. Before women's participation became relatively common, Shaykh Ahmad Yassin, founder of Hamas, said that "the woman is the second defense line in the resistance to the occupation. She shelters the fugitive, loses the son, husband, and brother, bears the consequences of this, and faces starvation

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<sup>56</sup> Francis Hasso, "Discursive and political deployments by/of the 2002 Palestinian women suicide bombers/martyrs," *Feminist Review*, 81 (2005), 30.

and blockade.”<sup>57</sup> This paints a picture of Palestinian women as suffering in silence under attacks from Israel, unable to do anything but mourn the loss of the men in their community who fight bravely in defense of their land and people. This is far from the reality of the situation, especially during the second Intifada and at present. Women’s participation in militancy challenges the norms of duty and responsibility to the Palestinian cause because it changes who protects the community and who is being protected within it.

When Palestinian women have chosen or been recruited to carry out violent acts against Israel and Israelis, they have made a powerful impact. On average, a bombing mission carried out by a woman gets eight times as much press attention as a similar attack by a man.<sup>58</sup> This is extremely significant in a situation where the goal of such operations is to generate a reaction from others and convey a political message. Bloom says, “Young women who combat Israel by blowing up their bodies generate a powerful symbol that creates publicity throughout the world. The image of women defying tradition to sacrifice their lives for the Palestinian cause has drawn international attention to the despair of the Palestinian people.”<sup>59</sup> Beyond the shock value that suicide bombing generates in itself, the realization that a supposedly passive and victimized woman would be willing to blow herself up for a political cause is quite jarring for both insiders and outsiders to the conflict. Especially within Arab and Muslim culture, women are often limited from becoming public actors as opposed to being private actors within the home, and a woman undergoing this transformation from private to

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<sup>57</sup> Hasso, 31.

<sup>58</sup> Bloom, 23.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 22.

public can garner a lot of attention. A woman's action as a suicide bomber conveys her participation in a desperate situation and the lengths to which some Palestinians will go in their fight for autonomy. Militant groups who have recruited women to be bombers have capitalized on the impact that their participation creates by using the bombing as an opportunity to present a woman's martyrdom as both a triumph and a tragedy and to generate sympathy among participants and onlookers alike.

The inclusion of women in suicide bombing attacks also demonstrates that Palestinian militant groups are not all composed of religious fanatics who forbid the participation of women in the struggle for autonomy and a homeland, as stereotypes of such groups might suggest. It also indicates that they are changing their ideology to align more effectively with contemporary social and political pressures. Welcoming and celebrating the actions of female bombers serves a purpose that the same support of men's actions would not fulfill: making the plight of the Palestinians more relatable. If a woman is internationally recognized for detonating a bomb in Israel while a man would be only mentioned in passing, then it is very worthwhile to the Palestinian cause to use women to facilitate as much publicity and promotion of political goals as possible. Bloom maintains that "this is a political war, not a religious war, and the suicide bombings are being carefully planned and executed as part of a precise political strategy."<sup>60</sup> The usage of women is a definite part of this strategy, whether they are participating through their own initiative or are being actively recruited.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 24.

## **Palestinian women undertaking jihad**

Between 2002 and 2009, ninety-six Palestinian women attempted suicide attacks, but only eight of them were successful because most of the women were preempted before they could complete their missions.<sup>61</sup> A report by the Israel Security Agency states that between 2002 and 2009 there were 107 successful suicide bombings in Israel,<sup>62</sup> which when paired with the number of successful female bombers makes the fraction of bombings carried out by women just over 7% of the total.<sup>63</sup> This does not seem like a very high rate of representation, but the examples of several of these women's stories provide insight into the effect their successful missions had on their society and on other communities in the region.

During the second Intifada, Yasser Arafat was having difficulty mobilizing people loyal to his Fatah organization and inspiring them to give their lives for his cause.<sup>64</sup> He decided to turn to a largely untapped resource by stressing the importance of women's participation in the uprising. On the morning of January 27, 2002, he gave a speech at his compound in Ramallah to over a thousand Palestinian women in which he said, "You are my army of roses that will crush Israeli tanks . . . You are the hope of Palestine. You will liberate your husbands, fathers, and sons from oppression."<sup>65</sup> That afternoon (perhaps by coincidence, as she did not attend the speech), Wafa Idris became

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>62</sup> "Suicide Attacks," *Analysis of Attacks in the Last Decade 2000-2010*, Israel Security Agency (2010), 1, Accessed 04 February 2014, <http://www.shabak.gov.il/SiteCollectionImages/english/TerrorInfo/decade/SuicideAttacks.pdf>.

<sup>63</sup> It is uncertain whether the numbers reported by Bloom and the Israel Security Agency came from the same source. Therefore, conflating them may not produce a completely accurate representation of the number of Palestinian women who have carried out attacks. However, I wanted to provide the reader with some idea.

<sup>64</sup> Barbara Victor, *Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale, 2003), 18.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 19-20.

the first woman to carry out a suicide bombing mission in Israel. The plan was for her to dress in Western clothing and transport a bomb through the military checkpoint between Ramallah and Jerusalem, where she would transfer the weapon to her brother so he could carry out the detonation.<sup>66</sup> It is unclear whether Wafa chose to detonate the bomb herself or if an accident occurred, but the explosion resulted in the death of one Israeli and the injury of 131 others.<sup>67</sup> By helping to facilitate a bombing, she became one of the few women who had joined the militancy at that point.

Whatever the cause of the explosion, Wafa immediately became a revered figure in Palestine and the wider Arab community and set a precedent for other women. At the public memorial held on January 31<sup>st</sup>, around 3,000 people (mostly women) gathered to march through the streets of Ramallah, “chanting and carrying posters of other Palestinian heroes in a display of pride and joy.”<sup>68</sup> Her photograph was displayed in the main square, ceremonies in her honor were held across the West Bank and Gaza, and there were ads in newspapers that praised her bravery.<sup>69</sup> In her eulogy at the symbolic funeral held by Fatah, a council member said, “Wafa’s martyrdom restored honor to the national role of the Palestinian woman, sketched the most wonderful pictures of heroism in the long battle for national liberation.”<sup>70</sup> Her actions inspired other young women to follow in her footsteps.

In the three months following Wafa’s death, three other women carried out their own bombing missions in the Jerusalem area: Daren Abu ‘Aisheh, an excellent student

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

and devout Muslim; Ayat al-Akhras, an eighteen year old girl; and Andalib Takatka, whose two female cousins had failed in their own mission. Ayat received the most public recognition after the completion of her bombing. In her pre-operation video, she admonished, “I say to the Arab leaders, Stop sleeping. Stop failing to fulfill your duty. Shame on the Arab armies who are sitting and watching the girls of Palestine fighting while they are asleep.”<sup>71</sup> Her words were significant in an environment where men on both sides of the conflict were and are the ones who do almost all of the negotiating and decision making, and were in her eyes inadequate to the task.

After her attack and the spring 2002 Israeli siege of the West Bank, public displays of support for militancy increased among women and girls throughout the region. Such displays were most notable in Egypt where women praised their Palestinian counterparts as heroes and threw stones at police guarding the Israeli consulate, and in Saudi Arabia where women passionately declared their support for the Palestinian cause in demonstrations, the largest of these encompassing about 1,000 people.<sup>72</sup> By becoming suicide bombers, these Palestinian women and those who followed after them inserted themselves into an arena dominated by men, and demonstrated one way for other women to escape the marginality they often experienced in national and regional politics.

### *Leila Khaled*

It is pertinent to include Leila Khaled in a discussion of influential female Palestinian militants because she was perhaps the main forerunner for the women who

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<sup>71</sup> Hasso, 29.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 35.

undertook missions after her, especially during the second Intifada. Although Khaled participated in militancy years before Idris and her counterparts, it is useful to discuss her last because she serves as an example of a woman who, although she has participated in militant activities, does not believe that suicide bombings are a beneficial way for women to participate in the public sphere. She also serves as a bridge between militant activity and political participation because of her roles in government later in life.

While carrying out her missions, Khaled's goal was to make a statement and gain leverage for her organization, not to kill people. Her motivation for undertaking acts of militancy was different from that of Idris and those who came after her, but Khaled's impact was no less public or significant. During the Black September civil war with Jordan that began in 1969 and determined whether the Palestinian Liberation Organization or the Hashemite monarchy would rule the kingdom, Khaled took part in two plane hijackings as an agent of the communist-based group the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). The PFLP has come to be the second largest faction of the PLO after Fatah, and exercises a great deal of influence in Palestinian governance.

In 1969 Khaled, a beautiful woman in her early twenties, hijacked an Israeli aircraft on its way from Tel Aviv to London and diverted it to Damascus, where it was blown up after all the passengers had disembarked.<sup>73</sup> Khaled escaped after she was put on the same bus as the victims.<sup>74</sup> In 1970 Khaled wore a blond wig and boarded a TWA flight with two hand grenades concealed in her bra, with the goal of again destroying a

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<sup>73</sup> Rosemarie Skaine, *Female Suicide Bombers* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2006), 59.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

plane that had been emptied of passengers.<sup>75</sup> The mission was unsuccessful because before the hijacking could take place, Khaled was subdued and her male accomplice was killed, and she was arrested by British authorities.<sup>76</sup> Her release was negotiated in a hostage exchange after she had spent twenty-eight days in jail.<sup>77</sup>

Although Khaled did not kill anyone, she was and continues to be hailed as a symbol of armed struggle and of the Palestinian cause. She became a powerful symbol for the PFLP as well as a long-time active member of their Central Committee, claiming a spot in the Palestinian political arena as well as using her influence to speak publicly around the world about the Palestinian cause. She is immortalized in numerous portraits such as a huge mural on one of the Israeli barriers near Bethlehem, and her life is profiled in the film “Hijacker—The Life of Leila Khaled.” She believes that the only way for Palestinians to claim their land is through armed struggle, and that both men and women should struggle equally because all Palestinians suffer equally under Israeli occupation.<sup>78</sup> However, perhaps surprisingly, her opinion on the use of female suicide bombers is critical. In a 2002 interview with journalist Barbara Victor, she says, “When religious leaders say that women who make these actions are finally equal to men, I have a problem. Everyone is equal in death . . . I would rather see women equal to men in life.”<sup>79</sup> Her words speak to the issue that Palestinian women face in their endeavors to make a difference in the trajectory of the conflict.

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<sup>75</sup> Victor, *Army of roses: inside the world of Palestinian women suicide bombers*, 62.

<sup>76</sup> Skaine, 59.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Victor, *Army of roses: inside the world of Palestinian women suicide bombers*, 63.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 64.

It is very important that women have been publicly called upon to struggle in the name of the Palestinian cause, where previously they seem to have had a more marginalized role. “Palestinian women are increasingly involved in all levels of terrorist activity, everything from scouting targets and smuggling guns and explosives to being suicide bombers.”<sup>80</sup> But why are women seen as so inspiring by authority figures and the wider community mainly after they participate in acts of violence? According to Bloom, although women’s involvement in militant organizations worldwide is usually that of a sacrificial lamb and marginalized member of a movement, Palestinian groups are a notable exception. She asserts, “Palestinian women are acknowledged as the equal of men in the steadfastness of their opposition to the Occupation . . . The increasing number of female bombers shows how proactive Palestinian women really are.”<sup>81</sup> Becoming a suicide bomber may demonstrate proactivity, but these bombings have not solved the conflict, made Israel more likely to give up its demands of a homeland, or given women more power in decision-making processes. As Leila Khaled said, the scope of women’s proactivity in becoming leaders and ending the conflict is better demonstrated by what they are able to achieve in life instead of in death.

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<sup>80</sup> Bloom, 128.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 137.

## **Making an impact through non-violent and political opposition**

Although militant activities are often more news-worthy than grassroots activism and diplomatic negotiations, this does not mean that non-violent avenues of conflict negotiation and resolution are not being pursued. There is a long history of women's participation in mobilizing their communities to both strengthen and support Palestinian society as well as women's engagement in the political sphere at low and high levels. As demonstrated by the disparity between the amount of information available about female suicide bombers when compared to the information available about female Palestinian politicians, general knowledge about women's participation in the political sphere is limited. However, Palestinian women have made important non-violent contributions to their society and to the Palestinian struggle from before the first Intifada to the present.

### **Women's activism before and during the first Intifada**

While many historical accounts cite the First Intifada as the emergence of Palestinian women's political activism, University of Kansas political science professor Deborah J. Gerner asserts that women were making important political contributions to the national struggle many years earlier. In the 1920s and 1930s Palestinian women (mostly urban, upper class, well educated, and from activist families) opposed the influx of European Zionists and also advocated for social welfare concerns in their communities.<sup>82</sup> By the mid-1930s, women's associations were engaging in

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<sup>82</sup> Deborah J. Gerner, "Mobilizing for Nationalist Agendas," in *From patriarchy to empowerment: women's participation, movements, and rights in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia*, ed. Valentine M. Moghadam (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 2007), 20.

demonstrations, fundraising for prisoners and their families, and smuggling and providing arms for the 1936 Arab Revolt. They raised regional and international support for the Palestinian national cause and participated in women's conferences in many locations.<sup>83</sup> After Britain suppressed the Arab Revolt and then the UN Partition Plan enabled the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the political activity of both Palestinian women and men dropped off sharply. When Israel declared independence, forces from Jordan, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq invaded the new state. An already declining Palestinian society was further decimated by the fighting, and a staggering number of Palestinians left or were expelled from their homes. This period is known among the majority of Arabs as the Nakba, or catastrophe.

After the Palestinian Nakba, Palestinian women's groups both within Israel and the Occupied Territories as well as exiled without were forced to return to activities more typical to women's associations in the past, such as establishing a home for orphaned Palestinian children or a women's self-help association.<sup>84</sup> Another change came in the level of conservatism practiced in Palestinian society regarding the public behavior of women. One woman who had been active in the Arab Revolt commented, "in the [refugee] camps the Palestinian male became ultrastrict, even fanatic about the honor of his women. Perhaps this was because he had lost everything that gave his life meaning and honor was the only possession remaining to him."<sup>85</sup> One of the only parts of life that Palestinian men could control was the behavior of the women in their

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<sup>83</sup> Gerner, 21.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 21-22.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 22.

families, and thus new restrictions for what was acceptable for women came to the forefront.

In 1965 people involved in the various Palestinian women's organizations formed the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW), which although independent when first established was quickly commandeered to function as a part of the PLO and was thus strongly influenced by the male-dominated PLO leadership.<sup>86</sup> After the June War in 1967, Palestinians in Gaza began a three-year insurrection that was finally crushed by Israeli military leader Ariel Sharon.<sup>87</sup> The existing charitable organizations formed a framework that women used to undertake resistance activities, especially as arrests and deportations had resulted in a vacuum of male leadership. These women also found themselves taking over the jobs of males in their families who had been jailed or expelled.

By the early 1970s a peaceful resistance movement had replaced the failed armed resistance in Gaza and the West Bank, and this coincided with the Women's Committees Movement which was facilitated by women from all of the major PLO factions.<sup>88</sup> There were women's branches of the DFLP, the Palestine People's Party, the PFLP, and Fatah. "Each organization included the political emancipation and formal equality of Palestinian women in employment and education as part of its official mandate . . . At least initially, none addressed deeper social and cultural issues explicitly."<sup>89</sup> These committees focused on democracy, gender, and class concerns, as well as making an effort to network internationally with other feminist groups and

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 22-23.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 24.

activists through international conferences. However, involvement in this type of activity did not directly translate to involvement at the forefront of the Palestinian political sphere, and women found that although they were technically part of the political and intellectual process, the men were still the ones making the decisions in the end.<sup>90</sup> This truth led the women's committees to stop focusing on the highest levels of publicly-visible politics and to instead prioritize local, grassroots efforts to enhance women's political participation at the lower levels.

During the first Intifada, the mobilization and sustainment of the movement was brought about by mass-based organizations including those made up of students, workers, professionals, and women. Women's committees were especially effective at meeting the needs of their communities; these organizations "tried to integrate political, social, and cultural features and addressed both the aspirations and the concrete needs of the population."<sup>91</sup> Thus, women's organizations were able to serve as avenues to sustain the intifada by promoting a unified social and political consciousness in the people they served. Women themselves were also intimately involved in all aspects of the resistance at the local level. "In the first Intifada, the site of struggle was the community, its streets, neighborhoods and homes, the 'stone' was the main weapon in defending the dignity of the community, and women participated in direct confrontations with the Israeli army, whether as demonstrators, stone-throwers or protectors and rescuers of young men."<sup>92</sup> These women were sources of strength and unification for their

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>91</sup> Penny Johnson and Eileen Kuttab, "Where have all the women (and men) gone? Reflections on gender and the second Palestinian Intifada," *Feminist Review*, 69 (Winter 2001), 27, JSTOR, Accessed 21 March 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1395628>.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 31.

communities and their participation in acts of resistance was integral to the organization of those activities.

The period from 1978 to 1991 was dominated by wide-ranging grassroots and non-violent organization of women and girls. After the 1993 Oslo Accords the focus of most women's organizations shifted from mobilization to state-building through the creation and maintenance of informal institutions.<sup>93</sup> With the second Intifada and a then-solidified Palestinian state government, there existed an elite leadership that was not responsible for specific constituencies but rather got its legitimacy from "the people" for its symbolic role as guardians of national liberation."<sup>94</sup> This leadership also largely replaced the political roles of informal institutions, which continues to limit the amount of participation people and particularly women are able to have in governance because only a certain number of people can be elected, and only a small percentage of this are women. The mass activism of women's organizations in the first Intifada has been replaced by "an NGO model of lobbying, advocacy and workshop-style educational and developmental activities,"<sup>95</sup> although these organizations also continue to take part in some protests and demonstrations. This type of community action is exemplified by the grassroots organizations described in detail below, as they do most of their work through capacity-building. There seems to be a disconnect between what grassroots organizations want to achieve and what they are actually able to do: a problem which may be abated by the enhancement of women's greater participation in high-level politics.

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<sup>93</sup> Hasso, 34.

<sup>94</sup> Johnson et al., 27.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 25.

The international donor community promotes gender issues in a limited context of state building through community-based services instead of in the context of a fight for independence and true democracy and progression toward equality.<sup>96</sup> This may be out of practicality, because there are pressing problems that face Palestinians such as their lack of access to basic resources and services. CARE is an NGO which promotes the economic empowerment of women, but focuses its effort on meeting people's basic needs and "strengthening the capacity of local organizations to support their neighbors in times of crisis, and to act as hubs of social, cultural, and economic support."<sup>97</sup> The World Bank funds projects for water supply and sewage system improvement, improving teacher education, and capacity-building for Palestinian economic and regulatory institutions.<sup>98</sup> USAID has implemented projects for bolstering democracy through civic participation and local government infrastructure, but neither of them specifically address women's political participation or gender equality.<sup>99</sup> All of these projects involve helping Palestinians (including women) become self-sufficient and involved in their government, but they do not focus on encouraging increasing the number of women in places of power or on the issues that women face when trying to become politically active.

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<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>97</sup> "CARE's work in West Bank and Gaza," CARE (2014), Accessed 7 May 2014, <http://care.org/emergencies/west-bank-gaza-crisis>.

<sup>98</sup> "Projects," *World Bank* (2014), Accessed 8 May 2014, <http://search.worldbank.org/projects?qterm=palestin&projname=&id=>.

<sup>99</sup> "Civic Participation Program" and "Local Government and Infrastructure," *USAID* (2014), Accessed 8 May 2014, <http://map.usaid.gov/>.

## Contemporary grassroots organizations

Many local Palestinian NGOs and CBOs (charity-based organizations) operate alongside their international counterparts. While the political impact of modern grassroots women's organizations may be small or hard to measure, they nevertheless continue to exist and provide valuable services to their communities. It is difficult to find extensive information about most of the existing organizations because many of them probably do not have websites, and even the ones with websites are difficult to locate. For the purposes of this project I have chosen to focus mainly on organizations that maintain websites in both Arabic and English, because this gives them the capability to be more publically visible and reach a wider international audience.

Examples of organizations with Arabic-only websites do deserve mention, and they include the organization Faten, which was established in 1999 and provides microloans to Palestinians who want to start small businesses, especially women.<sup>100</sup> It has a special focus on helping women to become economically independent and therefore able to make more of their own decisions.<sup>101</sup> Another organization is *Jamaiya annahda annisa'iya* (Women's Renaissance Society), which was established in 1925 in Ramallah and strives to raise the status of women in social, cultural, and economic aspects.<sup>102</sup> A third is *Jamaiya wafaq li-raiya al-mer'a wa attefl* (Wafaq Society for

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<sup>100</sup> "Faten litamwil al-masharia al-saghira [Faten for the financing of small projects]," *Faten*, (2014), Accessed 7 May 2014,

[http://www.faten.org/ar\\_page.php?id=CSeJ32RgbKa35187A9A8BpgvAE0&m\\_id=9](http://www.faten.org/ar_page.php?id=CSeJ32RgbKa35187A9A8BpgvAE0&m_id=9).

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> "Al-safha al-ra'isiya [Main page]," *Jamaiya annahda annisa'iya [Women's Renaissance Society]* (2014), Accessed 7 May 2014,

[http://www.alnahda.org.ps/nahda/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=frontpage&Itemid=5&lang=ar](http://www.alnahda.org.ps/nahda/index.php?option=com_content&view=frontpage&Itemid=5&lang=ar).

Women and Child Care), which was established in January of 2010.<sup>103</sup> Although it has a strong focus on women as victims of violence, it also promotes the principles of equality and women's rights and participation.<sup>104</sup> These organizations and others like them may not have the international outreach capability that groups which employ English-speakers have, but they have many of the same goals and are just as intimately involved with their communities.

The four organizations introduced below (The Palestinian Working Woman Society for Development, The Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy, Women's Affairs Center, and Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counseling) all have lofty goals for the political integration of women, but their first priority is to provide opportunities to women for education and growth, independence, and human rights. Their existence and work toward changing political policy does not necessarily indicate actual progress toward greater involvement for women in the political sphere, but their work is legitimate and represents an important step in the direction of greater participation for women.

*The Palestinian Working Woman Society for Development (PWWS)*

The Palestinian Working Woman Society for Development was established in 1981 as the Union of Palestinian Working Women Committees, which was affiliated with the PFLP.<sup>105</sup> "The organization believes that liberating women is connected directly with ending the occupation and establishing a full Palestinian democratic

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<sup>103</sup> "An al-Jamaiya [About the Society]," *Jamaiya wafaq li-raiya al-mer'a wa attefl [Wafaq Society for Women and Child Care]* (2011), Accessed 7 May 2014, <http://www.wefaqociety.ps/ar/Details.php>.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Gerner, 24.

sovereign state.”<sup>106</sup> This is a strong and encouraging stance: one that shows how determined Palestinian women are to achieve political equality. In one of their brochures, PWWSD states that the only way to achieve the desired degree of development in women’s rights is if it is facilitated by a strong political will to eliminate all forms of discrimination, which will in turn enable social, economic and political progress both at the community and at high levels.<sup>107</sup>

One of the programs the organization cites as its most important is the Women’s Empowerment in Decision Making Processes Program, which was initiated to help raise women’s awareness of their rights and to help their ability to protect and utilize these rights in public and private life. This outreach involves women helping other women, including educational lectures, workshops, and experience exchanges between women’s groups locally, regionally, and globally. These educational opportunities develop women’s knowledge of their rights, help change gender stereotypes, and build women’s leadership capacities.<sup>108</sup> In this program PWWSD also gives special attention to female members of local decision-making bodies and other authorities in order to ensure that they are provided with adequate support. This is often achieved by forming shadow councils that back up the elected women in local councils, and by monitoring these local authorities to ensure their commitment to the principles of gender equality and respect for women’s rights.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> “Palestinian Working Woman Society for Development,” *PWWSD* (2013), 3, Accessed 24 February 2014, [http://www.pwwsd.org/media/cms\\_page\\_media/56/English%20Brochure.pdf](http://www.pwwsd.org/media/cms_page_media/56/English%20Brochure.pdf).

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

The organization has a variety of publications: a radio program called Through Women's Eyes that discusses issues related to women and aims to create a public opinion that is supportive of women's issues; a periodical magazine called Yanabee' Magazine that analyzes social, developmental, and political issues from a woman's perspective and creates social dialogue about women's status and their social and national roles; and research and study findings that contribute to developing a progressive discourse in the community.<sup>110</sup> Further efforts of the PWWSD go toward combating domestic violence and abuse of women and girls, and helping women get the tools and skills they need to be economically successful and independent.

*The Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy (MIFTAH)*

MIFTAH was established in 1998 by Hanan Ashrawi, who continues to act as the organization's director. The organization aims to empower effective leadership in all components of Palestinian society and to spread knowledge of the Palestinian cause and narrative globally to both official and popular entities and decision-makers.<sup>111</sup> While the organization is not solely focused on women's political participation, it does include this component as a key part of its mission, along with supporting the rights and political involvement of Palestinian youth. The project listed first on its website under programs and projects is one for empowering Palestinian women in leadership, which provides capacity-building and training sessions to young female activists in advocacy and issue-based campaigning, alliance building and networking, political

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>111</sup> "About Us," *MIFTAH* (2013), Accessed 24 February 2014, <http://www.miftah.org/AboutUs.cfm>.

communication, and audio-visual media skills.<sup>112</sup> The project also focuses on holding a series of roundtable discussions that create communication networks between the activists and the people in charge, enabling youth and especially women to express their needs and points of view.<sup>113</sup> This project was designed to assist groups of young Palestinian women with being successful in community activism and aligns with the organization's goal of supporting effective leadership at all levels of Palestinian governance. MIFTAH also stresses the importance of implementing UN Resolution 1325, a measure that advocates for the wider participation of women in all levels of government and is discussed in greater detail below.

#### *Women's Affairs Center (WAC)*

The Women's Affairs Center is a Palestinian NGO established in 1991 and based in Gaza that advocates for women's rights and gender equality. Its programs include capacity-building for women, research about political and societal issues related to women, and advocacy and communication about the problems Palestinian women face in working toward equality. Some of the workshops the organization has coordinated cover topics like preparing women to start their own small business and preparing female college graduates to enter the labor market. WAC also targets men in its outreach, holding workshops that raise awareness of women and gender issues in Palestinian society. The organization issues briefings on its website concerning topics of importance such as how women's issues are addressed in the media and the proposal of

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<sup>112</sup> "Supporting Young Palestinian Women Leadership: Promoting Women's Voices Project Brief," *MIFTAH* (January 2013), 1, Accessed 24 February 2014, <http://www.miftah.org/Programmes/Briefing/SYWLV4CEn.pdf>.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

creating a unified document about Palestinian women's issues for the use of researchers and other interested parties. WAC also publishes a magazine every few months called "Al Ghayda'a" that has covered important topics including women's political participation, women with disabilities, and how the Palestinian Nakba has affected women.

*Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counseling (WCLAC)*

The WCLAC is a Palestinian non-governmental organization that seeks to develop Palestinian society through promoting the principles of gender equality and social justice. It was established in Jerusalem in 1991 and has special consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council.<sup>114</sup> Though the organization ideologically champions women's rights in general, it focuses specifically on combating violence against women within the Palestinian community as well as the effects on women of increasing militarization due to the Israeli occupation. "To this end, WCLAC acts not only to reverse historical negligence, negative cultural legacies and discriminatory social attitudes towards Palestinian women, but also, to address the needs of women victimized by Israel's violent actions in the occupied Palestinian Territories."<sup>115</sup>

The main strategic goals of WCLAC are to help protect and empower women who are experiencing discrimination and violence, and to promote women's rights by opposing negative practices against women. WCLAC maintains a documentation and advocacy unit which promotes the adoption of legislation that adheres to international legal and human rights standards and protects and empowers women. Some of the legal

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<sup>114</sup> "About Us," *Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling* (2014), Accessed 9 February 2014, <<http://www.hclac.org>>.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

issues they focus on include abortion, polygamy, equal legal status between men and women, divorce, and marriage age. They also actively document and work against femicide (also known as honor killing), as the extent of the problem is not widely tracked and publicized. In addition to this activism, WCLAC's main work is to provide legal services including legal advice, court representation, and social counseling to mediate situations involving women and families and help women be empowered to make the best decisions for themselves and their families.<sup>116</sup>

The organization also runs an around-the-clock shelter in the West Bank for domestic abuse victims that is formally designated by the Palestinian Authority as the primary resource for women in emergency situations. The organization works closely with the Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Women's Affairs in the PA to increase its own capacity and to promote the growth of services available to women such as safe houses and shelters.<sup>117</sup> Finally, WCLAC raises awareness about women's rights and issues through holding workshops for both men and women in Palestinian communities that address topics of local importance.

### **Women in high-level political roles**

Although most of them are relatively unknown to the rest of the world, there have been a number of influential women who were and are involved alongside their male counterparts at the highest levels of Palestinian politics. It is important to recognize their achievements and the challenges they and other aspiring female

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<sup>116</sup> "Service Unit," *Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counseling* (2014), Accessed 10 February 2014, <<http://www.hclac.org>>.

<sup>117</sup> "Capacity Building Unit," *Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counseling*, (2014), Accessed 10 February 2014, <<http://www.hclac.org>>.

politicians face in working toward equal participation. These women have laid a foundation of leadership that other women can continue to build upon.

*Samiha Khalil*

Samiha Khalil was born in 1923 in a Palestinian village on the West Bank called Anabta. She married at age seventeen and during the 1948 Nakba she and her family became refugees and were forced to flee to Lebanon.<sup>118</sup> Although she graduated from high school at the same time as one of her sons in 1964, what she lacked in formal and higher education she made up for in passionate nationalism.<sup>119</sup>

During the first elections in January of 1996 for the president of the PA and the members of the Legislative Council, 672 candidates competed for the eighty-eight seats on the Council. Twenty-eight of these candidates were women, and five women were elected.<sup>120</sup> Samiha Khalil was the only candidate to run against Yasser Arafat in the presidential election, and she managed to garner ten percent of the vote.<sup>121</sup> Even this small fraction is significant since Arafat was considered the father of the Palestinian resistance and had been an influential leader for decades preceding the election. Prior to the election, Khalil was a member of the Palestinian National Council, but did not

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<sup>118</sup> "Samiha Khalil," *American Friends Service Committee* (30 March 2010) Accessed 17 February 2014, <http://afsc.org/story/samiha-khalil>.

<sup>119</sup> John Battersby, "Arafat's challenger serves as Palestinian role model," *Christian Science Monitor* (04 January 1996), 6, Academic Search Premier, Accessed 16 February 2014, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com.libproxy.uoregon.edu/ehost/detail?sid=71e1ed19-6f17-4ce1-96a1-4eea1cd9ea52%40sessionmgr111&vid=1&hid=125&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWWhvc3QtbG12ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#db=aph&AN=9602050452>.

<sup>120</sup> "Palestine," *UN Division for the Advancement of Women* (30 April 2004), 4, Accessed 17 February 2014, <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/Review/responses/PALESTINE-English.pdf>.

<sup>121</sup> Daniel Schorr, "Palestinians voted for their own participation," *Christian Science Monitor* (26 January 1996), 19, Academic Search Premier, Accessed 16 February 2014 <http://web.b.ebscohost.com.libproxy.uoregon.edu/ehost/detail?sid=41b5acd8-94e6-40e2-a90e-e4f3fcfe81d5%40sessionmgr112&vid=1&hid=125&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWWhvc3QtbG12ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#db=aph&AA=9607080704>.

belong to any of the factions of the PLO.<sup>122</sup> One article covering the election asserted that “many Palestinians say just the fact that she is posing an alternative to Mr. Arafat furthers democratic principles among Palestinians.”<sup>123</sup> The same article quotes Khalil herself as saying, “I hope to win but, if I don't, it will be enough for me that I raised my voice high as a Palestinian woman, demanding the fulfillment of the dreams of Palestinians at home and abroad. I believe that women, like men, are fully entitled to lead the Palestinian people.”<sup>124</sup> She did not win, but her presence as the only competitor against Arafat shows that it was and is possible for women to compete with men at the highest level of Palestinian politics.

Interestingly, while Khalil cared deeply about the welfare of Palestinian women, she was described in one memorial account as a “reluctant feminist” and as promoting traditional Islamic and family values as more important than political equality between women and men.<sup>125</sup> She considered women to be the building blocks of Palestinian society and wanted to help women, and especially female heads of households, to become self-sufficient and eventually able to engage with the building of Palestinian society on a political level. Khalil was a long-time grassroots activist, founding her own aid organization called Ina'ash al-Usra (revival of the family) in 1965 in her garage with a budget of \$100 and a goal to help the children and wives of those imprisoned or killed

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<sup>122</sup> Battersby, 6.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ghada Talhami, “In Memoriam,” *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 21.2 (1999), iii, Academic Search Premier, Accessed 16 February 2014, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com.libproxy.uoregon.edu/ehost/detail?sid=8d2c5d1b-8a8b-4010-a029-788be39bf3c8%40sessionmgr198&vid=1&hid=125&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWZWhvc3QtbG12ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#db=aph&AN=2211292>.

in resistance against Israel.<sup>126</sup> Her charity continues to provide vocational training for thousands of women, self-help commercial enterprises, assistance for university students, and a range of educational and welfare activities for children.<sup>127</sup> Though it came from modest beginnings, Ina'ash al-Usra has grown to have a \$6 million annual budget and has positively impacted the lives of an impressive number of Palestinian families.<sup>128</sup> She was also active before and during the first Intifada in its organization and in acts passive resistance and civil disobedience, which led to her being jailed six times by Israel.<sup>129</sup> She continued to be politically and socially active until her death in 1999 of natural causes.

#### *Hanan Ashrawi*

Hanan Ashrawi is arguably the most well-known Palestinian woman worldwide, and she has accomplished much in her political, academic, and activist careers outside her role in the PLC. Ashrawi was born to a prominent Christian Palestinian family in Ramallah in 1946. She was majoring in physics and attending the American University in Beirut during the Six Day War in 1967 where Israel was victorious, and as a result was counted as an absentee and not allowed to return home for five years.<sup>130</sup> After the war, she was active in pursuing Palestinian rights and in 1969 attended her first conference of the General Union of Palestinian Students, where she was the only woman and was chosen as the spokesperson for the Lebanese chapter.<sup>131</sup> This was also

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Battersby, 6.

<sup>128</sup> "Samiha Khalil."

<sup>129</sup> Battersby, 6.

<sup>130</sup> Barbara Victor, *A Voice of Reason: Hanan Ashrawi and Peace in the Middle East* (London: Fourth Estate, 1995), 57.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 59.

the first time that a woman had represented the PLO's interests, and it gave her experience with debating issues in the pressured environment of the many conflicting and diverse factions that are present within the PLO.<sup>132</sup> After she graduated from AUB in 1969, she attended the University of Virginia and received her doctorate in English and comparative literature in 1970. While working on her PhD and living in Virginia, she was exposed to civil rights activism and the push for women's rights in the United States and this experience fueled and inspired her in her own endeavors in Palestine.<sup>133</sup>

In the years after her 1973 return to Palestine she was a dean at Birzeit University, where she and many of her students were fiercely active in the fight for independence, organizing protests and marches.<sup>134</sup> In April of 1988, a few short months after the beginning of the first Intifada, she was invited in her capacity as Dean to appear on ABC's "Nightline" and participate in a panel discussion between three Israelis and three Palestinians about the problems that faced Israel on its fortieth anniversary as a state.<sup>135</sup> She dazzled the world with her eloquence and her presentation of the plight faced by the Palestinians.<sup>136</sup> Ashrawi was able to bring the Palestinian side of the story to international attention and presented a new image of Palestinians that was one of people who were willing to negotiate and not just participate in acts of terror.<sup>137</sup>

Barbara Victor describes her performance:

With eloquence and dignity Hanan told the Palestinian story in a language of tears. With clarity and composure she lowered the volume of disparity and dispute among the many diverse factions within the PLO.

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 142.

Never once did she falter in her presentation of her people's side of the struggle: injustice when it came to the Palestinians, indulgence when it came to the Israelis. Within hours Hanan became the official voice of the Palestinian people, their most effective weapon since Yasir Arafat had embraced terrorism in 1965.<sup>138</sup>

After this, her political career took off and she served as the official spokesperson for the PLO from 1991-1993. During this time she was a key participant in both the Madrid Peace Conference and Oslo Accords delegations.<sup>139</sup> This influence gave her opportunities to speak around the world and garner support for the Palestinian side of the conflict, and to continue to present a new image of the PLO as a diplomatic and not a terrorist organization.

In 1993 she resigned from her position as spokesperson due to what she saw as the political corruption of Yasser Arafat and his organization.<sup>140</sup> In 1996 she was elected to serve on the PLC and became the Minister of Higher Education and Research. In 1998 she founded the Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy (MIFTAH) which seeks to end the Israeli occupation on the basis of humanitarian rather than ideological or historical grounds.<sup>141</sup> In 2001, she was appointed as the spokeswoman for the Arab League with special responsibility for Palestinians.<sup>142</sup> Ashrawi is the author of multiple publications about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the peace process, and continues to be an activist and sought-after speaker around the world, especially in the United States.

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>141</sup> "About Us," *MIFTAH* (2013), Accessed 24 February 2014, <http://www.miftah.org/AboutUs.cfm>.

<sup>142</sup> Jamie Chosak, David Jacobson, Faysal Itani, and Donna Doss, "Handbook of Palestinian Legislative Council Members," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy* (Washington, DC: 2007), 140, Accessed 17 February 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/html/pdf/PLCHandbook.pdf>.

*Isra al Modallal*

A second woman in a prominent spokesperson position is Isra al Modallal. She was appointed in November 2013 as the first female spokesperson of Hamas, becoming the public face of what was until recently the Hamas government in Gaza.<sup>143</sup> Al Modallal was born and raised in Egypt as the daughter of Palestinian refugees.<sup>144</sup> She is twenty-three and a media studies graduate of the Islamic University in Gaza, which has close ties with Hamas. She also studied in the UK as a teenager and is a divorced mother, a status which she says has given her freedom as her ex-husband helps to care for their daughter.<sup>145</sup> “She wears a traditional headscarf along with a touch of makeup, listens to non-Islamic music and will on occasion shake hands with members of the opposite sex, behavior usually frowned on by Hamas.”<sup>146</sup> She is decidedly different from the average Hamas representative.

Al Modallal’s experiences as a journalist and working as a television reporter have prepared her for the job of liaising between Hamas and the international media.<sup>147</sup> “She plans to launch Twitter and Facebook campaigns in the near future to promote Hamas and its policies,”<sup>148</sup> and also plans to focus on human rights and humanitarian

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<sup>143</sup> Harriet Sherwood, “Yorkshire-educated woman becomes first female Hamas spokesperson,” *The Guardian* (7 November 2013), Accessed 7 May 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/07/yorkshire-educated-woman-female-hamas-spokesperson>.

<sup>144</sup> Robert Tait, “British-educated woman becomes first female spokesperson for Hamas,” *The Telegraph* (11 November 2013), Accessed 7 May 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/israel/10442055/British-educated-woman-becomes-first-female-spokesman-for-Hamas.html>.

<sup>145</sup> Emily Harris, “In a ‘brilliant’ move, Hamas puts a woman out front,” NPR (22 March 2014), Accessed 7 May 2014, <http://www.wbur.org/npr/292794493/in-a-brilliant-move-hamas-puts-a-woman-out-front>.

<sup>146</sup> Tait.

<sup>147</sup> “Hamas appoints first spokeswoman,” *Al Jazeera* (11 November 2013), Accessed 7 May 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/11/hamas-appoints-first-female-spokesperson-2013111013586831738.html>.

<sup>148</sup> Sherwood.

issues facing the Palestinian people. According to Al Jazeera, “she takes a slightly different line than many Hamas spokesmen. She refers to ‘Israel’ rather than the ‘Zionist entity.’ She does not consider herself a Hamas loyalist but says she would be equally willing to work as spokeswoman for the [previously] rival Palestinian government in the West Bank.”<sup>149</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, she is reported to not identify with any political faction. She says, “I am a Palestinian activist who loves her country.”<sup>150</sup>

“According to Ihab al-Ghusain, head of the government media office in Gaza, Modallal's appointment was part of a program to develop dialogue with the west, to explain the Palestinian issues and Hamas's positions.”<sup>151</sup> He also said that it additionally “falls within the framework of strengthening and emphasizing the role of Palestinian women.”<sup>152</sup> This is an interesting step for Hamas, an organization which is seen by the West as one of terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism. Changing the organization’s image is very important for garnering international support for the Palestinian cause, as is the integration of women into its ranks. While al Modallal does not have decision-making power within Hamas, she does have the power of shaping the way the rest of the world will see the organization, and that is notable.

#### *Women in the Palestinian Legislative Council*

At present, there are a modest number of women participating in the highest levels of Palestinian politics. Within the PLC most parliamentarians can be divided into

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<sup>149</sup> “Hamas appoints first spokeswoman.”

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Sherwood.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

the categories of Hamas-affiliated, Fatah-affiliated, and Independent. The female members of the PLC are split fairly evenly between the two largest factions Hamas and Fatah, with a few remaining Independent. The numbers of female participants have risen from the five women who were chosen during the first elections in 1996 to seventeen in 2006, but seventeen of the 132 members (about 12%) is still not a very high number, especially when taking into account the fact that only two of these women are actually members of the cabinet and the PNC Executive Committee. Additionally, the rest of the women are general parliamentarians elected from party lists, and none of them occupy the seats allotted for the official representatives of each constituency (the official representative of Gaza, for example). These women are wives, mothers, scholars, activists, and professionals in many fields. They come from diverse backgrounds but all have in common the desire to form a better future for Palestine and to ensure that women will continue to be able to occupy political leadership positions.

Hamas lays claim to Mariam Mahmoud Saleh, who as the Minister of Women's Affairs is one of the only female cabinet members of the PLC. She possesses a Doctorate in Islamic Law and is one of the few Hamas members who has never been taken into custody by Israel.<sup>153</sup> Another parliamentarian, Jameela Abdallah al-Shanti, holds an English degree and has spent twenty years teaching English around the Arab world, is a lecturer at the Islamic University of Gaza, and heads the Women's Activities Division of the Palestine Islamic Movement.<sup>154</sup> A third member, named Sameera Abdullah Halaykah, holds a BA in Islamic Studies and is a journalist for two Hamas-

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<sup>153</sup> Chosak et al, 22.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 11.

affiliated journals. Her husband and son are imprisoned by Israel.<sup>155</sup> Unsurprisingly for Hamas members, a few of the women openly present militant views. Houda Naim al-Qrenawi, an activist in the Muslim women movement who was born in a refugee camp, said, “As a woman and an MP there are areas I want to concentrate on but that does not mean we have forgotten our struggle for our homeland, and preparing our children to die when the homeland calls for it.”<sup>156</sup> Similar views were expressed by Mariam Muhammed Farhat, who said, “I encouraged all my sons to die a martyr’s death, and I wish this even for myself.”<sup>157</sup> Three of her six sons were killed during the second Intifada, and she appeared on television in 2002 encouraging one of her sons before he carried out a mission in Gaza. Her electoral platform is the continuation of armed struggle, strengthening Islamic culture, compulsory hijab-wearing for Palestinian women, and a fight against poverty.<sup>158</sup>

The female Fatah members outnumber those of Hamas by a few. One standout is Intisar Moustafa al-Wazir, who is the widow of former PLO military chief Khalil al-Wazir and a founding member of the General Union of Palestinian Women. She has been a member of the PLC since 1974 and serves as the Minister of Social Affairs. She said, “One woman in the National Authority is not enough . . . They have to be involved in all levels of government.”<sup>159</sup> Alongside her is Rabiha Thiab Hamdan, whose activism led to her first arrest by Israel at the age of twelve.<sup>160</sup> Her incarceration time for other arrests and imprisonments totals about seven years, though she was able

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 98.

to hold various Fatah positions while in prison. She is also a board member of the GUPW, the PLO, and the Fatah Revolutionary Council. Other parliamentarians include Najat Omar Abu-Bakr, a political science PhD and the former head of consumer society at Ministry of Economy;<sup>161</sup> Najat Ahmed Ali al-Astal, the general director of al-Amal Hospital in Gaza;<sup>162</sup> and Jihad Abu Zneid, the project coordinator at Israel-Palestine Center for Research and Information and general secretary of the Union of Women's Centers/Refugee Camps in Palestine and Diaspora.<sup>163</sup>

The representatives of the Independent party include Khaledah Kanan Jarrar, a member of the PFLP who is known as an active defender of women's rights;<sup>164</sup> Rawia al-Shawwa, the former leader of the anti-Arafat bloc in the PNC;<sup>165</sup> and the well-known Hanan Ashrawi.

Women such as Samiha Khalil, Hanan Ashrawi, Isra al Modallal, and their counterparts in the PLC, represent the achievements in leadership and political participation Palestinian women have been able to enact at the highest political levels. Their accomplishments are both a culmination of women's work towards empowerment in Palestine and a testament to the journey that still needs to continue in order to increase the number of women in Palestinian leadership positions.

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 144.

## **Moving Forward**

It is clear that Palestinian women are in a position to increase their political participation through their established base of representation from the grassroots to the highest level in the political sphere. At this point, it is necessary to examine what measures are in place both externally and internally besides the activities of NGO/CBOs to help encourage and support more women to participate. It is also important to discuss internal barriers that Palestinian women face when trying to mobilize politically, in order to draw some conclusions about what courses of action might lead to a greater degree of political influence and visibility for Palestinian women.

### **Palestine as a Non-Member Observer State of the United Nations**

There are no provisions for Permanent Observers in the UN Charter, but the practice of allowing them dates back to the 1946 acceptance of the Swiss Government as a Permanent Observer of the United Nations. Permanent Observers have free access to most meetings and relevant documents, but they are not member states and thus cannot vote on UN resolutions. Currently, the only other entity with this status besides Palestine is the Holy See. Palestine was voted into Non-Member Observer State status in 2012 by an overwhelming majority of 138 in favor to 9 against (including Israel and the United States).<sup>166</sup>

Although Palestine has not been officially recognized as a state, its inclusion as an Observer implicitly gives it statehood status. Some representatives heralded the

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<sup>166</sup> “General Assembly votes overwhelmingly to accord Palestine ‘Non-Member Observer State’ status in United Nations,” *United Nations* (New York, NY: Department of Public Information, 29 November 2012), Accessed 10 February 2014, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs//2012/ga11317.doc.htm>.

resolution as a step toward a two-state solution between Palestine and Israel, while others saw it as a hardening of positions and a widening of the rift between the two. After it was voted into the UN, “Palestine reaffirmed that it would always adhere to and respect the Charter and resolutions of the United Nations and international law, uphold equality, guarantee civil liberties, uphold the rule of law, promote democracy and pluralism and uphold and protect the rights of women.”<sup>167</sup> It is unclear whether the rights of women in this context include the right to equal political participation and the support for this participation.

In Palestine’s quest for official statehood, even symbolic positions such as this are steps toward realizing that goal. Becoming a Permanent Observer might not afford Palestine greater international influence, but the support of the UN does give it greater legitimacy. An implicit conferment of statehood does not bind Palestine to adhere to the UN Charter, but a commitment to human rights and equality reflects positively on Palestine and could aid in achieving official Member State status in the future. This should make Palestine more willing to comply with international standards for treatment of women, which is helpful for individuals and organizations within Palestine that are trying to improve women’s political participation. Perhaps implicit statehood could also make Palestine more likely to adhere to resolutions such as 1325.

### **UN resolutions advocating for women’s political participation**

In 2000 the United Nations passed Resolution 1325 which emphasized the importance of facilitating women’s involvement in conflict resolution and peace-building, and encouraged member states to work to integrate women more fully into

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

political processes. Language from the document says that the resolution “Urges Member States to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict,”<sup>168</sup> and also that it is important to implement “measures that support local women’s peace initiatives and indigenous processes for conflict resolution, and that involve women in all of the implementation mechanisms of the peace agreements.”<sup>169</sup> It is clear that the UN and wider international community recognize how valuable the contribution of women is to peace efforts at all levels, which makes possible diplomatic solutions that come from more than one facet of society and represent a wider range of interests.

In 2013, the subsequent Resolution 2122 was passed to reaffirm the Security Council’s commitment to supporting and implementing Resolution 1325 and others. It states that the persisting barriers to full implementation of Resolution 1325 will only be demolished through “dedicated commitment to women’s empowerment, participation, and human rights, and through concerted leadership, consistent information and action, and support, to build women’s engagement in all levels of decision-making.”<sup>170</sup> The resolution “further recognizes with concern that without a significant implementation shift, women and women’s perspectives will continue to be underrepresented in conflict prevention, resolution, protection and peacebuilding for the foreseeable future.”<sup>171</sup>

While this resolution does not specifically mention Palestine, it is worth noting that the

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<sup>168</sup> UN Security Council, *Resolution 1325*, United Nations, (13 Oct. 2000), 2, Accessed 12 February 2014, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N00/720/18/PDF/N0072018.pdf?OpenElement>.

<sup>169</sup> UN Security Council, *Resolution 1325*, 3.

<sup>170</sup> UN Security Council, *Resolution 2122*, United Nations (18 October 2013), 1, Accessed 14 February 2014, [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2122%282013%29](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2122%282013%29).

<sup>171</sup> UN Security Council, *Resolution 2122*, 5-6.

Security Council chose to pass Resolution 2122 when an evaluation of the world-wide progress of Resolution 1325 found it lacking. Its passage in 2000 was optimistic about the future of women's political participation, but reality has proven that a large degree of internal effort and possibly outside assistance is needed in order to implement the changes called for in the resolution, especially in increasing the power of women in decision-making at high levels.

An example of attempts to apply Resolution 1325 in Palestine can be found in a publication produced by MIFTAH on the integration of Resolution 1325 with its programs for women's empowerment, which states that as there is overlap between the resolution's tenets and the goals of the women's movement, a thorough linkage of the two is necessary and beneficial.<sup>172</sup> The report states that despite the PNA adopting policies to improve women's political participation and establish a foundation for equality such as electoral quotas, "women's contribution to leadership in institutions of sovereignty continues to be limited, symbolic and not comprehensive. Women's presence is restricted to administrative and junior positions."<sup>173</sup> Resolution 1325 presents a framework that can be adopted and improved on by Palestinians to help facilitate women's integration into politics and peacebuilding at the middle and high levels. In order for Resolution 1325 to become an activated part of the Palestinian political and social sphere, it needs to become rooted in the Palestinian consciousness; this can be accomplished by linking it theoretically and practically with Palestinian

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<sup>172</sup> Kittaneh Nazzel, Rima, "Palestinian Women and Resolution 1325," *MIFTAH* (2009), 25, Accessed 24 February 2014, [http://www.miftah.org/Publications/Books/Palestinian\\_Women\\_and\\_Resolution1325.pdf#page=68](http://www.miftah.org/Publications/Books/Palestinian_Women_and_Resolution1325.pdf#page=68).

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

women's movements like MIFTAH,<sup>174</sup> because they are intimately involved with the communities in which they are based and should be able to use this connection to spread their message to a broad base of people. MIFTAH proposes that a coalition be formed of members from groups like itself, female politicians, and other female professionals, who will design and implement an action plan for employing the resolution and serve as a bridge between the Palestinian women's movement and the UN, Palestinian politicians, the media, and other women's coalitions globally.<sup>175</sup> The coalition would also serve as a link between the resolution and the grassroots level of women's mobilization. The article additionally addresses a need to deal with internal conflict before Resolution 1325 can be implemented. This might consist of actions such as educating people (especially mothers and young women) about the importance of dialogue and tolerance of the other, building crisis resolution and management skills, and addressing the issue of lawlessness and violence against women in the community.<sup>176</sup>

While MIFTAH has been the main organization involved in promoting Resolution 1325, there are other groups that are working to implement it as well. An organization called the Palestinian Conflict Resolution Center (or Wi'am) has played a role by holding a seminar in December of 2008 with Palestinian, Israeli, and Swedish women to discuss how Resolution 1325 is applicable to the Israeli-Palestinian

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 31.

conflict.<sup>177</sup> The WCLAC (discussed previously) has used the resolution as a basis for its work with women living under the occupation.<sup>178</sup> In Gaza, two organizations, the Wissal Coalition and The Culture and Free Thought Association, have jointly run a project to raise awareness about the resolution and support networking among civil society organizations.<sup>179</sup> To address the lack of knowledge about the resolution, the Majed Women's Association and the Center for Women's Affairs in Gaza have jointly issued and publicized a brochure on the resolution's importance and on the need to strengthen education campaigns with women in different groups.<sup>180</sup>

Plans such as these are encouraging, but there is a definite gap between such plans and actual implementation of the resolution throughout Palestine. A report submitted in 2009 to Norwegian Christian Aid states that despite some successful attempts among Palestinian women's groups at implementing the resolution, even nine years after the forming of the resolution "the Palestinian women's movement does not fully incorporate the articles of Resolution 1325 into the nationalist and feminist struggles. Indeed, many Palestinian feminist organizations are still unaware that the resolution exists."<sup>181</sup> While President Abbas issued a decree in 2005 recognizing the legitimacy of Resolution 1325 and calling upon all PNA organizations to support the "full and equal participation of women in efforts to keep peace and security," there is

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<sup>177</sup> Dr. Nadera Shalhoub Kevorkian, "The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 Implementation in Palestine and Israel 2000-2009," Norwegian Christian Aid (February 2010), 29, Accessed 21 April 2014, [http://www.peacewomen.org/assets/file/Resources/NGO/unscr-1325\\_implementation-in-israel-and-palestine-2000-2009.pdf](http://www.peacewomen.org/assets/file/Resources/NGO/unscr-1325_implementation-in-israel-and-palestine-2000-2009.pdf).

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 22.

still no formal action plan for national implementation of the resolution.<sup>182</sup> This demonstrates the difficulty Palestinian women face in applying a theoretical concept to the reality of their political network.

### **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women**

CEDAW was conceived of as a culmination of women's activism worldwide and as a complement to the International Bill of Human Rights, the Universal Declaration of Human rights, and other human rights treaties because of a lack of specific focus on the promotion and advancement of women's rights worldwide that dealt with discrimination against women in a comprehensive way.<sup>183</sup> The text of the Convention was negotiated and drafted over a period of several years from 1976-1979, and adopted by the General Assembly in 1979. Originally under the authority of UN Women, responsibility for the Convention was transferred to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in 2008. The Convention is overseen by members of the Commission on the Status of Women that serve two-year terms and are made up of experts in the field covered by the Convention. Currently the committee is staffed by all-female members, including elected representatives from Qatar, Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt, and Israel.<sup>184</sup>

The Convention consists of a preamble and thirty articles that define discrimination against women and delineate a plan for states to end such discrimination. Importance is placed upon securing the rights of women in the political sphere as well

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>183</sup> "Short History of CEDAW Convention," *UN Department of Public Information*, United Nations (2009), Accessed 10 February 2014, <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/history.htm>.

<sup>184</sup> "CEDAW – Membership," *OHCHR* (2009), Accessed 10 February 2014, <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/membership.htm>.

as the social sphere. “The Convention provides the basis for realizing equality between women and men through ensuring women's equal access to, and equal opportunities in, political and public life—including the right to vote and to stand for election—as well as education, health and employment.” Article 7 of the Convention establishes that states shall uphold women’s right to “participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government,” and Article 8 states that women should be also be able to represent their governments at the international level.<sup>185</sup> Article 5 directs states to take appropriate measures to modify the social and cultural behaviors of both men and women to eliminate prejudice and stereotypes about the roles of men and women.<sup>186</sup> Countries that have ratified the Convention are legally bound to put its provisions into practice, and must also submit reports at least every four years to demonstrate how they are attempting to comply with the obligations set forth in the Convention.

Although Israel has ratified CEDAW and made progress in providing equal rights for Israeli women, very little mention is made in its reports to the committee about efforts to secure the rights of Palestinian women. In fact, Israel was chastised by the committee during the 2011 session for its breaches of CEDAW in regard to Palestinian women, especially those who are refugees and internally displaced, as Israel

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<sup>185</sup> “Full text of the Convention in English,” *UN Women* (2009), Accessed 10 February 2014, <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm>.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

holds that the Convention is not applicable to the Occupied Territories.<sup>187</sup> Because Palestine is not officially a state it is unable to ratify the Convention, but it is able to participate in committee proceedings to some degree as NGOs are invited to both attend conferences and contribute reports on topics of which the committee should be aware. These can be oral or written alternative/shadow reports of the one submitted by the country the NGO is concerned with, or other country-specific information. This is important because it allows Palestine to present an alternative point of view from that of Israel, and to include information that Israel itself might not want to present to the world. The WCLAC submitted one such report for the 48<sup>th</sup> session of the committee in 2011, which provided information to the committee about the hardships experienced by Palestinian women as a result of the Israeli occupation. According to the report, Israeli destruction and confiscation of Palestinian land and property disproportionately affect Palestinian women because without homes and property they lose a lot of capacity for self-determination and economic independence and they are more likely to be victims of physical violence.<sup>188</sup> Although Palestine cannot be officially part of the Convention, it is fortunate in the context of bringing attention to the rights of Palestinian women that the committee recognizes the value of non-state actors as well. As with its status as a Permanent Observer, Palestine and its female representatives are finding ways to participate in the international political arena despite their lack of statehood.

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<sup>187</sup> “Concluding observations of the committee on the elimination of discrimination against women,” *CEDAW*, United Nations (4 February 2011), 3, Accessed 10 February 2014, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G11/418/50/PDF/G1141850.pdf?OpenElement>.

<sup>188</sup> “Israel’s serious breaches of its obligations under the International Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in particular regard to Palestinian refugee and internally displaced women,” *BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights* (WCLAC, 4 February 2011), 4, Accessed 10 February 2014, [http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/ngos/BADIL\\_Resource\\_Center\\_for\\_Palestinian\\_Residency\\_Isra\\_CEDAW48.pdf](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/ngos/BADIL_Resource_Center_for_Palestinian_Residency_Isra_CEDAW48.pdf).

## **Barriers to women's participation**

In addition to acknowledging outside support for women's political participation, it is necessary to examine the obstacles that need to be overcome before such outside help can be effective. While it is true that there are women at even the highest levels of Palestinian politics, overall their occupation of decision-making positions is lacking. "Despite their important contribution to the liberation struggle over many generations, women are strikingly absent from the current state-building discourse and occupy very little of the public political space that produced it."<sup>189</sup> Although the political and social situation of the occupation has allowed some Palestinian women to access public spaces in a way that women in some other Arab countries would have no chance of doing, the majority of Palestinian women still remain removed from the political sphere. Furthermore, it seems that questions of securing women's rights have often been viewed by those with political power and by Palestinians as a whole as having much less importance than the pressing matter of Palestinian liberation and nationalism.

In this drawn-out struggle for independence, it is essential to ensure that the institutions that have power in the post-conflict situation will recognize the contributions of women to ending the crisis and commit to protecting their political, social, and economic equality by being informed and responsive to women's needs.<sup>190</sup> While there is a significant amount of rhetoric concerning the need to uphold gender

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<sup>189</sup> Vanessa Farr, "State-building or survival in conflict and post-conflict situations? A peacebuilding perspective on Palestinian women's contributions to ending the Israeli occupation," in *Defying victimhood: Women and post-conflict peacebuilding*, ed. Albrecht Schnabel and Anara Tabyshalieva (New York, NY: UN University Press, 2012), 264.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

equality as an important part of establishing the independent State of Palestine, the regular exclusion of women from political decision-making at both low and high levels undermines previous political gains made by women and allows women's interests to be neglected instead of advanced.<sup>191</sup> Women do participate, but they are most often not the ones in control. This connects to the fame and praise afforded to female suicide bombers as heroines in the fight for independence, when in reality their actions have not advanced women's rights or ability to participate in politics. They are celebrated as symbols of female power, but only in death, as Leila Khaled said. There has been a seemingly backwards progression from the time of the first Intifada, when women were integral to supporting their communities and leaders in organizing and carrying out acts of civil disobedience and protest.

This phenomenon of symbolic power carries over to women in elected positions as well. After the PLC elections in 2006, Hadeel Rizq-Qazzaz, a women's rights activist and gender and development specialist in Ramallah, noted that many of the women who ran for election may have participated only as stand-ins for male family members, or because they were used by political factions as token representatives and not as real political participants.<sup>192</sup> The Palestinian election system involves party lists that are controlled by males, although there is now a quota that guarantees one fifth of local council seats for women.<sup>193</sup> Election quotas like this have been received with mixed reactions. In a positive light, although they are forced on both the political parties and the electorate, they do speed up the process of bringing women into the political

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<sup>191</sup> Farr, 269.

<sup>192</sup> Farr, 271.

<sup>193</sup> Rebecca Collard, "Questioning the quota for Arab women," *Voice of America* (23 October 2012), <http://www.voanews.com/content/questioning-the-quota-for-arab-women/1531958.html>.

arena.<sup>194</sup> More negatively, the quotas are seen by many as giving women a seat at the political table but still not allowing them their voices and the ability to politically address women's issues in addition to the goals of their parties. Although the quotas might appear to be increasing women's political representation, it is not clear how much real power female elected representatives have to pursue their own agendas and those of the wider female Palestinian public.

Rizq-Qazzaz also observed that NGOs professing to support women's political participation were actually only focusing on well-known female activists who had the experience and ambition (and ability) to run for elections, ignoring women at the grassroots level and preferring their own members or the members of established political parties.<sup>195</sup> One big problem faced by Palestinian women in politics is the large cultural, social, and economic gap between female elected officials and women at the grassroots level. Many of the women who are willing or supported to run for political office are well educated and/or have grown up as secular Muslims or Christians (Hanan Ashrawi, for example), and often come into the socio-political sphere through previous work with NGO or volunteer organizations.<sup>196</sup> Many of these women have a greater number of opportunities for political mobility and are freer to move about in society than their less-educated, poorer, and more traditional counterparts. This is an issue because it can alienate more traditional women who see independent activity outside the home and having enough leisure time to spend in nonessential work as contrary to old

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<sup>194</sup> Powers, 128.

<sup>195</sup> Farr, 271.

<sup>196</sup> Powers, 129.

values and an Arab identity, and as associated with foreign ways of life.<sup>197</sup> An important thing to remember when considering the spaces women occupy in Palestinian society is that “there is no archetypal Middle Eastern woman. Rather, women exist in different socioeconomic and cultural arrangements, stratified by class, ethnicity, education, age, religious ideology, and politics.”<sup>198</sup> Because of this, women’s political consciousness and activism are strongly influenced by a wide variety of factors and this has had a bearing on what types of political participation they are undertaking. These divisions affect how women and groups from voters up to the PNC view and interact with each other.

Another barrier to cohesive political organization is the disparity between practical capacity and political activism that exists between different types of Palestinian women’s organizations. Some women’s organizations have come to associate politics with political parties and a political elite that is seen as untrustworthy and not representative of the Palestinian people, and this has been detrimental to the amount of political work the organizations have been able to do. Some organizations refrain from expressing a political stance for fear of jeopardizing their relationships with their beneficiaries, partners, and the donor community.<sup>199</sup> None of the four Palestinian grassroots organizations discussed above mentions an affiliation with a particular faction, perhaps for this reason. Community-based and charitable organizations especially, while deeply embedded in their client base and thus in a position to exercise a considerable amount of influence, often do not openly engage in political issues such

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<sup>197</sup> Powers, 129.

<sup>198</sup> Janet M. Powers, *Blossoms on the Olive Tree: Israeli and Palestinian women working for peace* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2006), 129.

<sup>199</sup> Farr, 274.

as the occupation, party politics, or combating patriarchy.<sup>200</sup> While the women running these CBOs and charities may have a thorough understanding of how the separation barrier, restrictions on movement and patriarchal control of economic and political space affect every aspect of their work, they are unlikely to openly identify them as the root causes of poverty and women's exclusion.<sup>201</sup> This may be due to a fear of being considered political or a limitation in their capacity to articulate their political work, but whatever the reason, it results in CBOs and charities being unable to identify their political partners and use an analysis of the political situation to develop their programs and campaigns most effectively.<sup>202</sup>

In contrast, many NGOs (especially feminist and specialized NGOs) do have the ability to outline highly political missions and objectives as well as publically discuss the political and social causes of women's difficulty in entering the political sphere.<sup>203</sup> They are also aware of the vocabulary and mechanics of the international donor system, which can help them navigate among outside sources of support. However, while NGOs often have a more politically savvy insight into women's issues, they can be unable to connect with their communities with the same intimacy and effectiveness of their lower-level counterparts. These NGOs carry out the work that would normally be done by governmental institutions but that is uncompleted under the weight of political divisions and the occupation. However, like CBOs they also may not recognize or discuss their political role in explicit terms. PWWSO's mission statement, for instance, highlights the importance of gender equality and eliminating discrimination, but it does not mention

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 273.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

the issues that cause such disparity.<sup>204</sup> By contrast, MIFTAH was very politically and physically active during the 2012 local elections through helping female candidates with their campaigns and lobbying political factions to increase the number of female candidates and move them to the top of the lists.<sup>205</sup>

The wide range of foci and capacities among all types of Palestinian non-governmental organizations means that it would be hard for them to present a unified front. CBOs, charities, and all types of NGOs and other service providers are “choosing not to work together on a joint platform, operate with different vocabularies, have different areas of expertise and are unlikely to engage in conversations about the political role they might play together.”<sup>206</sup> This is probably one of the biggest barriers that women face in organizing politically, because even existing organizations have so far been unable to support each other and work toward a common agenda, even though they share many of the same goals.

Another barrier is a resurgence of Islamic conservatism that has occurred in the last two decades. During the time of the first Intifada many gains were made for secular feminism, but now there is a reversion to a more conservative and traditionalist perspective especially in Hamas and its affiliates. Jameela al-Shanti, a representative of Hamas in the PNC, touts Islamic fundamentalism as a way to draw women more into employment and social activity of all kinds, saying “A woman can go out veiled and do

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<sup>204</sup> “Mission,” *PWWSO* (2014), Accessed 8 May 2014, <http://www.pwwsd.org/en/about-us1/mission/>.

<sup>205</sup> Julie Holm, “MIFTAH Activities Report 2012,” *MIFTAH* (2012), 13, Accessed 8 May 2014, <http://www.miftah.org/Mact/MiftahActivityReport2012.pdf>.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

all kinds of work without any problem.”<sup>207</sup> Her reference to the veil can be interpreted to mean that a woman can be a devout and conservative Muslim and still accomplish her goals. This is undoubtedly true, but the wider cultural terrain of conservatism does present challenges for women who want to become public actors instead of remaining private as tradition dictates. Many young women are attracted to this Islamic feminism as a kind of nationalistic unification, which is frustrating to secular feminists who have worked hard to progress toward the separation of politics and religion. Although proponents of an Islamic political system would say that Islam provides for the inclusion and independence of women in the social sphere, the vision of what this entails often clashes with secular ideals of fairness as well as the outlook of a sizeable Christian minority.

Because the majority of Palestinians are Muslim, political initiatives that support making Islam a greater part of Palestinian politics and society are met by many with agreement or acceptance.<sup>208</sup> However, Islamic interpretations of gender differences and of what men and women should and should not do can be varied. There are verses in the Quran that clearly uphold men and women as equal in the eyes of God and in their duties to adhere to their religion, along with their rewards for doing so. On the other hand, there are also various verses that establish men’s dominance over women. While the “truth” is subject to interpretation, fundamentalists tend to err on the side that inhibits women’s participation in the public sphere despite their assurances that conservative interpretations of Islam ensure women’s freedom, and this is detrimental to

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<sup>207</sup> Fadwa Allabadi, “Controversy: secular and Islamist women in Palestinian society,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 15:3 (2008), 184, SAGE Journals, Accessed 21 March 2014 <http://ejw.sagepub.com.libproxy.uoregon.edu/content/15/3/181.full.pdf+html>.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

broadening societal acceptance of women in positions of power. Not insignificantly, most if not all of this interpretation is done by men and has a direct impact on women's ability to participate. For example, in 2013 Hamas banned female participants from a UN-sponsored marathon, prompting organizers to cancel the race.<sup>209</sup> "Women have also been barred from riding on motorcycles while there have been complaints of social pressure on them to wear Islamic head covering."<sup>210</sup> Restrictions like these, even when combined with advancements such as encouraging political participation through Hamas' appointment of Isra al Modallal, do not contribute to the elevation of women's rights and roles as a whole.

Perhaps the most substantive problem facing Palestinian women as political agents is the occupation itself. The construction of the wall and check points has exacerbated already existing difficulties women face in society, including illiteracy, unemployment, poverty, and a lack of human rights.<sup>211</sup> A limitation in mobility affects every aspect of women's lives and creates a huge burden for them to bear, whether they lose access to their jobs and therefore the ability to be self-sufficient, they lose access to hospitals and healthcare, or they are separated from family members. The wall also serves to totally fragment Palestinian society and prevent the effective networking and mass-mobilization that was previously possible. With these physical tools of oppression, "Israel has exercised authority over the years to deny Palestinians access to livelihoods, social contact and national unity. In this context, women's roles in direct resistance are minimal, given the absence of community context, the militarized

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<sup>209</sup> Tait.

<sup>210</sup> Allabadi, 184.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 183.

environment and the differential impact of restrictions on mobility on women.”<sup>212</sup> If women are struggling just to survive and support their families, it is no surprise that their ability to participate in politics at local and higher levels is impeded.

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<sup>212</sup> Johnson et al., 31.

## **Concluding thoughts**

Palestinian politics have a long way to go before women and women's interests are adequately represented in the political sphere. Electoral quotas are a start, but they do not always translate into actual political influence and decision-making power. From the outside, it seems as though the situation is at a stalemate, with neither Israel nor Palestine willing to abandon grievances or give in to the other's demands. The foremost issue faced by women who want to mobilize politically is the occupation, and the occupation will only be ended by effective negotiation. This negotiation would reasonably have a greater chance of success if it included more input from Palestinian women, because they represent a fundamental part of Palestinian society and could be instrumental in negotiating a solution that is tailored to the needs of the Palestinian people.

Across the Middle East, women are politically marginalized to varying degrees. This region of the world is also often featured in the news as perpetually plagued by violent conflict. From long standing issues like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the violence surrounding the effort to topple Hosni Mubarak in Egypt to Bashar al-Asad starving his own population in Syria in the name of quelling insurgency, it is clear that the usage and development of conflict resolution and peace-building skills and processes is severely lacking, both within the region and from outside attempts of assistance. If the empowerment of women in these processes could make a difference in the outcome of these conflicts, it could have a profound impact on the future of relations between entities within Israel-Palestine and the region as a whole, along with providing

an example of positive and effective political involvement of women for other areas of the world that experience similar issues and are also working toward enabling their own women to exercise the influence they deserve. For the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular, any hope at ending the bloodshed has been hard to come by and new approaches involving a wider segment of Palestinian society should definitely be implemented.

Palestinian women successfully completing suicide bombings may be considered more news-worthy than a woman winning a seat on a local council by popular election, but it is these small political victories that may over time build into a high level of influence and visibility for women involved in peacebuilding. However, Palestinian women's achievements in politics so far should not be discounted. From before the first Intifada to the present these women have found ways to build up their nation and work toward realizing a Palestinian state. In the 2012 local elections, for the first time ever there were two all-female lists competing, as well as ten other lists that featured a woman at the top.<sup>213</sup> The number of women who were elected to serve on local councils increased from the last election, and even exceeded the quota by a small margin.<sup>214</sup> These are encouraging results, and hopefully this is the start of a new trend in the structure of Palestinian politics.

Palestine is in a time of transition at present after the announcement of its new unity government and the planned elections within the next six months. This is a chance for Palestine to choose to make women an integral part of its government, just as they are an integral part of society. International support such as Resolution 1325 and

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<sup>213</sup> Holm, 13.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

CEDAW can serve as a base for a political and social environment that is inclusive and supportive of female leaders, but the true impetus for change needs to come from within Palestine itself. This impetus must come from all segments of society, but it may be up to women to start the process themselves. I believe that if all sectors of the female political sphere from voters to NGOs to the PNC could find a way to connect and work together, they would create a formidable force for peace: an Army of Roses focused not on destruction but on the creation of a present and a future that will benefit the generations to come.

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