



---

Searching for Strategies: The Palestinian Women's Movement in the New Era

Author(s): Rita Giacaman and Penny Johnson

Source: *Middle East Report*, No. 186, After Oslo: The Shape of Palestine to Come (Jan. - Feb., 1994), pp. 22-25

Published by: [Middle East Research and Information Project \(MERIP\)](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3013060>

Accessed: 29/05/2014 03:59

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP)* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Middle East Report*.

<http://www.jstor.org>



## **MERIP Middle East Report**

Please Note: A number of pages in this article were originally published such that a portion of text and some images run across two facing pages. JSTOR has presented these pages as they appear in the source material, with no missing content. For ease of reading we recommend that users print the article.

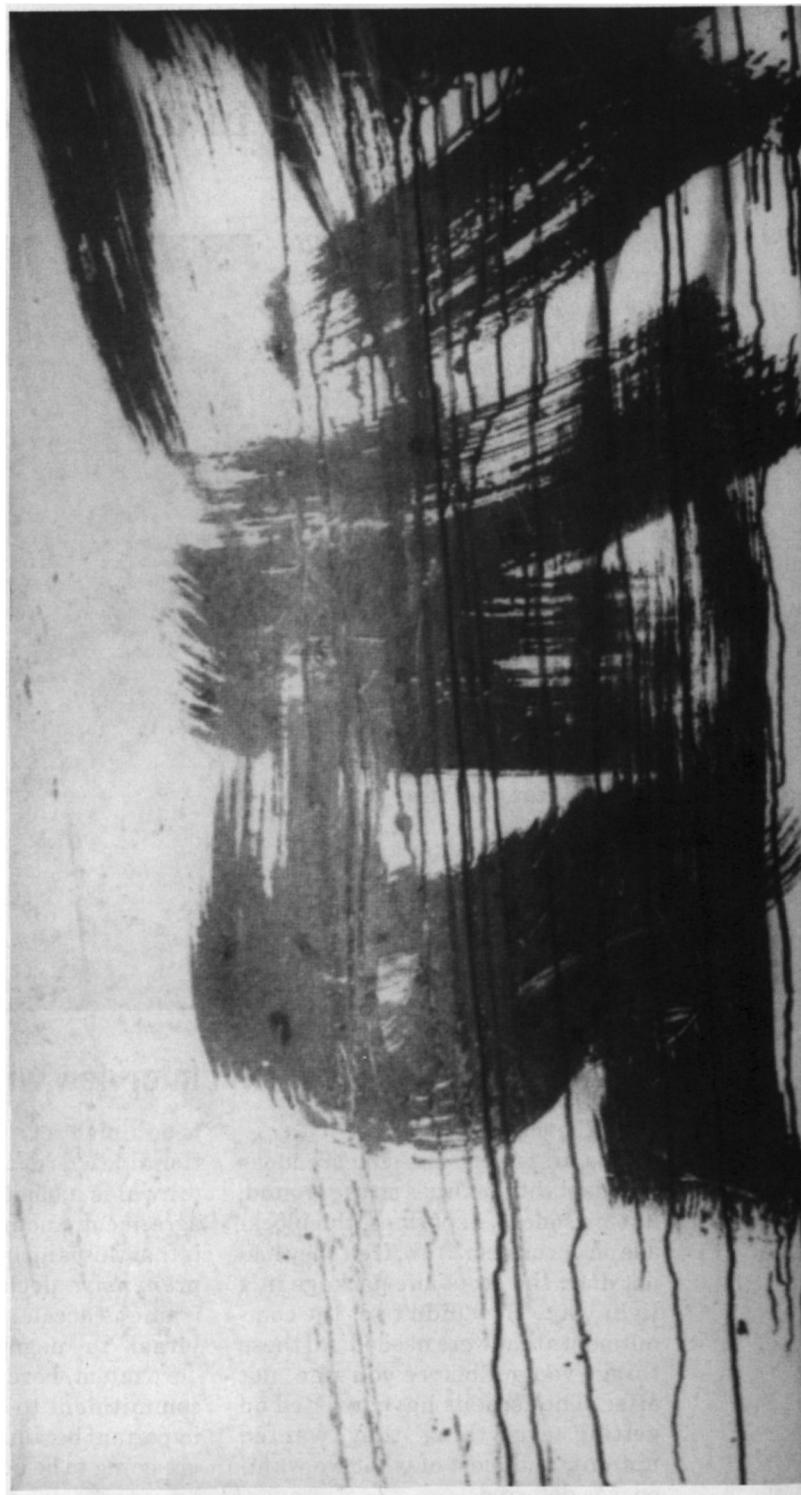
**Please click on "Next Page" (at the top of the screen)  
to begin viewing this article.**

# Searching for Strategies

## The Palestinian Women's Movement in the New Era

Rita Giacaman and Penny Johnson

In a heated student election campaign at Birzeit University in November, the oppositional "Jerusalem First" coalition made a striking spectacle as hundreds of its supporters marched smartly across the university's hill-top campus. In a prominent position at the head of the march, female students from the Popular Front, clad in blue jeans, brandished red-splattered rocks, while young men held banners against self-government. At the end of



Washing off graffiti, Old City, Jerusalem.

the march, "sisters" from Hamas walked as a segregated bloc. To the surprise of some observers, several young women were not wearing the obligatory head scarf. One bare-headed woman waved a green Hamas banner high overhead. In the middle, young women partisans of the Democratic Front (Hawatmeh) in casual Western attire mixed uneasily with Hamas men.

This scene, this coalition, depicts the unstable mix of



Tordai

gender and politics in Palestine today. The era ushered in by the signing of the Declaration of Principles pushes women activists to unite in order to safeguard women's interests, while at the same time it pulls them apart in the most profound split Palestinian politics has encountered

*Rita Giacaman and Penny Johnson are members of the Women's Studies Committee at Birzeit University. Johnson is also a contributing editor to this magazine.*

to date.

Inside the women's movement, the atmosphere has been steadily growing more tense as women struggle to maintain the gender-based coordination of the past several years in the face of radical political polarization. PLO leaders from abroad are sometimes referred to as the "abus" (fathers), underlining the one common and persistent fear of women activists: that any gains by women in general,

or as political leaders, will be ignored by the patriarchal character of the coming authority. An atmosphere of diminished hopes and anxiety over the future deeply affects both activists and ordinary women: "Oh, at least we might be able to travel freely to Jordan to visit our relatives," remark women in more than one overheard conversation. Travel plans are replacing dreams of nationhood.

## From Intifada to Independence?

Shortly before the Gulf war, in a conference in Jerusalem entitled "The Intifada and Social Issues," the Palestinian women's movement first publicly raised concern that political fundamentalism, sanctioned by conservative nationalist forces, was imposing new repressive conditions on women. Their concern was sparked by the campaign to force women to wear "modest" dress and scarves. Over the next few years, Palestinian women and men met to discuss issues that were hitherto taboo: domestic abuse, sexual harassment and personal status issues, among others. The Taskforce on Women has for almost two years brought together representatives of women's committees, centers and other organizations for sustained discussion around a united women's agenda.

Accompanying these positive initiatives was a mood of self-criticism that was almost painful. In some forums, women's movement activists, criticizing their previous lack of independence from male-dominated political factions and their failure to address women's issues, struck a "mea culpa" note that starkly contrasts with the self-confidence and courage they evinced as they brought women into the streets during the first years of the intifada.

The crisis within the movement has accelerated with the launching of the Madrid phase of the peace process. The impact was felt by women in terms of further marginalization. "Occupation destroyed the structural basis of the intifada, the neighborhood committees," says activist and academic Eileen Kuttab.

Here, the women's movement began to go into its present crisis. Then came the peace process, shifting the struggle to diplomacy and away from grassroots mobilization. Women's skills, developed in informal settings, were not utilizable. The political conditions became confusing and women could not get back into action.

Kuttab also believes that the program of the women's committees in the 1980s did not constitute a radical departure from the social services approach favored by the older women's charitable associations. "The committee women were younger and more politicized," she says, but "during the intifada, we found out that there is a big gap between committee women and women in villages and refugee camps."

Islah Jad, a lecturer in Cultural Studies at Birzeit University, disagrees in part. She believes the women's movement has a "strong foundation" for moving ahead, based on the living link between activists and grassroots women forged during the intifada. While she agrees with Kuttab that the women's committees were consumed, especially during the intifada, by "social service work with a

political connotation," she believes that the new era will leave women space for other activities. "All the issues we used to postpone for the national struggle now have space to be addressed as women," she says.

Assessments of the current strength of the base of the women's movement vary substantially, since they rest mainly on personal experience. Data on membership or levels of participation and support is unreliable or non-existent. The recently-released survey by Norwegian and Palestinian social scientists, however, provides an important new tool in analyzing women's conditions and attitudes.<sup>1</sup> It underlines the prevailing and overwhelming economic dependency of Palestinian women on the family, at the same time that women (and men to a lesser extent) may want or approve of work outside the home. The study also reveals a consistently more conservative attitude among young women aged 15-19 compared to women aged 20-29, for example.

## One Foot In

In examining the strategies currently being proposed by women activists for the new era, the mixed experience of the women's committees and the rollercoaster ride of the women's movement during the uprising are the immediate backdrop. But the overwhelming political question is the nature of the Palestinian authority, its capacity and willingness to democratize, and how either to influence the emerging self-government effectively or to oppose it.

The maze of Palestinian "technical committees" operating out of East Jerusalem's Orient House has been the object of periodic media attention as the builders of infrastructure, bureaucracy and policy for a Palestinian authority. A Women's Technical Committee, headed by leading activist Zahira Kamal, is among these quasi-governmental bodies. But it was established half-a-year later than committees on matters such as transportation and education, and it does not receive its funds from the regular budget: this committee resulted from a political struggle waged by women, and is funded primarily by a foreign donor.

"We have a choice between investing our resources in a bureaucratic governmental structure—training ourselves to be administrators—or transferring these resources to the grassroots," argues Jad, a member of the committee. "The argument for the first choice required confidence in the future authority. We discussed the evidence and found it was not enough to be sure that what we might build would be accepted. We decided to consolidate at the grassroots—as a pressure group really—while continuing to have a position in the emerging authority. It is a foot in/foot out strategy."

The committee has formed subcommittees to examine issues such as legislation, education and employment, with the aim of making policy recommendations. Its ability to influence political decisions remains in doubt: Yasir Arafat's appointment of an executive for the Palestinian Economic Development and Reconstruction Agency (PEDRA), head-

ed by himself, did not include any women. Among the committee's most ambitious projects is a draft Women's Bill of Rights, which is seen as a mobilizing tool to show the interests and strength of women prior to the introduction of key pieces of legislation, like a constitution.

It is, of course, striking that the committee, officially part of the emerging authority, sees itself as a "pressure group." In this it is allied with non-governmental organizations, oppositional women's groups, and what can broadly be called "democratic forces." Most, although not all, members of the committee do not view themselves as "governmental," and are surprised when others do. But the introduction of a quasi-governmental link in the women's movement is already producing stresses and strains. Women opposed to the agreement have repeatedly affirmed that they cannot work under the sole banner of the technical committee. For them, the most urgent priorities are, as one activist noted, "to defeat Fatah, to make the interim period a failure, and to build a democratic society." The three aims are seen as inseparable: thus women deeply committed to the aim of democracy have suddenly found themselves allied with Hamas in order to accomplish the first two goals.<sup>2</sup>

## Two Feet Out

One Popular Front-allied woman from the opposition endorsed the political alliance with Hamas in these terms:

You must understand that we have calculated that this is a dangerous alliance. But such an alliance is only temporary. And it is legitimate because the main aim is to do away with self-government. It is bringing to us a very undemocratic, fascist regime. The alliance is, moreover, only political, and does not touch on our social program.

There is a further twist to the justification:

This alliance with Hamas is the first test that our men will be subjected to. It will be very interesting to see how well our men will be able to defend our social agenda in front of Hamas. Such a confrontation will give women the chance to assess the situation internally for the first time.

Whether putting young women at the head of a march or running two women in the nine-person Birzeit Student Council slate will sustain secular leftists in this volatile alliance is open to question. With the victory of the "Jerusalem First" bloc at Birzeit, Hamas's pact with the Popular Front to "agree to disagree" over social issues will be put to the test. One careful feminist observer of Hamas in Gaza notes, "I've heard Birzeit people say, 'Hamas is no big deal.' I think it's a false assumption, borne because Fatah's power seems to be the main danger. But the day of a Fatah-Hamas alliance may well be coming."

## Donor Discourse

The intifada has left women's groups with a legacy of heightened consciousness and failed initiatives, exemplified by the closure of many of the small-scale women's production projects. In their urgent search for a viable strategy for the new era, Palestinian women activists have seized, perhaps

too quickly, on concepts developed elsewhere. Much emphasis, for example, has been put on women's meetings and the need for "gender training." This clearly appeals for two reasons: cadre women are eager to advance their own abilities to understand and deal with gender issues, and they hope to influence their male colleagues. The fact that international agencies smile favorably on "gender training," and that it is a part of their fashionable discourse, is a third factor. The magic of "training" and the methodology of "workshops" can perhaps offer women useful tools—there are examples of useful community-based training workshops for women in Gaza, for example—but they are a poor substitute for a strategy or a program for change.

Another "new era" concept with positive and negative features is that of a "women's lobby." In the current stage of the US women's movement, this reflects women's increasing economic integration, as well as the nature of the system itself. Palestinian women's groups uniting to pressure the emerging authority for policies favorable to women's interests would be, incontestably, a positive development. The notion of a lobby also addresses a pressing need for new forms of women's organization. (In the past few years, a spate of women's research and training centers and a women's legal center were born in response to the same need.) A lobby, however, emphasizes the exercise of influence, rather than a more public contest for equality.

In this regard, it is striking that the increase in feminist consciousness, often remarked on, has so far found little resonance in institutional struggles over women's issues, whether at schools and universities, factories or hospitals—three sites where women's presence and gender inequities might reasonably engender women's demands. A continued focus on the national arena, even in gender issues, is a partial explanation. However, as the women's movement and other democratic forces stress the development of civil society, it will be important that civil institutions, as well as the new authority, become a focus for transformation.

Women leaders stress time and again that, in the words of Jad, "We cannot defend women's rights without defending democratic rights." The women's struggle is placed squarely within the task of building a democratic society. But this having been said, women activists find themselves facing troubling questions: does the greatest danger to democracy come from an unbridled and unaccountable Palestinian authority and its gendarmerie, as opposition elements claim, or from "playing with fire" in an unprincipled alliance with the anti-democratic Hamas, as other critics assert? Or is it possible to pose a third question, and to unite to counter these dangers, whatever their position on a sliding scale, and thus move the long struggle for the rights and equality of Palestinian women to a new stage? ■

### Footnotes

1 Marianne Heiberg, et al., *Palestinian Society in Gaza, West Bank and Arab Jerusalem: A Survey of Living Conditions*, Oslo: FAFO, 1993.

2 For a discussion of political views of Palestinian women activists who oppose this agreement, see Maya Rosenfeld's interview with Maha Nassar and Aida Issawi in *Challenge*, 22 (Nov.-Dec. 1993), pp. 8-10.