

**GENDER,
NATION,
CLASS
AND THE
FIRST INTIFADA**

BY AITEMAD MUHANNAH



While the intro gives lots of context for this article by Aitemad Muhannah, we feel this is particularly useful for the left in the United States. The arrogance and lack of integrity of many on the left, the dogmatism and the inability of many on the left to even engage with ordinary people, are problems the left needs to critically deal with. We hope that this, printed of course for educational purposes, gives some insight on how we might better use our hearts, minds, time and resources to build a movement for liberation here in the belly of the beast.

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GENDER, NATION, CLASS AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF HAMAS


In this article originally for 'the Commune', Dr. Aitemad Muhanna, former member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) tracks the decline of the leftist movement in Palestinian society and how the rise of support for Hamas affected notions of gender in the Palestinian camps.

From her days in the PFLP she seems to have moved on into the world of academia, research and the like. She is a research fellow at the LSE's Middle East Centre.

Dr Muhanna-Matar's PhD thesis in 2010 examined the effects of the Palestinian Second Intifada on women's agency and contributed to challenging mainstream liberal conceptions of women's empowerment. It was published in a book 'Agency and Gender in Gaza: Masculinity, Femininity and Family during the Second Intifada, by Ashgate in October 2013. Of that book Ashgate writes:

Drawing on rich interview material and adopting a life history approach, this book examines the agency of women living in insecure and uncertain conflict situations. It explores the effects of the Israeli policy of closure against Gaza and the resulting humanitarian crisis in relation to gender relations and gender subjectivity.

With attention to the changing roles of men in the household and community as a result of the loss of male employment, the author explores the extension of poor women's mobility, particularly that of young wives with dependent children, for whom the meaning of agency has shifted from being providers in the domestic sphere to becoming publicly dependent on humanitarian aid. Without conflating women's agency with resistance to patriarchy, Agency and Gender in Gaza extends the concept of agency to include its subjective and intersubjective elements, shedding light on the recent distortion of the traditional gender order and the reasons for which women resist the masculine power that they have acquired as a result.



In the piece presented below, the author presents an interesting perspective. Her discussion of the failures of the left, especially the Marxist left within the Palestinian movement and the response, and growth of Hamas cannot be overlooked. As a leftist critic of Hamas, someone long involved in the fight against patriarchy and for the liberation of women, as a Marxist, this analysis has to sting. What stings the most is how familiar it sounds. This analysis, whether you like it or not, makes a whole lot of sense. It should give you something to think about.

The following is from the Commune from April 2010 and is presented here for Scission's Theoretical Mondays.

Gender, Nation, Class and the First Intifada by Aitemad Muhannah

Since Hamas was first established as an Islamic political movement within Palestinian society in December 1987 the leftist movement in Palestine has gradually come to be fragmented, and seems to be losing its popular constituency.

My own background as a women's activist belonging to the PFLP from the 1980s until the mid-1990s leads me to argue that leftist parties and their popular grassroots organizations developed historically from incoherent ideological underpinnings, and that this has critically constrained their influence on Palestinians' own systems of values and beliefs.


These leftist movements mostly failed to internalize their ideology among the population, because they maintained an artificial divorce between national politics and ideology on the one hand, and popular social and cultural change on the other. They were afraid of antagonizing popular opinion by openly mobilizing against traditional systems of values, especially those based on patriarchy and/or Islam. On the other hand Islamic political movements, especially Hamas, showed a more creative capacity to act effectively, shaping their national political and social agenda around the ideology of Islamic faith, belief and practice.

The massive popular support, emotional and even spiritual attachment that arose for leftist parties during the 1970s and until around the end of the First Intifada in 1991, could have been presumed to encourage the internalization of at least some of the values and beliefs of leftist ideology – including democracy, social justice and individual liberties. The problem was certainly not mass rejection of these values or practices, which later became the mainstream discourse used by the leftist parties' NGOs, which have largely been funded by the West.

However, the problem was that many poorer and less educated Palestinians, especially those marginalized social groups living in camps and smaller villages, were not influenced that much by leftist ideology. To put it another way, these social and cultural segments of the population were not actually able to relate to leftist ideology through their day-to-day life, and instead found their concerns reflected only in through involvement in national resistance. People were drawn to nationalist resistance agendas, rather than secular and leftist parties' agendas, which reduced the appeal of the secular left when it turned from resistance to inconclusive negotiations.

During this process, many more marginalized Palestinian constituents started to feel alienated as well as patronized by the leftist leadership's contradictory practices, and objected to the narrow factional and personal interests, the authoritarianism of the leadership and the tendency for cronyism in dealings with the population. The record thus suggests that the leftist leadership failed to seize its opportunity to create a positive model of political, social and cultural practices that could challenge the historically dominant hierarchical and authoritarian mode of governing and leadership and attract a strong following and support base among the majority of Palestinians. Few concrete positive changes and little substantial progress were achieved by secular and leftist parties' reliance on a negotiated solution.

The result was that many ordinary Palestinians started to search for alternative forms of political organization that could maintain their sense of national resistance, whilst providing them with a system of




values and moral principles. With the entrenchment of compromised secular elite, Hamas offered a political and moral discourse to fill the social and cultural environment gap where secular and leftist parties had failed to meet the interests and desires of the disadvantaged majority.

Rethinking Leftist Discourse in relation to Islamism

This analysis is supported by some existing research. It is also a reflection of my personal experience, having been actively involved in community and political mobilization with PFLP grass-roots students' and women's unions from the 1980s to the mid-1990s.

My belonging to PFLP – the prominent leftist party within the Palestinian national movement – was politically, ideologically and spiritually profound for me, as for many others in the PFLP. As women and men within the leftist movement, we devoted much time and effort to educating and convincing other young men and women about concepts like resistance for national liberation, and the centrality of social justice in the national liberation process. We concentrated our efforts round the camps in the Gaza Strip, visiting prisoners, martyrs and injured families, providing material and emotional support. As young men and women, we also participated in public demonstrations, and in street clashes with Israeli soldiers, helping and covering for our male colleagues on resistance missions. We were collectively working for the sake of our Palestinian people who were (and are) all victimized by Israeli occupation. At that time, we were taught to combine the ideology of national resistance with the Marxist ideology of class struggle, but struggles against social and cultural discriminatory practices based on gender, were not stressed and were not core to our political concerns.

From a national resistance standpoint, I believe that the PFLP's success in popular mobilization in the 1970s-80s lay in organizing and mobilizing the masses, and was based on our personal commitment and grassroots organizations in building relationships with people on the ground. We succeeded in this because we had a legitimate (national, just) cause to defend, a mission to implement,




and because we had a strong belief that it was right to oppose and try to stop the forms of colonial oppression against our people that we confronted daily. We were known and trusted by people, had easy access to them in their houses and workplaces, and cared about them, as well as being there to help them when needed. Our tasks needed daily, tiring, time-consuming effort in networking and organizing, and we knew the constituency of the PFLP on a personal level, and communicated with them face-to-face. Our activism was based on conviction and voluntarism.

In the 1980s till the second or third year of the First Intifada (1988/89), I was in my early 20s, and I was enjoying my involvement in the national resistance and leftist movement, considering that this determined my national identity. I did not think or feel that I was subordinated or oppressed as a woman, because I believed that working class ‘poor refugees’ who led the national struggle against the colonial occupation would become equal and find justice through national liberation on a left agenda.

With these enthralling ideas, I shaped my personal choices. I was born and grew up in a refugee family headed by a merchant who earned a good income, and lived all my childhood in a non-refugee area with relatively good standards of living. I decided to get out of this class structure by marrying one of the PFLP resistance militants from a refugee camp, and went to live in the camp which I had not visited until before I married. I achieved this goal, and had been living in the refugee Beach camp in Gaza for one year by the time the First Intifada began.

With no education in feminism or gender equality, I shared everything with my husband, including his tasks in political resistance. He used to ask me to help him with some missions, and never made me feel subordinate or ignored. At that time, I thought that the ethics of all members of leftist parties were like this: that they respected their wives, sisters, and daughters and considered them equals with the men in the family and in the public. Until the second year of the First Intifada, my multiple identities as a woman, Palestinian, and leftist were not in tension, and I did not experience



them as in any way contradictory.

During those first two years of the First Intifada, living in the Beach camp, I became well known by many refugees as a PFLP activist, involved in the process of grass-roots mobilization for resistance. I was seen walking in the camp unveiled, in modern though modest dress, several times a day. I was also seen involved in food distribution and social visits to families in need. I was observed participating in demonstrations against the Israeli soldiers. Yet in the summer of 1988, while walking in the camp with modest dress which showed, from my ethical leftist point of view, my respect to the martyrs of the Intifada, I was shocked at having eggs, tomatoes, and later stones thrown at me by young boys from the Beach camp.

When I later asked “why did you do this to a woman who is almost the same age as your mother?” they just replied: “you have to put on the head scarf because of the Intifada” and then ran away. I did not really take this incident seriously, however, until it was repeated by teenagers and older boys who threw things and shouted at me and at other women in the camp. Then I started to feel threatened, and started to hear more stories of women in other parts of Gaza, some of whom were attacked with acid. I was unable – within my own terms – to understand or analyze such actions and they threatened me to such a point that I felt I should leave home and proceed with my voluntary community activism elsewhere.


I assumed at that time that the whole Beach camp was secured by the PFLP. Yet the PFLP resistance group (mainly men in their early 20s) were informed about these incidents of attack and harassment, but did nothing to stop them. I also heard from friends that members of the PFLP resistance group said it was not their business to intervene in such cases, since women could solve the problem themselves simply by putting on the headscarf. The pressure to cover up meant nothing to the young men leading the First Intifada because they saw no reason for women not to be veiled in a traditional society like Gaza. I never myself thought about putting on the headscarf, or of veiling myself, whether in traditional or popular form. Not because they stood for oppression, but because

they were either simply a personal religious practice or a cultural and national symbol.

I decided to negotiate this issue with my husband, who was in a leading position in the PFLP national resistance. However his reply to me was shocking. He made the same statement the young field militants had made, those who were responsible for maintaining security in the camp. He said: “We know that these incidents are most likely done by Hamas members, but we are not now in a position to open a fight with them. We need to keep our national unity against the occupation. Just you throw a scarf on your head and stop those boys harassing you in the street”.

That was the crisis point for me as a person and I started to question my gender identity, and find contradictions with my identity as a PFLP activist and Palestinian nationalist. My active commitment to national resistance and mass mobilization counted for nothing when it came to the veil and protection by my leftist party and its members. That ran counter to my whole understanding of the leftist ideology, which stood against all forms of oppression. And I asked myself: is the imposition of a certain practice by another ideology, within the same class, not a form of oppression or discrimination? Do political and national alliances justify disrespect to women’s free choice? If so, should I compromise my gender identity for the sake of my national identity, in the time when religious veiling was not yet a dominant cultural practice (for example, my father never imposed veiling on me and many women at different age groups were unveiled in 1970s and 1980s).

That was the watershed that awakened my hidden gender identity. For the first time in my life, I started to think about my identity as a woman, and how it was obscured by my identity as a nationalist leftist subject. I also started to link the nationalist ideology with the leftist ideology which I, and other women’s activists, learnt from leftist men and based on their interpretation. I could no longer take for granted the link between national liberation and individuals/women’s freedom.



The issue of women and their subordinated position in the Gaza society was not part of the PFLP education or mobilization agendas, and it was sidelined by the PFLP thinkers in favor of a tradition and value system which needed to be preserved as part of a national Palestinian identity. I remember that, from the leftist men's point of view, all forms of social and cultural inequality would be resolved by national liberation, and by the leftist parties gaining political power.

Second, by the awakening of my gender identity, I also discovered the contradictory practice of leftist social and moral principles. I found out that many of the PFLP leaders (middle-aged men) restricted the movements of their wives and sisters and did not allow them to participate in national struggle: to maintain family honor. I also recalled that while I was a student at BirZeit University, the male leaders of the leftist parties, including the PFLP, were allowed to have girlfriends and sexual relations with women from middle and upper class, on the pretext of mobilizing them, while refugee poor students, who led the process of mobilization among students, encountered gossip if they deviated from cultural norms. All these examples of contradictory practices implied that the leftist parties had failed to produce a new system of social and cultural values and beliefs, despite their success at certain period of time in mobilizing the masses for national resistance.

This is the historical foundation that helped Hamas, by the end of the First Intifada, to have a fertile ground for the mainstreaming of its ideological and political strategy and action. Hamas leaders, since the early years of its establishment, learnt how to bargain and cooperate to advance their political agenda, but without jeopardizing the religious ideological beliefs (that were always open to reinterpretation). One early example was their statement regarding the attacks against unveiled women. They publicly announced that Hamas main concern was resistance against the occupation and it was not associated with these attacks, but they did not condemn the attacks.




Leftist secular parties, on the other hand, implicitly vindicated Hamas by stating in their bayans ‘leaflets’ that these attacks against women were done by collaborators with the Israeli occupation. This reflected the leftist leadership’s understanding of women, not as equal nationalist agents who need to be protected, but as a sexual target who may jeopardize the unity of national resistance and a social cohesion based on male domination.

Hamas won the game of mass mobilization by maintaining the national resistance discourse on the top of its agenda, and enhanced the ideological religious values and beliefs to flexibly and consistently determine the meaning and the practice of national resistance as well as social and cultural norms. For example, the common saying Hamas leaders used is that the one who resists the Israeli occupation has to resist all forms of corruption and anti-ethical practices – presumably the anti-ethical is always anti-Islamic. Or as mentioned in a Sara Roy article, Hamas leaders advocate that Palestinians defeat the Israeli occupation by preserving their culture and value system and Islam. By this discourse, men and women, who were not influenced by a different social and cultural value system and they were historically dominated by the fluid traditional understanding and practice of Islam, felt at home with the presentation of politics within the moral principles of Islam.

The inability or reluctance of the leftist parties to protect women against the imposition of veil, attributing this to the priority of national unity, was a gift to Hamas. By 1989, the majority of women in Gaza were veiled and that was an important symbolic sign of Islamization of Gazan society, even if it was forced in many cases. This symbolic sign was, a few years later, better consolidated by Hamas’s pragmatic strategies.

By the beginning of the Oslo peace negotiations in 1993, by the slowdown of the rhythm of national military resistance against the occupation, and by the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1994, a new ideological battle started. Although some leftist parties did not fully get involved in the peace negotiations and showed their rejection in the beginning, they decided to get fully involved in the




establishment of the Palestinian Authority. The leftist parties also became divided and lost many of their common political and ideological views.

The secular leftist leaders, including those who partially rejected Oslo agreement, started to negotiate the division of the Palestinian Authority cake (who is controlling what and on what factional and personal bases). The performance of the Palestinian Authority, from its early phase, was characterized by high levels of corruption, patronage and clientelism. I was close to many of the PFLP male and female activists from the camps in the years of the Palestinian Authority, and I noticed that most of them were mainly concerned to get jobs in the Palestinian security forces or Ministries, as a reward for their national resistance. Some of them succeeded in getting jobs through their close connection with the PFLP leaders, but the majority, who were the poorest, were deprived because they did not have strong *wasta* (a network), taking into consideration that the majority of jobs were given to Fatah.

Within this context, Hamas was working in silence developing its agendas to utilize the division among the leftist parties and the losing of their constituency by not being rewarded with jobs. Hamas remained strict with its rejection of the Oslo agreement and its institutional apparatuses.

In the period of 1994-2000, Hamas realized that continuing in national militant resistance was not the appropriate strategy within the new national political equation produced by the peace process. Hamas decided to shift its concern from political military action to social and community work as well as the mass mobilization of religious values and practices. Hamas established a large number of community-based charitable associations providing humanitarian support to families in need, as claimed by Hamas members, those who were deprived of their basic needs by the corrupt secular government. Hamas at this time enhanced religious education through the mosques, which attracted a large number of poor women and children from the camps and rural areas. This practice achieved a high level of credibility and trustworthiness, because it flourished



while the secular and leftist parties displayed a corrupt and immoral model of governing.

Hamas community activists, in contrast, show an open-minded democratic vision and practice – even if expressed with a different ideological language. Based on my observation, Hamas activists allowed anyone qualified to work with them. They also tried to be fair in distributing food and cash assistance, regardless the factional loyalty of applicants. This of course pushed many of those who used to be loyal to leftist parties, with no ideological underpinnings, to benefit from the Islamic associations' assistance, and later they became more integrated into their religious educational and social programs.

Deprived people in Gaza, like in other parts of the world, don't need to think about the political factional motives or interests beyond these practices, as long as these practices satisfy their needs and self-respect, and are consistent with their system of values and belief. Hamas's institutional community-based activities were largely influencing women, including those who were participating in the leftist parties' women's committees, because women were encouraged to get out of their homes and to participate in community activities to meet both their national and religious obligations. One of my female friends who used to be very active with the leftist grass-roots organizations said to me: “within Islamic community organizations, I feel more liberated as a woman because I really do what I want to do with respect from my family members, neighbors, and over all satisfy my God.”

Furthermore, Hamas's strategy of social and community work was presented as well as practiced to enhance collectivism and voluntarism. Despite Hamas's hidden political agenda and the actual sources of funds to their community work, they frequently urged Palestinian wealthy people to donate for supporting poor people appealing for Islamic justice. They also organized the collection of el Zakat and ensured its fair distributions.


I am not here arguing about accurate or inaccurate performance of social justice, but I am arguing that Hamas has deliberately focused

on the immoral practices of politics by the secular and leftist leadership in order to extract more popular support to its 'moral' religious discourse, to the ideological ground of its politics. This discourse appealed to the poor and disadvantaged people who suffered for years from the corruption of the official institutions.

Hamas, in addition, deliberately built upon the existing traditional values of collectivism and voluntarism, and did not replace family and kin informal institutions by religious institutions. What they do is that they maintained el-dawaween and lejan el-Islah (informal traditional social and family-based institutions), but incorporated their members and preachers into them. The training of large number of young and middle age people, particularly women, to be preachers who provided in-home visits and religious counseling rapidly increased the religious awareness of the masses.

One example from my PhD field research in 2008 is that moderately educated women in their middle age with young children were competing over who has more religious knowledge and tools of interpretation than the other, and who attended more religious lectures. The more religiously educated became more legitimized to participate in public mobilization. If I compare this with my period of activism with PFLP, I remember that the members of the regular awareness meetings of the leftist ideology rarely attended, and they did not show that much interest. In contrast, those best versed in leftist ideology were the least involved in daily mass mobilization.

I assume that one of the obvious reasons is that the presentation and the discussion of the concepts were not conceived as relevant to the actual life of ordinary people. I myself remember how class struggle was explained to me in a way that created a hostile sense towards many of my own people who were classified by the Marxist as bourgeoisie, even those who lived in the camps but in a better material standard of living. On the contrary, through my conversations with my research participants, they express how their awareness about religion enhanced their sense of cooperation and connectedness with those who are better-off within the family and in the local community, based on the Islamic concept of a 'person's fate




as God's will'. Of course, I don't deny the problematic as well as the different Islamic interpretations of this concept, but it can serve to overcome differences and promote collectivism.

The last point I need to mention is that although Hamas found its path based on community-based work and mass mobilization, the left missed their path by abandoning their history of grass-roots work. By the establishment of the Palestinian Authority and the increasing interest of donor agencies to fund and to develop civil society institutions, most of the leftist parties' grass-roots organizations shifted their concern and their strategy of work towards 'NGOization', as it is described by Islah Jad. The grass-roots committees and unions were replaced by, or restructured as, NGOs.

Without going into arguments about the role of NGOs, I would like simply to say that this phenomenon played a critical role in undermining the politics and the ideology of the leftist parties as a whole. NGOs, in order to meet the professional requirements of the donors, have to be managed by professionals who speak the language of the donors, they also had to concentrate on networking with the international agencies at the expense of their local community, reduced to a means of generating funds for staff and structures of NGOs.

Ideologically, secular and leftist NGOs contributed to a dilution of class identities and the emergence of a new 'class' of professionals among those who used to act as community volunteers and activists. With such a position comes a better standard of living, and the new professionals often move to the cities, send their children to private schools and drive expensive cars. The space they vacate in poor local communities in the camps and villages was smoothly filled by the Islamic preachers and Hamas community activists. Is this not a great opportunity for the Islamist message to spread, in the absence of any alternatives at the political, ideological and socio-cultural levels?





From the Introduction: In the piece presented below, the author presents an interesting perspective. Her discussion of the failures of the left, especially the Marxist left within the Palestinian movement and the response, and growth of Hamas cannot be overlooked.

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