The Palestinian *Shahida*: National Patriotism, Islamic Feminism, or Social Crisis

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Is it purely by chance that the phenomenon of Palestinian female suicide bombers occurred only during the height of the second intifada and not at all during the first one? In order to answer this question, two main factors must be considered: developments within the Palestinian national-political arena and gender phenomena in Palestinian society.

It is generally understood that the appearance of the women suicide bombers (*shahidat*) cannot be separated from the internal national-political developments within the Palestinian public during the nearly thirteen years between the outbreak of the first intifada in December 1987 and the eruption of the al-Aqsa intifada in October 2000. However, the most significant period in this respect was actually the seven or eight intervening years, bordered by the end of the first intifada in 1992 and the year preceding the onset of the al-Aqsa intifada in October 2000 – years marked by the evaluation of successes and failures, and of deep moral stocktaking. As to gender-related developments, there are strong claims that the appearance of Palestinian *shahidat* is but one element in the broader spectrum of gender phenomena evident within Palestinian society, both during the intifadas and between them.

At the beginning of the first intifada, the leadership of the Palestinian national movement called upon Palestinian women to take an active part in the national struggle. However, rather than allowing the women to choose how to serve their nation, it urged them to fulfill particular goals – goals that were part and parcel of their gender. One of the obvious duties laid upon them was to become "mothers of the nation." In one of the intifada leadership's flyers, Palestinian mothers, sisters, and daughters are described as Palestinian *manabit* – plant nurseries[1] – or as men-producing factories, and the woman's womb, now "nationalized," so to speak, was

termed a *batn askari* – a "military womb."[2] Article 17 of the Hamas charter, published on August 18, 1988, echoes the sentiment: "The Muslim woman has a role in the struggle for liberation that does not fall from that of the man in that she is the one who produces the men."

Thus, in the framework of the national discourse, women's contribution to the Palestinian cause was measured by their degree of productivity, in its purest and most basic meaning of re-productivity. This discourse, which turned Palestinian women's fertility into a nationalist patriotic subject in every way, recycled a similar refrain that had been common in Palestinian newspapers during the 1930s, and especially during the years of the Arab rebellion of 1936–39. At that time it was claimed, *inter alia*, that "the woman who rocks the baby's cradle with one hand, rocks the nation with the other."[3] Conversely, the woman who refrains from bearing children harms the nation. Not only did this discourse nationalize the body of every Palestinian woman; it also unequivocally ascribed her place to within the private domain of the home. It predetermined the continuation of her traditional duties of giving birth to, caring for, and educating children, and in doing so, excluded her from what was considered the loftiest possible contribution to the national struggle: participation in military activities against the enemy, which sometimes ended in the sacrifice of one's life. The danger that she might be killed is inherent in the participation in military actions, and her womb would then no longer be able to serve the nation's need.

Indeed, the climax of the process of nationalizing motherhood in the first intifada was the bestowal of the exalted status of "Mother of a *Shahid*" upon the Palestinian woman. Whereas their own self-sacrifice was categorically prescribed for them via common Palestinian rhetoric, Palestinian mothers were urged to sacrifice their sons willingly. Moreover, they were expected to do so with equanimity and even with joy. This demand changed Palestinian motherhood into "other mothering." Official flyers declared: "We salute the Mother of the *Shahid* and we stand at attention to the sound of the joyful ululation (*zaghalit*) emitted from her mouth, which she will ululate twice: once on the day that her son leaves to fight and to fall and become a *shahid*, and the day on which the [Palestinian] state will be declared."[4] The joyful ululation to be voiced by the mothers of *shahids* during their funerals symbolized the public sanction of the link between mother-son/*shahid* and the nation-to-be. The Hamas movement, which wanted to turn this into political capital and Islamicize the intifada according to its goals and needs, created an uncompromising link between the norms of feminine modesty (*'ard*) and the honor (*ard*) of the national *shahids*. This was the call for women to cover their heads with a scarf, *tahajabi*.[5] Hamas chose the

tahajabi as a sign of identification with the sanctified dead sons, and it quickly became a norm, mainly in the Gaza Strip where Hamas was a more dominant force.

The negative imbalance of the uprising for the Palestinians became obvious even during the height of the first intifada, especially after Yasir Arafat sided with Saddam Hussein in the 1991 Gulf War, as a result of which the Palestinians lost the support of the international community. This intifada saw an increase in the number of those killed, injured, imprisoned, and expelled, a greater number of Palestinian homes demolished, and a further decline of the economic situation in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip. The general disillusionment escalated following the Oslo accords (September 1993) and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority six months later; there was also more and more violence among the Palestinian populace, more frequent closures of schools, and greater limitations in freedom of movement.

There were several causes for this disillusionment, including revelations of corruption within the Palestinian Authority's leadership. There were also growing realizations that this leadership had failed to establish either the institutions necessary for the imminent Palestinian state or the infrastructures for education, health, and welfare services, or even workplaces that would relieve the Palestinians' dependence on Israel for jobs. All of these, separately and together, ate away at the feeling of solidarity and led to the erosion of the readiness among Palestinian women to adhere to the tasks designed for them by their leadership. This was expressed in 1995 by Suha Barghouti of the Institute of Women Studies at Birzeit University in the following way:

> In the past, sectarian divisions prevailed amongst us . . . nevertheless, we had many common denominators because of our clear-cut attitude regarding the struggle against the occupation. At present, our shared political and national interests have decreased significantly and the situation that has been created is one of deadlock and controversy.[6]

The climax of the situation described above found its expression in the al-Aqsa intifada, which lacked the widespread enthusiasm and support of the first one: it had been forced upon the populace in order to divert attention from the failures of the first intifada and to plant new hopes within the general public.

Along with the differences in the situation that prevailed in October 2000 compared to that of 1992, there was the concomitant steady (if slow) decline in the readiness of Palestinian women to bear the full weight of the national goals imposed upon them. The agenda of this intifada thus included three characteristics that

differed from those of the first one: a gender-oriented (feminist) social agenda as an alternative to the national agenda of the hegemonic male-dominated leadership; an alternative motherhood, along with the previous recruited national motherhood; and the phenomenon of women suicide bombers (*shahidat*).

The first signs of gender discourse had already begun to appear in 1992. The women who took part in it were adamant in bringing discussions regarding gender and social issues to the forefront of the national discourse, even at the cost of outright confrontation with the Palestinian leadership – which preferred to marginalize any discussion of social issues, including those regarding women. As far as elevating the national struggle above the social one, the women's earlier forgiving tone was replaced by a still apologetic but now defiant and even challenging one. Representative of this is an article written by Ilham abu Ghazalla, also of Birzeit University, which appeared on November 1, 1992 in the Jerusalem-based newspaper *al-Quds*. The title of the article was *"al-Maraah wal-Watan Yakun Takun*," translated here very freely as, "As its women, so too the homeland." Underlying the article is the author's claim that the national struggle has only a meager chance to succeed unless the social struggle is promoted:

> Due to the intifada many groups have come to understand that there cannot be a successful national struggle without an open-minded and creative young generation, [and] without workers free of deprivation. Women have also realized that the homeland is not only the ground itself, but those that live on it. For how can a person whose society oppresses him defend it and his country? Our women have begun to realize that family sorrow upon the birth of a girl directly affects the life of that girl as she grows up and when she becomes a woman – a woman constrained by dictates of attire and social behavior whenever she leaves her home: studies, work, social life, reading of books, finding a husband – she may not, she can not, initiate anything. And a nation half of whose population is shackled – how will it become liberated?[7]

One notable event in this direction was the August 1994 signing of an accord that united all of the women's organizations that had arisen in the occupied territories as of the late 1980s. These included the various centers for women's issues in Nablus, Jerusalem, and Gaza, and the Center for Legal and Social Counseling. The accord called for the removal of the obstacles blocking the way for the equalization of the status of Palestinian women with that of Palestinian men and was heralded by the slogan, "There can be no democracy without women's representation."[8]

An immediate step in this direction, initiated by the women's umbrella organization, was the establishment of a shadow parliament whose role was to formulate a social and gender-oriented agenda. In a newspaper interview in September 1994, upon the occasion of the establishment of this parliament, Eileen Kuttab, the head of the Ramallah-based Bisan Center for Research and Development of Palestinian Society, stated the following:

> The issue of the woman [in Palestinian society] is a purely social issue, and the role of non-government organizations is to work together as a group to put pressure on the Palestinian Authority to adopt the issue of civil rights – as a strategy – but, along with this, these organizations must also propel the society forward towards democracy. Our goal is to cause a change in the status of women as a guarantee for civil equality. And since the Palestinian women's umbrella organization is a non-government organization, it should be the one to put this process in motion.[9]

That same year, at the initiative of the Center for Legal Assistance for Women in Jerusalem and al-Haq, a Palestinian organization for civil rights, a congress dealing with women, justice, and legislation was convened. At the congress concrete demands were made for changes in the personal status law regarding the status of women, one of which was to raise the age of marriage for girls to eighteen. (This demand was based on statistics gathered by the Center for Women's Issues in Gaza, which indicated that 41.8 percent of the girls in the areas of the Palestinian Authority were between the ages of 12–17 when they were married.) Other demands included repealing the laws allowing *talaq* divorce (unilateral repudiation of a wife by her husband) and the concomitant transfer of the divorce procedure to the civil courts, and the cessation of polygamy.[10]

These organizations were not content with sterile theoretical discussions for changes at some indefinite future time, but were active in the field, where they offered women advice in such matters as family planning, childrearing, and integration in the workforce. The Islamic organizations did not allow this to go on without responses of their own, and within one year (1997–98) two organizations of Islamic women appeared, al-Huda and al-Khansa, each of which presented a platform that shaped the secular feminists' gender demands according to the commandments and laws of Islam.[11]

The peak of this process was reflected by an outpouring of women's achievements in cultural matters, this in the heat of the most critical period of the al-Aqsa intifada.

For example, in October 2002, at the initiative of Fikra, a Gaza cultural association, an original play *al-Sayyd Perfect* ("Mister Perfect") was staged and performed in Gaza City. The play, written by the twenty-nine year old Palestinian playwright 'Aatef Abu Sayf, deals with the phenomenon of violence in all of its forms in Palestinian society, but especially with the status of divorced women and society's attitude to them. Engagement in the knotty question of divorced women reflects a real crisis that Palestinian society was undergoing, a crisis borne out by data presented by Mona al-Shawa, the head of the Center for Civil Rights in the city of Gaza. For example, in 2001, when 1427 couples ended their relationships with divorce, most of the women were unable to bring their cases before the *shari'a* courts because they could not afford the financial cost of arguing for their legal rights as divorcees, among them to be awarded custody of their children. The play crossed virtually all possible red lines: from the very matter of the discussion of so sensitive a subject during the political whirlwind in which Palestinian society and its leadership were swept up; through the prominent dominance of the fundamentalist Islamic movements in the Gaza Strip; through the fact that the cast of the play were all women, this in a patriarchal society in which such a vocation, or even avocation, is considered taboo; and, finally, that the target audience of the play were high school students – "boys and girls in whom the play would awaken doubts," and preferably sooner than later, according to the playwright:

> I do not believe that we must wait for the end of the occupation; on the contrary, we have to discuss internal-social issues – for such discussion is necessary for the continued existence of our society. The occupation is no more than an excuse to postpone such a discussion to a later stage, if at all.[12]

The second gender phenomenon witnessed during the al-Aqsa intifada was the flourishing of a different kind of motherhood than the earlier "mobilized motherhood." During this uprising, Palestinian mothers expressed their fierce opposition to losing their sons for the sake of the homeland, even if the deaths turned the sons into *shahids* and themselves into Mothers of *Shahids*. They wanted their sons alive, and at their sides. They expressed their feelings in a series of interviews that were reported in the London-based weekly newspaper *al-Sharq al-Awsat* of December 28, 2000. The voices of the mother of Isma'il, the mother of Samir, and the mother of Maher themselves were heard, and not the voices of designated spokesmen. The interviewed women came from all strata of the population; some were well-educated and spoke fluently and coherently, while others were poorly educated and their language was faulty

and lacking. However, there was one common denominator: a perception of self as the birth-mother of her own, biological son, in which capacity she – the birth-mother – would do anything to protect her son from becoming a *shahid*. Mothers who failed in this renounced the title Mother of the *Shahid* and declared themselves "bereaved mothers" (*thukal'a*). In this vein, grief and mourning gradually replaced the mother of the *shahid*'s publicly expressed joy: "If only I was a mother, simply a mother and not the Mother of the *Shahid*,"[13] or, "I wanted to be a mother that no one knows, an anonymous (*nakira*) mother."[14] Support groups for mothers suffering from the trauma of having lost a son began to be active during the second intifada, and this allowed women to express their grief despite the patriarchal proscription that tried to stifle this sentiment: "I was forbidden to kiss him and to weep over him; the sheikh told me that my tears would cause him pain and defile him."[15] Most of the women expressed their longing to see their sons: "I couldn't sleep during the entire past month. Today I visited his grave and I called out to him, 'Arise, awaken, son; don't remain there buried under the earth.'" Or, "I don't want a son who is a hero; I want my son back again. He is mine!"[16]

The process of the privatization of motherhood was accompanied by trenchant criticism of the Palestinian leaders who, while exhorting the sacrifice of the nation's sons, did their utmost to keep their own sons safe from all and any dangers. "Is the Palestinian Authority aware of the pain and suffering I am going through? Does any one of them realize what it means for a mother to sleep in her bed while her son is buried under stones in an ugly graveyard?"[17] asked the mother of Riyyad defiantly. The voices of these Palestinian mothers thus express the process of privatization, from the nationalized motherhood that prevailed and had exhausted itself in the first intifada, to individualized motherhood that, step by step, separates itself from national responsibility.

The third prominent gender-related dimension to the al-Aqsa intifada was the appearance of the *shahidat* – young women suicide bombers – a phenomenon that was glorified but, conversely, also demonized. On January 27, 2002, Wafa Idris blew herself up on a main street in Jerusalem. While much has been written explaining her deed ideologically, testimony of her friends and family strongly suggests that the motivation for her suicide was personal rather than national or religious: Wafa Idris was twenty-five years old, divorced by her husband (who was also her cousin) after some eight or nine years during which she failed to bring offspring into the world. Her status as a divorced and barren woman, and her return as a dependant to her parents' home where she became an economic burden, put her in what is a

dead end situation in a traditional, patriarchal society. She was non-normative in Palestinian society and her chances of building a new life for herself were close to zero. Wafa Idris's only way of redeeming herself from the inferior status ordained by her surroundings was by choosing to become a *shahida* for the sake of her nation.

Idris was the pioneer; others followed soon after. In February 2002, Darin Abu Issa, a twenty-two year old student from a village near Nablus blew herself up at the Maccabim roadblock. Abu Issa, after having been divorced by her husband, was a student at al-Najah University in Nablus, where she was a member of the Islamic Students Union. According to Palestinian sources, her former husband and her brother had both been killed in a clash with Israeli military forces just months after her divorce, and this is what motivated her to become a *shahida*. After Hamas rejected her request to carry out a suicide bombing, PLO activists from the Balata refugee camp near Nablus granted it.

Hanadi Garedat, a young lawyer from a village in the Jenin area who carried out a suicide attack in a crowded restaurant in Haifa in October 2003, represents a different sub-group of women suicide bombers. At the age of twenty-seven and still unmarried, Garedat was in an untenable position in a society that sanctifies marriage. Her non-normative status exposed her to its supervisory apparatus, which refused to recognize her as an educated and economically independent woman, and continued to scrutinize her every move, especially her sexual behavior. Becoming a *shahida* rescued her from the lifelong spinsterhood dictated by her advanced age. Moreover, it bestowed upon her the title "Bride of Haifa," for as a *shahida* she has been, as it were, married to the soil of Haifa, while prior to this it was only the male *shahid* who in his death wedded the soil of the homeland. This title represents the feminization of the national metaphoric conjugal bond: the soil of Haifa is the substitute for a flesh and blood husband in Hanadi Garedat's unrealized marriage.

Women like Idris, Abu Issa, and Garedat were easy targets for recruiters who preferred childless divorced or separated young women, or unwed and apparently "unbetrothable" women.

Another sub-group comprises much younger women who carried out suicide acts after they were seduced by Tanzim activists and, whether or not they had become pregnant, whose virtue was suspect. They had violated the norms of honor and modesty dictated by their society's mechanism of supervision – namely, rumor and gossip, *kalam al-nas*. They had lost their own honor and had betrayed that of their families – and only by their deaths could the honor of both be regained. Becoming *shahidat* and national heroines could achieve this, as well as expiation for themselves

and an upgrading of their own and their families' social status. Thus, Aayat al-Ahras, an eighteen year old excellent high school student from the Deheishe refugee camp not far from Bethlehem, and Andleeb Takatka, a twenty-one year old student at Bethlehem University, both carried out suicide bombings in Jerusalem, the first in March 2002, the second the following month. Although through their behavior they had defiled their families' honor (*'ard*), which could lead only to social death, both – by self-sacrifice through suicide, *istishhad* – escaped the humiliating deaths they would otherwise have suffered.

Among the women who attempted to carry out suicide acts but were apprehended en route is another set of non-normative women. Such for example was Faiza 'Amal Juma'a, an unmarried thirty-five year old woman from the 'Askar refugee camp near Nablus, who was known as Ahmad. She was one of those called *mutarajilla*, manly-women. "Only God knows whether I am really Faiza, as is written in my identity card, or Ahmad, which is who I feel I am."[18] Faiza-Ahmad's fate was sealed, as she herself was well aware: "Who will want to marry someone like me? Have you forgotten that I am Ahmad?" Even Faiza's brother-in-law recognized her predicament – "I feel pity for her" – and admitted that her trans-sexuality was exploited by her recruiters: "Evil people used her personal problem and sent her to put an end to her life." Women such as Faiza neither have the necessary funds to pay for a sex change operation nor, even if they do and have such an operation, will they be accepted in their society, in which there is no freedom of choice. She was expected to resign herself to her God-given female sexuality, and to live according to it. Unable to do this, the only way for Faiza-Ahmad to redress her sin of refusing to do so was by death as a *shahida*.

An intensification of the *shahidat* phenomenon is represented by the suicide of Rim Riashi at the Erez check post, not only as the married mother of two small children, but also because of the sanction she received by Sheikh Ahmad Yassin. Yassin had previously ruled that "in our society there is a tendency among women to cleave to Jihad and holy death, but the woman is unique and at this time, we have no need of acts of suicide by women; ensuring the nation's existence is important many times over."[19] At the same time, unofficial sources confirmed that he would sanction suicide actions by women who had stained their family honor. Indeed, it was not long before it became clear that Rim Riashi had requested Yassin's sanction only after her relationship with a lover had, via *kalam al-nas* (gossip), become a known matter. Thus, the act of *istishhad* was the only way to remove the stain of dishonor from both herself and her family.

Both the Palestinian national leadership and the Islamic movements' women recruiters made cynical use of the suicides of young Palestinian women. The former tried to embellish them with a feminist slant by presenting the phenomenon as evidence of the trend towards equality insofar as Palestinian patriotism was concerned, a subject that permeated the national discourse. Thus, for example, in a eulogy at the funeral of Wafa Idris: "The martyrdom of the 'flower Wafa' proves that all sectors of our people, men and women, side by side, are joined together in the war of liberation and in the confrontation with the aggression."[20] A female member of the Fatah Revolutionary Council went even further and determined that "Wafa's martyrdom has restored honor to the national role of the Palestinian woman; [she] has presented us with one of the most awe-inspiring portrayals in the long struggle for national liberation."[21]

The Islamic movements adopted a similar claim but dressed the women suicides in a cloak of authentic Islamic feminism and claimed that women were permitted to take an active part in a jihad. To validate this they brought a *hadith* (a saying that is not in the Qur'an but is attributed to the Prophet Mohammed): "If even one centimeter of Muslim soil is conquered, then all are commanded to take part in a jihad: a child without his father's permission, a woman without her husband's permission, and a slave without his owner's permission." Basing herself on this *hadith*, Jamilla Shanti, in charge of recruiting women for the Islamic Jihad movement, has claimed that "there is no difference between the martyrdom of the Muslim sisters and that of the Muslim brothers."[22] We are witnessing a process in which the Islamic term *shahid/shahida* itself is undergoing a process of nationalization and Palestine-ization. And in this way, the Islamic "holy war for the sake of Allah" [*jihad fi sabil 'allah*] is being turned into an Islamic "holy war for the sake of the homeland" [*jihad fi sabil al watan*].

And yet, neither Islamic rhetoric nor nationalistic eloquence has succeeded to date in proving that the phenomenon of *istishhad*, self-sacrifice in the name of Allah, is truly a matter of gender equality. And if the question we are trying to clarify is whether the *shahidat* are dying for equality, the answer is yes, very much so – but they are dying to *be* equal, through the living of their lives and not through the sanctification of their deaths.

Notes

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3 Ela Greenberg, "The Cradle in One Hand, the Nation in the Other: The Portrayal of Women in the Palestinian Press, 1920s-1930s" in *Hamizrah Hehadash* 43 (2002): 61 [Hebrew].
4 Massad, "Gender and Palestinian Nationalism."
5 Rema Hammami, "Women, the Hijab and the Intifada," *Middle East Report*, May- August 1990, p. 26.
6 Anan Ameri, "Challenges Confronting the Palestinian Women's Movement," in Asma Afsaruddin (ed.), *Hermeneutics of Honor* (London: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 45.
7 *Al-Quds*, November 1, 1999.
8 Amal Jamal, "Engendering State-building: The Women's Movement and Gender-Regime in Palestine," *Middle East Journal* 55, no. 2 (2001): 261-62.
9 "The Women's Document: A Tool for Women's Empowerment and Struggle," interview with Eileen Kuttab, in Suha Sabbagh (ed.), *Arab Women between Defiance and Restraint* (New York: Olive Branch Press, 1996), pp. 121-26.
10 Lynn Welchman, "In the Interim Civil Society: The Shar'i Judiciary and Palestinian Personal Status Law in the Transitional Period," *Islamic Law and Society* 10 (2003): 57-58.
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12 Orli Halperin, "Feminism Gaza Style," *Haaretz*, October 22, 2002.
13 Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, "Liberating Voices: The Political Implications of Palestinian Mothers Narrating their Loss," *Women's Studies International Forum* 26, no. 5 (2003): 397.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., p. 398.
18 Smadar Perry, "A Terrorist Woman Suicide Bomber," *Yediot Ahronot*, June 18, 2004.
19 *Al- Sharq al-Awsat*, January 31, 2002.
20 *Al-Ayyam*, February 1, 2002.
21 Ibid.
22 *Al-Sha'ab*, February 1, 2002.