

Dynamics of Gender Ideology of Hamas

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Abstract. The West has often approached Hamas as monolithic and static. However, careful analysis reveals that the movement is flexible and fluid. Hamas actually provides its own discourse that offers an ever-changing framework of identity formation. By one merely labeling the group as a "terrorist" organization, the potential for comprehensive analysis is not only undermined but is reduced to focusing on the group's actions and doctrinal aspects of its charter. Although some scholars have begun serious in-depth studies and research into the Islamic Resistance Movement as a dynamic group within a broader context of socio-economic and cultural factors influenced and generated by the Nakba and subsequent Israeli occupation, the gender ideology of Hamas as well as other Islamic movements has been greatly ignored. Not only has the gender ideology of Islamic movements been sketchy but that also the women militants and their role(s) have been neglected in the study of Islamic movements.

1. Political Ideology: A Reflection of Adaptability

Palestinian Islamists have continuously fluctuated between revolutionary and reformist means to establish an Islamic state. The Israeli authors Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela define Islamic movements as revolutionary whose ideology states that through the seizure of power, whether through legal means or violence, will "Islamize" the society from above by use of state mechanisms. According to the authors, the other form of Islamic movement is reformist. Reformist Islamism contends that the Islamic state or *umma* can be achieved through education and social action (Mishal et al. 2000:28).

In August of 1988, Hamas issued its charter. The charter utilized the national values and ideology of the secular Palestinian Liberation Organization. However, Hamas reinterpreted those ideas within an Islamic framework through Islamic terminology and belief system (Mishal et al. 2000:43). The charter proclaimed that the Palestinian land was an Islamic *waqf* or "endowment" "consecrated for future Muslim generations until Judgment" (Mishal et al. 2000:44). The proclamation also declared that any forfeit of that land was forbidden by *sharia* or Islamic law. The use of "external *jihād*" was also indoctrinated as a religious duty to establish and preserve this *waqf*. Thus effectively combining religious values and nationalist desires and goals (Mishal et al. 2000:44).

Although the charter of Hamas is very dogmatic, the movement has continuously demonstrated its adaptability and dynamic character in response to its own inherent contradictions and to the political and social conditions in the Occupied Territories. Mishal and Sela argue that like other Sunni Islamic movements Hamas has to struggle with the innate difficulty of forming an institutional hierarchy, which contradicts the Sunni ideal of open interpretation of the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith*. The rivalry between Hamas and the PLO has been the ultimate source of conflict. Due to the PLO's hegemony, Hamas had learned from its inception to coexist with the PLO. However, the movement had to do so without relinquishing its legitimacy as an opposing alternative to the PLO (Mishal et al. 2000:46-47)

2. Gender Ideology

The Gender Ideology of Hamas: A Continuous Discourse

Because Hamas—like other fundamentalist movements—strives to construct a "moral society based on the moral family," its gender ideology and religious ideology cannot be separated (Jad 2005:174). Thus, in order to gain better insight into the neglected gender ideology of Hamas the texts generated by the movement as well as their mobilization of women must be examined. The history of the movement's attitudes towards women must begin with the eruption of the Intifada.

Prior to the attempted nationalization of the hijab or headscarf, the headscarf in Gaza assumed diverse forms and meanings. Through the hijab, class, regional background, age, or religion was indicated. Hammami argues that: "These forms and meanings are fluid, and since 1948 there has been an ongoing appropriation and reinvention of various traditions of clothing and head-covering." Hammami 1990:25).

During the late 1970s, the hijab began being redefined by the emerging Islamic movements, particularly al-Mujamma (which would later form Hamas). These groups strove to “restore” the *hijab* on women in the Gaza Strip as a means of returning to a more authentic Islamic tradition. However, Hammami contends that it is:

...in fact an “invented tradition” in both form and meaning. Here the hijab is fundamentally an instrument of oppression, a direct discipline of women’s bodies for political ends. The form itself is directly connected to a reactionary ideology about women’s roles in society and a movement that seeks to implement this ideology (Hammami 1990:25).

The Mujamma provided a model for both society and behavior that was relevant to the current conditions generated by the Israeli occupation. The group was able to offer a feasible solution to the social upheaval. By appealing to common cultural ideals and experiences as embodied in their Islamic interpretations, al-Mujamma’s influence and popularity grew in Gaza (Hammami 1990:25).

During the early years of the first Intifada, a fierce and sometimes violent campaign ensued in Gaza to impose the *hijab* on all women (Hammami 1990:24). The campaign would quickly spread into the West Bank. However, the UNLU would help suffuse it further spread into the West Bank. Hamas was at the forefront of the campaign. Upon its active participation in the Intifada, it soon summoned all women to adopt the *hijab* (Hammami 1990:25).

While Hamas actively campaigned for all women to adopt the headscarf, Hammami maintains that the *hijab* campaign was comprised of several forces. These forces operated collectively. The most compelling force was the combination of social pressure and the attempt to nationalize the *hijab*. The headscarf was soon ascribed new meaning as a symbol of political commitment to the uprising. Another argument for the *hijab* was that it acted as assurance of safety from soldiers. However, causality statistics reveal that soldiers do not distinguish along the lines of gender. The final reason for the adoption of the hijab was to ward off attacks from religious youths (Hammami 1990:26). Although the campaign to impose the hijab failed in the West Bank for various reasons—particularly the lack of al-Mujamma and Islamist influence—it was remarkably successful in the Gaza Strip. Neither the UNLU (Unified National Leadership of the Uprising) nor the women’s committees effectively hindered the influence of the Islamists (Hiltermann 1991:56). By December of 1988, it was common practice for women to wear the some form of *hijab* while walking about Gaza (Hammami 1990:25).

While some may argue that the gender ideology of Hamas is “fixed” and conservative (Jad 2005: 180), Islah Jad argues that it is indeed fluid and continues to evolve. Hamas’s beliefs regarding the role of women is constantly fluctuating and inherently contradictory. The ever-changing ideology is not only due to the socio-economic conditions of the Occupied Territories but also due to the discourse with feminist and nationalist women as well as Islamist women within Hamas (Jad 2005:178). The adaptability of the group is demonstrated in various forms. One, the movement recognized the importance of women as a mobilizing force; as a result, it encouraged the education of women. Another example is that Hamas provided career and public sphere opportunities not generally accessible to women (Jad 2005: 176). The veil or the hijab has become the ultimate symbol of Hamas’s evolving gender ideology. Islamic dress has assumed new meanings. It now signifies a woman as an active political member who is modern and highly educated (Jad 2005:177).

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