The Palestinian Women's Movement: From Resistance and Liberation to Accommodation and Globalization

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Introduction

I have been asked to talk about the Palestinian struggle and the role of the Palestinian women's movement in the struggle; I found it very difficult to talk about Palestine in a vacuum while every country in the Middle East is in turmoil and is struggling against global intervention, authoritarian regimes, undemocratic practices, poverty, unemployment and the collapse of humanity. Situating the Palestinian struggle in a global and regional context becomes more relevant to this Forum as globalization in its different expressions and faces has created a human deficit all over the world and particularly in the Middle East.

The new Empire has created its new network namely multi-nationals and financial corporations, in addition to the regional regimes, or the national governments which bureaucratically, politically and economically represent narrow special interest groups where wealth and power is concentrated, ensuring harmony with the global systems, instead of the local systems. International interests now have hegemonic control over local contexts including the Middle East. In addition, this process has marginalized the people at large and confiscated their willingness to resist and remain steadfast throughout their oppression. National

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[*] The first part of this paper is based on a recent publication by the author. See Kuttab (2008).

governments have all gathered to promote democracy and reform through economic prosperity using "wars". Real physical wars that not only have invaded our economies and markets, but also our lands, homes, families and schools by destroying civilizations and cultures. The wars in Palestine, Iraq and Lebanon are good examples of this new hegemony in the region where a New Middle East is being re-shaped. A Middle East that is subjugated by oppression, humiliation and alienation, with the support of the national political regimes; a region where the global substitutes the local and where resistance against colonial occupation becomes illegitimate, and where oppression by occupying forces become justifiable as a legitimate tool for spreading democracy and sustaining a unique form of security (Kuttab 2008).

The international players have promised the concerned nations to end poverty, unemployment, famine, and gender inequality, through economic and political reform, as well as empowerment of the poor and of women. They have claimed to promote human and sustainable development, but they have failed to do so as their promises have not been genuine. The neo-liberals have not invaded the Middle East to bring democracy but to cause chaos, destruction and despair. They have disorientated the political parties and social movements, and limited their capacity to challenge their model; they have subverted their efforts and diffused their power through the creation and cushioning of NGOs that become appendages and tools for generalizing their paradigms. They have undermined accountable and social public figures while at the same time creating technocrats and co-opting potential leaders. They have developed programs with a community and human face, transforming class politics into de-development, depoliticizing influential sectors of the population, and depriving a wide range of social groups from quality services. They have transformed civil society organizations into becoming accountable to overseas donors instead of local communities. Solidarity, a valuable concept for revolution in the region, was transformed into collaboration and egotism, and finally exploitation of the poor became a vehicle for the nourishment of a neo-liberal economy.

The NGO ideological frameworks have invoked pragmatism, citing the decline of the revolutionary left, the triumph of capitalism in the East, and the loss of alternative approaches to development. All this is being used to convince the people to work within the niches of the free market imposed by structural adjustment policies, and to confine

politics to purely electoral parameters. Hence, this period becomes one of the most critical periods in the history of the Middle East region as the true face of globalization is being exposed, and the political and economic corporate schemes are being instated. The recent earthquake among the financial institutions of global capitalism points out the corruption and greed of the political systems, and is a very important indicator for the beginning of the collapse of neo-liberal policies, a lesson that the South should learn and utilize to the utmost (Kuttab 2008).

Dichotomy of Transformation

While Arab regimes have internalized defeat, people's heroic resistance has continued to challenge it. While a neo-liberal definition of democracy is being promoted through militarism, the Palestinian democracy and the elections of the Palestinian legislative council in 2003 expose the double standards of the international democracy, which differentiates between a "right and suitable" form of democracy, and a "wrong and unsuitable" democracy. All this represents a period in history where two conflicting paradigms are struggling to prevail, the first being the global corporate paradigm that is using all means possible including wars to control resources and block future growth and development in the Middle East, while subjugating any resistance. The second paradigm concerns a national level, representing resistance movements, but without reflecting similarity and harmony, as there is no homogenous movement. National resistance movements are a combination of two trends, a fundamentalist trend that will abort the democratic heritage of the resistance, and a national democratic one that is challenging the new world order and the Zionist occupation in order to promote an alternative paradigm that launches the national comprehensive development process, based on real democracy and people's right to self-determination.

Palestinian Women's Movement: New Roles and Responsibilities

We place the Palestinian women's movement as an extension and part of the national democratic struggle, or a movement that has evolved

within the different historical stages of the national struggle to express people's aspirations and respond to national needs.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Palestinian women's activism has been influenced by its relation to, and identification with, the national liberation struggle.

Since the 1920s, Palestinian women's activism has been organically linked to and developed through the resistance movement, and hence women have shared the nation's fortunes, burdens and aspirations for independence and sovereignty (Jad 1995; Kuttab 1993). One of the historical events that had strategic repercussions on the national struggle in general and women's activism in particular was the creation of the women's union, which has shaped and organized women into a women's movement, sustained up to the present time (Jad 1995).

This process began in 1921, when the first Palestinian women's union was created in Jerusalem and came to exemplify the organic link between national struggle and social struggle. The political conditions of that period – namely the practices of the British Mandate and its support of the Jewish immigration policy to Palestine, and the Zionist encroachment on Palestinian land which resulted in the loss and fragmentation of the Palestinian community – encouraged Palestinian women to struggle alongside men in protesting against the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

Women's participation in the struggle from 1929 until 1947 was spotlighted in different headlines in both local and international newspapers, especially in the Arabic press regarding the British Mandate. The media was baffled by slogans that expressed clearly that women are also nationalists like men, or that the Arab women are in the vanguard and in the forefront of the ranks, indicating the extensive involvement of women in the national struggle. Their participation took on different forms such as demonstrations, congresses, memoranda to the government, arms smuggling, meetings with government officials, fundraising, support to prisoners, and aid to the wounded (Fleishmann 2003). Yet, despite these national activities, women were able to assert a feminist agency and autonomy from the male nationalist project and the colonizers' imposition of neo-traditional customs (Ibid).

Resistance continues against the British mandate and Jewish immigration to Palestine and was disrupted by the second major event in

the history of Palestinian people in general, and Palestinian women in particular: the outbreak of 1948 Arab-Israeli War, which created a new reality as a result of the uprooting and dispersion of the Palestinian people. The creation of the Israeli state in the larger part of historical Palestine and the destruction and fragmentation of the Palestinian social networks that represent the basic conditions for sustainability were challenged, which in turn imposed new demands on the women's organizations, and forced them to expand their structures in order to be able to offer relief and social services to needy families. While the Palestinians were still rising from the ruins and coping with the agony of loss from the 1948 war, the 1967 Six-day war erupted resulting in the complete destruction of the political, economic and cultural infrastructure of the Palestinian society, reducing its ability for survival and continuity, which now demanded further solidarity and unity among the people and within the national movement. These events transformed the women's movement to a wide structure of charitable organizations that supported and responded to the needs of the communities.

Following the 1967 war and the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza strip, structural changes occurred in the Palestinian society that drastically transformed the economic and social lives of its population. The economic displacement of the peasants, through Israeli appropriation of lands, transformed the peasant class into a proletarian workforce for the Israeli labour market, which has put the traditional peasant family at risk. The full control of water resources by the Israelis and the structural distortion of the labour market have transformed the Palestinian economy into an economy fully dependent on the Israeli labour market (Kuttab 1988). All these practices have put new pressures on women in general and the women's movement in particular, with the central role of Palestinian women transferred to the preservation of tradition, national heritage and culture, as symbols of identity and continuity. Although on the surface these roles seem to be traditional and passive, their importance and meaning lies in the fact that sustaining a society became critical for its survival.

In this same period, women also joined different political parties to enhance their political role and enrol in the resistance. Although these developments created a new image of women's militancy, gender segregation and the traditional division of labour – where women's

roles were sexually defined and limited to providing service support – were still maintained, but also critically questioned.

Nationalism and Feminism

Women's movements that have defined themselves as autonomous from male-dominated parties and institutions are often intertwined with broader movements for social change. Nationalist movements provide opportunities for large-scale women's activism and this opportunity comes to recognize gender specific grievances and concerns. (Basu 1995)

The Palestinian women's movement has developed through its engagement in the broader issues of the nation. The process of resistance against the colonial occupation has also shaped the class and gender consciousness which affected systematically the women's agenda and their struggle for their own rights. The history of the women's movement and the analysis provided in this article serve to illustrate some of these issues more clearly.

Although Palestinian women's participation in the national struggle had been perceived as a necessary but not a sufficient condition for their emancipation as women, they still express their belief that the struggle for women's liberation is not distinct from national independence and at the same time does not constitute a paradox. Since the women's involvement in the national movement in the 1920s and throughout the *Intifada* of the 1980s, nationalism was seen as a "releasing effect" and a necessary tool to legitimize their activism, and provide them with a public role, political expression and gender identity (Fleischmann 2003). A realistic approach for women living under colonial hegemony would depend on the capacity of the women's movement to understand the working reality of their everyday lives under colonialism, and thus to accommodate the nation's worries, concerns and issues with their own. It would have been unrealistic for the women's movement to prioritize women's issues and rights, while all the Palestinian people, men and women alike, were being denied their basic human and national rights (Kuttab 1996b).

Different writers on the women's movement argue this further when they point out that from its inception, the women's movement agenda was not explicitly articulated, and was located within a nationalist framework. Yet, one of the first resolutions and by-laws in 1929

that followed the national movement and the creation of the first Palestinian women's union included a clause that stated the goals of undertaking a women's awakening, and elevating the standing of Arab women in Palestine (Fleischmann 2003). Working towards these goals, women had to prioritize the national dimension as part of their vision to improve the Arab women's status, which was embedded in their concept of the role of the nation-state. This view was not based on conceptualizing gender roles, or factors of internal oppression, but rather women perceived it as the means to and end result of social change or "reform", where achievement becomes linked to the struggle for building a nation-state. Hence women's rights became organically linked to the nation-state, and the notion of rights became linked to the political connotation of suffrage and nationhood (Ibid)

Although women did not problematize the tension between their nationalist participation and gender inequalities early on in the struggle, they always expressed the difficulty inherent in promoting what they perceived as narrow, feminist issues especially when the whole nation is under attack with men more targeted by the occupiers, and also when both Palestinian men and women have not attained their political rights.

Demands of gender equality are more mature now but are also questioned in their relevance to the struggle, as the Palestinian problem is still not resolved and the continuation of the national struggle is still necessary for attaining liberation. Hence the gender aspect of the struggle has to be redefined to incorporate national as well as social struggles, which is a difficult formula to achieve on the practical level. Yet this does not mean that the women's movement did not deal with women's issues or did not promote gender equality in its programs, but gender in its modern form and meaning, and as a concept and category of analysis did not appear even in the modern societies in the early twentieth century when the Palestinian women started their resistance against the British and Zionist political agenda.

It has now become clearer that the relation between "Feminism and Nationalism" in the Palestinian context has experienced tension, but at the same time has been misinterpreted due to the limited understanding by Western-oriented feminists who ignored the realities of imperialism and colonialism, and have universalized Western women's experiences as representative of all "women" (Fleischmann

2003; Kuttab 1996a). Acknowledging the fact that women's issues are not separated but linked organically to issues of the nation deepens the understanding of Palestinian women's vision of tying the national liberation struggle to gender equality and women's emancipation.

Democratization of the Women's Movement

The programmed Israeli practices after the 1967 war led to the destruction of the political, social and economic infrastructure of the occupied Palestinian population which affected all sectors, classes and institutions of the Palestinian society. The Israeli impact was so pervasive that it produced broad-based Palestinian resistance to defend the national identity. The period between 1976 and 1981, therefore, witnessed a process of democratization of the national struggle. Different writers have documented the experience of resistance organizations (Jad 2003; Kuttab 1993), including Taraki who describes:

> [T]he emergence of open frameworks for political, social, and cultural action; the amplification of mass participation in political activities; and most important, the incorporation of new social forces, particularly the less advantaged sectors of society, into Palestinian institutional life. (Taraki 1991)

Additionally, this stage exposed the limitations of previous Palestinian traditional social and political structures that led to the loss of their functional and operational capability. In other words, the traditional formations based on class, gender and religious affiliation created by traditional figures and social forces became utterly ineffective in coping with the scope and nature of everyday problems posed by the Israeli occupation. One reason for this was the social distance between the traditional elite leadership and the masses, and the other was the misinterpretation of a dialectic relation between national and social liberation. The democratic change at the structural and ideological level created new organizations that mobilized Palestinians under broad categories and sectors such as youth, workers, women and students.

It is at this point that Palestinian women facing a triple form of oppression – by class, gender, and nationality – took advantage of the above mentioned democratization initiative and created their own mass-based organizations. A new generation of women activists

appeared with a new approach to understanding the relationship between national liberation and women's emancipation. This "new" movement, which was mainly initiated by a nucleus of progressive women of different political ideologies and of petit bourgeois origins, established new mass-based organizations capable of organizing and mobilizing women in villages and refugee camps using national as well as women's issues as frameworks for their work. The creation of the women's committees which represent the "new" women's movement have broadened the issues, expanded their agendas to include social issues in addition to national issues, and have put forward different demands such as: the right to struggle, to work, to be educated, and to be represented equally in political decision-making. All these demands have challenged the social, cultural and political traditions that prohibit women from participating actively and effectively in public life. Translating these demands into practice, the committees had to work on different levels, namely the national, economic and social in addition to the political (Kuttab 1993; 2003).

Despite the clear connection between the national and the social struggle on the theoretical level, the situation became more difficult on the practical and daily level as the political and national issues remained a top priority. This did not mean that the new women's movement did not emphasize the required changes affecting the role and status of women in the Palestinian society. But the complexity of balancing the national and social agendas, under colonial settler occupation, made the whole process very demanding and complicated.

The committees had to respond continuously to emergency situations due to the occupation, which made feasible, systematic work plans or programs difficult to achieve and implement.

It is known historically that the eruption of the 1987 *Intifada* came within a long process of democratic activism led by mass-based organizations acting as democratic extensions of the national movement. The strength of the national movement and the crystallization of democratic political consciousness in the mid-1970s had a direct impact on the creation of democratic vehicles of change that integrated political, social, and cultural action in a comprehensive strategy for political activity (more detailed discussion can be found in Taraki 1991 and Kuttab 1993).

These different mechanisms have become the mobilizing tools for organizing larger sectors of the community such as students, women,

workers and professionals, who became major actors in sustaining the first *Intifada* of 1987 (Kuttab 1993). In comparison, the second *Intifada* or Al-Aqsa *Intifada* erupted within a different political situation, during a period where democratic political activism had been weakened, political activity was transformed to formal official negotiations, and civil society was being marginalized (Johnson and Kuttab 2001).

Contemporary Palestinian Women's Movement

Characterizing the contemporary women's movement, one can talk about two distinct periods: a pre-Oslo Agreement period of revolutionary style covering the 1970s and 1980s that featured a genuine democratic movement emerging in its decentralized structures to respond to the needs of the national struggle and promote women's consciousness around national and gender issues; and on the other hand, an elite movement represented in more central and formal institutions or non-governmental organizations that has institutionalized women activism and transformed it into specialized work.

The social movements in general and the women's movement in particular have accumulated their democratic resistance culture and continued the national and social function through sustaining a responsive agenda and program, and maintaining relevance to women's needs and priorities, hence becoming the legitimate representative of Palestinian women in general (Taraki 1991, Kuttab 1993, Jad 2000). The build-up of such democratic activism prepared the grounds for the democratic *Intifada* of 1987, which has been characterized as one of the major popular uprisings in the recent history of the Palestinian struggle.

Although the connection between the national and the social struggle was very clear on the theoretical level, on the practical level and daily basis, the political and national issues remained the top priority. This did not mean, as was mentioned before, that the new women committees neglected gender issues. It is the level of complexity involved in balancing the national and social agendas, while under colonial occupation, which made the whole process very demanding and confusing (Johnson and Kuttab 2001).

Mass-Based Organizations and Oslo Agreement

While the 1980s reflected the golden era of democratic activism led by mass-based organizations and civil society organizations as complementary to political parties and unions, the early 1990s treated the equation differently, resulting in the failure of these organizations to pick up the opportunity and ensure sustainability. The Israeli-Palestinian Declaration of Principles (Oslo Agreement) was agreed upon in September 1993 by the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel, which resulted in a peace agreement that committed both parties to a series of actions and interim measures including partial Israeli territorial withdrawal and limited Palestinian self-government. This agreement created a political environment of euphoria and optimism among the Palestinian people who had suffered a long colonial occupation of almost forty years, hence setting a new mindset whereby people felt less pressured by the daily presence of the occupiers and more responsible for their own affairs. The Palestinian National Authority (PNA) was expected to have the power and will to control the future of the country under the assumption that there would be more opportunities for self-reliance through an expansion of the labour market, and that the Palestinian economy would be relatively liberated from full dependence on the Israeli economy, especially the Israeli labour market (Kuttab 2006).

This state of euphoria did not last long, as the situation changed drastically after a period of about seven years. The Al-Aqsa *Intifada* erupted in September 2000 as an expression of protest against the above-mentioned, short-sighted political agreement and against Israeli intransigence in the implementation of agreed-upon measures.

The mass-based organizations that were important actors in the first *Intifada* were dispersed or diffused due to the cantonization policy, leaving behind only a symbolic elite leadership with no constituency. The fragile left opposition parties were not able to regenerate or maintain their activity and viability as a result of their structural weakness and orthodox culture that has not been dynamic in responding to abrupt changes and realities. This in addition to the hegemony of the PNA which was able to monopolize power in the formal authoritarian structure, and diffuse democratic culture which altogether negatively affected the democratic culture that existed previously in the 1980s.

Women's Movement: Challenges and Risks

One of the most outstanding and serious challenges of all facing the Palestinian women's movement during the last ten years has been its transformation from a grass-rooted movement to an elite movement. In the early 1990s, a new phenomenon came into play: the "Ngoization" of women's organizations occurred, where the feminist NGOs came to play a prominent and highly controversial role in the revolutionary women's movement (Jad 2003). These NGOs have come to represent particular kinds of groups with orientations and practices distinct from those of the historic women's groups of the 1970s and 1980s. Growing numbers of specialized and professional feminist NGOs have mushroomed to intervene in national and international policy processes. The inception of these organizations was directly an outcome of the absence of internal democracy and indifference of the national movement regarding gender issues on one hand, and the political process and peace agreements that created a political environment of euphoria on the other. It became obvious that the women's movement leadership sought to use this opportunity and space to impact new national policies through specialized and professional work. Consequently, they became more noticeable on the national map by receiving funds from bilateral and multilateral agencies. They adopted a new agenda more oriented to policy and advocacy and provided expert input into official preparatory documents. Hence, this structural transformation that institutionalized women activism into new NGO forms marginalized the input of the grass-roots movements and weakened the historic women committees. The majority of women NGOs were further de-linked from the national movement through a rationale of decreasing control and hegemony among different political factions. In addition, the erosion of mass movements and the weakening of mass mobilization and democratic representation affected the women's movement's credibility and legitimacy. Consequently, the women's agenda was further de-politicized, reflecting a post-conflict situation through separating women's issues from governance and the political system on the one hand, and from the national struggle on the other. These challenges have not been accommodated or faced, and deeper structural imbalances between women's rights *vis-a-vis* women's practical and strategic needs, versus requirements for national libera-

tion struggle, were placed in conflict and were not resolved. This situation has empowered an elite leadership that has promoted and enhanced a new agenda, which does not focus or represent the women's priority issues (Kuttab 2008).

Women Activism: A step behind

This general demobilization of Palestinian social movements in the Al-Aqsa *Intifada* seems to have affected the women's movement, which then lost its visibility and its dynamic nature. The transition to "democracy" or to "normal" politics as I call them here, and not national politics, has also exposed the real differences and tensions among women that were latent in the past, as national issues had been a uniting force. The beginning of a fundamental divide exists today between those who believe that women's greater equality can be fought from within the state or institutions by pressuring policy makers, while a majority still sees this as a potential for losing autonomy and power for transformation and emancipation. The General Union of Palestinian Women's Executive Committee, which is a quasi-governmental organization that is controlled by women of outside leadership and the Gender Committees in different Palestinian Ministries are consolidating policy transformation by using international platforms as a basis for gender activism. As these formations are not autonomous bodies and are appendages of the state, the ability to mobilize women on issues of equality, democratic governance, and political participation decreases. Hence the limited autonomy of the women's union combined with the absence of elections as a democratic process has handicapped its representative power and limited its ability to mobilize women in the recent uprising. Although there was a consistent attempt to promote women's neighbourhood committees and popular committees in order to mobilize women for the current *Intifada*, this has failed to occur on a wide scale because of the absence of a clear program and a gap between leadership and the constituency.

It seems that women always have a dilemma in responding to the question: "Can the state be a potential force for greater equality or is it an instrument for patriarchal oppression?" (Alvarez 1990). In the Palestinian case, the Palestinian National Authoritarian state has indicated in different instances due to its patriarchal nature that it does not have

the ability or the political will to become the democratic force for democratic transformation. Hence maintaining an autonomous body that is responsible and accountable to women can be the only solution for promoting citizenship and accountability, rather than placing this responsibility on the state level.

Institutionalization of Women's Issues

The growing demand for specialized information about women's status that can be effectively fed into the policy process has led to the creation of non-governmental institutions that have professionalized women issues. These organizations have dominated the political and organizational dynamics and controlled the women's movement participation, in the form of international conferences and workshops. Hence the professionalization of women activism has not promoted women or empowered them in the formal and informal structures of national politics, but has isolated them and separated them from the real issues of the majority (Kuttab and Abu Awwad, 2004).

All of these factors combined – namely the structural limitations, institutionalization of the women issues, and the nature of the elite leadership that has alienated the women's agenda during the political transformation process – have limited the participation of women in the current *Intifada*. It is difficult to see at this stage a women's platform that has the potential ability to empower women and mobilize them in the daily political life. The political period needs a broad coalition of women organizations and independents who only believe in democratic transformation and are elected democratically to represent core women issues that take into consideration class and gender as main categories of formulating an agenda. It is clear now especially due to the *Intifada* and the policy of siege and closures that women are separated geographically, but an additional issue that we have to mention here is the localization of the issues according to the geographic or regional setting. It is clear that the *Intifada* has affected some women more than others and differently, and if such analysis is endorsed maybe a more realistic agenda can be promoted that is able to mobilize a wide spectrum of women into the struggle in a decentralized structure.

The Way Out

As long as the women's movement and other social movements are unwilling to carry the banner once again in order to safeguard their democratic achievements, there will not be a democratic Palestine that we have all dreamed of and lived for. This period is a challenge for all democratic forces and social movements. If these forces do not turn back to their constituency and become more relevant to the needs and aspirations of their people; if they are not able to build some kind of public opinion concerning the advantages of a democratic future state that maintains political pluralism and individual liberties; if they are not able to redefine their priorities and focus more on a decentralized structure that can integrate women's grass-root input into an outreach policy similar to that of the 1980s or even more developed; and if women will not regain their role as the main skeleton of the popular *Intifada,* and become truly democratic organizations, representing people's needs; then the women's movement in particular will be preparing the conditions for a deeper setback with perhaps irreversible circumstances. Serving and regaining people's confidence, maintaining their interest and fulfilling their needs are the real assets for legitimacy and credibility.

Finally, if women's organizations continue to speak of equality and empowerment in abstract and isolation from national liberation issues, and hence accommodate the local agenda as the most important agenda of all, it will continue to be distant from the masses and the needs of the masses. To make women's issues societal issues, the women's movement and women's organizations should go back to their original agenda of balancing the national and the social, in a workable formula that can bridge the gap between the requirements of the elite with the needs of the masses.

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