

Making women able to take care of themselves : Islamic women's organisations on the West Bank



Islamic organisations' role in improving women's position in society is often dismissed. Instead, they are believed to be devoted to charitable work and entrench patriarchal structures in line with traditional religious norms rather than challenge them. This brief nuances this picture, and describes some of the goals and activities of Islamic women's organisations on the West Bank. In addition, the brief highlights factors that challenge the allegations that Islamic women's organisations are affiliated with Hamas. Islamic women's organisations provide more than charity. They provide a public space for women, and "educate the whole person for the future". Four years of Fatah-Hamas infighting, however, have removed this important public space for the West Bank Islamic women's organisations.

Islamic women's "charities": Expanding the knowledge of all women

In the largely Muslim occupied Palestinian In the largely Muslim occupied Palestinian territory (OPT) Islamic social organisations are important providers of health, education, and social services. In Arabic, such organisations are commonly known as khayriyyat, or charities. They are run by women, and their main target is women in the local community. Early 20th century women's organisations were often charities. Palestinian women received their first brush with politics when charitable work became imbued with a national political ideology geared towards

developing and modernising the nation and the role of its women in particular.

The idea that so-called Islamic charities have a role to play in improving the position of contemporary Palestinian women is largely dismissed. The label "charity" evokes ideas of projects that cement patron-client relations instead of acting as vehicles for social change. The aims of Islamic organisations are also often considered to bolster patriarchal structures which tie in with traditional religious norms instead of promoting women's public role in society.

"We concentrate on developing the mind and expanding the knowledge of all women."

Ibtisam in al-Bireh

Ibtisam leads an organisation in the town of al-Bireh. In the beginning she made, tabikh al-khayri – fundraising dinners – making traditional dishes and inviting female friends and relatives to enjoy the food in return for a donation to help the poor. Now, however, her organisation has moved beyond charity. "It is better to enable people to help themselves. The principle of self-help is enshrined in Islam just as much as the principle of charity is. We want to make women able to help themselves rather than depend on charity." To achieve this, the organisation runs income-generating projects that support women who work from home and help them promote their products. This method is employed by both secular and religious organisations. Ibtisam's organisation has opened a private co-ed school that gives priority to girls from poor families. The funds required are raised by Ibtisam and her friends, and by donations from wealthy benefactors in the Gulf. The curriculum includes extra lessons in Islam, but also lessons in computer training, science, and English. "This will be a modern school. We want to educate for the future. And we educate the whole person." This emphasis on education can be found in several Islamic women's organisations.

Farida in Jenin

Farida is the director of a similar organisation in the centre of Jenin. Their educational courses attract participants from the illiterate to the university educated.

"We prefer to be known as a cultural centre, not a charity, because the majority of our activities are not charitable. We concentrate on developing the mind and expanding the knowledge of all women." There are classes to help schoolgirls improve their grades, various levels of English courses, as well as vocational training programmes to encourage women's financial independence. Nevertheless, it is the courses in Islam that are most popular and prioritised. These courses include the art of Koran recital and memorisation, as well as courses on the teachings of the Koran, the Hadith, and Sharia. "We are Muslim women and we live in a Muslim society," says Farida emphatically, "but many women have no idea of the rights they are entitled to as Muslim women. We teach them that. We teach women their religion."

Rural organisations: Marwa

Islamic women's organisations are active in villages as well. Marwa administers a group of about 60 fee-paying women who run the only nursery offering infant care to working mothers and a small library and computer lab with internet access that female students can use for research. "Very few around here have a computer at home. The internet café in the village is not a place where young girls would go," explains Marwa. In addition to the income generating and vocational training programmes, Marwa and her colleagues organise what they call cultural lectures in health, science, and religion: "It is important to teach women about the values

our society is based on. Many of the problems Palestinian women face are a result of the fact that they do not know the basic teachings of the Koran and the Prophet Muhammad," says Marwa.

Some Islamic organisations devote all of their time to traditional charity, e.g. distributing food, medicine, and blankets to the poor. Yet, rather than being the *raison d'être* of these women's organisations, charity is done simply because it is necessary. Their main effort is invested in developing a society where no one needs charity. In this society, women will enjoy a more prominent public position, and women's rights will be expanded and respected. This society is one that is guided by the principles of Islam, although the women may disagree on the exact form it will take. The women's organisations concentrate on giving Palestinian women the opportunity to educate themselves, in particular about Islam. The idea is that once educated, women will contribute to develop this society not only through their role as mothers and wives, but also as public figures of politics and religious affairs. The education also serves another purpose, namely to empower women and to equip them with the tools they need to argue their rights and improve their position within the frames of this new society – namely knowledge of the basic texts of Islam.

The question of " Hamas affiliation "

When Hamas won the 2006 parliamentary election, some observers partially attributed this to the Islamic organisations' role in mobilising the grassroots, in particular the women. Many secular and leftist women's groups had, once the Palestinian Authority (PA) was established, turned their attention towards lobbying and research, often funded by international donors. The grassroot activism that had been prominent during the First Intifada (the first Palestinian uprising, 1987-1993) dwindled, and the Islamic organisations stepped into this vacuum. One claim is that Islamic women's organisations recruited female candidates for Hamas after the election law was amended to include a 20 per cent quota for women before the local elections in 2005. Another claim is that these organisations helped to increase Hamas' female constituency by distributing charity directly to women. It is however hard to find empirical evidence to support these claims.

A 2003 study by the International Crisis Group (ICG) shows how difficult it is to establish unequivocal proof of affiliation between an Islamic organisation and Hamas. In fact, what counts as affiliation is not always clear. Some argue that it must entail the direct transfer of funds, as well as recruitment and political incitement. To others, affiliation means all that, as well as more diffuse efforts to generate popular support for the goals of political Islam in general and/or for the violent actions of Hamas' military wing in particular, e.g. by financially supporting the widows and children

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of militia members killed in action. The fact that Hamas is widely known for providing welfare and health and education services contributes to blur the picture even more.

It should be pointed out that in the Palestinian context the "affiliation" between civil society organisations and political parties has traditionally been quite close. The various parties of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) have consistently channelled resources in return for support through their particular women's groups, professional unions, prisoners' committees, student and youth movements, sports clubs, and medical organisations. Palestinians are quick to assign political affiliation to an organisation, but the criteria for doing so are not always clear. Islamic organisations may be labelled "Hamas organisations" simply because people assume that groups with a religious Muslim profile must be aligned with Hamas. In some cases the (assumed) political inclination of the leader of an organisation is extended to encompass the organisation itself. Ibtisam was asked to run as a candidate for Hamas in the local election, but declined because she was too busy. Farida's husband is known in Jenin for being actively involved with Hamas. Yet the women deny any connection between their organisations and the party.

The fact is that the majority of the Islamic women's organisations on the West Bank are isolated groups. Their activities started with the initiative of an individual or a small group to address local issues and offer services to women in the area. Their projects are limited to the local town or village. There is no coordination between the various groups. In fact, women have little or no information about similar organisations elsewhere on the West Bank, and they do not actively seek such information. There is therefore no reason to believe that these organisations constitute a network of any kind, Hamas-affiliated or other.

When it comes to the transfer of funds, it must be pointed out that these organisations have modest financial resources. They do not receive any support from the PA or from international donors. An exception is Ibtisam's school project which is partially funded from the Gulf. The school is operated as a private foundation with its separate budget and accounts. Almost all the activities are conducted on a voluntary basis, and the leaders and teachers are not paid. Funds are raised by going from door to door asking for donations, and sometimes from membership and training fees. Equipment such as computers is donated by businesses and private individuals. These organisations struggle daily to find money to continue their activities and have no funds to transfer.

Islamic women's organisations envision, and strive to contribute to, a Palestinian society guided by the principles of Islam. Presently, Hamas is the political party that promotes this

vision constituting the clearest link between these women's organisations and Hamas, and may count as proof of "affiliation" to certain observers. This is a tenuous proof that must be propagated with caution to avoid implicating the organisation in Hamas' campaigns of political violence.



Sorting out raided offices.

The campaign against Islamic organisations

In comparison with other countries in the region, civil society organisations in the OPT enjoy a relatively independent position vis-à-vis the PA. When the Law of Charitable Associations and Community Organisations (the NGO Law) was passed in 2000, after several years of debate, it was characterised as the least restrictive law of its kind in the Middle East. The relationship between the PA and Islamic organisations has fluctuated considerably, however. They have cooperated in mapping the need of and assisting the poor. The PA has since its inception also relied on private initiatives to provide welfare services. At the low point, the authorities have shut down Islamic organisations and forced them to end their activities. These often short-lived measures have been seen as attempts by the PA to deflect international pressure following violent actions from Hamas. In comparison with secular organisations, however, the Islamic organisations have operated relatively freely. This is because they rarely engaged in activities that confronted and criticised the performance of the PA, e.g. in human rights and democratisation work. Since the Islamic organisations do not receive donations from the (Western) international community, they have been regarded as less of a competition by the PA than the secular organisations.

As the relationship between Fatah and Hamas deteriorated towards the summer of 2007, this changed. The parties have engaged in a tit-for-tat campaign involving civil society organisations believed to "belong to" the enemy, and the Islamic women's organisations

"We teach women their religion"

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have not been spared. When Hamas gained control of the Gaza Strip, President Mahmoud Abbas declared a state of emergency on the West Bank. Soon after, he issued a decree that revoked the licenses of all Palestinian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and called on them to renew their registration with the Ministry of the Interior. Since then, more than 200 organisations have been dissolved, and a similar number of organisations have not received renewed licenses. Several organisations have reported how security forces have broken into and raided their premises, confiscating and breaking equipment. Leaders and active members have experienced harassment and threats, and many have been imprisoned. Bank accounts have been frozen, boards have been forcibly dissolved and board members have been subject to scrutiny by intelligence agencies.

In al-Bireh, the premises of Ibtisam's organisation, as well as the school, have been set on fire three times. "I report the incidents to the police, but do not expect anything to come out of it. They do not bother to investigate properly." She is certain that the arsonists are "Fatah thugs" and has become dispirited and wary. Her husband has recently been imprisoned, and she has received threats that she may be put in prison too, if she does not end her activities. Thinking of her children, Ibtisam has surrendered and now only teaches Koran studies at home. The school is still open but acquiring the promised

funding from the Gulf is proving increasingly difficult.

In Jenin, the cultural centre that Farida led has closed down completely, and Farida herself rarely leaves the house anymore. She has completely distanced herself from any organised activities, in particular because her husband has been imprisoned, first by Israel and then by the PA, and she worries that he will receive harsher treatment in jail if she is seen as defying the authorities. Other members of the organisation continue to do charity or lead Koran-memorisation sessions in a mosque. They are supervised by female Fatah loyalists who make sure that no unwanted activity goes on.

According to the Palestinian Basic Law, a state of emergency can not last for more than 60 days. More than four years after the takeover of the Gaza Strip, Islamic organisations on the West Bank continue to be closed, and women have lost an important arena for socialising and learning, as well as a public space. The attempts at reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas that were made in the spring of 2011 have yet to yield any concrete results. At present, the process has been put on hold while the PA concentrates on approaching the UN in bid for international recognition as a state. Whatever the outcome, a future Palestinian state must not reserve the freedom of assembly to a few.