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THE CHANGE IN RHETORIC TOWARDS
FEMALE MARTYRDOM IN HAMAS :
SAVING FACE OR CHANGING THE FACE OF
WOMEN IN PALESTINE?

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The Change in Rhetoric towards Female Martyrdom in Hamas:

Saving Face or Changing the Face of Women in Palestine?

Abstract: This paper will discuss the implications of the use of female martyrdom by Hamas. Considering Hamas's position of political power within Palestine, the paper argues that their change in rhetoric towards female martyrdom is significant when considering the political empowerment of women in the future. As both a political resistance movement and an Islamic authority for the Palestinian people, Hamas is in the position which will have the most impact on the political future of women in Palestine. Women will not wish to relinquish power which was given to them during a time of conflict, just as Hamas will not wish to relinquish public support after the conflict. For these reasons, Hamas will be the conduit through which female empowerment will occur in Palestine in the future.

*Tell Ayaat, O' bride of the Heavens !
All beauty stands ransom for your eyes
When paragons, the cream of my people, are castrated
A beautiful [woman] stands up to the criminal
She kisses death with a smile
While leaders flee away from death
Paradise opened its gates for you and greeted
Fatima Al-Zahraaⁱ was in your welcome
--Ghazi al-Gosaibi, "The Martyrs"¹*

I. Introduction

Saudi Ambassador to Britain, Ghazi al-Gosaibi wrote this poem in response to the martyrdom of 18-year old Ayaat Akhras, a Palestinian female who became a suicide bomber. In

¹ Khan, Zafarul-Islam. "You are the Martyrs." *IslamOnline.net*, Apr. 29, 2002.
<http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=Article_C&pagename=Zone-English-Muslim_Affairs%2FMAELayout&cid=1156077760499>.

the world of Islamic fundamentalism, women always seemed to take a backseat to men. Yet a recent trend has seen a sharp rise in the number of Muslim females seeking a more active military role in the form of martyrdom, or what the West calls suicide terrorism. Islamic scholar Yoram Schweitzer noted that “the use of female bombers in the past signified secular terrorism, but the line between secular and religious ‘has become increasingly blurred.’”² To a western mind, the idea of finding gender equality and empowerment in a political context through an act which ends in the death of the participant seems incomprehensible, yet that is exactly what the women of Hamas are trying to do.

There is a common belief that Islamist organizations prey on women whose families have poor reputations or women who have committed a “dishonor” so they may regain their honor through martyrdom. Or the organizations seek out women whose brothers have dishonored the family in order to restore the family’s honor. This unfortunate justification is true for some women, especially those forced into committing these acts by groups such as al-Qaeda. But some women, especially those in Palestine, are able to find empowerment from Islamist rhetoric as their rights and influence push into a new genre - military.

While the focus of this paper will be on Hamas, this Palestinian Islamist organization is not the only group who uses female suicide bombers. The others include Chechen rebels, al-Qaeda, and the Palestinian secular group known as al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade. The Black Widows and other Chechen female suicide bombers bear the closest resemblance to the Hamas women because they are motivated by religion and actively seek out opportunities to become martyrs. Yoram Schweitzer recognized their importance in the world of Islamic suicide bombing in that “the growth in the number of Chechen female suicide bombers signals the beginning of a change

² Schweitzer, Yoram. “Female Suicide Bombers for God.” n.88, Oct 9, 2003.
<www.tau.ac.il/jcss/tanotes/TAUnotes88.doc>.

in the position of fundamentalist Islamic organizations with respect to the involvement of women in suicide attacks.”³

In contrast to both Chechen women and Hamas, the idea of female martyrdom in the context of al-Qaeda cannot be linked to empowerment because many reports show that the women who commit these acts are not doing so of their own free will. They are often drugged or brainwashed into becoming unwilling martyrs. In fact, a fifteen-year old Iraqi girl named Rania was used by al-Qaeda in such a way. She was interviewed in late 2008 on al-Baghdadiya TV testifying to the fact that her husband’s cousin drugged her before putting an explosive belt onto her and bringing her into a market against her will.⁴ Stories such as this point to the fact that al-Qaeda cannot be used to show an organization which may be able to advance the political rights of women through their rhetoric.

Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, the military wing of the Palestinian secular group known as Fatah, is also an interesting study because they had used women as female suicide bombers before Hamas – including the first Muslim female suicide bomber, Wafa al-Idris. But as they have not been the leading political figure in Palestine since the elections in 2006, their influence will not be as important to the political future of women in Palestine as the influence of Hamas.

When the phenomenon of female suicide terrorism emerged, the initial reaction of Hamas followed the patriarchal trend, where they believed the women should not have been allowed to be martyrs in this way. However, leaders in this community soon changed their minds and are now encouraging this behavior in women, even citing Qur’anic and other Islamic examples to justify their participation. Hamas will be the focus of this paper because, unlike al-Qaeda, the majority of women in Hamas are acting of their own volition. Also, Hamas’s leaders outwardly

³ Schweitzer. “Female.”

⁴ Al-Baghdadiya TV, Sept 1, 2008. Found in MEMRI, *Special Dispatch No. 2057*, Sept 22, 2008. <<http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/76/3120.htm>>.

criticized female martyrdom initially, making their change in rhetoric both striking and significant. To understand and predict the impact this change will have on women in Palestine in the future, we must understand why the rhetoric has changed and analyze how a change like that will affect female political empowerment in Palestine.

While political empowerment is rarely a major motivation for female suicide bombers, many females in the Muslim world see the acceptance and propagation of this act as an advancement of their rights and actually feel empowered, whether they agree with suicide terrorism or not. Knowing that Hamas – as elected – is the major political actor in Palestine, the women of Palestine must rely on them for advancement of their rights in all sectors. This paper will analyze the impact Hamas's rhetoric towards female martyrdom may have on the political rights of women in Palestine. It will question what will happen now that Hamas is no longer using martyrdom operations - will women strive for equality in other sectors through Islamic feminism, or will they be pushed back into the private realm?

The first section of this paper takes a look at what scholars have said about this topic and how this paper will build upon their ideas. The second section looks at the history of women's rights in Palestine for the last century, taking into consideration the unique characteristics of Palestine as an occupied state and the unfortunate reality for women in Gaza in particular. Then this paper will discuss the background of Hamas including its start in martyrdom operations and how women were used in the organization before Wafa al-Idris. The next section describes the reaction of Hamas to the introduction of female suicide bombers from the time of the first Palestinian female bomber to now, seen in multiple media sources. This will show the change in Hamas's rhetoric and will delve into why Hamas's rhetoric has changed – was it out of convenience, to maintain popular support, or an act of female empowerment? The fourth section

will predict the impact this change in rhetoric will have on women in Palestine in the future, especially considering suicide operations have not been used for the past two years and Hamas seems to be heading towards more peaceful routes of expression.

II. Operational Terms and Definitions

Not all suicide bombers are religiously motivated and not all religiously motivated attacks are suicide bombings. Sociopolitically, suicide terrorism is “the operational method in which the very act of the attack is dependent upon the death of the perpetrator. [Aimed at] striking a blow to public moral[e].”⁵ In theological terms, suicide terrorism is considered a part of holy war, or jihad, and is a form of martyrdom. The only form of martyrdom which had been attributed to women before Wafa al-Idris – the first official female suicide bomber in Palestine – is the martyrdom which comes from dying in childbirth.⁶

Since part of this paper focuses on female martyrdom through jihad, the meaning of jihad must be ascertained. Jihad remains a term whose meaning is deeply contested, but the important connotation of the term for this paper would be the meaning Hamas uses. Jihad is seen as a religious duty in Islam. It is a struggle against an opposing force. When the term was first established it “involved no *qital* (fighting or combat): it was an entirely nonviolent form of struggle.”⁷ Now groups such as Hamas use the term jihad to refer to a holy struggle, sometimes violent, to rid their land of oppressors – the Israeli occupation, in Hamas’s case.

A *fatwa* was issued by Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi to officially support female martyrdom. In Islam, *fatwas* are religious orders which Muslims are supposed to follow. Religious leaders,

⁵ Boaz Ganor qtd. In Beyler, Clara. “Messengers of Death.” Feb. 12, 2003.
<<http://www.ict.org.il/articles/articledet.cfm?articleid=470>>.

⁶ Cook, David. *Martyrdom in Islam*. UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Print.

⁷ Tamimi, Azzam. *Hamas: A History from Within*. Massachusetts: Olive Branch Press, 2007. pg. 175. Print.

or sheikhs, such as those in Hamas can issue *fatwas*. Based on the issuer's religious authority, a *fatwa* can be disputed as to its legitimacy.

Hasan bin Salim notes that according to many people in the Islamic world, “any writer, newspaper, or [TV] station that describes the victims as martyrs [embodies] nobility, pride, and resistance – and, conversely, anyone who doesn't is described as a deserter, servile, and an agent of the West!”⁸ To avoid any Western bias or anti-Western bias, I will use these terms interchangeably and will attempt to not associate any positive or negative feelings towards the women who choose to pursue this act. The intent of this paper is not to pass judgment on these women, but to show how their advancement in this sector can be used to predict their advancement in the political sector.

III. Methodology

Most who write on this topic are either Western or come from a Western-aligned background, but through Middle Eastern media, personal interviews, and the few Eastern works on female martyrdom, I hope to give my study a broad spectrum of information to rely on, and avoid working through a purely Western scope of analysis.

In order to get a background on Hamas, I referred to Azzam Tamimi's work titled Hamas: A History from Within. He wrote this book “to enable an English readership to understand how the movement sees itself and the world around it.”⁹ As was his purpose, this book provides an account of the organization from their own perspective as opposed to the other literature on the subject which work from an Israeli or Western viewpoint.

⁸ “‘Martyrs’ or ‘Victims’ in Gaza? Divisions in the Arab World Reflected in the Policies of al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya TV.” January 23, 2009. Found in MEMRI, *Special Dispatch No. 2205*. <<http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/3042.htm>>.

⁹ Tamimi, pg. 1.

Israeli sources logically make up a majority of the work done in the topic of Palestinian female martyrdom. These sources include Rivka Yadlin and Mira Tzoreff who provide insights into the roles and impact of women in Palestinian society, before and after the start of female suicide terrorism in Palestine. Interestingly, they provide contrasting opinions as to the motivations of female suicide bombers in Palestine. Yadlin shows little to no political bias in her analysis while Tzoreff's analysis depicts female suicide bombers as the tarnished women of Palestinian society desperately seeking redemption; this analysis leans toward an anti-Palestinian route since desperately killing oneself is considered suicide in Islam.

Yoram Schweitzer is another Islamic scholar hailing from Israel, though he writes in a way which makes it hard to distinguish any political intentions behind his words. As a leading scholar in female suicide bombers, Schweitzer's work was critical in understanding the history and rise of female suicide bombers throughout the Middle East and Asia.

Karla Cunningham is a terrorism and homeland security expert born and educated in America. Currently, she works at the Research and Development (RAND) Corporation, a non-profit think tank funded by the U.S. Government. However as she analyzes the Palestinian, Chechan, and Global Jihadi Movement (GJM) cases of female martyrdom from an intelligence and law enforcement background, no notable bias is indicated in her work.

I interviewed Dr. Ayse Kadayifci, Islamic scholar and assistant professor at American University in Washington, D.C. Her opinions substantiated this paper both as an Islamic scholar and as a Muslim woman. In addition, her expertise in conflict resolution, particularly in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, made her a particularly useful source during my research. For the interview, I based the conversation off a set of questions to stimulate conversation and maintain a semi-structured format to assist in getting substantial information:

1. What do you think is the reason behind Hamas's change in rhetoric and their justification for female martyrdom?
2. Rivka Yadlin discusses how Islamic feminism differs from western feminism and how women must find empowerment through the dominant normative order, which in the case of these women, lies not in Western feminist ideas, but in the Islamic normative order. Is martyrdom an example of Islamic female empowerment? Is so, how? And if not, why not?
3. Is this a path that may lead to empowerment and equality in the future?
4. What will happen when Islamist organizations decide that they don't need females to become martyrs?

I made sure to use the term "martyr" when asking these questions because it is the term Hamas uses, and the use of a term such as "female suicide terrorist" as often seen in Western literature may only put the interviewee on the defensive, which makes them less likely to speak openly.

To find the reactions from Islamist groups as well as their propaganda, different forms of media in the Middle East were used. These include al-Aqsa, Hamas's personal television network; al-Baghdadiya in Iraq; al-Jazeera; and national newspapers. In addition, Dr. Yusuf al-Qaradawi founded a website called *IslamOnline* which proved useful in attaining texts of some fatwas and articles. MEMRI – the Middle East Media Research Institute – was also used as a source of some translated media and Islamic rulings. Despite the controversial nature of some of MEMRI's translations in the past, there are unfortunately very few sources which provide English translations of these texts.

Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi is used often throughout this paper. His *fatwas* and rhetoric are espoused throughout the Islamic world, including the Hamas organization. He is a very

trusted sheikh despite some Islamists considering him too moderate and some Westerners considering him too Islamist. His words – and television program – are followed by many Muslim citizens and Islamist groups which made his work very useful to this paper.

IV. Literature Review (4)

To discuss women's rights in Palestine, I referred to interviews with women's rights organizations and the Freedom House organization, in addition to scholars who focused on the issue. One scholar was Cheryl Rubenberg who travelled to Palestine and conducted interviews with Palestinian women about women's rights, issues, and organizations. Her book was published in 2001, before the rise of female suicide bombers, but her work provides a good background for the progression of women's rights through the 1980's and 1990's.¹⁰

The Arab World for Research and Development poll used in this paper was a public opinion poll on Palestinian women – their rights and what people believe their roles should be. This poll was conducted on February 2nd through February 5th in 2008 and polled 2400 Palestinians from all districts. The participants were asked about the status of both men and women in Palestinian society; what rights should be priorities for women; how economic participation of women is viewed; the issue of violence against women; women's political participation; what legal reform should be demanded; the role of organizations – women's and human rights – in society; and the gender gaps that are present. Public opinion proved very useful in indicating where public will may be headed and therefore where Hamas's focus may turn as they attempt to maintain public support.

¹⁰¹⁰ Rubenberg, Cheryl. Palestinian Women: Patriarchy and Resistance in the West Bank. Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2001. Print.

Many scholars have looked at the topic of female suicide bombers in different ways. Some look at the advantages of using women in this way. Others look at the ways states can counteract female suicide terrorism. A few Islamic scholars glance over the Islamic legitimacy of female martyrdom, but do not focus entirely on the implications of this legitimacy. Very few scholars look at the political ramifications of female suicide terrorism, or female martyrdom, as I will do in this work. Four scholars who have tackled parts of this issue in their research are Rivka Yadlin, Yoram Schweitzer, Karla Cunningham, and Mira Tzoreff.

Yadlin in her work “Female Martyrdom: The Ultimate Embodiment of Islamic Existence?” introduced the crucial element of Islamic feminism in contrast to the much espoused Western feminism. In the Muslim world, Yadlin found, female roles are born of “social and religious commandment, which has been both internalized by women and harshly enforced by their social environment.”¹¹ Instead of pushing a Western ideal of feminism at these women, Yadlin believed the best way to find equality in the Muslim world was “within the dominant normative order,” which women are able to do by refusing Western influence and accepting their roles and duties in Islam.¹² She expressed that women will be able to improve their status and maintain their Islamic tradition at the same time. While I do not agree that these women are becoming suicide bombers in order to gain equality, this paper will build off her idea of Islamic feminism when considering the future of Palestinian women.

Yoram Schweitzer doubted whether the organizations “allowing” women to become suicide bombers really wish to help women attain an equal standing with men. He says that:

¹¹ Yadlin, Rivka. “Female Martyrdom: The Ultimate Embodiment of Islamic Existence?” Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality? Ed. By Yoram Schweitzer. n.84, Aug 2006. p.52. Accessed 13 Oct 2010. <<http://www.gees.org/documentos/Documen-01398.pdf>>.

¹² Yadlin, pg. 55.

Although women were already integrated into the army, they did not earn commanding positions, and hence the promise – ultimately empty – of gender advancement for their female colleagues if they volunteered for suicide operations...those sending the women may be exploiting the modern cry for emancipation of women.¹³

Yet the women of Hamas wished to commit these acts with or without the backing of an organization, so they were not being exploited for a chance at political equality. Nor will I argue that their acts are being retrospectively glorified by the organizations for bringing about equality, as Schweitzer addressed later in the work.¹⁴ Rather, I will argue that the change in rhetoric towards female advancement in religious duties and rights has brought about an environment of empowerment for women which they will not let go of once the martyrdom operations are no longer needed.

Dr. Karla Cunningham of the RAND Corporation wrote an article comparing the Palestinian, Chechan, and Global Jihadi Movement (GJM) cases in the scope of female Muslim participation in their movements.¹⁵ While they all rely on jihad as an individual obligation, she found that Palestinian and Chechen are nationalist, religious movements while the GJM is a religious, theocratic one.¹⁶ In addition, the Palestinian case is limited to the Occupied Territories as opposed to being a Wahhabi or global Islamic movement and can be secular at times – especially when looking at Fatah.¹⁷ Cunningham concluded that “while the Palestinians and Chechens pay lip service to the idea of *fard ‘ayn*,ⁱⁱ and do conceptualize their respective battles

¹³ Schweitzer, Yoram. “Introduction.” Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality? Ed. By Yoram Schweitzer. n.84, Aug 2006. pg. 10.

¹⁴ Schweitzer, “Introduction,” pg. 11.

¹⁵ Cunningham, Karla. “The Evolving Participation of Muslim Women in Palestine, Chechnya, and the Global Jihadi Movement.” Female Terrorism and Militancy: Agency, Utility, and Organization. Ed. by Cindy Ness. UK: Routledge, 2008. pg. 84. Print.

¹⁶ Cunningham, pg. 87.

¹⁷ Ibid.

as total war, the religious overtones of the conflicts are largely symbolic.”¹⁸ Furthermore, she stated that these increased rights given to women come from *fard ‘ayn* and religious obligations, but won’t be “reflected in nationalist settings where women’s participation remains optional,”¹⁹ such as when the religious obligations – martyrdom operations – are no longer necessary. I disagree with this last statement as I believe – as this paper will show – that women will not easily give up their new rights when martyrdom is not an obligation.

Dr. Cunningham’s work gave a significant insight into the conception of *fard ‘ayn* in addition to the characterization of Hamas as a nationalist group. Her look at the use of religious symbols is particularly important to this paper, but she looks at its effects on violence whereas I will look at its possible effects on Islamic feminism.

Mira Tzoreff in her work “The Palestinian *Shahida*ⁱⁱⁱ: National Patriotism, Islamic Feminism, or Social Crisis” addressed the question of why women were only used in this capacity during the Second Intifada and not the first. She linked it to the growing gender phenomena in Palestine from the First Intifada through the Second. During the First Intifada, Tzoreff found that the women were asked to be part of the national struggle, but they had no choice in how they could be active. Their roles were allocated to them based on their gender. They became “mothers of the nation” which Tzoreff believed represented a nationalizing of reproduction.

Tzoreff found that a woman being forced into the role of the mother in the private realm “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

¹⁸ Cunningham, pg. 95.

¹⁹ Cunningham, pg. 96.

sacrifice of one's life.”²⁰ But in the Second Intifada, Tzoreff saw a change in the feminist agenda in three ways:

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*).²¹

She concludes that women, now active in the fight to protect their family and protect their homeland, are dying to be looked upon as an equal in their lives – often because they have done something dishonorable and feel that martyrdom will bring their family honor.²² Whether intended or not, her analysis makes the women seem like they are acting out of desperation to save their tarnished honor, which actually demotes their acts to suicide according to Islamic principles. While she overlooks the cases of female suicide bombers who held no dishonor and still wished to be a martyr, Tzoreff provided a solid analysis of women's status throughout both Intifadas.

V. The Progression of Women's Rights in Palestine

The Peculiar Case of Palestine

Palestine is a peculiar state because it is not its own recognized state at this time and its territory is divided between the West Bank and Gaza with two competing forces leading each area. With Hamas in control over the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) and Gaza, and Fatah in control of the West Bank and the presidency, Palestine is suffering from a great internal

²⁰ Tzoreff, Mira. “The Palestinian *Shahida*: National Patriotism, Islamic Feminism, or Social Crisis.” Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality? Ed. By Yoram Schweitzer. n.84, Aug 2006. Accessed 13 Oct 2010. <<http://www.gees.org/documentos/Documen-01398.pdf>>. pg. 14.

²¹ Tzoreff, pg. 16.

²² Tzoreff, pg. 21-22.

struggle. As will be shown in this paper, Hamas will be the most influential party for women's empowerment due to the fact that their Islamic rhetoric has established ruling precedent throughout Palestine and as the most recently elected power, Hamas holds more public sway.

Being part of an occupied territory in constant conflict makes the push for women's rights particularly difficult. The Israeli occupation brought about periods of displacement for the Palestinian population, meaning that a majority of Palestinians no longer live in Palestine. Many are internally displaced and reside in refugee camps. Therefore a lot of activity for the women's movements comes from inside these camps. The Arab World for Research and Development conducted a poll in Palestine in 2008 regarding public opinion on women's rights and roles. The study revealed that 78% of Palestinians believed the "emotional and psychological impact of the Occupation [is] an important factor" for the lack of women's empowerment and 76% also saw "internal conditions, especially factional fighting, have an important negative impact on the status of women."²³

The Beginning of the Occupation through the First Intifada (1987-1993) and the 1990's

Before, the 1967 Israeli Occupation, the different areas of Palestine were ruled under Jordanian and Egyptian law. A FreedomHouse report shows that "while there have been many positive changes for women under laws adopted by the Palestinian Authority, gender-based discriminatory practices enshrined in the Jordanian and Egyptian laws still apply to situations not covered by new legislation."²⁴

The most prominent female figures in Palestine were not originally violent figures. In fact, many of them – including the famous activist Hanan Ashrawi – were powerful within the

²³ Arab World for Research and Development. "Palestinian Women." *Conducted by Reem Ziad-Ghattas*. 20 Feb 2008. Accessed 19 Oct 2010. <<http://www.awrad.org/etemplate.php?id=32&x=4>>.

²⁴ Azzouni, Suheir. "Palestine: Palestinian Authority and Israeli-Occupied Territories." *FreedomHouse. Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Country Reports*. Accessed 17 Sept 2010. <<http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=180>>.

peace movements in Palestine and the surrounding territories. Gender scholar Valentine Moghadan believed that:

By intervening in a sphere traditionally regarded as male – that of international relations and military action – Israeli and Palestinian feminist peace activists confound gender stereotypes, push the boundaries of women’s political citizenship, offer an alternative model of politics, and strengthen civil society.²⁵

In the 1980’s, the women’s movements focused on creating unions for working women, creating kindergarten and child care programs, helping to raise the literacy rate of women, and offering training programs in craftwork.²⁶ Yet the 1988 Palestinian Declaration of Independence regarded women as “the guardian of our survival and our lives, the guardian of our perennial flame.”²⁷ Then in the late 1980’s and 1990’s, the women’s movement changed their focus. Women’s non-government organizations (NGOs) worked on issues pertinent to women, such as education, birth control, and more power in society.

The 1988 Hamas charter expressed in Article 17 that “Muslim women have a role in the struggle for liberation that does not fall from that of the man in that she is the one who produces men.”²⁸ Mira Tzoreff explained that this belief sparked a nationalizing of reproduction in Palestine which pushed women into the private realm.²⁹ This nationalization of a woman’s body eventually turned into the idea that a woman is a “mother of a martyr” and she should live for the day when her son goes off to serve his country by blowing himself up and killing Israelis.³⁰

²⁵ Moghadan, Valentine M. Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East. 2nd ed. Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2003. Pg. 294. Print.

²⁶ Rubenberg, pg. 209.

²⁷ Qtd. in Rubenberg, pg. 219.

²⁸ Qtd. in Tzoreff, pg. 14.

²⁹ Tzoreff, pg. 14.

³⁰ Tzoreff, pg. 15.

Eventually in 1994, all of the organizations devoted to women's rights and status joined together to "[call] for the removal of the obstacles blocking the way for equalization of the status of Palestinian women with that of the Palestinian men."³¹ The women exclaimed that "there can be no democracy without women's representation,"³² and began a "shadow parliament" who worked towards furthering women's empowerment.³³ This "shadow parliament" demanded reforms mainly concentrated in marriage law – raising the marriage age, ending polygamy, and getting rid of the right to *talaq*, which gives the husband the right to divorce his wife without her consent and leaving her with no assistance.³⁴ By 1997, Islamic organizations recognized that they were losing ground in the new feminist movement and created their own Islamic feminist organizations – al-Huda and al-Khansa – which formed political rhetoric to fulfill the demands of the Palestinian women while also maintaining accordance with Islamic law.³⁵

Women did have some rights in Palestine, such as the right to birth control (gained in 1994) and the right to education. But most were unable to pursue these rights due to the intricate nature of Palestinian society – mainly blamed on "both extensive poverty and the Israeli occupation."³⁶ Cheryl Rubenberg expressed that the concern that parents had "about their daughters' honor being sullied by contact with Israeli soldiers."³⁷ For this reason as well as the obligatory household duties for young girls, most Palestinian girls were forced to leave school and stay at home. Additionally, according to one Palestinian woman, if a woman's father did not wish for her to complete school, "she can ask one of her uncles to talk to him. In the end, though,

³¹ Tzoreff, pg. 16.

³² Ibid.

³³ Tzoreff, pg. 17.

³⁴ Tzoreff, pg. 17.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Rubenberg, pg. 123.

³⁷ Rubenberg, pg. 123.

it's his decision.”³⁸ This dominating patriarchy extended to women who were married as well, so if her husband said she could not go to school or work, a woman must obey that decision.³⁹

Other hindering factors in women's empowerment were violence against women and oppressive social norms. The women felt that their “society demands that women have many children, and religion tells [them] that a woman's place is in the home.”⁴⁰ These characteristics led to “many women [being] completely confined to their homes.”⁴¹ Even those who participated in the women's movement found themselves held back by elitism within organizations and the patriarchal society which dictated where women were allowed to go and when.

The Second Intifada

Since the Second Intifada – the second time of resistance against Israeli occupation – began, the push for women's political equality has fallen in favor of the resistance movement. In an interview with the Moroccan-based project E-Joussour, Hanin Nassar, activist in the Union of Palestinian Women Committee, stated that “the Palestinian women's groups have sacrificed the social rights of women in order to have social rights for the people in Palestine to get rid of the occupation.”⁴² The 2008 AWRAD study showed that 80% of Palestinians see women as being oppressed in society.⁴³

To improve their status in society and have the opportunity to exercise what rights they are given, women need more political power. Palestine adopted the UN Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which is supposed to

³⁸ Qtd. in Rubenberg, pg. 129.

³⁹ Rubenberg, pg. 130.

⁴⁰ Rubenberg, pg. 129.

⁴¹ Rubenberg, pg. 134.

⁴² E-Joussour. “Interview with Palestinian women activist: struggling for equality, women's rights and freedom.” 10 Mar 2010. Accessed 11 Nov 2010. <<http://www.e-joussour.net/en/node/3158>>.

⁴³ AWRAD study.

protect women against any discrimination by obligating the signers to change their legal system and public institutions to support equality.⁴⁴ However, Hanin insists that “it is only a signature on the paper, as they have not changed anything in their rules and regulations.”⁴⁵ Additionally, Article 9 of the Palestinian Basic Law established the equality of all Palestinians; but again, this 2005 amendment is a law on paper only.

As of June 2009, only 15.1% of the labor force was female. As far as the government is concerned, Palestine’s parliament (PLC) consisted of 17 women out of 132 seats (12.9%) and only five ministers in the government were women. Furthermore, since Hamas was elected, the political situation for women in Gaza has gotten worse,⁴⁶ alluding to the importance of this organization for the future of women in Palestine. Even when women reach the government, they are stonewalled as they are put “inside the box, meaning that they have to follow the government orders, they have limited powers, and cannot go beyond imposed limits.”⁴⁷ The factors which hindered the women’s movement in the past are still present – the dominating issues of patriarchy and violence against women; yet these factors have been joined by an even bigger issue: Islamization.

The Palestinian movement used to be “the most secular and democratic movement in the Arab world.”⁴⁸ However, the strong women’s movement which came from that time was hindered as a result of the Second Intifada due to the occupation and Islamization of the region. This environment stalled the political progression for many citizens, especially the women who

⁴⁴ U.N. Division for the Advancement of Women. “Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.” *United Nations: Department of Economic and Social Affairs*. Accessed 10 Nov 2010. <<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>>.

⁴⁵ E-Joussour.

⁴⁶ Euromed Gender Equality Programme. “National Situation Analysis Report: Women’s Human Rights and Gender Equality – Occupied Palestinian Territory, 2009-2010.” *Belgium: Euromed Gender Equality*. Accessed 15 Nov 2010. <http://www.euromedgenderequality.org/image/file/Analyse%20de%20la%20situation/Situation%20Analysis_Report_OPT.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Hanin Nassar qtd in E-Joussour.

⁴⁸ Moghadan, pg. 24.

were making a lot of headway towards a secular equality before 2000 (the start of the Second Intifada). The Islamization brought on yet another hurdle for the women as strict Islamic gender rules were imposed onto society, pushing the women into a more traditional life centered in the private realm. These gender rules include a strict dress code requiring women to be covered and a forced position of modesty, purity, and humility.

The creation of the Islamization hurdle is the greatest obstacle facing women's empowerment in Palestine. For that reason, the focus of empowerment for the future should be on the Islamist organization that provides rhetoric establishing and changing Islamic regulations; Hamas demonstrated this power with the military empowerment given to women through the propagation of female martyrdom. This power over Islamic rulings gives Hamas a crucial hand in the progression of women's rights.

Back in 1990, Jean Said Makfisi, a Palestinian writing from Beirut asked, "Here, the question of women lies at the bottom of things and cannot be touched without upsetting the whole order. Can the question of women be separated from religious arguments?" The answer still remains: no. But using Hamas as a foundation for Islamic rhetoric, the women of Palestine have a good opportunity to advance their rights.

VI. Hamas: The Organization

On December 9, 1987, the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood wing in Gaza met to discuss the precarious situation brewing violence on the Gaza Strip. The violence that had broken out earlier that day was said to be the result of a traffic accident, but ultimately led to soldiers from the Israeli military opening fire into a crowd of Arab protestors throwing bottles. Seeing this outright display of unequal power further resolved this leadership in their decision to

turn the Muslim Brotherhood wing into a resistance movement. Among the members of this leadership were Sheikh Ahmed Yassin – Hamas’s leader until his assassination in 2004- and Dr. Abdul Aziz al-Rantisi, Hamas’s leading Islamic scholar.⁴⁹ The Muslim Brotherhood organization was started in Palestine to “cure” the plights of Palestine through Islam until the atmosphere was fit for resistance;⁵⁰ the creation of Hamas marked the transformation to resistance.

Harakat a-Mokawana al-Islamiya,^{iv} the organization commonly known as Hamas, is best characterized as a political resistance movement with only slight religious undertones. Their main classification relies on their dedication to the resistance of Israeli occupation, while their attempts to form and lead a state results in their political label. And though the group is primarily considered an Islamist organization to the West and has “Islam” in their name, their primary focus remains getting rid of the foreign occupation in Palestine.

Hamas is broken down into two separate wings – a military wing called Izzadin al-Qassam and a political wing. Their political wing worked to achieve political advancements and enter the state politics, similar to the strategy used by Sinn Fein, the political wing of the Irish Republican Army – a group which based its tenets off Catholic law and resisted British control in Ireland. In 2006, the political wing of Hamas ran in the elections opposite Fatah, the previous leading organization, and a few insignificant groups of about seven or eight people. Many were surprised when Hamas pulled out a victory in the election. To the Palestinian people, they represented not only an “opposition to the existence of Israel,” but also “a grassroots sense of community.”⁵¹ Since its inception, Hamas worked to gather the support of the Palestinian people by reacting to public will and working within the community to make sure any Palestinian who

⁴⁹ Tamimi, pg. 10.

⁵⁰ Tamimi, pg. 35.

⁵¹ Ward, Olivia. “Why Women Put their Faith in Hamas.” *Chatelaine*. Toronto: Jul 2006. v.79.7, pg. 67.

needed help, received help. They had provided support for the people of Palestine in many ways including tuition assistance and other financial aid, such as the help given to the family of a martyr.

Martyrdom Operations

“The children of the kindergarten are the martyrs of tomorrow.” - Slogan on a poster in a Hamas-run kindergarten

In February 1994, an American-born Jewish settler, with the supposed aid of the Israeli military, fired upon members of a mosque and threw grenades which resulted in the death of 29 Muslims with many others wounded. In reaction to that event, Hamas began martyrdom operations that April.⁵² Izzadin al-Qassam Brigades, Hamas’s military wing, was the first Sunni Muslim group to use suicide operations.⁵³ In Shia Muslim groups, the tactic emerged in Iran during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980’s and then in Lebanon against the Israeli invasion beginning in 1982.⁵⁴ Azzam Tamimi believed these operations may have started from Lebanese influence as members of Hamas who has been deported to Lebanon came back the year before suicide bombings in Palestine began.⁵⁵

Data shows that “suicide attacks on average kill four times as many people as other terrorist acts.”⁵⁶ Yet that is not the most emphasized reason Hamas chose to use suicide terrorism. Scholars like Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi accepted Palestinian suicide terrorism in particular because they view all Israeli citizens (except children) as part of the military and

⁵² Tamimi, pg. 159-160.

⁵³ Tamimi, pg. 162.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Tamimi, pg. 163.

⁵⁶ Hoffman, Bruce. “The Logic of Suicide Terrorism.” *The Atlantic Monthly*. v.291.5. June 2003.

Palestine has no other means of defense in the unequal conflict.⁵⁷ This reasoning was used to justify its use to the Palestinian public.

To perpetuate the positive attitude towards suicide terrorism, Hamas also used “images of ‘martyr heroes’ and encourag[ed] children from kindergarten onwards to regard self-martyrdom – and killing Israelis – as the highest honour achievable on earth” through slogans such as that seen at the start of this section.⁵⁸ While at first many Palestinian citizens were against this tactic, most eventually accepted it as an unfortunate necessity in the unequal power structure they faced. According to Azzam Tamimi, author of Hamas: A History from Within, “polls conducted at different times have given different results, but rarely has support for these operations dropped below fifty percent.”⁵⁹ According to Jeroen Gunning, author of Hamas in Politics, most Palestinians now believe that “Israel responded disproportionately to Palestinian violence and that violence was the only way forward.”⁶⁰

Nationalist, Not Religious

One qualifier which many scholars overlook is that these martyrdom operations, while done under a religious name, are actually nationalist suicide operations. This qualifier may seem little more than an issue of syntax, but the political implications of religious operations and nationalist operations differ as much as their meanings. One scholar who did recognize this important characteristic was Dr. Karla Cunningham, an American scholar specializing in terrorism and gender, who realized that “the bombings have been nationalistic acts that extrapolate religious symbolism and terminology.”⁶¹

⁵⁷ Tamimi, pg. 184-185.

⁵⁸ Gunning, pg. 216.

⁵⁹ Tamimi, pg. 161.

⁶⁰ Gunning, Jeroen. Hamas in Politics: Democracy, Religion, Violence. NY: Columbia University Press, 2008. pg. 217. Print.

⁶¹ Cunningham, pg. 84.

Women and Hamas

The females most prominent in the Hamas organization used to be the wives and daughters of the Islamist leaders. Before the first Palestinian female suicide bomber, Wafa al-Idris, blew herself up in Jerusalem, the closest women expected to get to these martyrdom attacks was to be honored by having their son or husband as a martyr, or to be put in charge of the sector of the organization which assists the families of the men who are martyred. Culturally more than religiously, Palestinian women have been hampered by limited gender rules which “prescribed that women restrict themselves within the private space of the home.”⁶²

Hamas promised that it wished to empower women through social welfare programs. According to Najah Batnijee from Hamas’s Working Women’s Society for Development, “economic aid and political empowerment helped Hamas to reach ordinary women.”⁶³ In its electoral platform, Hamas included a section on women where they wanted to “fortify a woman by Islamic education, make her aware of her religious rights and confirm her independence which is based on purity, modesty, and commitment.”⁶⁴ Also, they called for protection of women’s (and children’s) rights and encouraged more employment for women.⁶⁵ The right to Islamic education may not seem promising to a Western mind – at least not one that links feminism with secularism. But in the event of a call for Islamic feminism, one built around the dominant order of Islam in Palestine, the inclusion of a woman’s independence in this platform is crucial.

While Hamas’s victory in the 2006 election came as a surprise to most, one thing was made certain – the future of Palestine, wherever it may lead, will be greatly influenced by the

⁶² Bloom, Mia. Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terrorism. NY: Columbia University Press, 2007.

⁶³ Qtd. in Ward, pg. 69.

⁶⁴ Qtd. in Hroub, Khaled. “A ‘New Hamas’ through its New Documents.” *Journal of Palestinian Studies*. v.35.4, 2006. Accessed 4 Nov 2010. <<http://www.palestine-studies.org/journals.aspx?id=7087&jid=1&href=fulltext>>.

⁶⁵ Hroub, Khaled.

workings of Hamas. For the women of Palestine, this reality means that their empowerment and rights will be drawn from the rhetoric of Hamas and dependent upon this organization having female empowerment as a goal for the future, whether that goal stems from an independent action to improve women's status or whether it is a reaction to public will.

VII. The Rhetoric on Female Martyrdom

"The Muslim woman has a role no less important than that of the Muslim man in the battle of liberation." (Hamas Charter, Article 17)

When the first female suicide bomber, Wafa al-Idris, walked into Jerusalem and blew herself up – killing herself and one Israeli citizen and wounding many others – the leaders of Hamas denounced her, claiming Hamas was against the use of female martyrdom. Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, founder of Hamas, claimed she left her home in an inappropriate way – “improperly clad and unaccompanied by a male family member...breaching the boundaries of modesty.”⁶⁶ This woman and the men who helped her were considered a disgrace. Worse still, some leaders of Hamas believed that using women in this way shows the powerlessness of them.⁶⁷

Following the attack, “Palestinian women began begging the Islamic authorities to be more involved in armed conflict...assert[ing] their right to be martyrs.”⁶⁸ These women included one named Dareen Abu Aisheh who went to Hamas seeking to be a martyr for their cause. She was turned down as Hamas stuck to their original rhetoric of being against female martyrdom and Aisheh went to al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade to complete her task. Sheikh Yassin was reported in *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* on January 31, 2002 saying that women can only complete martyrdom

⁶⁶ Yadlin, pg. 51.

⁶⁷ Kadayifci, Ayse. Personal Interview. 9 Sept 2010.

⁶⁸ Bloom. Dying. pg. 148-149.

missions if they are accompanied by a male.⁶⁹ Two days later, he slightly annulled that statement by saying that women are allowed to go on these missions alone if they have not been alone for more than 24 hours, but still insisted that women were not needed.⁷⁰ He claimed they were not short of male volunteers and as such, women should remain at home in their current role as a mother and a daughter of martyrs.

Islamic scholar Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi issued a *fatwa* in 2003 establishing the right for women to participate in jihad and martyrdom by saying that he thinks “the committed Muslim women in Palestine have the right to participate and have their own role in Jihad and to attain martyrdom.”⁷¹ Yet Hamas continued to disagree with the act until 2004 when Hamas and al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade sponsored a female suicide bomber together – Reem al-Raiyshi. This sponsoring signaled a change in Hamas’s public attitude toward female martyrdom and ultimately became reflected in their new rhetoric.

The Change

“Palestinian women have torn the gender classification out of their birth certificates, declaring that sacrifice for the Palestinian homeland would not be for men alone; on the contrary, all Palestinian women will write the history of the liberation with their blood, and will become time bombs in the face of the Israeli enemy. They will not settle for being the mother of martyrs.”⁷² - Dr. Samiya Sa’ad Al-Din

In 2004, Hamas changed their rhetoric to condone female martyrdom as they sponsored Reem al-Rayishi in her operation. Sheikh Ahmad Yassin said that “although recruiting Muslim women to fight for the land and for Islam is exceptional, Jihad (holy war) is obligatory on every

⁶⁹ Qtd. in Bloom, Mia. “Mother. Daughter. Sister. Bomber.” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. 1 Nov 2005. v.61.6, pg. 60.

⁷⁰ Qtd. in Bloom, “Mother.” pg. 60.

⁷¹ Living Shari’ah: Fatwa Bank. “Palestinian Women Carrying Out Martyr Operations.” *IslamOnline*. 22 Feb 2010. Accessed 9 Sept 2010. <http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1119503545134>.

⁷² Qtd. in Bloom. *Dying*. pg. 147.

Muslim, male or female.”⁷³ Using women versus men in a certain situation then became “related to the abilities and the circumstances that the Brigades of al-Qassam [were] passing through,” according to a senior Hamas leader named Sheikh Saeed Seyam.⁷⁴ Hamas’s leading Islamic scholar, Abdul Aziz al-Rantisi, expressed on Al-Jazeera that the female attacks were the most important “strategic weapon” of Hamas’s resistance, explaining that “there is no reason that the perpetration of suicide attacks should be monopolized by men.”⁷⁵

The rhetoric then espoused by Sheikh Yassin and Abdul Aziz al-Rantisi, Hamas’s main Islamic scholar, included the usual rhetoric encouraging a *shahid* (martyr), in addition to rhetoric specific to female martyrs, or *shahidat*. One issue which had to be resolved in order to encourage martyrdom of either sex was the issue of whether a person killing himself in that way should be considered martyrdom or suicide. According to the *fatwa* issued by Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi:

A person who commits suicide does so out of desperation because of some kind of failure: he is one who seeks to rid himself his life. In contrast, to give oneself to martyrdom is an act of heroism, and an act deemed by the majority of Muslim scholars to be the greatest form of Jihad.⁷⁶

Since martyrdom operations are not seen as acts of desperation, Hamas was able to convince the Palestinian public that this action is not suicide. The Qur’an and Hadiths^v are also used to justify suicide bombing as martyrdom. Qur’an 3:169-70 says:

And do not think of those who have been killed in the way of Allah as dead; they are rather living with their Lord, well-provided for. Rejoicing in what their Lord has given

⁷³ Qtd. in Abu Ramadan, Saud. “Muslim women can be martyrs too.” *United Press International*, 15 Jan 2004. Retrieved 14 Oct 2010. <<http://www.comtexnews.com>>.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Rantisi, Abdul Aziz. “Al-Jazeera This Morning.” *Al-Jazeera (Doha)*. 20 May 2002.

⁷⁶ Qtd. in Tamimi, pg. 183-184.

them of His bounty, and they rejoice for those who stayed behind and did not join them, knowing that they have nothing to fear and that they shall not grieve.⁷⁷

Substantiating this act as being “killed in the way of Allah” and therefore worthy of “living with their Lord” quelled fears that blowing oneself up is actually suicide, which would result in being denied from Paradise, according to a quote from Prophet Muhammad (as reported by al-Bukhari).⁷⁸

Previously, the issue of martyrdom through jihad was considered *fard kifaya*, meaning a “collective obligation,”⁷⁹ to be undertaken by “the part of the Muslim community who can successfully wage *jihad*,”⁸⁰ traditionally believed to be the men. However jihad was reinterpreted by Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi to be *fard ‘ayn* since Palestine was under occupation.⁸¹ This interpretation called for thinking of jihad as “an individual obligation,”⁸² where the responsibility falls on every member of the Muslim community, whether they are a man or a woman.

For females specifically, Hamas cited evidence from Islamic history which shows powerful Islamic women dying in war. In fact, the first person to die for the Islamic faith was a woman – Sumayyah bint Khayyat.⁸³ She was part of Muhammad’s original followers and was the first to die for proclaiming her belief in Islam. The Islamic scholars also bring up the story of Aishah, the Prophet’s wife, who led many into a battle called the Battle of the Camels. Safiyyah, the Prophet’s cousin, killed and beheaded a member of the Qurayzah tribe.⁸⁴ Hamas also

⁷⁷ Qtd. in Cook, pg. 31.

⁷⁸ Qtd. in Tamimi, pg. 181.

⁷⁹ Yadlin, pg. 53.

⁸⁰ Cunningham, pg. 85.

⁸¹ Living Shari’ah.

⁸² Yadlin, pg. 53

⁸³ Cook, pg. 14.

⁸⁴ Yadlin, pg. 53.

explained the rewards of this martyrdom for females. Instead of the 72 *houris* waiting in Paradise, the women are offered purity and a chance to bring honor to their family. Some even say that the *shahida* is one of the 72 virgins.⁸⁵

Change of Convenience, Maintaining Popular Support, or a Move towards Empowerment?

According to Raphael Israeli, a national security scholar from Israel, accepting women into this role was not an act in search of furthering equality.⁸⁶ Did Hamas realize, as many scholars have, the logistical advantages of having women in these military roles? Did they, despite Israeli's belief, change their rhetoric to empower women? Or did they bring women into more power to further develop their own power and status?

Convenience

Of course, the organization must have recognized the logistical advantage to using a woman against Israeli forces. In her interview, Dr. Ayse Kadayifci discussed the limitations of men in the military sense that were made obvious after the use of women. First, the Israeli military was more respectful of women, allowing them to get through security with a less forceful search. Women were also less visible and therefore not easily identified. Also, a stereotype about women says that they are more peaceful, making them less suspicious.⁸⁷ Mia Bloom seconded these advantages in her book Dying to Kill while also adding that these women could pretend to be pregnant to hide the bomb and make sure they were able to go through

⁸⁵ Berko, Anat & Edna Erez. "Martyrs or Murderers?: The Voices of Would-be Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers." Female Terrorism and Militancy: Agency, Utility, and Organization. Ed. by Cindy Ness. UK: Routledge, 2008. pg. 146-166. Print.

⁸⁶ Israeli, Raphael. "Palestinian Women: The Quest for a Voice in the Public Square through 'Islamikaze Martyrdom'." *Terrorism and Political Violence*. v.16.1, 2004, pg 66 – 96.

⁸⁷ Kadayifci, Ayse.

security without being frisked, or they could westernize their appearance to make themselves blend in on the streets of Israel.⁸⁸

Another advantage to using women is that women are more likely to attract great media attention. According to Yoram Schweitzer, “the organization and its particular cause...will almost automatically enjoy greater exposure, which in large measure is an immediate aim of the bombing itself.”⁸⁹ With a lot of media attention, an organization has an easier time attracting recruits across the globe as well as bringing international attention towards their struggle. In addition, within the organization, a higher sense of morale and enthusiasm will spring forward after seeing their cause publicly displayed in the media.⁹⁰

Empowerment

Surprisingly, Schweitzer found that “female suicide bombers appear almost exclusively in societies that are heavily traditionalist and conservative, where women lack equal rights and their status in society is much lower than that of their male counterparts.”⁹¹ Perhaps in some societies, this paradox would indicate that the women are being used as a weapon by the men because of their inferior status. Yet the women of Hamas argued for their right to be martyrs, so they are not being used. Instead, perhaps this paradox points to an act of defiance against patriarchy and a push towards empowerment. Since Hamas is choosing to support this act, they may have had the intention of encouraging female empowerment.

Besides giving women equality in society, female empowerment also gives Islamist groups like Hamas legitimacy in the international and national arenas since they cannot be perceived as organizations which discriminate against women. So perhaps Hamas wishes to

⁸⁸ Bloom. *Dying*. Pg. 143.

⁸⁹ Schweitzer, “Introduction,” pg. 9-10.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Schweitzer, “Introduction,” pg. 10.

improve their image in the international realm and for that reason, they gave in to the demands of the Palestinian women. Though Islamic scholar Dr. Ayse Kadayifci noted that Hamas became more tolerable to female martyrdom after Yassin's death in 2004,⁹² suggesting that perhaps the leadership is becoming more accepting of an increased role for women in society. Still, the timing of their change in rhetoric insinuates that empowerment was not the foremost motivator for supporting female martyrdom.

Maintaining Popular Support

The reason which best explains Hamas's change is that they wished to maintain their power and status in society by keeping their popular support. Jeroen Gunning asserted that "for rhetoric to be successful, it must resonate with the target audience."⁹³ After Wafa al-Idris, Palestinian women were frustrated and sought a more active role in martyrdom. According to Dr. Ayse Kadayifci, "Hamas had to accommodate since the women were doing it anyway."⁹⁴ If they did not accommodate the will of the Palestinian women, they would lose popular support of that section of the population who had been so vital to their last election in 2006.

Scholar Azzam Tamimi noted that "Hamas was reluctant to recruit female bombers but removed the ban under pressure from its female members,"⁹⁵ who told Hamas leadership that they would commit these acts with or without the support of the resistance organization. Some even said they would use another organization within the country, such as Fatah.⁹⁶ Facing this loss of popular support, Hamas changed their rhetoric. Despite this evidence to the contrary,

⁹² Kadayifci, Ayse.

⁹³ Gunning, pg. 219.

⁹⁴ Kadayifci, Ayse.

⁹⁵ Tamimi, pg. 163.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

Sheikh Hassan Yusef, a high-ranking official of Hamas, still insisted, “we do not act according to the opinion of the street or of society.”⁹⁷

Dr. Karla Cunningham noted that “women’s mobilization, including violent mobilization, within this context is made consistent with cultural norms...mainly by emphasizing mothering and sacrifice.”⁹⁸ As this paper has shown, the cultural norms were not adapted by emphasizing mothering and sacrifice. However Cunningham brought up an important point – Hamas did have to bring female martyrdom under their rhetorical umbrella to explain it away as a cultural norm in order to maintain popular support since public will was heading that way. In other words, no, their change was not made as a way to empower the women of the society, but instead to maintain their power as the popular choice of Palestine (while also recognizing the convenience of using women). Yet unintentionally, this change opened up the floodgates for Islamic feminism.

VIII. Looking Towards the Future

The political lives of women in Palestine have been bleak in the current state. Now that Hamas is turning away from martyrdom operations, Palestine is entering an era of political change. As Dr. Kadayifci asserted, gender role negotiations will have to begin as the women who have profited from a higher status so far in the Intifada will not accept returning to the private realm and relinquishing their empowerment. Instead, a type of Islamic feminism is going to be sought.

Giving up On Suicide Bombing

⁹⁷ *Al-Sha’ab* (Egypt). 1 Feb 2002.

⁹⁸ Cunningham, pg. 86.

For at least the past two years, Hamas has shown a reduced reliance on martyrdom operations. In fact, on June 12, 2010, Ahmed Yousef – a top advisor in Hamas – divulged to *The Australian* that “Hamas had moved into a non-violent phase” for multiple reasons. First, Yousef notes that these violent acts have “damaged Hamas internationally” and fed the “Israeli propaganda machine.”⁹⁹ Also, Hamas expressed interest in accepting a Palestinian state with the 1967 borders^{vi} which requires them to maintain an open-minded, non-violent image.¹⁰⁰ But Israeli officials note that Hamas has previously claimed to abandon martyrdom operations, yet continued to use them. Therefore officials still believe the intent of Hamas to commit violent acts is there, but optimistically hopes Hamas is forced to stop due to reduced capacity to pull off the attacks.¹⁰¹

Whether they were forced to stop their operations or they chose to seek non-violent means of resistance, Hamas’s decreased reliance on martyrdom operations is quickly taking women out of their powerful role in the military. Hamas, as mentioned before, is more of a political resistance movement and used suicide bombing in a way which Robert Pape would consider to be nationalist – to get rid of the Israeli occupation and recapture Palestine (and Jerusalem) for the Palestinians – instead of Islamist, to spread Islam through the Global Jihadi Movement.¹⁰² However the organization continues to have legitimacy as an Islamic foundation and therefore the Muslim women of Palestine will turn to Hamas to achieve their version of feminist power – an Islamic feminism.

What Will Happen in Palestine?

⁹⁹ Qtd. in Lyons, John. “Hamas Abandons Suicide Bombing.” *The Australian*. 12 June 2010.

¹⁰⁰ Lyons, John.

¹⁰¹ Lyons, John.

¹⁰² Pape, Robert. Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism. NY: Random House, Inc., 2005. pg. 77.

Bloom insists that by pushing their way into a military role predominantly filled by men, the women of Palestine have already begun to “[reconstruct] the normative ideals of the society.”¹⁰³ Indeed this change has already affected politics. Hamas’s female wing called the Sisterhood was instrumental to Hamas winning the 2006 elections as they mobilized the female voting population. Electoral laws were also established creating a “quota system for female representation.”¹⁰⁴ However as previously shown, women’s rights in Palestine are far below that which would consider them equal to men.

Cunningham noted that “religious symbolism and terminology becomes a potent ideological force to mobilize society to support violence by armed groups.”¹⁰⁵ Changing the religious rhetoric became not only a potent ideological force to help people support violent armed groups, but also a force to mobilize women toward Islamic feminism. When women were accepted into the role of a suicide bomber, journalist Zaki Chehab witnessed that “the acceptance of female suicide bombers for military operations created confusion amongst conservative Palestinian society, which questioned its legality under sharia law.”¹⁰⁶ Sharia, or Islamic law, became the first question on the mind of the society, demonstrating that religious justifications are the most important hurdle in current Palestinian politics.

Women who get more roles – such as these women did in the military – are not likely to want to give up their new roles as their mindset towards their duties in Palestine have changed. Even after the conflict is over, women will still want to have status in society, so Hamas will have to negotiate new gender roles if they no longer rely on martyrdom. Before Hamas accepted female martyrdom, many considered this act to be against Islamic values. If Hamas is able to

¹⁰³ Bloom. *Dying*. pg. 146.

¹⁰⁴ Cunningham, pg. 90.

¹⁰⁵ Cunningham, pg. 86.

¹⁰⁶ Chehab, pg. 88.

accept or even further women's empowerment in the future, they will – as a legitimate source of Islamic jurisprudence and fatwas – be able to jump the religious hurdle many consider to be blocking Muslim women from having equality and political rights.

Some Islamic scholars such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi - an Egyptian Islamic scholar who was the first to announce a fatwa approving female suicide bombing - do not believe women should be given leadership roles since that kind of role is “such a huge responsibility which in most cases outweigh the capacity of the woman (and the man) and conflicts with the natural disposition of the woman as a mother.”¹⁰⁷ But Mariah Saleh, one of the few females on the Palestinian Legislative Council, was optimistic when asked whether she believed Hamas would impose rigid rules on women. In response, she quipped about whether the questioner really believed Hamas would take its cue from the fanatical Taliban,¹⁰⁸ suggesting that she does not believe Hamas will push women back into the private realm but instead work to empower women into society.

Of course, not all women who live in Palestine are Muslim. But political equality is going to be achieved when two factors are present:

1. The public will is in support of gender equality.
2. Hamas finds a way to make the empowerment culturally and religiously acceptable.

As seen with the acceptance of female martyrs, Hamas will work to keep the support of the public by going along with public will. In order to keep the female population on their side, Hamas will have to accept female political empowerment if the women of Palestine want to be empowered. As Ness emphasized, “groups and the societies they depend on for popular support

¹⁰⁷ Al-Qaradawi, Yusuf. “Refuted Misconceptions: Judiciary and Political Corps.” The Status of Women in Islam. English version accessed online 17 Sept 2010. <http://www.witness-pioneer.org/vil/Books/Q_WI/default.htm>.

¹⁰⁸ Ward, pg. 73.

create, define, and reinforce new social spaces and categories.”¹⁰⁹ As the elected leader, Hamas will be essential to the future of feminism in Palestine and because they will be searching for a religious justification, using Islamic feminism will smooth out this process for Hamas.

IX. Conclusion

Just as Hamas called for Islamic education and independence for women in their electoral platform, so will the women of Palestine call for independence through the Islamic framework. The Western world should not hope for western feminism to appear in the rhetoric of the Palestinian women, but instead realize that the advances these women are calling for are advances which Hamas will be able to give them.

As simplistic as it sounds, if Hamas uses Islamic rhetoric to support women’s rights, the women’s rights movement will be given legitimacy and priority in Palestinian politics. The Palestinian population was wary about the Islamic ruling toward martyrdom operations, but Hamas legitimized it. Women began participating in these operations and once Hamas accept it, the Islamic legitimacy of the act was established in Palestine.

Rivka Yadlin saw that by accepting the dominant norms of their society as they increase their power – such as becoming “the ultimate embodiment of the Islamic ideal of existence [through] the sacrifice of their body - women will begin to enjoy “the formation of their autonomous consciousness by their society, further situat[ing] them in a consensual position, rather than in one motivated by aberrancy.”¹¹⁰ In other words, society will begin to see women as independent within the proper Islamic framework instead of the un-Islamic “western” framework. Through Islamic feminism, Palestinian women can demand more freedom of

¹⁰⁹ Ness, Cindy. “In the Name of the Cause.” Female Terrorism and Militancy: Agency, Utility, and Organization. Ed. by Cindy Ness. UK: Routledge, 2008. Pg. 29. Print.

¹¹⁰ Yadlin, pg. 58.

movement – allowing them to participate in politics and get a proper education; they can petition for an increased status in society, past that of a “mother”; they can improve their lives in the private realm so they may enjoy the power of the public realm - all within the confines of Islamic law with the help of Hamas’s rhetoric.

Of course, the end of Israeli occupation will be helpful in giving women an opportunity to exercise their rights and gain more rights – especially because many people view the Israeli occupiers and soldiers in the region as the main violators of women’s rights through accusations of Israeli violence and fears of the soldiers defiling females who leave the home.¹¹¹ In addition, an end to the occupation would bring political stability to the territories and a chance to establish a genuine state. But even without Israeli occupation, women would remain oppressed without Islamic legitimacy behind their empowerment.

Hamas’s goal may not be directly one of female empowerment, but for the organization to maintain power and status, they must concede to the public will. After the women of Palestine have gotten a taste of empowerment through their military advancement, their determination to do more and be more in society will not stop just because the suicide terrorism operations have. The desire for empowerment will be there. The power lies in the hands of Hamas. But will they really risk losing face in Palestinian politics as an entire population is frustrated in want of rights? Or will they change their rhetoric once again and establish women’s empowerment in Palestine? Hamas has shown, and will continue to show, a strong will to lead Palestine. This will, combined the female population’s desire for empowerment, is what will bring political equality to Palestine.

¹¹¹ Rubenberg, pg. 123.

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ⁱ Fatima al-Zahraa was the Prophet's daughter.

ⁱⁱ *Fard 'ayn*, as described later in the work, refers to an individual obligation in Islam.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Shahida* is the Arabic word for a female martyr in Islam; *shahid* is a male martyr.

^{iv} The Arabic phrase which stands for "the movement of Islamic resistance"

^v *Hadiths* are quotes or actions which are not in the Qur'an but are supposedly the word of Prophet Muhammad. The validity of Hadiths are questioned by Islamic scholars and verified by sheikhs.

^{vi} The 1967 borders of Palestine consist of the small shore area of Gaza and the larger area of the West Bank with western Jerusalem included (obtained from BBC News Key Maps: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/static/in_depth/world/2001/israel_and_palestinians/key_maps/4.stm).