



A Conflicts Forum Monograph

**FEMINISM BETWEEN
SECULARISM AND ISLAMISM:
THE CASE OF PALESTINE
(West Bank and Gaza)**

**By Dr Islah Jad
July 2010**

Conflicts Forum: Beirut - London

**Feminism between Secularism and Islamism:
The case of Palestine (West Bank and Gaza)**

By Islah Jad

Legislative elections held in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in 2006 brought to power the Islamist movement *Hamas*, which went on to form the majority of the Palestinian Legislative Council and also the first majority *Hamas* government. These elections resulted in the appointment of the first female *Hamas* minister, who became the Minister of Women's Affairs. Between March 2006 and June 2007, two different female *Hamas* ministers assumed this post, but both found it difficult to manage the Ministry since most of its employees were not *Hamas* members but belonged to other political parties, and most were members of *Fatah*, the dominant movement controlling most Palestinian Authority institutions. A tense period of struggle between the women of *Hamas* in the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the female members of *Fatah* came to an end following *Hamas*' takeover of power in the Gaza Strip and the resultant fall of its government in the West Bank – a struggle which sometimes took a violent turn. One reason later cited to explain this struggle was the difference between secular feminist discourse and Islamist discourse on women's issues. In the Palestinian context this disagreement took on a dangerous nature as it was used to justify perpetuating the bloody political struggle, the removal of Hamas women from their positions or posts, and the political and geographical divides prevailing at the time in both the West Bank and the occupied Gaza Strip.

This struggle raises a number of important questions: should we punish the Islamist movement which has come to power, or should we consider the reasons which led to Fateh's failure in the political arena? Can feminism offer a comprehensive framework for women, regardless of their social and ideological affiliations? Can a discourse of a shared common ground for women help them to realize and agree upon their common goals? Is paternalism only present in Islamist ideology, and not in nationalism and patriotism? What do we mean by feminism? Is there only one feminism, or several feminisms? What do we mean by Islam - is it the movement known by this name or the religion, the philosophy, or the legal system? We need to go to the bottom of these issues and consider them carefully, and we must agree upon them so that we can later decide, as feminists, if our criticism of paternalism should be directed at religion (faith), which should be confined to the heart of the believer and not be allowed to take control of the world at large, or the jurisprudence, which relates to different schools of faith which explain the legal system contained in the Quran and the sayings of the Prophet - the *Sunnah*.

Dr Islah Jad is Director of the *Women's Studies Institute* and Assistant Professor of Gender and Development at Bir Zeit University. She is one of the founders of the *Women's Studies Institute* at Bir Zeit University and is one of the founders of *WATC* (Women's Affairs Technical Committee), a national coalition for women in Palestine. She has published many works on Palestinian and Arab women's political participation and is co-author for the Arab Human Development Report of 2005.

We can find many Islamist feminists who also criticise this philosophy and who call for the gates of *ijtihad* to be reopened*, so as to harmonise the *shariah* with the spirit of current times.

This deconstruction and criticism is important as it can bring together the different elements of the feminist ranks to work together rather than as small groups, and have them together consider the crucial and polarising points which impede issues of political and social change in the Arab region in general and within every one of our societies in particular.

To more precisely define the concepts used in the ongoing debates between the secular feminist movement and religious movements, writers such as Ziba Mir-Hosseini (1999 and 2003) predicted the importance of distinguishing between religion as faith and a set of values, and between organised religion (its institutions, laws and practices). Current post-independence secular systems are based on some aspects of traditional jurisprudence condensed to form a '*shariah* law' which combines various legal opinions and holy issues. Modern political Islamist movements came to add veneration to these holy issues. This situation prompted women within some of these modern Islamist movements to distinguish between what is holy and what is human (all jurisprudence and all different religious schools), to create a not necessarily hostile space between religion itself and its institutions, laws and practices. This opened up tremendous space for actions, operations, criticisms and changes, and led to the emergence of what became known as 'Islamic feminism'. The word 'feminism' here denotes the more general meaning, indicating awareness of the underlying factors (political, economic, social, cultural) which discriminate against women on the basis of their gender and working to change these factors in favour of greater rights and freedoms for women. Feminism is a way to help us find out what we know about women's rights in society in general (through religious laws which challenge paternalism from within, as is the case with Islamic feminism).

This paper is based on the debate that in the Palestinian case in particular - the conflict between those who call themselves secular feminists and female Islamists conceals a fundamentally political conflict for influence and power - and is not necessary a conflict over the meaning of feminism, clothed in either secular or Islamist terms. When Palestinians assume a 'secular' identity, this 'identity' is still one of opposition to the Other (in this case the Islamists) – even though this Palestinian 'secularism' may still be rooted in traditional religiosity or its customs and patterns of behaviour.

I will begin by presenting a critical analysis of the ambiguous concept of 'secularism' in the framework of Palestinian nationalism. I will then present Islamist feminist thinking as it has evolved by women from the Islamist resistance movement (*Hamas*) in an attempt to find out if we can find common ground for women who are suffering from occupation and who share in a conviction of the need for resistance.

*The gates of reasoned judicial interpretation (*ijtihad*) were deemed to be 'closed' by the Sunni legal schools some centuries after the death of the Prophet. The same does not apply to the Shi'i who have remained open to the principle of reasoned judicial interpretation that reflects changes in the times in which Muslims live and their 'place'; i.e. their circumstances.

Ambiguities of Palestinian secularism

Since its inception, Arab nationalism has invoked Islam as a cornerstone of its legitimacy. Neither Islam nor nationalism are fixed concepts. An Islamist movement competing with the authority of the Palestinian nationalist movement is, to a great extent, the outcome of the failure of the secular nationalist movement to achieve the tasks it took upon itself and to keep the promises it made to achieve national liberation and build a state. One of the elements which facilitated the growth of 'cohesion' between Islam and Palestinian nationalism was the defeat of the nationalist movement in Palestine, which allowed the Islamist movement *Hamas* to take on the nationalist struggle to achieve Palestinian national rights.

Two researchers with contradictory points of view on the Palestinian issue have discussed the links between religion and secularism in creating Palestinian nationalism. Badiri, on the one hand, argues that the fact that *Fatah* made use of religious symbols and ideology to rally and recruit support cast doubts on the often-repeated claim that *Fatah* - and thus the Palestinian national movement - was a 'secular' force (Badiri 1994:12). Badiri states that Islam was and still is one of the principal elements of Palestinian identity, particularly within the occupied territories. He says: "The Islamist movement in Palestine has represented and encompassed nationalist discourse since the beginning of the British mandate period. It is truly difficult to draw a dividing line between Islamists and their nationalist opponents" (ibid: 7).

Badiri believes that this 'cohesion' between Islam and nationalism undermines the concept of a secularism that is somehow distinct and separate from Islam. He therefore sees Islam and politics in terms of continuity and not separation, meaning that there has been an 'Islamist movement' from the mandate period right up to today.

Here we should note the idea of Islam being used as a symbolic point of reference which functions as an icon from which both the nationalist and Islamist call to resistance is derived (Stowasser 1987). Given this view it is no wonder it has been pointed out that the identity of the leader of the national movement during the British mandate, Hajj Amin Al-Husseini, is similar to that of Azzadin Al-Qasam. Both were 'religious' and 'Muslims' despite the political and ideological differences between them.

In contrast to Badiri, Hilal does not believe that Islam was a factor in the construction of Palestinian national identity, either under the mandate or in its more modern form dating from the 1960s. He sees secularism as a clear divide between political and religious establishments, and says: "In the national political field, we see institutions, identities and ideologies with different models, dynamics and definitions than those in the religious field" (Hilal 2002:1). He believes that the conflict with Zionism and British rule gave a secular or nationalist colouring to Palestinian identity which was uniquely nationalist and went beyond religion, sect and region (ibid: 1). According to Hilal, Palestinian nationalism at no point made use of religious discourse or religious mythology to keep control. He says: "This does not contradict the fact that most Palestinians were and still are religious in the popular sense of the word" (ibid: 1).

Whilst I agree with Hilal that the PLO does not use Islam as a key reference point in its politics (Salama 2001:8), in practise there was an engagement with religion. For example, the PLO believed it was necessary to base the system of marriage, divorce and inheritance on the prevailing popular understanding of Islam. Gender relations in Palestinian society, which were under the political control of the PLO, were also subject to the provisions of *shariah* law, not to secular civil laws. This suggests that in terms of gender relations there is more continuity than division between the two Palestinian currents – although Islamists are often reluctant, or unable to perceive this common thread. Gender relations are ‘the unseen element’ out of sight of the devotees of Islam and secularism who have failed to see that there is more continuity than division between the two ideologies when it comes to gender and the family. This enforces Kandawati’s view that the hidden aspects of modernity appear most clearly when it comes to the question of women’s role in the political entity (Kandawati 1998: 283). Moreover, Hilal, who makes a sharp distinction between religion and nationalism, does not provide any explanation why a movement with a ‘primarily’ secular nature should use religious terminology and wrap itself in *shariah* law whilst competing with a ‘religious’ movement like *Hamas*.

One diagnostic criterion which reveals the essential content of the nationalist project is to examine how it constructs gender and gender relations. However, many writers and researchers who have written about *Hamas* and Palestinian nationalism have kept silent on this particular issue (Hurub 1996, Al-Hamd and Al-Barghouthi 1997, Abu Al-Amrain 2000, Abu Amru 1994).

Authors who insist that Palestinian national identity is based primarily on secular models must make this identity homogenous, as they do not want to consider how this nationalism and its numerous identities were created by factors of class, gender and religion (Anthius and Yuvall-Davies 1989, Kandawati 1991). For example, Kandawati writes that “Although many nationalisms of a secular nature were influenced by enlightenment era ideas, they also subconsciously adopted the idea that any change in the position of women would only be acceptable if it served the nationalist interest” (Kandawati 1991 A: 410). Nationalist ideologies need “a modal woman”, but she must remain hidden. *Fatah* viewed gender relations and the image of the modal woman as carrying, in the words of Kandawati, “her ambiguities and her own particular tensions” (Kandawati 1998: 282). The ‘model woman’ conjured up images of rural life, childbirth, humility and ‘authenticity’. The ‘contemporary woman’ on the other hand was seen as a controlled abstract embodiment of passionate emotions, ‘the sister of men’. In other words, the Palestinian nationalist movement viewed women as “the special depository of pure and uncontaminated nationalist values” (Kandawati 1991 A: 410). These two visions of women continued to live side by side in the actions of *Fatah*, the PLO and the Palestinian Authority.

Fatah constantly resisted women’s challenges against paternalistic authority in the PLO. Numerous attempts by female activists from the *General Union of Palestinian Women* to strengthen women’s rights in matters of divorce, marriage, inheritance and protection all failed. The activists ascribed this failure to the refusal of the president of the PLO to make any serious attempt to prosecute the shameful abuse by some *Fatah* fighters who exploited the fact that their identities were concealed (for security reasons) to carry out morally deplorable practices such as polygamy (using false

identities and names), denying paternity of children born by unofficial wives, and frequent domestic violence (Laila Khaled and Samira Salah, article).

This easy transformation might be explained by supporters of a secular PLO composed of both men and women by sympathy for the Islamic movement, often even a sense of loyalty towards it. The increasing politicisation of gender relations and religious identity might pose questions about the extent of 'progressiveness' and secularism of all of Palestinian nationalism. The roots of the Islamists' growing popularity do not only stem from cultural or ideological factors, but also from a number of important changes which took place in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank after the Israeli occupation in 1967, which weakened the strength of those rallying under the banner of the PLO and led to the rise of the Islamist movement (in this paper, due to lack of space, I do not address this in detail).

Gender, Islam and Islamists: Feminism and the conceptual struggle

Islam and Islamists have attracted a lot of attention from feminist scholars. Discussions on gender relations in Muslim societies reflect the great importance of culture and ideology (Hale 1997: 234). Many feminist scholars have criticised discussions of gender relations and religion, and the treatment of Islam as though it were an unchangeable entity, an exception, beyond the bounds of history (Keddie 1979, Tucker 1983).

These feminists have revealed strategies of resistance, adaptation and compromise used by women everywhere in situations of oppression or subordination (Hale 1994: 234). Other thinkers have stated that there can only be one reading of the subject of gender and Islam, which does not permit the realisation of women's demands (Moghissi 1993, 1994, 1995). However, a number of comprehensive studies of women and gender in Islam or in Muslim societies have suggested that women's rights have actually increased and been supported by Islamic movements.

In an attempt to classify the different approaches used to treat the issue of gender and Islam, Mir Hosseini (1999:3) identifies three different methods. The first uses various interpretations and a reinterpretation of the holy texts which are cited as sources of influence and legitimacy for particular ideologies or for positions adopted on women's rights and gender roles and relations. The second approach relates to regional and national ideologies and their regional and historical characteristics, which produce their own particular discourse on women and gender roles. The third approach is an attempt to have individuals and regional societies coexist, which reveals the structure of opportunities and restrictions which affect women. These approaches therefore differ in seeing Islam either as the principal reason for women's subjugation or as the general cure for women's problems, based on the idea that Muslim societies have denied women their true position because they have misunderstood the Prophet's message on equality in the legal system (Beck and Keddie 1978, Bodman and Tawhidi 1998, Kandawati 1991, Karam 1998, Mir-Hosseini 1999).

I will not go into the first approach in this paper, but instead will focus my analysis exclusively on the second two discussions. I will analyse *Hamas'* ideology of gender and its position on gender relations, and the actual experiences of Islamist women in the political ranks of *Hamas*. The aim is

to understand what attracts such a large number of women to political/social movements which some feminists perceive as opposing the advancement and liberation of women.

Islamist feminists, whether active members of Islamist movements or independent, have influenced discussion amongst feminist scholars over what can be thought of as feminism in the context of religious or revivalist movements which openly reject the idea of total equality for women. Sabha Mahmoud has identified “two essential issues which explain feminists’ lack of engagement with religion: firstly, the view that religion is primarily a masculine affair and that, historically, it has accorded women a subservient position, and secondly the more recent phenomenon manifested in the emergence of political-religious movements (in the United States, the Middle East and South Asia) whose goals are contrary to women’s interests” (Mahmoud 1996:2). If we take the term ‘feminism’ to mean any movement which consciously rejects patterns of thought and behaviour constructed on gender distinctions, and which agitates and works to end injustice based on gender, then some people do believe it is legitimate to talk of ‘Islamist feminism’. For example, Karam (1998) uses this term to refer to women who are Islamists since they explicitly locate their programme of political and social action within the framework of political Islam, and who are feminists since they acknowledge the special forms of repression imposed upon women and aim to rectify the situation through the use of Islamic principles. They seek to ensure justice through granting women resources and rights and ‘fulfilment’ rather than calling for total equality (Karam 1998: 10, 235). Karam defends the use of the term ‘Islamist feminists’ as she makes a useful distinction within the Islamist movement between those who call for justice for women and those who do not support this idea. She adds that using this term also allows points of intersection with other feminisms, which can challenge the existing hegemonic power (Karam 1998:10). Karam distinguishes between Islamist feminists, Muslim feminists and secular feminists. The first distinction refers to women who are aware of particular oppression against women and who aim to rectify the situation through the use of Islamic principles, but who refrain from using the term ‘feminist’. The second distinction indicates Muslim feminists who use Islamic sources like the Quran and the *Sunnah* to demonstrate that a discourse of equality between men and women is valid within Islam (ibid: 11).

Similarly using a comprehensive method, Mir-Hosseini presents ‘feminism’ in the broadest possible sense, defining it as a general interest in women’s issues and a realisation that women suffer from discrimination at work, in the home and in society, and as a series of activities which aim to improve women’s lives and change their circumstances. The term is thus useful from the political angle as a means of defining and identifying those who are Islamist feminists. It is also important to maintain the term because of its importance in positioning women’s demands in a political context linked to women’s movements and experiences in other places around the world (Mir-Hosseini 1999:6). Mir-Hosseini acknowledges that feminism became a component part of global politics in the twentieth century, and that through participating in this movement Muslim women were able to affect and benefit from the programme of work of global politics (ibid:7). Accordingly, she urges a re-examination of the approach which links Western feminism to a non-critical model for discussion. She emphasises that for Muslim women to participate in global feminism, the dialogue

must allow “scope for the emergence of visions of feminism based on active gender policies in Muslim societies, in which religion forms a highly significant element” (ibid: 9).

However, Badran has given voice to the ‘discomfort’ which many female activists feel in using the term ‘feminism’. She proposes an alternative – ‘gender activism’ (Badran 1994: 202), and distinguishes between feminism as a political practice and as a concept defining the identity of the one being labelled or described. She states that there are some women who articulate and practice forms of feminism and yet who refuse to be known as feminists. She has created the term ‘gender activism’ for these women, leaving the term ‘feminist’ for those who choose to adopt it.

A close examination of the different discourses outlined above reveals that it is useful to use an analytical approach to distinguish between gender relations governed by paternalism within the family and paternal rules approved and propounded by religion. It is important to avoid a simplistic amalgamation of Islam with nationalist culture, strengthening the idea of the existence of an ‘authentic’ culture (Kandawati 1991: Al-Athma 1988, Hale 1997). As Hale points out, it is also useful to avoid over-emphasising the importance of theoretical issues at the expense of paying close attention to real life experiences within the framework of a reality influenced by Islamic thought, and how it has influenced the daily life of people in general and women in particular (Hale 1994). In her study on Islamists in Turkey, White has reached a similar conclusion: at the same time that the Islamist movement offers women strategic opportunities, within the limitations of class, it also offers contradictory and conflicting expectations which support both feminist activities and paternalism at the same time (White 2002:2). This state of affairs can be found in the Palestinian situation, as I will discuss in detail below.

Islamists between ‘authenticity’ and globalisation

Islamists and Islamist movements often invoke cultural ‘authenticity’¹ against Westernisation to weaken the position of those who challenge the male-dominated religious hierarchy. As we will see when analysing the position of Islamist women within *Hamas*, accusations of ‘a lack of cultural authenticity’ are often raised at female Islamists who try to reconcile Islam with human rights. According to Al-Azmeh, authenticity is invoked here “at the expense of an appreciation of the articulated historical facts” (Al-Azmeh 1993:72).

This discussion has stoked disagreement in feminist academic circles (Muqaddam 1994, Kandawati 1991, Molineux 2001, Hale 1994, Bin Habib 1999, Phillips 1993, 2002, Nussbaum 2002) over the

¹ ‘Authenticity’ in Arabic is a euphemistic term for sincerity and integrity. As an expression, it refers to commendable moral values such as loyalty, nobility and feelings of commitment to a particular social group or set of values. It also indicates feelings of self-dependability connected to these emotions. When these emotions are grouped together and ascribed to a collective historical Arabic trait, Islamic or otherwise, they become ‘authenticity’, according to Aziz Al-Azmeh. This is a central idea in the romantic conception of history which evokes features generally linked to this kind of idea. One of the fundamentally important features here is an evolving conception of nationalism and politics. Al-Azmeh says that the discourse of authenticity is “thus a discourse with a fundamental essence, which greatly resembles the opposing point of view which we find in discourses of primitivism in Orientalism, and other discourses on cultural differences (the culture of the Other). In harmony with these discourses, the discourse on authenticity supposes a self-defining historical subject with a fundamental continuity over time, and considers itself the material difference from other historical subjects” (Al-Azmeh 1996: 82-83).

possibility of implementing global values which transgress cultural borders and which can act as a means of achieving women's rights and enablement. Some agree that such a framework must be implemented for cultural values in order to assess if they merit preservation (Nussbaum 2002:52). However, those who criticise the general application of global values and principles believe it is necessary to consider cultural diversity and to avoid assuming a 'paternalistic' position towards cultural differences, and seek not to impose the practices and values of the dominant group on others (Phillips 2002: 119). Philips believes that the call for cross-cultural global rights obscures cultural variations. It does not seem to take into consideration that the bases of justice are always relative to the particular society which devised them, reflecting the particular values and practices of that society, and that there is no general 'truth' beyond the local context. At the same time, we can observe that adopting a position of preserving 'cultural authenticity' is often done by Islamists who reject the discourse of general rights. It is necessary to adopt a position which is more critical than either of these two approaches. On the one hand, we cannot concede that a particular concept of 'culture' that simply seeks to entrench male primacy on the basis that this represents a 'culture' which society as a whole seeks to preserve (ibid: 139). And, on the other hand, argue that general rights can only be rooted in a comprehensive understanding of the historical, cultural, economic and political context of society. Women must participate in the debate. They must agree on which rights must be upheld, to whom these rights apply, and what constitutes the supporting/contesting infrastructure for implementing these rights - as a prior condition for drawing up general agendas for all women.

Some definitional issues: Who are Islamist women?

The term 'Islamist women' has been used to refer to women who belong to the Islamist movement and who work actively in the general field of calling for what Keddie describes as "an Islamic state which at the very least will impose some Islamic laws and customs" (Keddie 1988 in Karam 1998: 16). Different forms of Islamic dress point to the differences between Islamist groups and their political projects in the Palestinian context. *Hamas* are working on the gradual Islamic re-education of the public by calling for the public itself to prepare for Islamic governance. Islamic Jihad and *Hizb ut Tahrir*, meanwhile, support the idea of seizing power by force, as they believe this is the main way to prepare the state and society for Islam (al-Barghouthi 2000: 43-46). However, all these groups are united and agree upon one way of preparing people and the state for Islam - an increase in Islamic awareness and Islamic practices. This varies between giving lessons in mosques, universities and homes, to demanding the application of the *shariah* through various institutions (Karam 1998: 235). This movement has developed in opposition to the secular nationalist movement, yet has been affected by it at the same time.

The Israeli occupation and the formation of a new elite

'New' Islamists differ from those who were active during the British mandate or Jordanian rule. The old generation of Muslim Brothers came from the wealthy urban upper classes, whilst the new generation are mostly from displaced rural families who left the Gaza Strip after the catastrophe of 1948 and the foundation of the state of Israel. The older generation of founders (for example

Ahmad Yassin, Ibrahim Yazouri, Abdul Fatah Dukhan and Muhammad Hussein Saham) were school teachers and sheikhs occupying esteemed positions in society. The second generation (Mahmoud al-Zahar, Abdul Aziz al-Rantisi, Salah Shahada, Isa al-Nashar, Ismail Abu Shanab and Mousa Abu Marzouq) were of poor backgrounds from the refugee camps, and trained as doctors, engineers, school administrators and university teachers at various Arabic universities (Abu Amran 2000 257, Al-Barghouthi 2000:57-59). However, their supporters were mostly students, often from poor and conservative families, as well as religious men and professionals.

Hamas' popularity is inversely related to progress in the peace process led by the Palestinian Authority. Progress – or the lack of it – has been also a key factor inciting variable determining the level of activity of economic and social activists. With hopes raised by the Oslo Agreement of September 1993, many believed that *Hamas'* days as a significant player were numbered. The peace agreement not only helped the PLO regain a name for themselves, but more importantly brought about international pledges to provide funding to support the agreement, which filled the empty coffers of the PLO and greatly helped the work of its support and care networks, which in turn helped strengthen its legitimacy (Asher 1997: 343). However, with the failure of the peace process and the spread of corruption in the Palestinian Authority, *Hamas'* popularity soared. Its influence also played a role in increasing religiosity amongst Palestinians.

It is necessary here to make a distinction between religiosity and political Islam. The first does not necessarily have any political significance. The level of religiosity in a given society can only be understood as one part of a complex system of beliefs, and does not necessarily include any definitive social or political vision linked to Islamist political activities. Thus, the growing influence and strength of *Hamas* does not have a definitive path, but is largely dependent on individual events and factors. The decline in the economic situation after Oslo helped boost Islamists' popularity because of the institutions they ran which provided services and care to a large number of people, particularly women. I use the term 'Islamists' to indicate fighters those supporting the Islamist movements in Palestine and elsewhere. Islamists are hostile towards the use of the term 'Islamic fundamentalism', which they see as a foreign concept. For example, Abu al-Amran, a Palestinian Islamist historian, uses the term 'the Islamic expansion' to describe various historical periods rather than any other term.

It is possible to study the changing power and influence of the Islamist movement in the West Bank and in particular in the Gaza Strip where it began, through considering the economic, nationalist and political contexts. The various types of social institutions set up by the Islamists became important economic and social structures and networks for young women who were searching for work or for the possibility of general activity and movement.

I will now look at the path of the Islamist movement in Palestine - a path which mirrored the political decline of the PLO – a decline that was marked by that organisation's abdication from the leadership of resistance against occupation.

Policies of the *shariah*, and the possibility of establishing common ground for discussion and action

A review of the literature of female activists in the *Hamas* movement between 1997 and 2004 (i.e. before *Hamas* came to power in 2006) illustrates several important conclusions. These conclusions are derived from in-depth interviews with female leaders within the movement and a review of a number of papers presented at women's conferences organised by these activists between 1997 and 2003. One of the most striking things is that it is the political framework surrounding the Islamist movement which decides its Islamic discourse, not religious sources. Continuous modifications have been made to the religious discourse to adapt to meet the movement's daily needs. These modifications (for more information, cf. Jad 2005) raise two issues. First, they challenge the discourse of non-governmental women's organisations which adopt the principle of individual rights and ignore the plight facing society as a whole under occupation. By implanting Islam in the core of society, Islamists have been able to create a modified Palestinian nationalism which strips feminist discourse of its legitimacy by portraying it as Westernised and not nationalist. Secondly, this 'modified' form of the *shariah* challenges the opposing ideology of Palestinian secularism which also uses Islam as a source of legitimacy. Through the 'Islamisation' of Palestine and the 'national application' of Islam, Islamists have succeeded in moulding a form of Palestinian nationalism which organically incorporates Islam to become a tremendous force for mobilising society.

In such a situation, secularists are losing ground, even though they continue to challenge the Islamists, because they focus on individual rights removed from a nationalist agenda and because they lack an organisation capable of mass mobilisation. The effectiveness of non-governmental organisations which rely on 'political professionalism' and the dissemination of a temporary real-time culture linked to the life cycle of a short-term project (cf. Jad 2003) is not able to offer an alternative. The Islamists have been able to develop their political organisation by taking up a stance opposing all forms of violations committed by the Palestinian Authority since its establishment in 1994 which infringe the civil and political rights of the opposition, in particular the Islamists. Compared to this, women in non-governmental organisations do not have any organised base, and rely for what little support they do have on a crumbling authority whose legitimacy is consistently being worn away.

In a similar fashion, Islamist women have created space for the actions and activities of groups of women, mostly well-educated from displaced and poor families, who are thus bestowed with an air of moral legitimacy in all spheres of public life. This explains how they have been able to establish themselves amongst the poorest women, particularly widows and the wives of martyrs, by offering them services and defending the rights of their imprisoned male relatives. Concern for these groups of women stems from the Islamist resistance movement's commitment to supporting those most harmed by the resistance to the occupation – the same approach previously adopted by the PLO and its female activists, before it transformed and adopted a policy of 'peace and negotiations'. When the PLO gave up this approach, it created the space for the influence and actions of *Hamas* activists

and a large growth in the number of its female members. This large number of activist women was an important addition to the movement's political mobilisation towards national liberation.

I have discussed elsewhere (Jad 2005) two different situations in which the *shariah* has been used as the guiding principle for women's rights in a contradictory manner, as part of the dialogue influenced by secular women's organisations in the course of their operations to modify the text of the Personal Status Law based on the Islamic *shariah*, from 1998 (during the Model Parliament project) until today.

The *shariah* was initially used by Islamists as a rigid, sacred and unchangeable linguistic formula in order to strip groups of non-Islamist women of their legitimacy and to silence them. At the same time, it denied the legitimacy of the idea of popular sovereignty being proposed by the Palestinian Authority as the basis of the new legislation. It is unclear whether the Islamists wish to establish an alternative to popular will: e.g. a sovereignty based on divine rule. Hamas has not yet outlined its intentions for a Palestinian State.

This same discussion on the *shariah* has prompted internal discussions within the Islamist movement itself. The search for an alternative to secular feminism has led its members to examine what they would require of it. I have shown elsewhere how female Islamist teachers have influenced higher education with the discourse of complete equality, to defend equal rights for women in the public sphere (at least at work and in political activities) and in daily life.

I have also shown how the male high command acted quickly to 'establish' the *shariah* (Zabida 2003:1) in relation to other legislation - in relation to the the penal code - once again order to silence and discourage feminist and secular groups from proposing changes to the first Palestinian parliament that was formed in 1996. The fact the male high command lent their weight to supporting the *shariah* does not only relate to women's rights but also confirms the influence of the Islamists and their supremacy within society and in opposition to the Palestinian Authority. It might also indicate the prospect a struggle yet to come, centred around strategies of active citizenship, and the identity of any future Palestinian state.

In this context, some feminists have cautioned against celebrating the extent of women's participation and significant action within conservative social movements, in opposition to the alternative possibility of achieving democratic reform and social change to elevate women and grant them more rights (Molineux 1996:6). Some feminists argue that mass social participation by women might be exploited by those intent on implementing a politicised society, which might then proceed to impose 'extremist' gender distinctions on such a society (Molineux 1996: 6). I do not believe this would necessarily be the case; my research reveals that Islamists, as a nationalist movement seeking their own land, have been forced to borrow and incorporate a new vision to address general needs with the aim of widening their base of support. Their opponents' challenges forced Islamists to react to ideas like pluralism, human rights, women's rights, the common good, sustainable development, and the social self versus the individual self. These are all ideas borrowed and adopted by Islamists from their global context. I have discussed in a previous paper how the

Islamist movement, in its initial stages in West Bank universities, did not have a specific organisation for women within the universities. However, the Islamist bloc did compete with secular blocs for their allegiance, which was the first move towards paying more attention and care to female students to avoid losing the ability to compete democratically (Jad 2005).

Conclusion

Even though there have been periods of greater openness and rapprochement between Islamist women and secularist and feminist women, there are still many contradictions which create the possibility of incomprehension and a retreat to 'static' explanations of Islam with a negative effect on women, such as once again seeing women as child-bearers for the nation and subservient to men, as well as many unclear and disputed sensitive topics such as polygamy, men's 'authority' over women, a woman's right to initiate divorce, etc. In addition, heated discussions have been waged over the 'suitability' of women for military action. However, numerous criticisms from women - both Islamists and secularists - led to a change in this position, and there is now a special organisation for women engaged in military action within the Islamist movement.

However, despite all this, I believe that the type of 'Islamist' state which these activities could lead to will largely depend on the general framework being drawn up by secularists, and to what extent it abides by regulations limiting relations with other parties. The Islamist movement is not claiming 'ownership' of the new theory of democracy on the basis of which we can suppose the struggle for power will be conducted. Rather, the party claiming 'ownership' of this theory is the secularists/nationalist camp in the Arab region in general, and Palestine in particular. The possibility of establishing common ground which will house different ideological visions without the need for bloodshed, conflict or war will depend upon the extent of true, authentic commitment to the principle of the democratic theory as it relates to the creation of political, civil and social freedoms, and to commitment to the rule of law.

Islamist women's discourse does not derive solely from the Quran. It is also positively touched by the discourse of other groups, both nationalist and feminist secularist groups. I believe that this influence provides Islamist women with a motivation to return to the sacred text to look for possible new readings, with the aim of responding to the challenges of other women's and feminist groups. Islamist women's discourse does not depend solely on the sacred texts, but is also influenced by the actions and discourse of other women. This contact can also form common ground on which Islamist, secular and nationalist women can unite and work towards a new reading of the sacred texts, by working with, and adjusting to, the daily reality experienced by women in the context of the ongoing struggle for national liberation. This mutual interaction (Hudson 1996, Norton 1993, Salama 2001) requires each side to wake up to the changes to the position and discourse of the other side, rather than adopting a position of totally rejecting the Other, whether this be by the feminist movement and non-governmental women's organisations, or by the Islamist movement.

We therefore see that Islamists have had to construct their position based on the achievements contemporaneity has provided to women, in terms of educational and job opportunities. Thus, the type of state which they may establish will not depend on a legislative model based on a sacred text,

but will rather depend to a large extent on the type and form of the state and society in which they actually live, and the visions and challenges posed by nationalist and secularist groups, particularly if they form a majority and command enough influence from senior figures.

This interrelatedness calls first and foremost for both sides to recognise the existence of the other current – whether Islamist or ‘secular’ and to acknowledge the legitimacy of its viewpoint. The situation presented at the beginning of this paper, in which a struggle developed in the name of feminism between *Fatah* women and the Islamist women who had assumed control of the Ministry for Women’s Affairs after the elections, was not really about feminism as much as it was about different political affiliations. One side, using methods far removed from any democratic principle, was trying to preserve its position of power which was being severely threatened by the arrival of Islamists at the gate of power.

The opinions in this paper are the author’s own and do not necessarily represent those of Conflicts Forum.

REFERENCES

English sources:

1. Al-Azmeh, Aziz (1988) "Arab Nationalism and Islamism." Review of Middle East Studies 4: 33-51.
2. _____ (1993) "Islamism and the Arabs" in Islams and Modernities. London and New York: Verso.
3. Benhabib, Seyla (1999) "'Nous' et 'les Autres'" in C. Joppke and S. Lukes eds., Multicultural Questions. Oxford : Oxford University Press.
4. Bodman, Herbert, and Nayereh Tohidi eds., (1998) Women in Muslim Societies: Diversity within Unity. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
5. Anthias, Floya and Nira Yuval-Davis (1989) "Introduction" in Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis eds., Woman-Nation-State. Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: MacMillan.
6. Badran, Margot(1994) "Gender Activism: Feminists and Islamists in Egypt" in V. M. Moghadam, ed., Identity Politics and Women: Cultural Reassertions and Feminisms in International Perspective. Boulder: Westview Press.
7. Budeiri, Musa (1998) "Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness" Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniya Summer 35.
8. Hale, Sondra (1994) "Gender, Religious Identity, and Political Mobilisations in Sudan" in Valentine Moghadam ed., Identity Politics and Women: Cultural Reassertions and Feminism in International Perspective. Boulder: Westview: 145-66.
9. _____ (1997) "The Women of Sudan's National Islamic Front" in Joel Beinin and Joe Stork ed., Political Islam: Essays from Middle East Report. Berkeley: University of California Press.
10. Hilal, Jamil (2002) "Secularism in Palestinian Political Culture: A Tentative Discourse" in HAGAR, International Social Science Review 3.1
11. Hroub, Khaled (1996) Hamas: Al-Fekr wal momarasa al-siyasiyya (Hamas: Ideology and Political Practice). Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies.
12. Hudson, Michael (1996) "Obstacles to Democratisation in the Middle East" Contention 14: 81-106.
13. Jad, Islah (2003) The 'NGOisation' of the Arab Women's Movement, Al-Raida, Centenary Issue, Vol. XX, No. 100, Winter 2003: 38-47
14. _____ (2005) Islamist Women of Hamas: A New Women's Movement? In Fereshteh Nourai-Simone (ed.) On Shifting Ground; Muslim Women in a Global Era, Feminist Press.
15. Karam, Azza (1998) (change to 1998) Women, Islamisms and the State: Contemporary Feminisms in Egypt. London: Macmillan Press and New York: St. Martin's Press.
16. Kandiyoti, Deniz (1988) "Bargaining with Patriarchy" Gender and Society 2.3: 271-90.
17. _____ (1991) Women, Islam and the State. London: Macmillan Press Ltd.
18. _____ (1991a) "Identity and Its Discontents: Women and the Nation" in Millenium Journal of International Studies 20.3: 429-43.
19. _____ (1998) "Some Awkward Questions on Women and Modernity in Turkey" in Lila Abu-Lughod ed., Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
20. Keddie, Nikki R. (1979) "Problems in the Study of Middle Eastern Women" International Journal of Middle East Studies 10: 225-40.
21. Kortan, David C. (1987) "Third Generation NGO strategies: A Key to People-Centred Development" World Development October, 15 Suppl.: 145-60.

22. Mahmood, Saba (1996) "*Feminism and Religious Difference*" A paper presented at the Carsten Niebuhr Institute of Near Eastern Studies conference Women, Culture and Modernity Copenhagen (18-21 February).
23. Mir-Hosseini, Ziba (1999) Islam and Gender: the Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran. London: I. B. Tauris.
24. _____ (2003) "*Stretching the Limits: A Feminist Reading of the Shari'a in Post-Khomeini Iran*" in Bryan S. Turner ed., Islam: Critical Concepts in Sociology, Vol. III, Islam, Gender and the Family. London: Routledge.
25. Moghissi, Haideh (1993) "*Women in the Resistance Movement in Iran*" in Haleh Afshar ed., Women in the Middle East: Perceptions, Realities and Struggles for Liberation. London: Macmillan.
26. _____ (1994) Populism and Feminism in Iran: Women's Struggles in a Male-Dominated Revolutionary Movement. London: Macmillan.
27. _____ (1995) "*Public Life and Women's Resistance*" in Rahnema, Saeed and Sohrab Behdad eds., Iran after the Revolution. London: I.B. Tauris.
28. Moghadam, Valentine (1994) "*Introduction: Women and Identity Politics in Theoretical and Comparative Perspective*" in Moghadam ed., Identity Politics and Women: Cultural Reassertions, Gender and Feminisms in International Perspective. Helsinki: UNU/WIDER. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.
29. Molyneux, Maxine (1996) '*Women's Rights ad the International Context in the Post-Communist States*' in M. Threlfall ed., Mapping the Women's Movement: Feminist Politics and Social Transformation in the North. London: Verso, pp. 232-59.
30. _____ (2001) Women's Movements in International Perspective: Latin America and Beyond. Hampshire: Palgrave.
31. Nussbaum, Martha (2002) "*Women's Capabilities and Social Justice*" in Maxine Molyneux and Shahra Razavi eds., Gender Justice, Development, and Rights. UK: Oxford University Press.
32. Norton, Augustus Richard (1993) "*The future of Civil Society in the Middle East*" The Middle East Journal Spring 47.2: 205-16.
33. Phillips, Anne (1991) Engendering Democracy. Cambridge: Polity Press.
34. _____ (1993) Democracy and Difference. Cambridge: Polity Press.
35. _____ (2002) "*Multiculturalism, Universalism, and the Claims of Democracy*" in eds., Maxine Molyneux and Shahra Razavi, Gender Justice, Development, and Rights. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
36. Salame, Ghassan (ed). (2001) Democracy without Democrats? The Renewal of Politics in The Muslim World. London: I. B. Tauris.
37. Stowasser, Barbara (1987) "*Introduction*" in Barbara Stowasser ed., The Islamic Impulse. Washington, D.C.: Croom Helm in association with Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University.
38. Tucker, Judith (1983) "*Problems in the Historiography of Women in the Middle East: The Case of Nineteenth Century Egypt*" International Journal of Middle East Studies 15: 321-36.
39. Usher, Graham (1997) "*What Kind of Nation? The Rise of Hamas in the Occupied Territories*" in Joel Beinin and Joe Stork ed., Political Islam: Essays from Middle East Report. Berkeley: University of California Press.
40. White, Jenny (2002) Islamist Mobilisation in Turkey: A Study in Vernacular Politics. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press.
41. Zubaida, Sami (2003) Law and Power in the Islamic World. London, New York: Tauris.

Arabic sources:

41. Abu Amran, Khalid (200) Hamas: The Islamist Resistance Movement in Palestine, Arabic Cultural Centre, Cairo
42. Abu Amran, Ziyad (1989) The Islamist Movement in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Al-Aswar Publishing House, Acre
43. Al-Azmeh, Aziz (1992) Secularism from different viewpoints, Centre for Studies on Arab Unity, Beirut
44. Al-Barghouthi, Eyad (2000) Political Islam in Palestine: Behind the Policy, Jerusalem Media and Communications Centre, Jerusalem
45. Al-Hamad, Jawad and Eyad al-Barghouthi (1997) Studies on the Thoughts of the Islamist Resistance Movement of Hamas 1987-1996, Middle East Studies Centre, Amman

Interviews:

46. Laila Khaled (Leadership of Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine), Tehran, October 2003
47. Samira Salah (Leadership of Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine), Tehran, October 2003