How Palestinian Islamist Women Activists in Israel are challenging the Status Quo

Drawing upon extensive fieldwork conducted between 2008 and 2013, this policy brief offers a detailed empirical exploration of the activism, aspirations and ideas of female activists in the Islamic Movement in Israel (al-Haraka al-Islamiyya fi Isra’il), with a particular focus on female Islamist student activists at Israeli universities. The question assessed is to what degree female Palestinian Islamist activists in Israel are agents of change in the field of gender relations.

While Islamist movements in general have tended to be male-dominated, the Islamic Movement in Israel is different in several regards. Female students are more active in terms of both numbers of activists and in terms of degree of dedication when compared with their male peers. Their focus, which is on the re-reading of religious sources to accurately describe the position and status of women in Islam and combat misinterpretations that justify the subjugation of women, demonstrates a level of agency. At the same time, there is still hesitation on the part of female activists in the Islamic Movement regarding women taking on prominent roles of political representation. Significantly, in the particular context of the Jewish state of Israel, the question of women’s position and status among Palestinian Israeli citizens cannot be separated from the issues of nationalism and minority struggle.

The Palestinian case is interesting in terms of understanding how Islamist women activists relate to the patriarchal structures of domination in their community, and in terms of whether their attitudes and activism represent actual challenges to prevailing attitudes about gender relations. As will be discussed below, the female Islamist activists interviewed are in the process of reconstructing the content of gender relations in the Islamic Movement in Israel, and thus contribute...
to a development away from a patriarchal order towards a new Islamic lifestyle that keeps some gender traditions while challenging the subordination of women.

Agency and Choice: Becoming Islamist Activists

All the interviewees showed a great degree of agency and freedom in opinions and decision-making regarding their own choice to lead a religious lifestyle and to be activists in the student groups of the Islamic Movement in Israel. Similar to their male counterparts, but to an even greater degree, these women felt deprived of knowledge and education about Islam and about their Arab Palestinian history. As Palestinian citizens of Israel, their education in the Israeli school system did not include classes about Islam or a Palestinian narrative or Arab history, thus they told of having to search for this knowledge in order to complete their own identities. As such, they were reacting to having been exposed to what is called the ‘process of Israelization’, which can be either state-led measures directed at Palestinian citizens, intended to decrease their Palestinian identity and strengthen their identity as Hebrew-speaking acquiescent ‘Israeli Arabs’; or the influences on Palestinian citizens’ identity, culture and lifestyle by living and working in Israel and through the resulting exposure to, and, to a degree, participation in, Hebrew and Israeli media and mainstream culture. Most of the interviewees described their activism in the Islamic Movement as a natural continuation of this search for knowledge and identity, combined with a desire to improve the situation of the Palestinian minority in Israel. To illustrate with a quote by the activist Najah Satel: ‘I found myself in this situation, knowing that we live in such a diverse society, with people of many different roots; therefore you need something to identify yourself, to be a part of the group. You have your identity; you have your classification. At that time, thank God, I succeeded and religion really helped me see the other [the Jewish-Israeli] as the other, and [I succeeded in] not assimilating myself in the other and being part of the other, which substantially is not me.

Agency Reform and Traditional Roles

Interviewees spoke about the need for reform of the views of women in the Islamic Movement and among Palestinian Muslims in Israel in general. Based on their own newly acquired knowledge of Islam, they realized that uneducated and/or manipulative men had deprived women of knowledge and positions. Thus, they now wanted to teach men and women in and outside of the Movement about the active, positive and, in their view, necessary roles of women. In order to do this they established organizations for women connected to the Movement across the country. These organizations were the first of their kind and scale among Palestinians in Israel and encouraged women to take public roles.

Yet, few could envision a female Islamist representative in the Israeli parliament or, due to their preference for gender-segregated events, a female speaker addressing a mixed audience. Despite these restrictions, the Islamic Movement has had
female representatives at local councils in Israel. Their reluctance to address (lobby for) change at the parliamentary level is difficult to answer, but we have to appreciate the context of this issue. It is significant to note that the first female Palestinian representative to the Knesset for a secular (Palestinian) party was elected in 2009. Hence, the fact that the Palestinian Islamists in Israel are not yet ready to promote a female representative to the highest level might not be surprising, or even the most important issue. For now, it seems that female Islamists are focusing on assisting the grass roots and the majority of women, rather than making political statements by positions of representation.

One could argue that the politics of symbolism takes a back seat to the politics of everyday life. Secular Palestinian women might oppose this perspective, such as Member of Knesset and feminist Aida Touma (interviewed) who is very critical of the Islamic Movement’s gender politics and practices.

Most of the Islamist student interviewees made the point that being or becoming a wife and a mother is important to them, and as such, they are in line with the view of the Islamic Movement. However, we have to consider the context since, in addition to being a traditional view in Islam and also among many Islamists, for a Palestinian in Israel being a ‘birthing mother’ is also highly political. Until recently, Palestinian pronatalism was an expression of nationalism and opposition to state polices, which were designed to lower the birth rate among its Arab citizens in order to win the ‘demographic war’.

This trend is slowly changing, and today the new discourse among the educated professional middle-class Palestinians in Israel centres on limiting Palestinian birth rates as a new method in the same national struggle. The students interviewed for this research are part of the latter discourse: they want to be wives and mothers, but also to have an education and a career. They said that they want to continue their studies and/or work also after becoming a wife and, if possible, also after becoming a mother. As such, these students challenge the traditional model of a stay-at-home mother, and also of the mother who works only to contribute to the family income by taking a convenient job near her home. Yet they fall short of challenging the core idea of the main female role as mother.

On this issue, it is also significant to remember the context when considering the opportunities for Palestinian women in Israel. In addition to the general dilemmas shared by working mothers worldwide, these women have to deal with their ‘double predicament’ as Arab women in Israel. According to Adalah, ‘Unemployment rates remain significantly higher among Arabs than among Jewish citizens, and the rate of labour force participation among Palestinian women citizens of Israel, at just about twenty percent, is among the lowest in the world’.

In addition, child care is expensive, if available, in Palestinian communities, and in fact, the Islamic Movement has improved this shortage by providing nurseries.
Agent of Change within Limits

The Islamist women researched here are agents of change, because of their chosen entry into Islamic activism, their views of women’s roles according to re-interpretations of Islamic sources and their ability to choose and attend higher education. With regards to their decisions to go to university and be Islamist activists, they display agency, knowledge and the freedom to make up their own minds. Just from the fact that so many young women from and associated with the Islamic Movement study at Israeli universities with the intent and hope of relevant future employment, we learn that they are taken seriously and take themselves, their desires and abilities seriously. By their reinterpretations of the female role in Islam, they criticize the male-dominated subjugation of women within their community, which has been based on the mis-interpretation or manipulation of Islamic sources.

There is still hesitation from both men and women in the Islamic Movement when it comes to women taking on prominent roles of political representation.

They are not yet ready to imagine senior political positions, and are not in favour of female speakers at large events at university campuses. Thus, in these regards, the women interviewed here cannot be described as agents of change.

Despite the fact that the Islamic Movement has appointed women to municipal positions, both male and female spokespersons doubt that the Movement or they themselves would accept a female representative in parliament at this point. With the new generation of university-educated Muslim Palestinian women steadily entering the working force, this may change.

In sum, the female Islamist activists interviewed for this research can be said to be in the process of reconstructing the content of gender relations in the Islamic Movement in Israel within self-imposed limits, and thus contribute to a development away from the patriarchal order. Thus they uphold some gender traditions while creating a new Islamic lifestyle that challenging the subordination of women.

• In line with Norway’s commitments to UN Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, it is necessary to actively approach and support female representatives of groups in all organizations representing the native national minority of Palestinians in Israel.

• The aim should be to recognize that Palestinian women of Israel are fighting for their rights in several arenas simultaneously – within their own community and as discriminated native non-Jewish citizens of Israel. In so doing, these women are at the bottom of the state’s priorities.

• They would be best approached from within/via their existing organizations, despite some of the shortcomings in feminism in the attitude of these organizations and their rhetoric.