Agents of Change? How Islamist Women Activists in Israel Are Challenging the Status Quo

Introduction

The present report focuses on the activism, aspirations and ideas of female Palestinian students at Israeli universities who are members of the student associations belonging to the Islamic Movement in Israel (Al-Haraqa al-Islamiyy fi Israil). According to the National Manager of the Islamic Movement’s student association Al-Kalam, 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. How do these women relate to the patriarchal structures of domination in their community? Can their attitudes and activism be said to represent challenges to traditional patriarchal control?

As with the study of anything pertaining to Palestinians in Israel, the issue of women’s position and status among Palestinian citizens cannot be separated from the issues of nationalism and minority struggle. While there exist some writings on their predicament, only one article focuses on women in the Islamic Movement in Israel. Based on fieldwork material from 2008-2013, the present paper aims to contribute to fill this lacuna. However, the aim here is not to offer a broad or conclusive analysis of the situation and status of all women in this Islamic Movement, but rather to introduce the voices of some young women and their views on their roles and praxis as Palestinian Islamist activists in Israel.

The present paper is based on in-depth interviews with one female leader and six female student activists from the Islamic Movement in Israel. In addition, it draws on interviews with male activists and leaders, as well as other fieldwork material collected during the duration of this research. The interviews were semi-structured; all interviewees were asked the same questions, but the conversations developed freely and all were recorded. The student activists are anonymized, but the leaders are identified, according to their wishes. It is important to note that while many Palestinian women in Israel today attend higher education institutions, the positions and perceptions of these students, to a degree privileged and probably middle-class, do not represent all Muslim women in Israel. Muslim Palestinian women are a diverse group from different backgrounds across the country, including so-called mixed cities (with Jewish and Palestinian inhabitants, such as Jaffa and Acca), Palestinian towns and villages, and unrecognized villages. The
interviews for this report were conducted at the University of Haifa, Tel Aviv University, and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and all of the students interviewed come from the north and centre of Israel.

Focusing on the interviewees’ road to – and their views on – Islamic activism, on women’s roles, and on their practical activism, the material presented below reveals the social and political limitations and boundaries facing these female Muslim Palestinian activists in Israel. In addition to providing an insight into the lives and thoughts of these women, the present paper shows their agency and ownership over not only their thoughts and ideas, but over their life choices so far. Accordingly, the present article argues that these women are agents of change. However, their challenge does not extend to all areas of their activism and can thus be described as incomplete.

The Context: Palestinian Citizens of Israel

As a result of the war in 1948, more than 700,000 Palestinian Arabs, or seven-eighths of the inhabitants in the territories that became the state of Israel, had been expelled or fled (Morris 1989). Today, approximately twenty per cent of the Israeli population is not Jewish, but indigenous Arab Palestinian (Central Bureau of Statistics 2014). According to official data, at present Muslim Palestinians (excluding Druze) constitute approximately eighty per cent of the 1.5 million Palestinians in Israel (the rest are Christians and Druze, about ten per cent each) (Central Bureau of Statistics 2014). The overwhelming majority of Muslim Palestinians are Sunni.

While Palestinians in Israel have certain civil rights, such as the right to vote and to be elected to political representation, they lack national rights. Thus, as a native non-Jewish national minority in the Jewish state, they are discriminated against when it comes to distribution and access to land; in economic resources; job opportunities; privileges given to those serving in the military; and citizenships rights, as illustrated by the Law of Return that allows all Jews in the world to immigrate to Israel, but Palestinian citizens are prohibited from bringing in Palestinian spouses from outside Israel (Adalah 2013). It is within these boundaries of the opportunities and limitations created by their Israeli citizenship and Palestinian national belonging that the Islamic Movement in Israel conducts its activism.

The Movement was established in the 1970s by shaykhs newly educated in religious institutions in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, and it grew from a movement of grass-roots activism into a player on the local political field during the mid-1980s. It emulated its organization on the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The Movement split into a northern and a southern branch in 1996 due to a disagreement over whether or not to participate in national elections for the Israeli parliament (Knesset). Both branches base their activism on the inter-related agendas of Islamization, Palestinization and Arabization of both Muslim individuals and the Muslim society at large. These agendas are direct responses to the de-Islamization, de-Arabization and de-Palestinization this community underwent from 1948 until 1967 while it was under Military Rule and isolated from the surrounding Muslim and Arab countries, as well as from their Palestinian brethren in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The agendas are disseminated via the branches’ state-wide network of mosques,
educational and social organizations. Most of the organizations and activities of the Movement are gender segregated.

**Studying Palestinian Muslim Women in Israel**

Whereas there were only a handful female Palestinian students at Israeli universities in the 1950s, since the mid-1980s this percentage has increased from around thirty to over fifty per cent in the nineties when compared with male students (Daoud 2009, 65–66; Sikkuy og Ali 2013). The high level of women at higher educational institutions in Israel is due to the fact that ‘all segments of Palestinians in Israel, regardless of their gender, strongly support higher education among women’ (Daoud 2009, 66). It should be noted that despite a steady increase in the number of Palestinian students since the 1970s, according to a recent report by Sikkuy, the Association for the Advancement for Civic Equality in Israel, ‘there is an unacceptably low representation of the Arab population in the higher education system on all the levels examined’ (Sikkuy og Ali 2013, 8). While Palestinian citizens constitute over 20 per cent of the population, the Sikkuy report found that in the 2012–13 academic year, PCI constituted 10 per cent of all undergraduates, 7.3 per cent of all graduates, 4 per cent of all doctoral students, 1.75 per cent of faculty, and 0.9 per cent of the administration (Sikkuy og Ali 2013, 8). These statistics do not provide numbers for comparison between female and male Palestinian students.

In her book, *Palestinian Women and Politics in Israel*, Daoud examined the status and predicament of Palestinian women in Israel, questioning why, until today, despite being well educated, they are hardly represented in politics. Daoud explains that the low level of representation and participation of Palestinian women in Israel is caused by their double marginalization as women in patriarchal Arab families who (also) belong to the Palestinian ‘trapped minority’. That means that they are marginalized by the Israeli state and society as non-Jews and as indigenous Palestinian Arabs, and are also marginalized within their Palestinian nation where they have no influence and have not been designated a role or position (Rabinowitz 2001). Daoud argues that state policis together with practices of patriarchal subordination of women ‘support each other at the expense of women’s political development and empowerment’ (Daoud 2009, 4). This is not due to an intentional cooperation between the Zionists and the patriarchs to subdue Palestinian women, but a consequence of the combination of colonial policies towards Palestinians in Israel and of Palestinian reactions to these policies. As Erdreich explains, the ‘patriarchal policies’ marginalizing Palestinian women in Israel are:

> .. the fruits of state policies of pseudo-cultural sensitivity towards the Palestinian population that reproduces an image of the Palestinian community as traditional and religious, and on the other hand, the fruit of the desire of Palestinian men to preserve an image of authenticity and autonomy from Jews. It preserves the power of the patriarchal assumptions inherent to both liberal democracy and traditionalist Arab culture often associated with Islam (Erdreich 2006a, 39).

Daoud also noted that ‘the research on Palestinian women in particular has been distorted and one-sided. It has aimed to show Palestinian women as powerless, dependent and victims of patriarchy and Arab male oppression’ (Daoud 2009, 2). She also critiques the media for ‘largely focusing on oppression of women within the frameworks of Arab culture and the Arab family. Most
research and press coverage has dealt with the issue of violence in the Arab family or on honor killings' (Daoud 2009, 2). Thus, the complex reality and challenges that faces Palestinian women are either reduced to one issue or their struggle/s against patriarchy, and indeed their successes are ignored all together.

To my knowledge, in addition to Daoud, only Marion Boulby has written about women’s role/s and patriarchy in the Islamic Movement in Israel (Boulby 2004). In her article, she argues that the Movement has contributed to the emancipation of Muslim Palestinian women within the limitations of patriarchy. The emancipatory contributions are increased opportunity and encouragement to pursue higher education, to work outside the home and also outside traditional workplaces. Yet she emphasizes that the Movement upholds the idea that the main role of a woman is to be a mother and to bring up the new generation, and thereby be the guardian of Islamic heritage. Thus, the Islamic Movement simultaneously instigates the seemingly contradictory processes of challenging certain patriarchal patterns, while reasserting other patriarchal patterns.

In her article about Palestinian female students’ struggles against patriarchy at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Erdreich focused on the political strategies these young women used in order to participate in student politics. She interviewed women belonging to all the political parties representing Palestinians in Israel, including the Islamic Movement, and she describes that the women student political activists as ‘trailblazers into a traditionally male-dominated public sphere’ (Erdreich 2006a, 36). Erdreich describes these women’s time at the university as a ‘liminal phase’, when these young students live away from home and the control and support of the family, and have space and time to develop new ideas and challenge accepted norms (Erdreich 2006b, 495). In term of their gendered status, as students they are in-between being girls, defined as not married, and women, defined as married. Thus, university studies offer these young students the opportunity to live outside of the patriarchal organization of their community, or, as in the case of one of the interviewees introduced below, outside the (Communist) political framework of her family and village. These observations are significant background for the following analysis.

The present analysis also looks at female students and their relationship with patriarchy. However, differently from Erderich, all the interviewees were from the Islamic Movement; and differently from Boulby, in the present article the issues discussed stem from the interview materials and were not predefined. To clarify, the interviewees were not asked about patriarchy or their views on women, but they choose to talk about these when answering other broader questions about their activism. Thus, the present analysis can be described as a bottom-up representation of the reflections on state, society and personal relations by the young women interviewed.

Analyzing the interview scripts, it can be seen that these interviewees spoke about being women, and patriarchy, under three themes: the/their entry into Islamic activism; their views on women, including their roles and position in Islam and as educated professional women; and the practical conduct of segregated Islamic activism at universities in Israel. The following sections are organized according to these themes.
Turn towards Islam: A Positive Choice

From several interviewees and stories I heard over the years of researching the Islamic Movement in Israel, I was told that women often made the first steps towards an Islamic lifestyle and activism. Far from being coerced, they were interested in – and often introduced their husbands and/or families to – revivalist Islam.

To illustrate, one of my first interviews with a leader from the Movement was with Kamel Rayan, then Deputy Manager of the Union of Local Authorities in Israel. He told me that it was his wife who introduced him to ‘the path of Islam’ (Rayan 2008). He proudly declared that she was the first Arab woman to wear the Islamic dress among her peers in the early 1980s. Rayan (the husband) went on to becoming the Movement’s first elected local head in his village Kafr Kara in 1983.

Najah Satel is another example of a woman who decided to educate herself about Islam and live ‘according to Islam’. She was in her forties when interviewed and belongs to the same generation as Rayan and his wife. Satel is from the mixed city of Jaffa where she works for the local shari’a court as an arbitrator and is considered to be one of the informal female leaders of the southern branch. She is married to the local Imam who also is the local representative of the southern branch of the Movement, and she has four children and grandchildren.

As a child Satel attended a Christian school in a predominantly Jewish neighbourhood and described her parents as traditional Muslim who were not religious and were ‘good simple people, who taught me to adapt to the situation and be a good citizen’ (Satel 2008). She described not knowing much about Islam or her Palestinian identity as she grew up. As a young teenager, she began asking questions about who she is and about her history.

As with all Palestinians in Israel, Satel had been exposed to the process of Israelization that had suppressed her Palestinian and Muslim roots. The process of Israelization can be viewed from two perspectives. It can be state-led measures directed at its Palestinian citizens, intended to decrease their Palestinian identity and strengthen their identity as Hebrew-speaking acquiescent ‘Israeli Arabs’, enforced through controlling their education, as well as economic and political opportunities (Rouhana 1997). Israelization can also be the normal 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 (Smooha 1999).

When she transferred to a Muslim high school, Satel was taught about Islam as subject, which increased her appetite to learn more about her own identity:

> 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.

Satel described reading books and asking questions to satisfy her need for knowledge. She went on to be one of the initiators of one of the first Islamist groups for women in Israel. She said that the
group was established to assist Muslim women in ‘forming their identity and returning to the roots and begin to live, in my view, with the new true identity’. Today their organization is part of the larger (southern) Islamic Movement, or in Satel’s words, ‘we are like a movement within the [Islamic] movement’. She emphasized the fact that they work within the framework of the law and that their activism is ‘non-threatening’ (to Israeli state and society), with a focus on strengthening women in their personal lives and increasing their knowledge about their rights according to Islam.

Women studying Islam is not new among Palestinian citizens of Israel. From the early days of the Islamic Movement’s development in the 1970s and 1980s, both men and women went to West Bank cities, in particular to Nablus and Hebron, to study Islam at the seminaries there (Satel 2008). It was these students who established the Islamic Movement in Israel when they returned home. This flow of religious learning has since stopped after the government decided not to support, or allow, Palestinian citizens to be educated in the occupied Palestinian territories.

Ghada is a young student who recently decided to educate herself about Islam. When I interviewed her, she was a law student at Hebrew University in Jerusalem and she was active in the administration of the Islamic Movement’s student association for women. Ghada comes from a secular family and village where people predominantly adhere to the socialist coalition party the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality (al-Jabha al-Dimokratiya lil-Salam wa'al-Musawa, also known by the Hebrew acronym Hadash). She described having a gradual personal transformation from being secular to becoming religious:

I found that the Islamic thing is broader, and as a Communist, I had a lot of ideas about Islam that were actually anti-Islam. I started to read and interact with people. I understood that my thoughts were prejudiced and not based on sound ideas. I was the fanatic, not them; they used to accept me; with their Islamic theory, there was acceptance of me despite the big difference, but as a Communist, I did not accept them; they were strange to me, and not worth being present in the intellectual and political arena, and I found that what was speaking to me more was the religious attitude.

When she came to university Ghada described it as ‘natural’ to become active in the student association belonging to the Islamic Movement. In a another article about Islamic student activism in Israel analysing their reasons for joining the Islamic Movement’s student associations, these reasons are described as a combination of: previous contact with the Movement’s organizations in their home town/village; having had a religious upbringing; and political frustration (Rosmer 2015). This was the same for male and female students. As such, the female students interviewed for this research have not been markedly different from their male peers in their reasons for becoming active in Islamic student politics.

The element of choice is also reflected in my interviewees’ talk about their decision to dress modestly and cover their hair. For Ghada, starting to wear hijab was a big step, since most of her town, and all her friends and her extended family are secular. She said that the reactions in her town were negative. However, at university she has experienced that non-religious and religious students get along and agree on many issues after getting to know each other.

Satel, who began wearing hijab in the 1980s when few young Palestinian women in Israel did so, spoke about negative reactions from both Palestinian and Jewish Israelis:
For example, during the time I was at university, it was really at the beginning of the return to religion in Israeli society, and there were very few women with head coverings, and in the traditionalist view, we looked like aliens who had fallen from some planet. This period was very hard, and there were people who reacted verbally and there were those who looked towards me and valued this, [but asked] something like, ‘with all due respect, how can you do this?’ Then there were people who could not tolerate this, and had a hostile look, and we could see this in their body language.

She recalled many covered women talking about negative experiences in public, such as on the bus. Most of these instances were verbal, however there are also stories about covered women who were suspected by Jewish Israelis of being terrorists and were asked to show identification, and in some cases told to leave the bus. Satel related the Jewish Israeli reactions to the general prejudice she faced from her Jewish fellow students:

For example, there were [Jewish] students who studied with me at the time, who wondered how an Arab, religious, unmarried girl with her head covered would come to study at the university and until late hours at night. They thought this because of their preconception that an Arab Muslim woman stays at home, trapped within four walls, and is just a servant in the house, and the males bring her all she needs to the house, and she does not have any right to study, develop and establish her own entity (Satel 2008).

Daoud writes that the wearing of hijab increased among Palestinians in Israel with the Islamization and growth of the Islamic Movement from the 1970s. One turning point was in 1978, when Palestinian citizens were allowed to travel to Mecca for the Haj for the first time. Because Muslim women are supposed to wear hijab after completing the Haj, those who returned became symbols of the custom (Daoud 2009, 103). In addition, the increasing numbers of religious schools and other institutions have also encouraged young women to cover their hair. One of Daoud’s Muslim interviewees emphasized the fact that the Palestinian hijab is more of a head scarf, and that Christian women, especially nuns, wear such scarves (Daoud 2009, 103).

Two Muslim women student activists interviewed by Erdreich also represented the decision to wear hijab as a free choice (Erdreich 2006a). As Erdreich observes, ‘while these women ostensibly preserve the social order by wearing the hijab, their choice to do so integrates a rational individual element that empowers them, not only in their connection with God, but also in terms of the gender-blind western discourse of individualism’ (Erdreich 2006a, 47).

These stories about these women’s desired return to Islam and Islamic activism, and their preference to wear hijab, clearly tell us that these women have agency, as well as knowledge and freedom, to make up their own minds. By making these choices some faced familial and social challenges. In addition, they faced reactions from the majority Jewish-Israeli society. Satel’s life story exemplifies the need for knowledge about Palestinian history and Muslim identity that has been suppressed by state policies. Her need corresponds with the tripartite agenda fostered in the Islamic Movement of Islamization, Palestinization and Arabization. The next section discusses the views of the interviewees on their roles as Muslim women.

Women: Role/s and/in Islam

‘According to Daoud, ‘Islamic feminism’ was one of the new trends that emerged in the 1990s as part of the ‘flourishing’ of feminist and women’s groups among Palestinians in Israel. This surge was
part of the general development of Palestinian civil society in Israel, which in turn was part of the
development in Israeli civil society, illustrated by the establishment of 40,800 associations between
1981 and 2005 (Daoud 2009, 79). The Muslim feminists were related to, if not formally part of, the
Islamic Movement. Similar to other Islamic feminists elsewhere, they argue that women rights,
gender equality and social justice are Islamic values, and they conduct re-readings of the Qur’an
and other religious texts to support their claims (Bøe og Tønnesen 2011).

Satel was part of this development and in our conversations she spoke about the need for
knowledge about women’s roles according to Islam among Palestinians in Israel:

I knew almost nothing about Islam, except from the remnants of Islam, which are reflected in the customs and
culture. Many of the customs and culture have really distorted the truth of religion and what religion has
required, specifically about women, which is the subject of my interest, in terms of her rights and status.

In the last century, women have been deprived from the moment people [men] began deviating from Islam
and [since then] all the ideas of Islam were really distorted and parts of Islam were taken out and applied to
women: women are not allowed to go out, not allowed to lead a private life, even an independent economic
life has been forbidden as if she is owned by, or under domination of, and not a partner to, a husband or to a
man in society – she was really under domination. Today, we are more exposed to religion, to all these issues
that were not true, but only convenient for the ‘male’ society to subjugate women [so they would] be just
women who remain at home, housewives, not individuals with independent lives who make decisions and
express their opinions and have a status (Satel 2008).

Satel and her organization were part of the many new women’s organizations connected to the
Islamic Movement that appeared in Palestinian cities, towns and villages and that focused on
charitable, educational and social programmes for women and children (Daoud 2009). These
organizations were the first of their kind and scale among Palestinians in Israel and encouraged
women to take public roles.

Contrary to expectations, Daoud writes, the Islamic
Movement mobilizes and places a big
importance on women’s roles. She argues that this is connected to elections and vote competition.
First of all, the Movement wants these women’s votes; secondly, it wants them to, and believe they
can, influence the vote of their husbands; and thirdly, the Movement sends women from door to
doors during political campaigns, to get other women to vote for the Movement (Daoud 2009, 101).
In addition, the Movement wanted to demonstrate that it embraced women, in order to fight back
against attacks claiming that is was extreme and backward (Daoud 2009).

Satel’s recollection of her inspiration and activism adds to the picture painted by Daoud. Satel
exemplifies women who are inspired to change their predicament due to their own beliefs and
aspirations. Far from being instrumental or strategic, for Satel the activism for women’s rights
according to Islam and in the Islamic Movement was inspired by her desire to improve the
marginalized status and position of (Muslim) women.

As for aspirations, when asked how far a Muslim woman in Israel can reach today, Satel replied:

I still have not seen myself at a level where I aspire, not just personally, but also our female movement, to
arrive at the position to represent ourselves politically and in the Knesset. We still have not reached this level
in our organization. We are more into the self-empowerment of women with regard to their status and
forming their identity that was distorted for many years. These are largely the goals, in terms of their identity,
rights and status from the religious Islamic standpoint, as there are a lot of rights and the status of women is very high from the point of view of the Muslim religion. We need to amend the distorted view on the status of the woman. I am not looking at Israeli society in particular, I am looking at the Arab Muslim society itself and their views that were distorted for many years and needed something to correct the distortion in the conflict of our people, as well as the clash [with]in the woman herself, who has been educated to be submissive and content with what is decided for her. It is time for her to be informed that it is not so, that she has much more than what she receives and what is made possible to her.

The southern branch of the Islamic Movement, which participates in Knesset elections and has had representatives in the Knesset since 1996, has not promoted women to the Knesset. Former Member of Knesset for the southern branch, Abdel-Malek Dahamsheh, explained why and simultaneously tried to show openness towards women and adhere to the contradictory patriarchal view: ‘I do not object to women’s participation and representation in politics, but we have to protect women’s honor. The main role for women is in the home – raising children and managing the household’ (Daoud 2009, 200–201).

However, the promotion (or not) of women to prominent political positions has to be viewed in the context of the Palestinian community at large. Hanin Zoabi was the first female representative of a Palestinian political party to be elected to the Knesset in 2009, and she represents the secular party the National Democratic Alliance (Al-Tajammu al-Watani al-Dimuqrati, called Balad in Hebrew). Thus, the Islamic Movement cannot be said to be (far) behind its secular counterparts when it comes to promoting women to this level. In fact, the southern branch has pushed women candidates for local and municipal councils. In Daoud’s view, the Movement ‘is making efforts and significant progress in promoting women, not through elections, but through appointments’, compared with the two main secular political parties who have failed to ‘meet women’s demands for positions of power and to meet the parties’ own agenda for women’s representation’ (Daoud 2009, 203). She quotes a female Islamic politician who was promoted to a local council, who described being willing to continue her political carrier only if pushed to do so by the Movement (Daoud 2009, 131–2). There were talks about this candidate running for the Knesset, but it never materialized.

However, as indicated by the quote above, and as Boulby found, both male and female spokespersons of the Islamic Movement upholds that the main role of a woman is to be a mother and to bring up the new generation. The centrality of marriage for Palestinian women students at Israeli universities is illustrated by the title of Erdreich’s article ‘Marriage Talk’. The young students talk about the constant pressure from their family to get married; friends and family members’ weddings and marriages; and their dual desire to get married and to be professional, independent women (Erdreich 2006b). Similarly, all the women students interviewed for this research either were already, or expected to be, married. Being a wife and a mother is important to them. As Kanaaneh describes in her book Birthing the Nation, for Palestinians in Israel reproduction and women are associated with nationalism (Kanaaneh 2015).

However, there are changes happening. Previously, 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’ (Kanaaneh 2015). Today, the new discourse
among Palestinians in Israel centres on limiting Palestinian birth rates among the educated professional middle class as a new method in the same national struggle. The students interviewed for this research are part of the latter discourse. They said that they want to continue their studies and/or work 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 in a convenient job near her home (usually more due to financial need than professional desire). Yet they fall short of challenging the core idea of the main female role as mother. Interestingly, these young Islamist activists did not display any concerns about the inherent contradictions in their view. One speculation can be that they have enough self-confidence to stand up for their views in practices when the time comes and, perhaps, also that they trust their future husbands, who most likely are also university-educated, to agree that they can and should work in a relevant job in addition to being mothers.

It has to be added that Palestinian professional women face challenges on several levels. First of all, they will face challenges finding a job due to their double predicament as Arabs and women, and this is made even harder due to the fact that they are likely to move to their own or to their husband’s village or town, where the employment market is small. According to Adalah, ‘Unemployment rates remain significantly higher among Arab than among Jewish citizens, and the rate of labour-force participation among Palestinian women citizens of Israel, at just about 20 percent is among the lowest in the world’ (Adalah 2013, 9).

Second, like women all over the world, but more so in traditional and patriarchal societies, Palestinian women have to work hard to combine their roles as mothers, wives and professionals. Adding to this, child care is expensive if available in Palestinian communities and, in fact, the Islamic Movement has addressed this shortage by providing nurseries. Satel described her choice to be a working mother as ‘a positive burden’ (as would probably most working mothers regardless of place and religion):

As I invested more in my family and marriage, this did not allow me to study for a Master’s degree. Today, I have doubts because there is a lot of pressure on me with regard to the family and children. This is not simple, as studying needs dedication and a lot of time and this would be at the expense of my children who need me. I have a burden, but a positive burden, I feel that I am obliged. I have a child that is a teenager and I need to keep my eyes open and care for him and accompany him in all his actions. I also have two children, one aged twelve-and-a-half, which is really close to the age of a teenager and one who is nine-and-a-half. The children, even my married daughter, need a lot from me and their father, and because he is busy most of the time, there needs to be someone who is more involved in matters of the children. I involve him in everything, and he does too, and we cooperate on everything related to the children, but in spite of this, we feel that we are depriving them a great deal because I work many hours, eight and a half, and that is a lot. In addition, thinking about studying, developing and advancing myself is a hindrance, and I feel I am in a very serious dilemma, because on the one hand I want to develop and advance myself while on the other hand, I have a responsibility that I cannot just shirk off onto someone else. This is what is holding me back at this time, but at least I say I got the basis. I received the basis and succeeded in getting to where I am today.
My younger interviewees have yet to experience these challenges, and at university they are focusing more on their studies and activism than life after the end of their studies. Those who already got married and moved home are either working in, or are active in, the Movement, in one of its organizations, most likely with either children or women, thus continuing their Islamic activism. Some said this was the best solution when the children are young and that they can progress their own career later when family life is less demanding.

From the survey conducted for this research with fifty-three students, sixty per cent of the respondents were women. To the question of whether they would continue to be active in the Movement after their studies, sixty-five per cent (of the total male and female) answered yes. However, to the question of whether they would be active in politics after they graduate from university, only forty-one per cent said yes, while thirty-nine per cent said they ‘don’t know’. Thus, we can deduct that if these women are not able to find employment, or who cannot take on employment due to duties at home, they will probably be active in the local Islamic Movement’s associations. Many of the positions in these associations are salaried, and the scope and importance of the Movement as an employer for women (and men) became evident this winter after the northern branch was outlawed on 17 November 2015.

The ban by the Netanyahu-led government is based on claims that this branch, and in particular its leader Shaykh Ra’ed Salah, incited their followers to violence. The southern branch of the Islamic Movement, which is led by Shaykh Hammad Abu Daabes and continues to participate in national elections through the Joint List, remains legal. From the point of view of many of Palestinian citizens of Israel, however, the ban is an attack on their rights to representation and association, as well as on their freedom of speech. Notably, Palestinian leaders from across the spectrum of this national minority within Israel – whether nationalist, secular, Islamist or Christian – protested and condemned the ban, deriding it as yet another example of Israel’s ‘divide and rule’ approach to its Palestinian citizens (Keinon, Ben Solomon, and Harlov 2015). The ban was also criticized by members of the Israeli security services, on two principal grounds (i24News 2016), as there is no proof of the alleged violent behaviour.

In addition to causing the closure of the northern branch’s main office and curtailing the religious and political activism of this branch, the ban affected numerous organizations and charities associated with the Movement. The ban made several thousand men and women who were employed in the various organizations funded by the Movement unemployed overnight. According to one report, the staff at one unemployment office were shocked when former employees of the Movement’s organizations arrived with salary statements and papers to claim their unemployment benefits – the staff had no idea that the Movement’s organizations functioned in such an orderly manner, or that it paid its employees salaries (Salaime 2016).

Certainly, the picture that emerges, of women and their roles and possibilities within the framework and mindset of the Islamic Movement in Israel, is not limited to the traditional patriarchal role of mother and wife out of the public eye. Just by the fact that so many young women from and associated with this Movement are at Israeli universities, studying with the intent and hope of future employment, indicates that they are taken seriously, and take themselves, their
desires and abilities seriously. Satel is the role-model of any woman her age, juggling a career and being a mother and a wife. While the (southern branch of the) Movement has not yet promoted a woman to the highest level of Israeli politics, it has promoted them at the lower levels, and its leaders are willing to discuss the promotion of women in the Knesset. However, from the activists’ perspective, it seems more important to assist more women in achieving progress in their everyday lives than to have prominent women in the Knesset. The focus is on empowerment, solidarity, and the need to correct the misunderstood and abused position of women in Islam.

Gender-Segregated Activism

The aim of the student activities of the Islamic Movement’s student associations are two-pronged: to develop and/or strengthen a political awareness and a religious Palestinian Arab identity among the students (Rosmer 2015). Hence, this is the practical application of Islamization, Palestinization and Arabization with the aim to combat the influences of Israelization. In addition, the student associations offer practical assistance to all Palestinian students. The activities and assistance are the same for male and female students. However, they are gender-segregated when the activities are small-scale.

To increase the students’ political awareness, events arranged by the student associations include lectures by academics and politicians; information on the associations’ website; and demonstrations and protests in response to recent events, such as during the wars in Gaza in 2009 and summer 2014. To improve the status and knowledge of the Arabic language, the associations arrange a variety of events, including reading groups, poetry events, and stand-up evenings. In order to increase the awareness of Palestinian history and the predicament of Palestinians in Israel, the associations provide literature, and arrange lectures and trips to Palestinian communities in Israel.

The students’ religious awareness is increased through arrangements such as lectures by religious leaders; smaller gender-segregated gatherings with preachers from outside the campus; and regular small reading groups on campus led by students. In addition, the students go to pray at Al-Aqsa mosque in East Jerusalem on a weekly basis.

Practical assistance offers to the students include financial assistance, such as selling meal tickets and copy cards to students at lower prices than regular, and providing scholarships to students for teaching in villages and for tutoring new students. All the expenses are covered by the Movement. Providing assistance with Hebrew language, especially in the first year of study, is another important activity, in addition to general tutoring for new students. The student associations also provide social support for new Palestinian students. This is the first time they live away from their families and communities and, in addition, they live in dorms with Israeli students who have a different lifestyle. One of the problems many spoke about is when Israeli students have girlfriends or boyfriends visiting in their dorm rooms. Another concern mentioned by several students is that they disturb their Israeli roommates when they get up to pray at dawn.

As mentioned in the introduction, female activists are described as being more involved and committed than their male students (Ibrahim Hijazi 2012). To illustrate, scholarship programmes,
involving going back to their home village or town to teach pupils, were initiated and run by female students. According to one of the women student activist leaders interviewed, seventy per cent of the students who participate in this scholarship programme are women, even after male students joined in in this activity (Female student 2012).

In general, all student activities arranged by the Islamic Movement’s student associations are gender-segregated when the events or gatherings are small, and gender-mixed when the events are large, such as film screenings, lectures and trips outside campus. This is presented as an accepted and acceptable fact by the interviewees. Erdreich argues that whereas the gendered segregated activities at university seemingly reproduce the ideal of the patriarchal society by separating men and women, they also provide a safe and comfortable space for women students, and, what is more, challenge the basic idea behind the traditional segregation into male-rational space and female-biological/sexual space (Erdreich 2006a, 48). At university, the activities for men and women are the same, and not differentiated by content or quality, but purely divided by gender.

A challenge to gender segregation occurs when the Islamic Movement student associations arrange large events together with the other student associations representing Palestinian students. The other main student associations are related to the other political parties representing Palestinians in Israel, the nationalist National Democratic Alliance and the socialist-coalition party National Front for Peace and Equality. The student associations of each of these secular parties want to have female speakers at public events. However, this is not acceptable to the Islamist students. Men and women can be at the same events, but at these, Islamists have the view that women should not address a mixed crowd. This is presented as an accepted and acceptable fact by the interviewees. Sometimes this disagreement has led to events being cancelled or not coordinated. As explained by one female Islamist student:

For example, in terms of association, we believe in the separation between male and female, it is a small issue, but they focus on it [when they say]: ‘When we want to have an activity for the Arab Students Committee, we want to have association between the sexes, we want to have a female facilitator.’ Having a girl [speak in public] is not very acceptable to us, and we have some reservations. They focus on the things we differ on, and forget that there are many issues in common between us (Female student 2012).

This student claimed that the reason for the secular associations to want to have female speaker at their joint events was not feminism, but politics, meaning that the other associations are using this as a tool in their competition with the Islamic Movement associations. In 2008, one of the Islamic Movement’s student groups won in elections to the Arab Student Councils at the three largest universities in Israel. The landslide victory was a shock to many, including the secular Palestinian student groups, which until 2008 had dominated Palestinian student politics in Israel and who were disappointed over their loss. It is in this context that Islamist student activists interviewed accused secular activists of using gender politics to sabotage events, as all failures of the Arab Student Council will reflect badly on the leading association, namely the association of the Islamic Movement.
It might seem curious that at the university, where, as Erdreich described, the students are in a ‘liminal phase’ that provides freedom from familial and social constraints and thus offers opportunities to challenge societal norms, these female (and male) Islamist students choose to uphold gender segregation to the point where it jeopardizes their joint protests against state policies.

One interpretation could be that gender politics has become a tool for both the secular and Islamist student associations to assert their identity vis-à-vis each other and to show each other, themselves, and their mother movements/parties that they are serious, able to uphold traditions, and do not give in to pressures to change. However, this is only an interpretation, and is not based directly on any explanation by the interviewees.

It is also legitimate to question the degree of independence of the student associations of the Islamic Movement. While described as run independently by the student activists at the different universities, the associations and their activities are supported and coordinated by the National Manager, who is employed by the respective branch of the Movement. Additionally, all activities are financially supported by the Movement. All the students interviewed made the point that they are free to do what they want and that not all activities are coordinated with the National Manager. However, since National Manager of the respective branches are always older, employed by the Movement, and provide financial support to the association, we can assume that they have a large degree of influence.

Last but not least, of course it might be that the female student interviewees do believe in what they practice, and that they prefer not to have female speakers and to keep areas of segregated activity. As emphasized, the student activities are more or less the same for both genders, with a focus on the political and religious development of the individual and on providing practical assistance to the students. All students interviewed confirmed their belief in the naturalness and need for segregation of small-scale events, and were against female speakers at mixed events. Since they did not seem to think there was a need to challenge this segregation, even if they could (since they were operating in an environment outside of the control of their families and also outside the direct control of the Movement), segregation in itself does not seem to be a hindrance for these women who have made it all the way to Israeli universities, studying for various degrees.

In Conclusion

Going back to the title of this report, ‘Agents of change?’, are the women who have been interviewed agents of change? If so, how do they challenging the status quo? The conclusion drawn is multi-faceted, just as is the activism and approaches to activism articulated by the interviewees.

When considering the interviewees’ chosen entry into Islamic activism and their views of women’s roles according to re-interpretations of Islamic sources and, as testified by their ability to choose, and actually attend, higher education, these women are agents of change. With regards to both these decisions – to be active in an Islamist movement and to study at Israeli university (part of the increasing number of Palestinians generally to do so, as indicated in the statistics above) – these women display the agency, the knowledge, and the freedom to make up their own minds. Just by
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 take themselves, their desires and abilities seriously, and therefore are taken seriously by others. By their actions, they criticize the male-dominated subjugation of women, which has been based on the mis-interpretation, or the abusive (mis-)interpretation, of Islamic sources.

Najah Satel, a pioneer in female Islamist activism, represents the first generation of Islamist Movement women in Israel, and is a critical thinker who challenges both male (Palestinian Muslim) subjugation of women and Israeli suppression of Palestinians in Israel. As one of the leaders of the Movement’s unofficial organizations for and by women, she spearheads the re-reading of religious sources, to accurately describe the position and status of women in Islam. Her fight is with misinterpretations of these sources, and the subjugation of women in Palestinian Muslim society connected to that. She and her organization aim to empower women by teaching them about their rights and roles according to Islam, and by providing them the opportunity for higher education and professional working lives next to their roles as wives and mothers.

There is still hesitation from both men and women in the Islamic Movement when it comes to women taking on any prominent roles of political representation, as described both with regards to Knesset representation and 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 Movement has appointed women to municipal positions, both male and female spokespersons doubt that the Movement or they themselves are ready for a female representative in the Knesset. Why they hesitate to make this change at the top is difficult to answer, but, if viewed from another angle we can ask: what does it matter? The first female Palestinian representative to the Knesset for a secular party was elected only in 2009, and while not in any way wishing to undermine the importance of women in prominent positions, it seems that female Islamists are focusing on assisting the grass-roots and empowering the majority of women, not on making political statements by symbolic gestures. With the new generation of university-educated Muslim Palestinian women steadily entering the workforce, 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 and thus contribute to a development away from the male-dominated patriarchal order towards a new Islamic lifestyle that keeps some gender traditions, while challenging the subordination of women.

The New Middle East: Emerging Political and Ideological Trends (NewME)

A research project based at the University of Oslo, comprising researchers from PRIO and the UiO. There are several researchers on the project, each working on their own sub-projects within a common framework. The project started in 2011 and will be completed by the summer of 2016. The project is founded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.


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