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This is an accepted manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in the Routledge Handbook of Middle East Politics on 20 April 2020, available online:

http://www.routledge.com/9781138047631

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ISLAM AND RESISTANCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST:

A METHODOLOGY OF MUSLIM STRUGGLE AND THE IMPACT ON WOMEN

Following the violent events of 11 September 2001 in the United States, 'Islam' increasingly came to be seen as a problematic category in western policy-making circles. From existing simply as a world religion with over a billion followers, it has been reconceptualized as a 'terrorist' ideology intent on challenging the dominance of the west. 'Islamic terrorism' has replaced soviet communism as the main competitor and enemy of western ambition. Under the banner of a global 'war on terror', western governments have engaged in what appears to many Muslims to be a concerted campaign against Islam itself'. The 'Islamic terrorism' justification has also been deployed to legitimize 'the preservation and extension of a Western-dominated liberal international order' (Jackson 2007:422). Of particular relevance to this chapter, the 'threat' posed by Muslim men has become a rallying cry for the west to intervene to 'save Muslim women' (Abu-Lughod 2002), as evidenced by the western invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. The 'discursive links' between al-Qaida and Afghanistan, 'between supporting war and believing in peace, were reinforced through gendered articulations' (Shepherd 2006:20). Soon after the invasion began, Laura Bush, wife of the American president, spoke of 'the brutality against women and children by the al-Qaida terrorist network and the regime it supports in Afghanistan'. The brutal oppression of women, she added, 'is a central goal of the terrorists' (2001). But these understandings are profoundly misplaced and run the risk of confusing acts of violence committed by Muslim groups and individuals with a larger framework of 'Islamic resistance' against various forms of neocolonial coercion, a resistance that is practiced by women as much as men.

In this chapter, I will look more closely at the phenomenon of resistance under the banner of Islam and consider why it is routinely dismissed as terrorism. I will consider, in particular, its impact on Muslim women. I will start by situating Islamic resistance within the broader terrain of historical and contemporary Muslim struggles, with reference to the theoretical literature and various manifestations of political and militant Islam; second, I will ask what 'resistance' means to the powerless and how it is being articulated by women; finally, I will demonstrate the efficacy of 'Islamic resistance' by exploring case studies of Hamas in the Palestinian Territories and Hizbullah in Lebanon. My own research focuses on the development of an 'Islamic resistance' movement in the Middle East and North Africa, specifically resistance to Israeli occupation and western intervention; it has focused on the particular experiences of Arab-Muslim women and I will refer throughout to their words to illustrate my arguments.

Francis Fukuyma's 'end of history' thesis (1992) suggested that the western liberal model of 'modernity' has triumphed over other world views. However, subsequent events have proved him wrong. The Middle East's experience of western – including Israeli – domination has given rise to movements of national resistance, some of which claim to embody a more authentic version of 'modernity'. As Heba Raouf Ezzat remarks, 'we have a golden opportunity to construct our own modernity, having seen where things went wrong' (2000:136). I will contend that the linkage between Islam and violence, so insistently made in the west, is a 'resurgence of Orientalism(s) in the wake of the 9/11 attacks' (Yamaguchi 2012:242); it deliberately misinterprets the traditions and priorities of Muslims in the Middle East. To support this claim, I refer to Alastair Crooke's argument that 'the West keeps misreading events in the region because the West interprets

Islamism as a simple struggle over power sovereignty'. In his view, this is not the case. Instead, he sees Islamism as 'a distinct view of human behaviour that posits an alternative method of thinking about the human being; …his or her place in society… and the management of politics' (2009:29). In other words, for Crooke, Islamic resistance represents a revolutionary movement. I propose to build on the idea of political Islam as a 'grand narrative' and a potentially empowering development for societies in transition from authoritarian regimes to more inclusive polities. I will argue that, for many Muslims in the Middle East and North Africa, men and women, Islamic resistance represents a potentially emancipatory project.

Researching 'a revolutionary movement'

In 2007-08, I conducted an ethnographic research project into women, Islam and resistance in Lebanon and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.[1] I chose to undertake this project for several reasons. Firstly, I was concerned by the negative and even inflammatory rhetoric by many in western states towards 'Islam', whether as a faith or a political motivation. Secondly, the issue of 'Arab women' is also poorly understood in the west, with many believing that all Muslim women are victims of 'barbaric' and patriarchal practices; 'women's active support for socioreligious movements that sustain principles of subordination', as Saba Mahmood remarks, 'poses a dilemma for feminist analysts' (2005:5). Lastly, as a scholar of the 'Arab world', I felt a responsibility to shed light on topics of contemporary urgency, especially in view of the backlash against Muslims following 9/11. I was keen to challenge some of the myths around female powerlessness

[1] Funded by the United States Institute of Peace.

in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. I decided to focus on two case studies, Lebanon and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, where notable Islamic resistance movements are active.

Over the course of four fieldwork visits, I interviewed a wide variety of women (academics, refugees, journalists, politicians, civil servants, homemakers and students), as well as some men (mainly political and religious leaders); some of my interviewees were members or supporters of Islamist parties while others were neutral or critical. I asked women for their opinion of 'Islamic resistance'; their responses were varied and illuminating; many recognized the vital role of Islamist activism in the struggle against Israeli occupation; they supported Islamist parties and had voted for them in national elections; they felt that the strategies of these parties was legitimate. Others took a more ambivalent stance; they saw Islamist violence as unhelpful and even counterproductive; some argued that Islamists endorse a conservative agenda, which stifles women's rights. There was no consensus other than a feeling that Israeli tactics of violence and intimidation must be confronted.

Political Islam as a competitor of western modernity

A leading organization in the evolution of political Islam is the Muslim Brotherhood, which was founded in Egypt by Hasan al-Banna in 1928 and would help shape the political response of Muslims throughout the region to the forces of capitalism, colonialism and secular-nationalism (Milton-Edwards 2018:164). Al-Banna and his followers 'called for a return to Islam, including *sharia*, and implementation of Islam through all aspects of life' (Stewart 2009:176); they saw it as the only alternative to the westernizing forces that were

infiltrating Arab-Muslim society. Although the Muslim Brothers' adopted a reformist approach, which emphasized the need to return to the roots of the religion, there were also moves towards greater militancy in the face of what many saw as escalating western intervention. Alongside the Brotherhood, a Muslim Sisterhood emerged. In contrast to academic literature on Islamist women's activism, 'which considers Islamist movements' conservative gender ideology and sexual division of labour as an impediment to female political leadership', Erika Biagini argues that 'Islamist informal networks can be conducive to female leadership under "negative" political circumstances' (2017:35). She refers to more recent events in Egyptian history and, in particular, the 2011 'Arab spring' uprisings.

In the post-9/11 era, 'Oriental' spaces and identities have been conceptualized and constructed, 'even in their resistance to "western" hegemony' (Nayak 2006:45) as Other and, worse, as barbaric and irrational. However, 'resistance also involves resistance to the imaginaries of the hegemonic power' (Tuastad 2003:591), and here political Islam has played a constructive role. Orientalist stereotyping and cultural imperialism has triggered a reaction across the Muslim world, broadly termed 'Islamic resurgence' or 'revival'; elements of this movement are addressing questions of what constitutes a 'modern' society that does not embrace the dubious values of the west. When modernity, defined as a political project, 'is recast as authoritarian and monolithic, resistance articulated in an Islamic idiom may be interpreted as an instance of subaltern expression' (Kandiyoti 2009:95). Perceiving their religion to be under threat, Muslims have turned to Islam as a tool of resistance. Modern Islamists are seeking, in the words of a religious leader, to present 'a new vision of modernity emerging for today's world. It is one that fundamentally

differs from what the West terms “modernity”’ (quoted in Crooke 2009:6). They claim to be a ‘moral force’ in Middle East politics, a claim that contributed, for example, to the electoral success of Hamas in the Palestinian legislative elections of 2006. Approval of a more ‘moral’ form of politics was articulated frequently by women I interviewed in Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories.

Scholars of Islamist movements have ‘argued that the resurgence of Islamic forms of sociability...within…Muslim societies is best understood as an expression of resistance against Western politico-cultural domination as well as a form of social protest against the failed modernizing project of postcolonial Muslim regimes’ (Mahmood 2005: 24), reinforcing the notion of an Islamic resistance not only expressed through violence. The ‘discourse of civilization and barbarism’ has played a key role in the global expansion of the west; it casts violence as ‘the marker of the primitive irrationality that civilized states are divinely and historically mandated to overcome’ (Skurski and Coronil 200617). According to this discourse, Islamism is ‘an anti-modern trend that champions a return to an uncivilized age with a social and political order based on despotic rule and barbarian practices’ (Milton-Edwards 1996:2); it lacks the values of ‘civilization’, as understood in the west, and is fueled by resentment, the so-called ‘global rage of Islam’ (Zizek 2009:159). Their modern colonial ‘civilizing mission’ is one of the reasons why western powers feel entitled to interfere in the affairs of Muslim-majority states, for example by ‘saving’ Muslim women from Muslim men. But this assumption is deeply flawed.

Resistance or terrorism?

‘Islamic resistance’ is embodied in acts that seek to challenge particular sets of circumstances. But it can also be described as ‘a revolutionary project of national and regional liberation movements committed to resisting the predatory US empire’ (Dabashi 2008:21). It is a post-colonial and activist movement, informed by broader ideological struggles and, according to Zizek, the ‘global rage of Islam’. National liberation and decolonization, as Fanon observed, ‘is always a violent phenomenon’ (1961:35). The clash of worldviews ‘has reinforced the Western tendency to see Islamic activism as extremism and fanaticism’ (Esposito 1999:8) and, therefore, many in the west have come to regard Islamism as a threat and something to be feared, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11. In order to separate ‘Islamic resistance’ from the ill-defined category of ‘Islamic terrorism’, I will briefly explore the terminology around the topic. Jean-Klein refers to the ‘ambiguity of political activity classified as “resistance”’ (2001:83). Even at its most ambiguous, however, resistance is a useful category because ‘it highlights the presence and play of power in most forms of relationship and activity’ (Ortner 1995:175). Acts of resistance range from ‘a seemingly paradoxical stream of everyday practice’ (Jean-Klein 2001:83) by Palestinians peacefully resisting the Israeli occupation of the West Bank to violent struggles waged by Iraqis against the American occupation of their country.

When the west invaded parts of the Muslim world in the 19th and 20th centuries, ‘it was only natural that local Muslims resisted the occupation – both physical and cultural – of their world’ (Walberg 2015:22). Their response has been characterized as ‘Islamic resistance to imperialism’ (Walberg 2015). In this scenario, the resisters are perceived as relatively powerless or disadvantaged and their acts of resistance as irrational and disruptive. However, it is possible that the ‘destabilization of dominant forms of knowledge

opens up critical space for the articulation of alternative and potentially emancipatory forms of knowledge and practice' (Jackson 2007:397). I argue that the practice of Islamic resistance both challenges and threatens to destabilize the 'civilizing mission' of the west.

While resistance in the modern era has been linked to various terrorist acts, a rational discussion of 'terrorism' has proved challenging as it has no legally binding definition. Should a definition include the use by states of armed force against civilians? Should it recognize that populations living under foreign occupation have a right of resistance and that a definition of terrorism should not outweigh this right? 'Terror is first of all the terror of the next attack' (Appadurai 2006). The UN explains it as 'any action…that is intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants, when the purpose of such an act, by its nature or context, is to intimidate a population, or to compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act' (2004); while, for the US Department of Defense, it is 'the calculated use of unlawful violence or threat of unlawful violence to inculcate fear; intended to coerce or to intimidate governments or societies in the pursuit of goals that are generally political, religious, or ideological' (2014). These are inadequate definitions that fail to address the complexities of political violence. International Court of Justice Judge Rosalyn Higgins describes 'terrorism' as 'a term without any legal significance. It is merely a convenient way of alluding to activities, whether of states or of individuals widely disapproved of and in which either the methods used are unlawful, or the targets protected, or both' (1997). In the post-9/11 world, policy-makers and observers of all kinds have struggled to categorize acts of political violence, often failing to distinguish between 'terrorism' and 'resistance'.

A related and equally contested concept is that of *jihad*, which comes from the Arabic root meaning to strive, to exert or to fight. But it is dependent on the context in which it is used; martyrdom, a familiar weapon of 'Islamic terrorism', 'is associated with the warrior interpretation of jihad and the devotion to the community's defense' (Gole 2002:5). In the current highly securitized study of Islamism and 'jihadism', the term 'is linked to a set of pejorative meanings' (Sadiki 2010:361). Thus, the average westerner tends to associate *jihad* with violence, terrorism or 'holy war'. It conjures up images of what many see as 'fanatics' in Syria, Iran, Yemen and elsewhere, and has done much to create mutual suspicion and hostility between Islam and the west. In contrast, for some Muslims, the martyr, or *shahid*, is regarded as an honorable and heroic figure, prepared to lay down his or her life on behalf of the community. These understandings begin to articulate a more precise definition of 'Islamic resistance'. Acts of resistance take place within a framework. When a community feels itself to be unjustly oppressed or under attack, it will engage in various forms of resistance, both violent and non-violent. It is impossible, as Walberg remarks, to 'obliterate resistance… You can't stop resistance to injustice' (2015:28). According to Dr Mariam Saleh, a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, one aspect of *jihad* or resistance is:

> to fight with weapons but it can also be about giving money for *jihad*. If one teaches about *jihad*, if a son is in prison or has been killed, if one teaches women to be patient – all these are forms of *jihad*. Some women give their own souls – they fight and are martyred.... When a woman teaches her son about the land, this is a form of resistance. If a man wants to go for *jihad*, he will leave his family – he must know that he can depend on his wife to support the family – this is another kind of *jihad*. Staying in Palestine is a form of *jihad*; serving through social work or health work is also a kind of *jihad*. The highest level of *jihad* is to sacrifice oneself; when someone blows themselves up, they did not choose this type of struggle; these are not suicidal acts but acts of martyrdom.[2]

[2] Interview, Ramallah, 1 November 2007.

In the post 9/11 era, Islamic involvement in politics has been viewed by many in the west and some western governments as being inherently ‘dangerous’ and probably undemocratic, a response that evokes the reaction to the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran and, more recently, efforts to establish an ‘Islamic State’ in Syria and Iraq. Abou El Fadl argues that, in the post-colonial era, ‘Muslims have become preoccupied with the attempt to remedy a collective feeling of powerlessness and a frustrating sense of political defeat, often by engaging in sensational acts of power symbolism’ (2002:10); some of these ‘sensational acts’ include the use of Islam as a tool of protest or violence. There was, and is, a fear that Islamist regimes will be unsympathetic towards western interests and, worse, their policies might further destabilize the region; this fear was highlighted when the 2011 ‘Arab Spring’ uprisings brought to power Islamist-dominated governments. But what is the basis for such suspicions and how has ‘Islam’ been constructed in the minds of western policy-makers and publics as the embodiment of the enemy ‘Other’?

The ‘Islamic terrorism’ discourse is well-established in western media and policy-making circles. It is ubiquitous and ‘derives a great many of its core assumptions, labels and narratives from the long tradition…of orientalist scholarship on the Middle East and Arab culture and religion’ (Jackson 2007:399). At its heart, ironically, lies ‘a desperate *need* for Islamic fundamentalism as the threat that ensures the USA can become the Self *it was always meant to be*’ (Nayak 2006:46). The stigmatization, as Sadiki observes, of so-called ‘jihadism’ goes beyond mere ‘orientalization’. ‘The use of powerful labels to “name and shame” the adversary legitimizes disproportionately punitive action’ (2010:352). Thus, we see the demonization of democratically elected governments such

as Hamas in the Palestinian Territories (2006) and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (2012).

Women and Islamic resistance

While many western observers and policy-makers are alarmed by the bearded men who commit acts of violence in the name of Islam, 'it is nothing in comparison to the distaste aroused by women joining the Islamist movement' (Burgat 2005:140). The female Islamist is a paradoxical figure, reviled by some in the west, including feminists, as proof of women's subordinate status in Muslim-majority societies, but treated in her own environment as 'a privileged political site for the expression of difference and resistance' to western modernity (Kandiyoti 2009:95). However, 'Islamist discourse is open to subversion' (Ismail 2006:143) and it is clear from even a precursory understanding of Islamist movements that they include significant numbers of women who not only espouse Islamist discourse but act upon it; following the Egyptian *coup d'etat* in 2013, for example, thousands of Islamist women engaged in 'street demonstrations, human rights advocacy and anti-regime protests' (Biagini (2016:35). Semi authoritarian politics in some Arab states, as Nathan Brown notes, 'has not only allowed Islamists to pursue democratization in public life; it has also nudged their internal practices in a democratic direction'. Importantly, it has encouraged them to reach out to new groups, 'most notably women' (2012:220).

It is certainly the case that, for many male supporters of militant Islam, woman occupies a position at the heart of the *ummah* (community of Muslim believers), but it is not always clear whether she is imagined as a symbolic receptacle of communal honour

or an active participant. Egyptian Islamist Zaynab al-Ghazali (1917-2005) advised that the 'ideal Muslim woman must work out, with God's help, priorities for her life: Should she stay in the kitchen or should she go out into the battlefield?' (Cooke 2001:88) This dilemma is further explored by Stowasser who suggests that, although the Muslim woman has traditionally been regarded as the giver of life and preserver of continuity, against 'the onslaught of…hostile armies without and within, the fundamentalists see the Muslim woman…as a soldier fighting a holy war for the sake of Islamic values' (1987:277). The notion of a 'soldier fighting a holy war' has several connotations, not all of them peaceful or domestic. Their actions challenge conventional wisdom about Muslim women and many men now recognize that a woman, should the situation demand it, has a duty to 'go out into the battlefield'.

While Islamist movements tend to take a relatively conservative approach to the role of women, they include many female supporters, who feel more comfortable with religious forms of belonging. Moghadam comments on the 'surprising activism' displayed by these women. They 'staunchly defend the veil as liberation from a preoccupation with beauty, call for the education of women in order that they be more competent in raising "committed Muslims", and argue that Shari'a and women's emancipation are compatible' (1993:147). In response to the events of 9/11 and the perceived backlash against Muslims, there was a noticeable rise in religiosity among women. Many women, both in Muslim-majority states and elsewhere, 'are rediscovering the liberating potential of their religious traditions… Increasing numbers of them have chosen… to join the wider Islamic resurgence' (Ezzat 2000:137), as a tool of protest or resistance to westernization. Thus, an identification with a transnational understanding of Islam became 'the basis for rallying

political opposition to the west' (Scott 2007:9). Not all manifestations of Islamic resistance are favorable to women's involvement, and here it is useful to distinguish between Islam as a source of strength that protects and empowers women, and a distorted interpretation of Islam, such as that practiced by the 'Islamic State' group, that seeks to subordinate them.

Palestinian parliamentarian Mariam Saleh elaborated on the variety of roles practiced by women. In Hamas and Islamic Jihad, she said, 'women [have always participated] in social activities. [But from the start of the second] *intifada* [2000], their role changed. Women now do military operations; they help the fighters and they help when the Israelis enter the city. As the mother of a martyr and the wife of a prisoner, women help in practical ways'.[3] Muna, a journalist in Ramallah, agreed that 'women can involve themselves in violence against the occupation'.[4] Their words support Frances Hasso's observation that 'she's the mother of the martyr, sister of the martyr, daughter of the martyr – and now she is the martyr herself' (Hasso 2005:34).

Islamic resistance in the West Bank and Gaza Strip

For the remainder of the chapter, I will analyze the activities and ideologies of two groups which claim to practice Islamic resistance as an integral component of their strategy, Hamas in the Palestinian Territories and Hizbullah in Lebanon. In many Muslim countries, in recent years, Islam has become the primary and most potent language of political protest against oppressive dictatorships and military regimes' (Mayer 1995:15). It has also become a powerful weapon in the struggle against the Israeli occupation of Arab lands.

[3] Interview, Ramallah, 1 November 2007,
[4] Interview, Ramallah, 31 October 2007.

Although both Hamas and Hizbullah are framed by long-running conflicts that have had the effect of creating an environment of violence in which values and behaviour have been forced to change, there are also significant differences between the two examples. While Hizbullah emerged from communal deprivation, fueled by civil war and inspired by the Shi'i Islamic revolution in Iran, Hamas came into being in response to the perceived failure of the Palestinian national movement. Both have used Islam as a focal point for rallying their respective constituencies against the Israeli occupation of their land. As both groups are militarily weak, they have had to resort to other tactics, 'the response of the weak to oppression by the powerful' (Harik 2004:37), However, while Hizbullah mounted a sustained and effective guerilla campaign, leading to the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanon, Hamas's use of violence against Israeli civilian targets has led, some would argue, to even greater suffering for the Palestinian people. Besides their military activities against Israel, both groups have developed extensive social welfare networks, which offer much-needed support to disadvantaged members of the community, such as widows, orphans, former prisoners and those who have been disabled in the conflict.

I will start with Palestinian understandings of 'resistance'. For Palestinians, resistance is seen as a national obligation and a necessary survival strategy; although it is practiced by all Palestinian factions, whether secular or religious, in recent years it has come to be associated with Islamic violence, often characterized as 'terrorism'. From the mid-1970s until the start of the first *intifada* in 1987, 'Palestinian political resistance in the Occupied Territories predominantly took the form of grassroots, professional, and electoral organizing' (Hasso 2005:22). Until this point, the Muslim Brotherhood in the West Bank and Gaza Strip had concentrated their energies on social and religious activities. But the situation changed

in the late 1980s when the Brotherhood in Gaza 'decided to form the Islamic Resistance Movement…and participate fully in the resistance to the Israeli occupation' (Brown 1997:2). Hamas, the Palestinian resistance movement (*Harakat al-Muqawamah al-Islamiyyah*), which was founded by Islamic scholar Shaykh Ahmad Yassin, 'is an offshoot of Sunni fundamentalism in the Middle East, and essentially constitutes a political party which is nourished by the real hardships suffered by the masses' (Hasan 1992).

The strength of Islamism 'is rooted in the territory's extreme poverty, isolation, and traditional social structures, and its growth has been nourished by a profound sense of popular despair over the steady disintegration of daily life and the consistent failure of the nationalist movement to achieve any political resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and to end the occupation' (Roy 1995:22). Hamas 'derives its guiding principles from the doctrines and values of Islam, and its mission is to resist occupation and struggle for the liberation of Palestine' (Tamimi 1998:1-2). Initially encouraged by the Israeli government as a foil for the popular support of the largely secular Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in the occupied territories, Hamas has an Islamist and nationalist agenda. Unlike the PLO, it is not prepared to give up its claim over the whole of historic Palestine. In Islamic terms, the land of Palestine is regarded as 'a religious trust assigned by God to the Muslims until the end of time' (Harik 2004:25) and this is recognized throughout the Muslim world. Shaykh Yassin, the founder and leader of Hamas, was assassinated by Israel in 2004.

Hamas has built its modus operandi on the belief that it is the duty of all Muslims to 'reclaim' the whole of historic Palestine, and therefore it regarded the 1993 'peace agreement' between Israel and the PLO (the 'Oslo Accords') as a betrayal. Its objective is to establish an Islamic nationalist state. However, some of its tactics have been deemed

highly controversial. Since April 1994, the 'violence that Hamas has engaged in has included armed attacks against Israeli soldiers and civilians, suicide bombing campaigns and rocket fire from the Gaza Strip on Israeli targets' (Milton-Edwards 2018:184). Although Hamas leaders have stated that what they describe as 'martyrdom operations' are the only means they have at hand to confront the Israelis, their activities are seen by some as undermining any possibility of peace.

What, therefore, lies at the root of the Palestinian 'right' of resistance? It has been suggested that 'by simply existing and standing firm on their land, Palestinians are actually resisting' (Shikaki 2011:2), an explanation that echoes Mariam Saleh's 'forms of *jihad*'. But 'resistance', for Palestinians, has had to be more than simply 'standing firm'; it has moved into areas that are controversial and troubling. However, while there is 'a general consensus' that 'views resistance as a legitimate right of the Palestinian people, as it is the right of any people living under oppression, colonization and foreign occupation' (Shikaki 2011:2), Palestinian resistance has often been denounced as illegitimate and the use of violence unacceptable. Hamas leaders counter these accusations by claiming that 'they are waging a legitimate war against a foreign occupation and that a Hamas attack on Israeli civilians is no worse than Israeli soldiers who kill Palestinian civilians' (Milton-Edwards 2018:184). The Hamas Charter states that 'the day the enemies usurp a Muslim land, Jihad becomes *fard-u-'ayn* (compulsory) upon every single Muslim' (1988:16).

Many ordinary Palestinians agree with this analysis; they support Hamas because, they say, it is 'resisting the occupation'; they celebrate the suicide attackers as 'martyrs'. However, some prominent Muslim scholars have stated that 'martyrdom operations' are, in fact, suicide and, therefore, prohibited. In August 2005, Syrian theorist Abu Nasir al-

Tartusi issued a *fatwa* that 'suicide missions do mean that a person is committing suicide, which contradicts tens of valid and correctly interpreted religious texts which prohibit suicide, whatever the incentive' (quoted in Atwan 2006). Azzam Tamimi, on the other hand, argues that suicide 'is unacceptable in Muslim societies and therefore it is very important for the would-be martyr or *shahid* to be convinced that his or her act is not suicide but an act of self-sacrifice for a noble cause in a legitimate *jihad*' (quoted in Atwan 2006). But Hamas's strategy of an armed campaign (or *jihad*) has been criticized, first of all, because the Palestinian nationalist movement has 'exchanged the gun for the olive branch', as laid out in PLO leader Yasser Arafat's speech to the UN General Assembly in 1974; and, secondly, because violent attacks against unarmed Israeli civilians are viewed by many observers as counterproductive.

The Islamic resistance has sent out mixed messages to women, and some commentators argue that the increasing prominence of Islamist groups has had a negative effect on women's progress in terms of rights and entitlements. During my research with women in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Lebanon, I discovered a multiplicity of views of the Islamic resistance movement; while some women disapproved of what they regarded as heavy-handed and coercive tactics, for others, resistance through Islam is a welcome development as it respects the dignity of the Palestinian people, unlike the secular nationalist movement, which has, they claim, 'sold out' to Israel. This raises the question of where exactly Hamas stands on the issue of women. In a leaflet addressed to the Palestinian public in the early 1990s, Hamas praises 'the wives and sisters who have lost male loved ones yet are steadfast in their determination to raise

a generation imbued with faith and with the spirit of jihad, in order to continue the mission' (Mishal 1994:285).

Besides feelings of solidarity and comfort, there is a more controversial element to women's participation in Islamic resistance activities. A small number of Palestinian women have taken on the responsibility of sacrificing their own bodies to protect their communities. According to an academic:

> Hamas had no vision of how to include women in the national resistance, but women played an important role, watching, carrying messages but not being militants. Women asked why women could not become militants and they were told it is because a woman has to be accompanied; men endure difficult times but women could not do this without a guardian; this was Hamas's position. The first woman to participate in military action was Reem Raiyshi (in 2004); this was criticized, that Hamas uses women without mercy. Hamas replied that, if they do not use women, they are backward and, if they do, they are inhuman. [The following year], Hamas formed a brigade for women; they showed them doing military training; now there is a military women's section.[5]

In the words of Sheikh Yassin following a suicide attack that killed four Israelis on the border with Gaza: 'For the first time [Hamas] used a female fighter and not a male fighter and that was a new development in resistance against the enemy' (quoted by *BBC News*, January 2004). As journalist Muna explained to me:

> Islamic groups are not a threat to the state. If one studies Islam correctly, it gives women more than secularism; more rights are given to women by Islam, and more freedom. Therefore, Islamic groups should be involved. Many women are involved in Hamas, including in the government… I studied at al-Najah University [in Nablus] and the Hamas and Islamic Jihad movements had a strong influence on women students. The Jihad movement sent women on martyrdom operations; they see the girl and the boy in this way, they see it as a higher form of *jihad*, to choose to die for Palestinians under Israeli occupation is the bravest thing.[6]

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[5] Interview, Birzeit University, Ramallah, 31 October 2007.
[6] Interview, Ramallah, 31 October 2007.

Islamic resistance in Lebanon

Hizbullah (*al-Hizb Allah*, Arabic, 'the party of God'), inspired and supported by the Islamic regime in Iran, was founded in 1982 mainly in response to the large-scale invasion of Lebanon by Israel that began in June of that year and the Israeli occupation of Lebanese territory (1978-2000). It has been described as 'the political and military outgrowth" of a broad cultural movement, which incorporated various Islamic groupings' (Saad-Ghorayeb 2002). Like Hamas, it describes itself as an 'Islamic resistance' movement but, in a country that accommodates 18 separate religious sects, Hizbullah was often referred to as the 'national resistance' in its fight to remove Israel from the south of their country. As a pan-Islamic movement, Hizbullah regards itself as '*a* part of the Islamic nation in the world' (*Open Letter* 1985). As such, it has declared itself willing 'to shoulder the responsibility of liberating Jerusalem' (Saad-Ghorayeb 2001). In the belief 'that armed struggle was not only justified but also a sacred imperative to erase oppression, usurpation of rights and restore Muslim lands' (Harik 2005), Hizbullah also intends its efforts to serve as a model for other Arab-Muslim peoples struggling against oppression, such as Palestinians living under Israeli occupation.

The organization's objectives were set out in an 'Open Letter Addressed by Islamic Resistance to the Downtrodden in Lebanon and in the World'. These included 'Israel's final departure from Lebanon as a prelude to its final obliteration from existence'; the liberation of 'venerable' Jerusalem; the expulsion of the US, France, and their allies from Lebanon 'and the termination of the influence of any imperialist power in the country'; and giving the Lebanese people 'the opportunity to determine their fate and to choose with full freedom the system of government they want, keeping in mind that we do not hide our

commitment to the rule of Islam and that we urge to choose the Islamic system that alone guarantees justice and dignity for all and prevents any new imperialist attempts to infiltrate our country' (1985). Hizbullah's apparent boldness of vision and clarity of intent proved attractive to large numbers of disaffected Shi'is who had been inspired by the Iranian revolution and infuriated by Israeli aggression against Lebanese and Palestinians. Many Lebanese Shi'is are also motivated by the party's religious zeal. According to Umm Hassan, who lives in a town in the south of the country: 'My religion gave me strength during the occupation; it gave me the support to remain. In this period, people were forced to practice their religion privately'.[7] Umm Ali in Beirut agreed that 'religion is not simply praying and fasting; it structures a person's entire life, politically, socially and economically'.[8]

As for Hamas, the claimed difference between the roles of men and women in conflict is becoming blurred. According to Fatima, a Hizbullah member in Beirut, men bear the primary responsibility for waging war. But, if the enemy enters one's country, women too may fight and, therefore, are liable to become martyrs.[9] However, in the words of Hassan Nasrallah, the Secretary-General of Hizbullah, 'there was avoidance of the military participation of women' during the civil war and Israeli occupation of Lebanon, and this was 'in line with the traditions and customs of Shi'a culture in Lebanon'. The reasons for the non-participation of women, he said, were, 'firstly, there was no need; and secondly, it was important to keep women away from Israeli military retaliation; for the Israelis to harm women would be very cruel… Therefore, throughout all Islamic resistance

[7] Interview, Bint Jbeil (a town situated in the area of southern Lebanon occupied by Israel until May 2000), 21 February 2003.
[8] Interview, Beirut, September 2002.
[9] Interview, Beirut, 26 January 1993.

movement operations, women did not take up arms'.[10] His explanation is similar to that offered by Hamas leaders. The difference is that, in the Palestinian case, the situation has become sufficiently desperate to permit the involvement of all members of society.

Nonetheless, in Lebanon too, given the nature of the conflict, women were not always able to remain outside the action. Zaynab, in her 30s when I interviewed her, spent a year and a half in Khiam prison in southern Lebanon, accused of taking part in the Islamic resistance. Although she did not participate in military activities, she sometimes carried weapons for the fighters. She described her imprisonment and torture in detail but insisted that her Islamic faith gave her the strength to endure it.[11] Amal, another ex-prisoner revealed that 'all the girls were like one family; everyone tried to sacrifice for the other. We taught each other, everyone teaching what they knew. We sang sometimes, in low voices. We learnt verses from the *Qur'an*'.[12] According to Umm Farid, who was freed in 1991 as part of a prisoner exchange, 'all good believers are resilient and their belief in God protects them'.[13]

Pedagogical insights

Islamic resistance in the modern Middle East is a contentious and widely disputed issue. It is informed, on the one hand, by inadequate definitions and western prejudice and, on the other, by some notion of an alternative 'grand narrative' to that offered by the west. This chapter has explored the broader debate around Islamic resistance, arguing that, while it is dismissed by many western policy-makers as terrorism, it offers a source of

[10] Interview, Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, Beirut, 9 June 2003.
[11] Interview, Beirut, 19 September 2002.
[12] Interview, Beirut, 19 September 2002
[13] Interview, Beirut, 19 September 2002.

empowerment to Muslims facing western aggression and Israeli occupation. It has also been embraced by women across the Arab region who see it both as a legitimate tool of struggle and a potentially emancipatory project. I realize that such claims could be considered controversial; however, having conducted extensive fieldwork that is both rigorous and grounded in curiosity, I urge researchers to enter this terrain with an open mind, to listen carefully to the words of participants in order to challenge orientalist scholarship. While many in the west uncritically accept the narrative of 'Islamic terrorism' as a hostile stance, women I interviewed in Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories expressed astonishment at the lack of western empathy.

The conclusions I extract from this research are, firstly, it is important to distinguish clearly between terrorism and resistance, and what these terms mean to subject populations; in the period since 9/11, many western policy-makers have resorted to orientalist stereotyping in their desire to eradicate terrorist threats, thus disregarding the nuances of violent conflict. Secondly, while Hamas and Hizbullah have used tactics judged controversial by outside observers, such as the killing and kidnapping of civilians and the use of the suicide bomber, they contend that violence is a legitimate tool when used by oppressed peoples to liberate themselves from colonial control. This is in line with Fanon, who argues that violence is the highest form of political struggle (1961); it is the most effective way to fundamentally challenge colonial society and the 'civilizing mission' of the west that has been held responsible for significantly destabilizing the Middle East. Finally, my research revealed that many women in Palestine and Lebanon support Islamic resistance movements. They welcome the imposition of a more moral environment and they see Islamic groups as less corrupt, more socially active and

inclusive. Both Hamas and Hizbullah permit and encourage female participation, which supports the notion of Islamic resistance as a form of emancipation. In the process of conducting research into women, Islam and resistance, I discovered an alternative way of seeing the world. As a self-identified secular outsider, I had the privilege of meeting very many Arab-Muslim women, young and old, who spoke with passion of their support for religious ways of negotiating conflict. Their narratives were enlightening and humbling. Their words, ultimately, are the message of this chapter.

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