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# **RESISTANCE NARRATIVES: PALESTINIAN WOMEN, ISLAM AND INSECURITY**

## **Introduction**

In October 2007, I met a Palestinian woman called Souad<sup>1</sup> in the West Bank city of Ramallah. At the time, Souad was 30 years old; she was married with three children and was working as a journalist. Two years earlier, her husband, a computer designer at al-Najah University in Nablus, had been imprisoned by the Israeli authorities; the Israeli army also demolished the family's home. This experience left Souad feeling profoundly helpless; it also caused her to think about her own role as a Palestinian woman living under military occupation with few means at her disposal to challenge that occupation. One important tool she possesses is her own voice; during our conversation, she referred to the dignity and steadfastness of Palestinian resistance and, in particular, the efforts of Islamic resistance groups, such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Under other circumstances, Souad may not have identified herself as an Islamist but her experiences had forced her to conclude that, in her words, 'Israel will never accept any peace agreement that threatens its security, so it is a waste of time to continue negotiating. Palestinians have the right to return to their homeland and they believe that, with God's help and the Islamic movement, they can realize their objective'.<sup>2</sup>

Telling stories 'about the past, our past, is a key moment in the making of ourselves' (Kuhn 2007: 231), and Souad's story is such a 'key moment', in the sense that it embodies a 'narrative of resistance' on three distinct levels: firstly, it is a factual account of events surrounding the arrest of her husband and demolition of her family home, and the feelings of trauma and helplessness these events caused; secondly it is an expression of opinion as a way

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<sup>1</sup> The names of all women interviewed for this paper have been disguised.

<sup>2</sup> Interview, Ramallah, 31 October 2007.

both of making sense of her experience and also signaling defiance as an agenda for action; and, thirdly, it reiterates a larger narrative of Palestinian loss and rights. But her words also imply a deepening sense of insecurity as Palestinians struggle to maintain the morality of their cause while engaging in acts which have been termed 'illegitimate' or even 'terrorist'. Violence 'always has a context', which 'dictates both the range of public memory and political uses of the past' (Lawrence and Karim 2007: 3), and it is likely that Palestinian memory has been harmed by their current vulnerability and perceived loss of 'morality'.

Souad's narrative of injustice is richly evoked in the words of another woman, who arrived in Lebanon in 1948, aged four; she remembers her mother saying to her that

'I must not pick oranges from the grove nearby. I was puzzled and insisted on knowing why. My poor mother, with tears streaming from her eyes, explained: "Darling, the fruit is not ours; you are no longer in Haifa; you are in another country"... For the first time I began to question the injustice of our exile... I, as a dreamer living on the bare subsistence provided by a UN blue ration card...stand as a witness to Zionist inhumanity. I charge the world for its acquiescence in my destruction' (Khaled 1973: 28).

The child grew up to be possibly the most famous Palestinian woman 'terrorist', Leila Khaled. Her narrative, like Souad's almost 60 years later, illustrates how Palestinian scars 'have accumulated like layers of sedimentary rock, each marking a different crisis – homelessness, occupation, war, dependency' (Slackman and Bronner 2010) and how resistance has been constructed and articulated. What is striking is the presence of women's voices in the creation of a Palestinian national narrative utilized to justify acts of resistance ranging from speech and diplomacy to violent revolution.

In the face of mounting insecurity, in terms of living conditions and future prospects for a just resolution of the conflict, as well as the continuing Zionist project to delegitimize and obliterate their national identity, Palestinian women adopt various modes of resistance to

protect themselves and their children. They confront efforts to negate their identity through memory, solidarity and steadfastness. Resistance is practiced not only through violent means but also by constructing a national narrative of 'Palestinian-ness' and it is here that women play a key role. Some scholars suggest that women's voices 'often differ significantly in form as well as content from dominant discourse' (Gal 2002: 215), but I would argue that they frequently embody similar themes, although women find it more difficult to be heard. In this chapter, I will discuss how ways of enacting and narrating 'resistance' have changed, in form and content, over time and, through their resistance narratives, the impact women have had on the performance of national identity; I will test the hypothesis by examining processes by which Palestinian women's voices 'are routinely suppressed or manage to emerge' (Gal 2002: 215) and by hearing what those voices say.

In order to address the increasingly vulnerable nature of Palestinian national identity and the narratives developed to ensure its survival, I will focus, firstly, on meanings of 'narrative' and of 'resistance' for Palestinian women and how these are contextualized; next, I will reflect on the link between identity and what Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish called the 'blessings of memory' (1995: 16), the remarkable stories told by women about their own lives and the life of Palestine itself, and how these strengthen the ability to resist; thirdly, I will consider shared experiences of suffering, in exile and under occupation, and, in particular, the role of morality; and, finally, I will explore the specific modes of resistance adopted by women which enable them to challenge adversity, in the Palestinian territories and the Diaspora, in order to create a more tolerable future for themselves and their families. Beyond survival, resistance narratives are sometimes used to justify acts of violence, such as the 'terrorism' practiced by Leila Khaled in the 1970s and the more recent and controversial use of the suicide

bombing against Israeli military and civilian targets. I will argue that, through their actions and their stories, women are pushing at the boundaries of ‘acceptable’ behaviour and thereby expanding understandings and methods of articulating ‘resistance’, but they do so within an environment of insecurity and crisis.

In 2006-2007, I conducted two ethnographic research projects: the first explored Palestinian refugee women’s lives in the camps of Lebanon in terms of memory identity and change;<sup>3</sup> and the second examined the effects of Islamic resistance movements on Palestinian women in the West Bank.<sup>4</sup> During several fieldwork visits, I interviewed a total of 120 women, ranging in age from 18 to over 90, in towns, villages and refugee camps.<sup>5</sup>

While I recognize that to discuss ‘women’ as an undifferentiated category appears to disregard the wide variety of women’s experiences in Palestine and the Diaspora and, therefore, risks essentializing ‘Palestinian women’, I am seeking to engage in a particular sort of debate, one that takes *narrative* as a starting point. The prevailing narrative, in Scott’s words, is ‘the *self*-portrait of dominant elites as they would have themselves seen’ (2007: 200). However, as he argues, the ‘recovery of the nonhegemonic voices and practices of subject peoples requires...a fundamentally different form of analysis than the analysis of elites, owing to the constraints under which they are produced’ (2007: 201). In the context of patriarchal Palestinian society, the majority of women are still expected to assume particular roles and

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<sup>3</sup> Funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council (UK).

<sup>4</sup> Funded by the United States Institute of Peace.

<sup>5</sup> In the West Bank, a total of 58 interviews were conducted in Abu Diss, Ramallah, Nablus, Hebron , villages near Nablus and Hebron, refugee camps in Ramallah, Hebron and Nablus, and Birzeit University. The age range was as follows: under 20: 7 (12.1 per cent); 20 – 30:18 (31 per cent); 30 – 45:14 (24.1 per cent); 45 – 65: 16 (27.6 per cent); over 65 3 (5.2 per cent). In Lebanon, 62 women were interviewed in Bourj el-Barajne, Shatila and Mar Elias camps in Beirut, Ain el-Hilwe and Mieh Mieh camps in Sidon, Rashidiyya and Kasmiyya camps near Tyre. The age range was as follows: under 20: 8 (12.9 per cent); 20 – 30: 5 (8.1 per cent); 30 – 40: 11(17.7 per cent); 40 – 50: 14 (22.6 per cent); 50 – 65: 17 (7.4 per cent); over 65: 7 (11.3 per cent).

therefore lack an authoritative ‘voice’; even though the situations of violent and unresolved conflict that prevail in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories have permitted some women to engage in less traditional activities, this has not radically altered the notion of ‘a woman’s place’. Spivak argues that if, ‘the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow’ (2006: 32). While acknowledging that ‘[o]utside experts lack the deep nuanced knowledge that comes from...simply being in place’ (Society for International Development 2001: 21), this ethnographically-based study intends to make a small contribution towards challenging narrative exclusions (Sayigh 2007: 138). The focus of this chapter is on the practice of resistance and how it is articulated by women; diversity and creativity can be found in the rich tapestry of women’s voices.

### **‘A plurality of resistances’: articulating the narrative of 1948**

*Armed resistance is used ‘to defend our people’s rights and to force Israel and the international community to accept that our narrative of 1948, and our Palestinian rights, are of no less value than the rights or narrative of any other’.*<sup>6</sup>

In this section, I will look more closely at how ‘narratives of resistance’ are enacted in the Palestinian context. The narrative form has been consciously adopted by Palestinians, who insist that ‘our past history is an important source of our conception of ourselves; our self-knowledge, our conception of our own character and potentialities, is to a large extent determined by the way in which we view our own past actions’ (Connerton 1989: 22). Narratives, stories and life histories are used, firstly, to make a case for the restoration of justice and, secondly, to address the rising levels of insecurity felt by Palestinians as a result of their ongoing homelessness; and, thirdly, to set out a plan of action. However, it is likely that they

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<sup>6</sup> A senior Hamas leader (quoted by Crooke 2009: 195).

are articulated differently by women and men. Whereas ‘history’, in the formal, ‘account of real happenings’ sense, tends ‘to exclude marginal groups such as women’, the majority of ‘village storytellers were women’ (Sayigh 2007: 137). Men, the ones with authority ‘to speak and represent’ (Sayigh 2007: 137), usually assume the responsibility of recounting the national story of Palestine, while mothers and grandmothers relate the ‘small’ details of how life used to be. Various authors have noted the absence of women’s voices in the construction of the national narrative (see Hammami 2004). Swedenburg, for example, speaks of men as ‘the primary authorities...on local history and public affairs in general’ (1995: 175). Palestinian women’s memories ‘have rarely found a place’ (Abu-Lughod & Sa’di 2007: 8); their ‘voice’ tends to be conflated with maternal sacrifice (Peteet 2002: 151) and not taken seriously; they are likely to be excluded and their concerns often minimized or disregarded altogether. One concludes, therefore, that communal identity is largely a male construct with little reference to the particular experiences of women.

But ‘narrative’ has other connotations. Palestinians are aware that their narrative of injustice is constantly subordinated to the more powerful Zionist ‘narrative of 1948’. Power, as Bresheeth observes, ‘is not only exercised over the land and its people, it also controls the story, its point of view, and the meta-narrative of *truth* and *memory*’ (2007: 165). The destruction of the Palestinian landscape has turned memory into an antagonistic process between competing versions of history. Yet power also ‘engenders resistance. In this context, the power of the West, of an ascendant civilizational model, often forces others to look for means of resistance’ (Ajami 1981: 16). In order to examine some of the ways in which Palestinians have sought ‘means of resistance’, to challenge the western ‘civilizational model’ and the Israeli ‘narrative of 1948’, I have adopted Foucault’s suggestion of ‘taking the forms of

resistance against different forms of power as a starting point' (Drefus and Rabinow 1982: 211). I am interested in looking at 'the resistances resulting from [...] various antagonistic interactions' (Karam 1998: 4) in order to understand how power relations work. Foucault argues that 'there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case [...] They are the odd term in relations of power; they are inscribed in the latter as an irreducible opposite' (Foucault: 96). For Palestinian women in the West Bank and Lebanon, resistance operates at several levels, not only against Israeli power and violence, but also in opposition to the 'universalizing characteristics' of western feminism and, in some cases, against the anonymous, 'objective' violence (Zizek 2009) of the Islamic system.

Unlike the experiences of Leila Khaled and the secular Palestinian Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) in the early 1970s, Palestinian resistance in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries has been increasingly expressed and performed through the medium of Islam, whether in terms of authenticity or militant struggle. The national narrative of resistance is expressed through Islamic idioms which act as tools of legitimation and empowerment. My research reveals that, as members of a victimized population, many Palestinian women support the activities of Islamic resistance movements; they are aware that their position has been seriously undermined by Israeli policies. In the West Bank, for example, early marriage for girls is increasing as female students are forced by the prevailing economic and security situation to give up their education; women's mobility has been restricted by Israeli practices such as military checkpoints and the 'separation wall'. In Lebanon, the 2006 Israeli invasion resulted in massive loss of life and the destruction of homes and infrastructure and, although Palestinian communities were not directly targeted on this occasion, the memory of the war has



led to widespread anxiety about the future. In response, many Palestinians are turning to Islam to make sense of an increasingly uncontrollable situation.

From as early as the 1920s, women have played an active role in the Palestinian national struggle (Fleischmann 2003) and have contributed to the narrative of survival. However, as Peteet argues, ‘a gendered distinction appears in the practice of violence’ (2000: 116); while women certainly participated in activities aimed at ending the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, their responsibilities have differed from those of men. In September 2000, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip embarked upon a violent uprising, a second *intifada*, against the Israeli occupation. The following years witnessed the escalation of violence by the Israeli army and a corresponding increase in militant activities by the Islamist groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad. As a result of the increased use of violence by both sides, the position of women has been seriously undermined. Many women responded to their growing vulnerability by shifting their support to the Islamist political model. A high percentage of women actively contributed towards Hamas’s resounding victory in the January 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections and many celebrated the group’s ‘victory’ over Israel in the December 2008 – January 2009 Gaza war. Islamic organizations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip have actively recruited and mobilized women. For example, they have established programmes to instruct women ‘in Islamic culture, philosophy, law and religion’, and ‘to educate women in proper Islamic behaviour and the running of an Islamic home’ (Roy 2007: 178-79). It is likely that such activities permit women living in harsh and fearful conditions to feel they have some control over their lives.

Jamila is a 20-year old English literature student at Birzeit University in the West Bank. She spoke to me about the experiences of her family. During the first *intifada*, her father, who

was a member of the camp club at Jalazoun refugee camp near Ramallah, was arrested by the Israelis and imprisoned for six months, in her words, ‘just for giving aid to refugees’. During the 2002 Israeli invasion of Ramallah, there were bulldozers outside her house, which has four stories and is near the camp, and they were afraid the house would be destroyed. On one occasion, the soldiers did not wait for her father to answer the door – they blew it up. Another time, her uncle’s wife was driving her car late at night, as she was preparing for her son’s wedding, but there was a curfew and she was killed. In 2006, the Israelis invaded Jamila’s house for two months; they took control of the roof of the house and sometimes sat in the living room with guns aimed at the family. The Israelis ‘treat Palestinians as savages’, she remarked, ‘and this is why Islamic resistance movements began’.<sup>7</sup> Jamila’s account illustrates very well the construction of a narrative of justification; the brutality of the Israeli occupation caused intense feelings of powerlessness and victimization for her family and this, as she says, ‘is why Islamic resistance movements began’. As Hamas leader Khalid Mish’al argued: ‘If you stop resistance, there will be no pressure on Israel’ (quoted in Gunning 2009: 203).

### **The ‘blessings of memory’**

*‘How does a mother confirm her intimate recollections of childhood in Palestine to her children, now that the facts, the places, even the names, are no longer allowed to exist?’ (Said 1986: 23)*

Hammer argues that memory and identity are connected; both, she suggests, ‘are bound to historical contexts and have to be seen as constructions, intended and developed for particular purposes. They are subjective phenomena, changed over time, shared and contested’ (2005: 40). Although Palestinians’ ‘memories of a common origin [...] give them a ground, and a

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<sup>7</sup> Interview, Birzeit University, near Ramallah, 3 November 2007.

symbolic repertoire, for identity, it is their experiences which...provide references for those symbols and a landscape for that ground' (Bowman 1993: 95). Identity is linked to feelings of belonging and community, an attachment to the land and, as Bowman says, something that took shape out of individual experience. It evolved into a shared national identity rooted in traumatic experience and also a personal identity based on memories. Palestinian women, both those who live in Palestine and those located outside the borders of their homeland, possess a rich store of memories and these became central 'for the preservation of Palestinian identity in the diaspora' (Siddiq 1995: 88), for example Leila Khaled's memory of the orange trees in Haifa.

It was women who told me about Palestine-as-homeland. In Lebanon, memories are characterized by nostalgia for a way of life and a place that no longer has any tangible link to reality while, in the West Bank, there is a sense that the homeland remains tantalizingly close. Those old enough to remember Palestine before 1948 described life in traditional village or rural settings, while younger women repeated the stories of their mothers and grandmothers, often in vivid and compelling detail. They are narratives of belonging and contribute to the sustaining of a scattered community. Historical memory 'is a collection of narratives transmitting what a people "knows" about its shared past. It is fluid and plural and, like a highway, constantly under construction and repair'. At the same time, '[n]arratives composing historical memory are partial and frequently contradictory' (Tetreault 2006: 82). Oral historians alert us to the dangers of memory; as Thelen (1989) notes, '[i]n a study of memory the important question is not how accurately a recollection fitted some piece of a past reality, but why historical actors constructed their memories in a particular way at a particular time'. This is particularly true in the case of Palestinian narrators, for whom the accuracy of recollection is less significant than the underlying message.

During my fieldwork, what came across to me most strongly were feelings of continuity, familiarity and nostalgia. A good example is Umm Nasif, who is 75 years old and lives in a former hospital building in the Sabra area of Beirut. She was born in Lydda in Palestine and remembers that there were figs, lemons, olives and gooseberries; there were also schools and hospitals, although most girls did not attend school and she herself did not learn to read and write. Umm Nasif left Palestine when she was 14, but she still feels that her country is Lydda which, she observed, is now an airport.<sup>8</sup> This raises the question of how memories such as Umm Nasif's affect identity today. As Rosemary Sayigh notes: 'The village – with its special arrangements of houses and orchards, its open meeting-places, its burial ground, its collective identity – was built into the personality of each individual villager to a degree that made separation like an obliteration of the self' (1979: 107). Pre-1948 Palestine meant not only landscape and an abundance of fruits and vegetables but also a familiar way of life. Many women compared a settled, harmonious life in their own land with the uncertainties and humiliations of exile. They referred to customs associated with marriage and death, to styles of dress and cuisine, all of which impart a solid feeling of identity in the sense of knowing where one belongs. Their possession and dissemination of these precious memories, to family members and strangers, constitutes a powerful form of resistance and also a strong narrative of entitlement.

The familiar life was violently interrupted and effectively ended by the *nakbah* ('catastrophe') of 1948, when the majority of Palestinians were forced to flee from their homes and land. Many women regard this event as 'the end of history as "being", and the beginning of another kind of history they named "tragedy" or "destiny" or "God's will"' (Sayigh 2007: 144).

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<sup>8</sup> Interview, Gaza Building, Sabra, Beirut, 25 January 2007.

At that time, Palestine was a predominantly rural society and identity, therefore, was strongly associated with the land. Swedenburg argues that an ‘individual’s loss of land to Zionist colonization came to be regarded as an affront to the *national* honour...these constituents of the (male) individual’s identity – family, honour, land, women – resonated with the aura of the nation’ (1995: 79). But what implications does it have for *women’s* notions of identity? The sense of dislocation following 1948 has had a pronounced effect on their identities. For example, Samira, a 37-year old woman in Bourj el-Barajne camp in Beirut, said that ‘being a refugee means being homeless, insecure, different from others; other people treat you with pity and fear’.<sup>9</sup> Similarly Nayla, a 42-year old woman in Balata camp in Nablus, said she considers that all Palestinian refugees, wherever they live, are living under occupation; they do not have the freedom to express their Palestinian identity and are never treated well.<sup>10</sup>

This notion of identity as lack of freedom recurs repeatedly in the narratives of camp women. Huda is a 46-year old midwife with one son. She has spent all her life in Lebanon and now lives in Bourj el-Barajne camp in Beirut. When I interviewed her in June 2006, she told me that her parents were young when they left Palestine in 1948. They took the keys of their house and told their children about the happy life they had in Palestine. Huda said that she regards Lebanon as ‘only a country where I have to live while I wait to return to my own land’. A person without a homeland, she added, is exposed to suffering and poverty. If any hostilities break out, they have to hide their Palestinian identity. Following the 2000 Israeli withdrawal, she visited the Lebanese-Israeli border, she told me; her son tried to reach through the fence to touch Palestinian land.<sup>11</sup> This poignant image of continuing dispossession fuels a grand narrative of suffering.

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<sup>9</sup> Interview, Bourj el-Barajne camp, Beirut, 1 June 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Interview, Balata camp, Nablus, 16 June 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Interview, Bourj el-Barajne camp, Beirut, 2 June 2006.

Refugee women, whether they are located in the West Bank or Lebanon, tell stories of change, of how they and their families were abruptly uprooted from their places of belonging and plunged into terrifying uncertainty. These stories tend to emphasize the dislocation between an identity of attachment and the shattering or loss of identity, which has implications of violence. Mariam, a woman who was born in Palestine in 1936 and now lives in Beirut, told me about her childhood in Jaffa. She described hearing bombs and shooting at night, people shouting. In April 1948, she recalls, they headed north, through a landscape of explosions and overturned vehicles. Her family, like Huda's, took the keys of their homes and left most of their possessions behind, confident that the problem would soon be solved. She never saw her home again.<sup>12</sup> Even women who did not personally experience the *nakbah* are able to recount the stories of their parents' or grandparents' flight from Palestine and even to evoke the *smells* of their homeland. In Beirut, I met Wafa who, although she had spent all her life in Lebanon, had a strong image in her mind of her family's village in Palestine. A few years ago, she said, someone had a video of a wedding in her village, but she did not want to see it because she feared the reality might be disappointing. However, during the 2006 war between Israel and Hizbullah, the village was shown on the television; her son told her, 'look, it's our village'; even though people were being killed, she said, she felt happy because the village looked exactly like it did in her imagination; she could even smell it.<sup>13</sup>

Women's narratives chart the journeys undertaken by Palestinians into exile. They include many small details of how people coped. Asma in al-Am'ari camp in Ramallah, said that, when they first came to the camp, they lived in tents; people arrived from different

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<sup>12</sup> Interview, Beirut, 6 June 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Personal interview, Beirut, 1 February 2007.

villages, she said. UNRWA<sup>14</sup> issued cards to the refugees; they built a school and gave the pupils a glass of milk every day.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Umm Mahdi, a 67-year old widow in Bourj el-Barajne camp, who recalled that, after reaching southern Lebanon on foot in 1948, her family moved to Tyre, where they were given tents; a truck brought bread, fish and other supplies from the UN and Red Crescent.<sup>16</sup> Several women described how the tents gradually became more solid structures, but still could not replace the homes they had left behind. Memories such as these are recounted as painful, humiliating and unjust. For example, some of the women living in Lebanon recalled the discrimination they had experienced from local Lebanese. The early generations, as Bowman notes, ‘learned their identity through suffering intolerance and harassment at the hands of their unwilling hosts, the Lebanese authorities’ (1993: 84). Memories form the central core of Palestinian identity, but are experienced as both tragic and empowering; Palestinians use their memories of violent dispossession as a reminder of the unity of shared suffering and also as motivation for collective action. However, as Islah Jad says, there has been a fragmentation of Palestinians as a national community and an increase in enforced localism; people in one area often do not know what is going on elsewhere.<sup>17</sup>

As I listened to women in Lebanon and the West Bank, I noticed that their memories sometimes contain an element of dissent. For example, Umm Mahdi in Bourj el-Barajne camp, when recalling her family’s flight from Kabri in northern Palestine, remarked on how Palestinians had been poorly served by their leaders. One of the respected men in her village, she said, told people to leave and they would be able to return after a week. ‘He sold Palestine

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<sup>14</sup> United Nations Relief & Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, founded in 1950 to meet the day-to-day needs of Palestinian refugees.

<sup>15</sup> Interview, al-Am’ari camp, Ramallah, 18 June 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Interview, Bourj el-Barajne camp, Beirut, 3 June 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Dr Islah Jad, Birzeit University, Ramallah, 31 October 2007.

to the Israelis', she concluded bitterly.<sup>18</sup> Umm Saleh in the same camp, now aged 77, recalled how the Palestinian fighters were unable to protect the villages.<sup>19</sup> Occasionally one senses a thread of betrayal and disappointment running through women's narratives, highlighting what Julie Peteet calls the 'sacrificial nature of mothering'; in her discussion of 'mothering in the danger zone', she argues that women occupied a position as national activists that was regarded as being less central than 'formal masculinist militancy' (2002: 147). This role reflects their perceived incapacity as formal history-tellers. But it is thrown into question by the image of the 'unnatural' Palestinian mother, who urges her sons to die for the cause. This is well illustrated in the account of the mother of a 23-year old suicide bomber. When invited to respond to news of her son's death, she said: 'I was very happy, when I heard. To be a martyr, that's something' (quoted by Hoffman 2006: 162). Reports such as these are used to confirm the degrading of the national narrative.

### **A narrative of heroism**

*'The women of Palestine will resist this monstrous occupation imposed on us at gunpoint, siege and starvation'* (Al-Shanti 2006).

In response to displacement, Palestinians began to construct a narrative of heroism, which was reinforced by local and international media. Scattered and demoralized Palestinians were determined to demonstrate that the Palestinian people as a unique national entity were not going to disappear. Edward Said has written that exiles 'are cut off from their roots, their land, their past... [They] feel, therefore, an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives' (1990: 360). They do this through the recounting of a national story. The 'narrative of heroism' was

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<sup>18</sup> Interview, Bourj el-Barajne camp, Beirut, 3 June 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Interview, Bourj el-Barajne camp, Beirut, 1 February 2007.



enriched by the actions of fighters such as Leila Khaled, but it has also been coloured by tragedy and failure, and this requires an explanation. Following the expulsion from Lebanon by the Israelis of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1982, a counter-narrative began to be articulated which, although it acknowledged Palestinian victimization, also incorporated qualities of survival and ways of fighting back other than armed struggle. Counter-narratives of the nation, as Bhabha observes, ‘disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which “imaged communities” are given essentialist identities’ (1990: 300). It is through such ‘disturbances’, I think, that we can begin to appreciate the more subtle contributions made by women.

An inspiring example of women’s contribution to the narrative of resistance may be observed during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, when Palestinian women performed countless vital functions. After the Israeli military bombarded the Ain el-Hilweh refugee camp in Sidon, the camp was evacuated and some of the refugees took shelter in a local hospital. But the hospital was attacked too. Women in these places, said Siham, an activist in her late 50s, ‘were cooking, washing clothes – it provided a basic level of survival. They brought flour to make bread. It was distributed to all the people. There were no male adults to take care of the family so the women had to do it [...] It was a big responsibility for women. Life was hard at that time; three or four families had to live together’.<sup>20</sup>

The role of Palestinian women during this period, explained Khadija, a resident of the camp, was ‘to take care of their families after the imprisonment of the men’.<sup>21</sup> Women also worked to rebuild the destroyed camps, sometimes with their bare hands. In Khadija’s words:

‘Journalists came. They saw how the women were cleaning the camp and trying to make it feel like home. When they saw women cleaning and using cement to rebuild the houses, they asked why we were doing it. The women replied that we were working like this because the young men were in prison. Slowly we were able to rebuild the houses so that our families could return’.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Interview, Ain el-Hilweh camp, Sidon, 7 June 2003.

<sup>21</sup> Interview, Ain el-Hilweh camp, Sidon, 7 June 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Interview, Ain el-Hilweh camp, Sidon, 7 June 2003.

In 1982, women also ‘organized small but vocal demonstrations and marches to protest the arrest or disappearance of their sons and husbands’ (Peteet 2002: 139). These narratives illustrate the extraordinary resilience displayed by many women in a very dark period of Palestinian history.

Similarly, during the first *intifada* in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (1987 – 1993), women participated in innovative ways in resisting the Israeli occupation. The narrative being expressed was one defiance and exasperation. For instance, women took part in protests and confrontations with the Israeli army; they were central in organizing and maintaining essential services, such as education for children and students, the provision of health care, and the distribution of basic foodstuffs. Their work was social but also political, and their behaviour, as in Lebanon, challenged traditional forms of social control such as the family and the patriarchal nature of society. Raja Shehadeh has spoken of the strength of women such as these; ‘they have the least to lose’, he writes, ‘and no ego to be pampered [...] They have been used to [...] oppression by men from the day they were born’ (1982: 115). It is striking that, despite patriarchal oppression, many Palestinian women have found a ‘voice’, which they are using to create a more nuanced narrative.

An example of a refining of the national narrative took place in June 2007, when violent clashes erupted between Fatah and Hamas for control of the Gaza Strip. Many Gazans, appalled by the violence, took to the streets to protest. According to former Palestinian Legislative Council member Dalal Salameh, women played a key role in these confrontations; they tried to prevent the factions from firing at each other. The women behaved as nationalists, she said, and

were courageous.<sup>23</sup> Fatima, an activist in Ramallah, also referred to the demonstrations in Gaza; ordinary people, she recalled, including many women, took to the streets to protest.<sup>24</sup> This event illustrates a deterioration of communal solidarity, thus causing a fracturing of national identity and concomitant rise of insecurity. By raising their voices, women have sought to defuse the tension inherent in intra-Palestinian violence.

Finally, if we look at the refugee camps of Lebanon today, we can see the diverse supportive and constructive activities undertaken by women. Many women in the camps speak of being weary of politics. Political and military struggles, they argue, have failed to retrieve the homeland or solve the conflict. In the meantime, there are many practical pressures on them: to ensure the well-being of their children, to protect their own rights in an environment which remains intensely patriarchal, to care for the elderly and vulnerable members of their community and, above all, to tell the story of Palestine to the world. At the same time, despite their resilience, they cannot escape the deepening sense of crisis currently afflicting the Palestinian national entity.

Women have shared the struggle and disappointment of men. Both have contributed to the narrative of resistance and also the ongoing fight for self-determination. In their own ways, both women and men have sought to assert their independence as a nation, but the methods they have used and their underlying objectives have sometimes differed. The majority of women, whether they are encountering the Israeli occupation on a daily basis or watching helplessly from the camps of Lebanon, see their primary identity in terms of motherhood. For example, according to academic Fadwa al-Labadi, during the first *intifada*, everyone practiced resistance in ways that were mainly non-violent. There were good relations between families

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<sup>23</sup> Interview, Dalal Salameh, General Union of Palestinian Women, Nablus, 16 June 2007.

<sup>24</sup> Interview, Ramallah, 14 June 2007.

and within families. Now this has deteriorated. The second *intifada* witnessed a completely different sort of struggle; it was no longer the grassroots, but instead became an armed struggle, and this had a big impact on gender relations. Many women, she emphasized, do not believe in an armed struggle.<sup>25</sup> She is correct that women tend to incline more towards non-violent resistance, as we saw in the intra-Palestinian conflict in Gaza in 2007 and in Ain el-Hilwe in 1982. However, this is by no means always the case; Leila Khaled was not the only woman fighter; several of the women I met in Lebanon proudly recounted their own experiences as militant resisters. This raises the question of how the narrative of resistance has been shaped to accommodate women who choose to practice violence and how their choices might come into conflict with notions of morality and appropriate roles.

### **Narratives of morality**

In the run-up to the Palestinian elections of January 2006, women played a decisive role in the victory of the Islamist party Hamas. Having failed to end the Israeli occupation through negotiation, compromise or non-violent protest, many Palestinians – including women, who expressed frustration at their inability to play a meaningful role in the second *intifada* – have come to regard resistance that has the support of religion as being one of the few options available to them. In the opinion of Maha, a student at Birzeit University, people voted for Hamas because they need to see changes in all aspects of life. Islamic movements, she added, look at a woman in a different way to others; they look beyond her body to her mind and this is attractive to women.<sup>26</sup> During the election campaign, Hamas effectively mobilized women. For

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with Dr Fadwa al-Labadi, Al-Quds University, Jerusalem, 18 June 2007.

<sup>26</sup> Interview, Birzeit University, near Ramallah, 3 November 2007.

example, women went to different houses and convinced other women to vote for Hamas.<sup>27</sup> Described by many in Europe and North America as a terrorist organization, one could argue that Hamas has subverted the notion of ‘national identity’. The violence of the Israeli onslaught, for example during the December 2008 invasion of the Gaza Strip, has increased support for Hamas but, at the same time, the lack of a political process and the absence of security for ordinary Palestinian families has generated intense soul-searching about the degrading of identity and the failure of religious parties to conduct a ‘moral struggle’.

This raises the question of what exactly is meant by a ‘moral struggle’. While it has become routine, in Israel and the west, to condemn ‘Palestinian terrorism’, what effect is the culture of destructive violence having on Palestinian society and identity, especially since the start of the second *intifada* in September 2000, in terms of acceptable behaviour, and how is the tension between precious memories and current chaos affecting women’s sense of identity and involvement? In order to explore women’s unease and increasing helplessness in the face of violence, I want to discuss briefly the role of morality. An important indicator of identity for Palestinians is religion, and specifically Islam. In the period before the first *intifada* and the emergence of Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood in the West Bank and Gaza worked to create ‘the preconditions for an Islamic moral order’ (Taraki 1989: 172). Lisa Taraki argues that the Brotherhood was successful ‘in bringing a significant number of young refugee camp and urban women out of their homes and into mosques [...] Increasing numbers of young women and even girls adopted the “uniform” of the Islamist movement’ (1989: 173-4). The reason why many women seemed to welcome the re-Islamization of society was, firstly, that the secular nationalist movement, embodied in the PLO, had failed to end the occupation; and, secondly, that the Islamist movement appeared to offer a more inclusive environment.

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<sup>27</sup> Interview, Ramallah, 3 November 2007.

However, while a broad cross-section of Palestinians, across age, class, gender and geographic divides, supported and participated in the first *intifada*, and felt it to be a moral struggle, the waging of the second *intifada* was more ambiguous. Some observers have remarked on feelings of moral decay which are beginning to afflict the community. Dalia, an activist in Ramallah, said that

‘political parties who cover themselves with Islam spoil religion. People are losing confidence. The people who work in politics in Palestine have a lot of work to do to give people confidence back in the national struggle. They need to renew their vision. Popular resistance should be peaceful, not a few people fighting’.<sup>28</sup>

It is here that the Islamist movement has come to play an increasingly significant role. According to Islah Jad at Birzeit University, the Islamist parties have never used bribes but, instead, they have relied on motivation and internal conviction. In the 2006 elections, people reported that Hamas were not corrupt; they were seen as moral and as trying to build a model human being and this attracted many Palestinian voters.<sup>29</sup>

Islamism is often dismissed as either ‘a movement of rage, of marginal groups that have been excluded from the social and global orders lashing out at persons who are seen to oppress them’ or ‘movements bent on turning back the historical clock hundreds of years, of returning to traditional ways’ (Robinson 1997: 132). However, Glenn Robinson argues that both views are misleading and that most Islamist movements are ‘firmly entrenched in modern society’ (1997: 133). Islamists appeal to female members of the community on several levels. Firstly, they address the issue of Palestinian victimization. To become a victim is shameful and this is something with which women have great sympathy. The Palestinian people feel that they have been victimized by Israel for more than 60 years without effectively being able to fight

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<sup>28</sup> Interview, Ramallah, 14 June 2007.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Dr Islah Jad, Birzeit University, Ramallah, 31 October 2007.

back. Since its election in 2006, the Hamas government has been victimized, say Palestinians, by the international community. Some women complain that, although it is based on correct Islamic principles, this government has not been given a chance to introduce beneficial policies. Secondly, Islamist groups appeal to women on the level of good moral behaviour. They encourage the protection of women and the promotion of appropriate female roles. According to Hanan, a 41-year old mother of seven in Balata camp, the role of women in Hamas is very wide. They are regarded as strong and important. Before Hamas won the election, she said, women helped; now they are in the legislative and municipal councils.<sup>30</sup> Thirdly, these groups also strengthen notions of community and the role of the active citizen. Islah Jad observed that Hamas has been successful in spreading religious teaching; social networks have been created in which women invite other women to their homes; pre-election meetings took place in friendly and comfortable settings.<sup>31</sup> Finally, by rejecting traditional practices of corruption and ignorance, they present a compelling vision of modernity. In the words of Jamila al-Shanti, an elected Hamas member of the Palestinian Legislative Council: ‘There are traditions here that say that a woman should take a secondary role – that she should be at the back... But that is not Islam’ (Abunimah 2008: 26).

In the camps of Lebanon, too, many women express contempt for failed political projects and some are turning towards Islam but, in this case, in terms of enhanced religious knowledge rather than party politics. For example, according to Soraya, a 31-year old unmarried woman in Bourj el-Barajne camp, women now have more knowledge about religion; they understand more. She herself gives religious lessons to children and talks to other women

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<sup>30</sup> Interview, Balata camp, Nablus, 16 June 2007.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Dr Islah Jad, Birzeit University, Ramallah, 31 October 2007.

about their rights.<sup>32</sup> For women such as Soraya, a greater awareness of Islam creates self-respect and resilience. It enables them to contribute in important ways towards the well-being of the community, for example through teaching other women about their Islamic and human rights and by working with youth, elderly people, widows and the disabled to create more tolerable living conditions. These women, like women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, are trying to build a model human being, one that is modern and also moral. But the Islamist vision has been thrown into question by Hamas's war with Israel and the terrible destruction unleashed on the people of Gaza. In these circumstances, Palestinian women are portrayed as helpless victims, unable to protect themselves or their children, or worse as encouraging their children to become 'martyrs'. One senses that they have little say in the waging of war and thus have been disempowered or disabled. Looking at events in Gaza from outside, the refugees in Lebanon feel helpless anger; as they are beyond Israel's direct sphere of control, this is experienced as a further fracturing of 'national identity'.

The insecure conditions of life for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip has been highlighted by the emergence of a new model of female militancy: the *shahida*. According to Berko and Erez, three major 'types' of female suicide bombers have been identified: the first group acts 'out of religious conviction', the second out of a need to retaliate for the death of a loved one, and the third as a result of 'exploitation' by a militant group (2005: 606). This observation, based on interviews with a small number of 'failed' women bombers incarcerated in an Israeli prison, appears to disregard the larger narrative of the perceived threat to Palestinian national existence and to locate women's motivations in more mundane concerns. Other scholars have suggested reasons for the 'aberration' of the female suicide bomber, such as choosing martyrdom 'as a way to escape the predestined life that is expected of them'

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<sup>32</sup> Interview, Bourj el-Barajne camp, Beirut, 3 June 2006.



(Beyler 2003: 1) or as a misplaced quest for equal status in Palestinian society (Israeli 2004). As Brunner observes, 'the female martyr, the female suicide bomber, the female terrorist irritates gender roles by imitating what we are used to see men do'. In her view, however, this phenomenon, rather than subverting conventional representations, has 'helped to reinforce the traditional gender order' ((2005: 48). While religious conviction, revenge, coercion or the destabilizing of 'existing social realities and discourses' (Hasso 2005: 24) may be part of the complex web of reasons motivating women militants, one cannot help but feel that there is also an element of desperation. Far from espousing a 'moral' cause, the use of indiscriminate violence suggests the disintegration of Palestinian claims to justice; this is brought into stark relief by the involvement of women as defenders and perpetrators of terror as a weapon of resistance.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have tried to show how a Palestinian national narrative of resistance, which is also a gendered narrative, has been painstakingly constructed from the memories of pre-1948 Palestine, the stories of survival in the Diaspora and the active striving of women and men against Israeli policies of dispossession and obliteration in Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories. However, the solidarity of this narrative is threatened by violence, whether in the form of the intra-factional conflict, the controversial targeting of civilians by several Palestinian factions or the emergence of the female suicide bomber. While the Palestinian struggle for justice and resolution often appears hopeless, a disturbing new trend is apparent whereby Israel and its supporters are laying siege to and seeking to delegitimize the very core

of Palestinian national identity. Rather than a moral struggle, the Palestinian narrative is portrayed as embodying terrorism, irrationality and unnatural motherhood.

By detailing the lived experiences of Palestinian women in the Occupied Territory and the Diaspora, I have sought to assess their roles both as guardians of the Palestinian resistance narrative and also as voices of morality. But, as I have suggested, their voices have also been used to justify and celebrate violence, thus deviating from the notion of a 'just cause'. Although women's narratives reveal a strong resilience, they also reflect a growing insecurity, both at the precariousness of their situation and the means adopted to change it.

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