

THE STRUGGLE OF PALESTINIAN WOMEN



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The role of Palestinian women historically has been organically linked to the development of the Palestine Question. The activity of Palestinian women, be it social or political, can best be understood in the context of their national struggle. Palestinian women have not fought for their liberation in isolation from the overall Palestinian struggle for national liberation; on the contrary, through it they have been able to tear down many of the barriers of traditionalism and conservatism that commonly obstruct women in their progress toward total emancipation.

Palestinian women first associated themselves with the national movement early in the 1920's, when they transcended barriers of tradition to join national resistance organizations. Within these organizations they came to play an effective role in the various aspects of national political activism, including armed struggle. Since the June War, however, the women's movement has gained particular momentum—Palestinian women have extended their realm of action from the resistance movement to a broader challenge to traditional social structures as a whole.

Woman's role in a revolutionary situation is radically different from her conventional social role. Thus it is crucial that women emeshed in revolutionary circumstances assert themselves both politically and socially, in such a way that there can be no return to the old traditional order. Palestinian women are attempting to do this as they take part in the struggle within and outside the occupied territories. Beginning in 1969 the high level of revolutionary involvement of Palestinian women attracted international attention.

In an article dealing with the resistance of Palestinian women to Israeli occupation, the British writer Ethel Mannin observed:

Anyone who still believes that the "Arab woman" is backward and timid must have missed out on the press reports which have been appearing in the first months of this year . . . Occupation provokes resistance, and increasingly Arab women and girls will find a way to protest, to harass the enemy, to demonstrate, and to refuse cooperation. This is a certainty because, contrary to popular notion, the "Arab woman" is high spirited and both physically morally courageous . . . quite certainly as the resistance intensifies and develops, as it is doing all the time, we are going to hear more of her. (*The Arab*, March 1969, Arab League Office, London).

Historical Survey

As mentioned above, the involvement of Palestinian women in the national struggle is not a recent phenomenon. In 1920 they stood side by side with Palestinian men in resisting the British Mandate. This early action was, however, mainly individualistic and was limited largely to participation in demonstrations and other mass-protests.

In 1929 there occurred a significant event: the convocation in Jerusalem of a 300-member Women's Conference. The Conference elected a representative committee which repeatedly called up on the British High Commissioner in Palestine for the repeal of the Balfour Declaration and the termination of Zionist immigration. The Conference also gave birth to the Palestine Arab Women's Union, one of whose primary tasks was to care for the children of martyrs and prisoners.

During the six-month rebellion and strike of 1936, Palestinian women demonstrated *en masse* against British forces, and smuggled guns and ammunition to the Palestinian guerilla forces. One such woman, Fatima Khalil Ghazal,

was martyred on July 26, 1936 during the battle of Azzoun between the British Army and Palestinian rebels.

Shortly before the 1948 War, Palestinian women in Jaffa formed an organization named "Zahrat Al-Uqhuwan", The Daisy. The Women of this organization rendered invaluable medical services, carried food, water and ammunition to the rebels, dug trenches, and erected barricades. Many Palestinian women performed heroically in battle. Hulwa Zeidan, for example, witnessed the death of both her husband and son in fighting with Zionist forces; she likewise sacrificed her life in resisting the Zionist attackers.

As was the case with the Palestinian people in general, the political activity of Palestinian women decreased markedly following the 1948 War. However, with the rise of the armed Palestinian revolution after 1965 their activity underwent a unprecedented renaissance; this was particularly so after the June 1967 War.

In the wake of the 1948 War and the eviction of more than a million Palestinians from their homes, Palestinian women found themselves, in most cases for the first time, in need of employment to assist in the financial support of their families. In the ensuing years they formed several organizations and institutions to help overcome the newly-emerging problems of Palestinian refugee society. These organizations included:

1. The Arab Child Welfare House
2. The Young Adult's Welfare House
3. Orphanages
4. The Arab Women's Association
5. The Young Arab Women's Club
6. The Red Crescent Society
7. The Association for the Support of Wounded Militants
8. The Employment Association of Palestinian Refugees in Damascus
9. The Arab Women's Union in Lebanon

In 1950 the Arab Women's Union called for a Conference in Beirut. At one of the sessions Zlikha Shehabi, representative of the Jerusalem branch, demanded the establishment of a Palestine branch, as she had been forced by the Jordanian authorities to represent Jordan, rather than Palestine.

During the period 1948–1967, Palestinian women in Occupied Palestine, like all other non-Jews, were not allowed to form any kind of independent political organizations. They were permitted only to join the already present Israeli political parties; most joined the Israeli Communist Party (Rakah). However, Palestinian women played a prominent role in the clandestine organization "Al-Ard" (The Land), which was eventually suppressed by the Israeli authorities. One woman, Najla Asmar, occupied a leading position in the organization. During the same period, Palestinian women in the diaspora generally joined the ranks of the pan-Arab political parties, including the *Baath* and the Arab Nationalist Movement. Their efforts were directed towards the broader Arab national struggle against colonialism and imperialism and for Arab unity, both as steps toward the liberation of Palestine.

In 1967, with the defeat of the regular Arab armies, a drastic change took place: hopes for the liberation of Palestine shifted to the Palestinian commando organizations. Simultaneously, Palestinian women became active in the Palestinian Movement and in the resistance to the Israeli occupation.

The Struggle of Palestinian Women Since 1967

The Occupied Territories

In 1967 Palestinian women spontaneously formed groups to distribute food and clothing in the occupied territories to the needy, without the permission of the Israeli authorities. As early as August, 1967, they demonstrated in Gaza to protest Israeli atrocities against the Palestinian population. On October 19, 1967, the Israelis arrested Fatima Barnawi on charges of having thrown a bomb into the Zion Cinema in Jerusalem, and of belonging to Fateh. The extraordinary courage she displayed during her trial marked her as a pioneer in the struggle of Palestinian women.

By 1968 large numbers of Palestinian women had joined the ranks of the resistance and were taking an active part in the armed struggle. In January, 1968, five women were arrested in Nablus for acts of resistance and for giving shelter to Fatah members. In April of the same year 300 Palestinian women demonstrated in Jerusalem in protest of the Israeli military parade to be held in the Holy City. Some of the demonstrators were wounded and others arrested by the Israeli police. At the same time, five women demonstrators were killed in Beit Hannoun, and many others were arrested in Hebron and Bethlehem, accused of collecting money for the resistance and distributing anti-Israeli leaflets.

In January 1969, large numbers of Palestinian women staged a sit-in strike in front of Israeli prisons and detention centers demanding the release of their imprisoned husbands, brothers, and sons. In response, the Israeli authorities fired on them, killing and wounding many. On October 3, 1973, some 900 Palestinian women staged a sit-in at Nablus town hall. The women—all relatives of Palestinian prisoners held in Nablus, Jenin, Tulkarem, Beersheba, and Ashkelon—later

visited the district military governor to demand an impartial inquiry into the death of one of the prisoners, including participation by the International Red Cross.

Palestinian women were also, as mentioned above, involved in military activity; they carried guns and threw bombs. Below are examples of some of the outstanding female militants:

1. **ABLA TAHA**—Abla was three months pregnant when arrested on July 25, 1968, on charges of belonging to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and of carrying explosives. Her Israeli lawyer, Felicia Langer, revealed that Abla had been subjected to torture in prison. Two of Abla's comrades, Latifa Howari and Sarah Joudeh, were also jailed and subjected to torture.

2. **SHADIA ABU-GHAZALEH**—Shadia was born in Nablus in 1947; she studied in Cairo, where she joined the Palestine Students' and Women's Unions. After returning to Nablus following the June War she joined Fateh. She was martyred on October 21, 1968, at the age of twenty-one.

3. **MIRIAM SHAKHSIR**—Miriam was 19 years old when arrested and accused of planting explosives in the Hebrew University. The explosion caused many injuries.

4. **MUZNA NICOLA**—Muzna, aged 30 and a practicing nurse, returned to Israel from Britain in 1975 following a visit to her parents. She was arrested and accused of attempting to recruit residents of Nazareth into Fateh. She was also charged with passing information to Fateh.

Palestinian women from Gaza played an especially active role in resisting and opposing Zionist occupation. Typical was this demonstration reported in the pro-Zionist *New York Times* of February 3, 1969: The *Times* told how Israeli

forces drove back 2-3000 "rioting" students from three girls' high schools into their classrooms. The paper added that "A military government official in Gaza said that troops had cleared the streets by force after the girls rampaged, blocked and stoned traffic, injuring several persons. . . More than 40 of the injured girls required hospitalization". Earlier, the students of the Al-Zahra Secondary Girls School in Gaza had demonstrated against the trial of three women; they chanted slogans including "We are all fedayeen". In another incident, school girls were arrested on charges of throwing stones at an Israeli patrol.

In Rafah, near Gaza, ten women were wounded by Israeli troops while demonstrating against oppressive Israeli measures in the Occupied territories. Two of the wounded later died. This sparked off a series of actions, including a three-day sit-in by twelve Palestinian women in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, beginning January 28, 1969. Similar sit-ins were held in Arab countries in support of these protests.

A striking index of the degree of Palestinian women's involvement in the struggle is the fact that in the Gaza area alone, 65 women died resisting the occupation between 1967 and 1970. At one time, the women's prison in Nablus contained more than 500 political prisoners aged 14-16.

The Role of Women Outside the Occupied Territories

Palestinian women outside the occupied territories are involved in political, social, and military activity. Their tasks include the creation of popular social organizations, the provision of material support for the revolution, nursing, providing support for the families of martyrs, and preserving and developing the rich Palestinian folkloric heritage. Young girls are trained in the use of arms and combat tech-

niques. The first training camp for this purpose was established in 1968, for girls aged 6-14. Other women are encouraged to join the female militia units of the Palestinian revolution. Some militia women are over fifty years of age. The first military operation involving Palestinian women took place on August 6, 1970 near the Jordanian-Israeli border. In a three-hour battle two women of the five involved were wounded.

On the international level, Amina Dahbour and Leila Khaled captured international attention. The former was one of a four-member unit that attacked an El Al Plane at Zurich airport in February, 1969. The latter hijacked a TWA plane on August 30, 1969.

On the social level, the General Union of Palestinian Women, which was formed in 1965, is the most active women's organization. It is affiliated with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The G.U.P.W. contributes effectively to the development and raising of women's consciousness, to better enable them to participate actively on the various levels of the Palestinian national struggle, and to help them achieve equality in all areas of social and economic life. It contributes to the social and cultural development of Palestinian women in a variety of ways, including the holding of regular symposia, seminars, and lectures on the problems facing women throughout the Third World. The G.U.P.W. looks after the families of martyrs and destitute families, and provides medical care and supervises numerous projects which are channelled into material support for the revolution. The G.U.P.W. has organized dressmaking and other economic enterprises to train Palestinian women, and sponsors fairs and charity bazaars featuring Palestinian folklore. In 1968 its Arts Committee established a Palestinian folklore group, composed of 32 women, which toured the Arab world.

In addition to its educational and informational activities, the G.U.P.W. places special emphasis on military activity. Accordingly, it started its first military training camp in Syria in late 1969.

Before the establishment of G.U.P.W., there already existed the Palestine Arab Women's Union, which was revived in 1949. Its major achievements were on the international level, as a representative of Palestinian women. It is a member of the Union of International Democratic Women. Its primary role has been in introducing the Palestine Problem to the world. One of its most significant achievements was the establishment a school for the children of Palestinian martyrs in Souq Al-Gharb, Lebanon. Presently over 400 students are enrolled.

Palestinian Women have also been active in other Palestinian Unions, including the Teachers, Writers, Journalists, Artists, Workers and Students General Unions. They have played leading roles in the Palestinian Red Crescent Society and in the Social Affairs Association for the Welfare of the Families of Palestinian Martyrs.

Naturally, the growing involvement of Palestinian Women in national struggle has generated problems for the women concerned, particularly regarding the need to reconcile obligations towards the family and public activity. However, Palestinian women have been trying to solve their problems on their own. They have independently started kindergartens and other day-care facilities in a number of Palestinian camps in Lebanon and elsewhere. The G.U.P.W. has been especially active in this respect. Other problems relating to traditional social obstacles are being tackled with educational campaigns. Moreover, the increasing numbers of educated Palestinian women has been a significant factor in overcoming traditional social obstacles to involvement in public political and social activity.

Thus the Palestinian Revolution has contributed immeasurably to the awakening of the Palestinian woman, and to her effective involvement in the struggle of the Palestinian people on all levels. The traumatic experience of the Palestinian people as a whole has helped Palestinian women to transcend traditional conservative and oppressive attitudes toward the role of women that are characteristic of many Third World societies.