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This contribution seeks to explore the role of Palestinian women during the first and second intifadas from a gender perspective by tracing the changing role of women's organisations in Palestine. Since the end of World War I and the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Palestinian women's organisations have been active and productive components of a vibrant civil society. In the early and mid-twentieth century, the organisations provided charitable and institutional support to local communities in the form of orphanages and schools. After the Naqba in 1948 these organisations became more formal and extended beyond individual villages. From 1948 until the Six Day War in 1967 women's organisations served the Palestinian community in mainly charitable ways. Their work focused on education and refugee support.¹

Amal Kawar's book, *Daughters of Palestine: Leading Women of the Palestinian National Movement*, outlines three generations of Palestinian women leaders who shaped the national struggle and added to the vibrant civil society that ultimately initiated the first intifada. Most of the first generation leaders were born and came of age in, what is today, Israel. In 1948, during the Naqba, many of them became refugees who fled or refugees who remained in Israel. The first generation's political consciousness was formed by the Naqba, and this generation articulated a female political voice and allowed for greater participation by the second and third generations. Some in the second generation, born between 1935 and 1948,² remember the Naqba. Their political consciousness was formed by Nasser through the 1950s and 1960s and they

'were full of hope and dreams of change.'³ These women craved political independence and a state for Palestine. They dreamed of returning to their homeland and were bolder than the first generation in asserting women in the political struggle. The third generation came into political consciousness during the 1967 war. The Six Day War had a galvanising effect on all three generations. 'If the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip was *déjà vu* for the first generation, reviving dormant pain from the 1948 catastrophe, for the second and third generations, it was a confirmation of long-held fears – that Israel could reach them even in the mighty Arab capitals.'⁴ The majority of the third generation was born as refugees in diaspora outside of Israel and of what became the Occupied Territories after 1967. The '67 war was a message to all Palestinians that they could not rely on Arab leadership or armies to take back their homeland. It was an awakening of the Palestinian political consciousness. From '67 onward, these three generations of women leaders focused on the national struggle and became a strong network of women that provided politically and socially for their communities in diaspora.

A fourth generation of Palestinian women leaders, composed of academics, is critical of the older generations' commitment to the national cause at the expense of women's rights. 'The academics were a new element in the coalition of women's nationalist groups... and were previously unorganised but had gained visibility during the Intifada.'⁵ In the 1990s, as women lost gains made by the three early generations in the political area, the fourth generation offered a new agenda focusing solely on gender issues. 'Their contribution to the Palestinian cause centered on speaking and writing about the social, health, and economic situations of Palestinian women under occupation.'⁶

This kind of rhetoric was instrumental in securing international funding, which was needed as the women's organisations depoliticised after the first intifada. As women were marginalised from the political arena following the first intifada, they found new niches in communities offering trainings on women's legal and social rights. Though the fourth generation gained international support, women's exclusion from the political dialogue and the stifling of civil society during the Oslo period ultimately led to an unsustainable peace.

Before the first intifada in the period after 1967 women's organisations became very active. The Palestinian Women's Union was an organisation created by many of the first generation leaders in 1965. Though it was banned for 1966 to the mid-1990s, women's federations and charities created a network across the diaspora 'to participate in the Palestinian liberation effort and to represent women's interests in national and international forums.'⁷ By the early 1980s this network had four main unions sponsored by the four major political factions in Palestine.⁸ Their membership numbers and participation as of 1990 'symbolise the ability of women from the main PLO factions to navigate past Israeli suppression of political activity in the Occupied Territories.'⁹ One of the unions, the Women's Action Committee, was more decentralised than the other unions and encouraged local leadership and initiative. The style of the Women's Action Committee was useful because, even before the 1987 intifada, it was difficult for women in remote villages and members in Gaza to participate in operations centralised in Ramallah, Nablus, and Jerusalem. The Women's Action Committees across Palestine were active throughout the first intifada and integral in the uprising. Even after Israel banned civil society activities in 1988, many of the informal Women's Action Committees were able to continue

operations. Unfortunately, 'That movement [local women's committees] came to an end in the early 1990s, reduced to a few local committees....'¹⁰ With the disbanding of the Women's Action Committees came the silencing of female voices in Palestinian political parties.

Women's participation in the first intifada 'brought a greater visibility to the women's committees.'¹¹ In 1987 the occupation was everywhere and the intifada was in every community. Women participated in civil disobedience alongside their male counterparts. Not all women's participation came in the form of formalised committees. 'Enthusiastic support for the uprising came from organised and unorganised women alike, but was ultimately sustained by widespread networks of Palestinian institutions – including women's committees and charitable societies....'¹² While women all over Palestine participated in what Penny Johnson and Eileen Kuttub call "'mother activism"... when older women sheltered youth and defied soldiers'¹³ the formal societies kept the intifada in motion from the top. The women's unions 'participated in distributing the secret communiqués of the Unified Leadership, delivered PLO funds for social relief, visited prisoners and their families, and performed other activities....'¹⁴ This involvement resulted in higher visibility of women's programs. After the 1988 ban of committees by Israel, women's groups were marginalised. The ban coupled with a shift from grassroots Palestinian leadership to outside, more formal leadership by the PLO led to the steady decline of women's political participation in the 1990s.

At the same time women's organisations were becoming more visible and vocalised opposition to the occupation politics within the Occupied Territories was evolving. The shift from internal territorial leadership to external leadership by those

in exile was exacerbated by the intifada. The pivot towards Yasser Arafat and the PLO within Israel and Palestine followed by the endorsement of the PLO by the international community proved fatal to the once vibrant women's unions and committees. The effect of the first intifada on women's movements was 'paradoxical'. 'Women were politically visible in clashes with Israeli soldiers and in leadership podiums... At the same time, the Intifada brought about a new political reality in the Occupied Territories that caused the Women's Committees' Movement to unravel.'¹⁵

As the peace process lurched forward after the first intifada, the women's leadership realised that 'Women had lost out and become politically marginalised after the first few months of the Intifada... there was an underlying realisation that grassroots mobilisation of women had slowed tremendously.'¹⁶ As evidenced by the second intifada, during the Oslo years women's grassroots civil participation came to a screeching halt. Even the charitable works provided and established by the women of the first generation were suspended. The PLO became responsible for the welfare of the Palestinian people and took over roles such as education and health care that used to be administered by women's organisations.

Towards the end of the first Intifada, as Hamas and the Islamic Jihad expanded, an event shocked the leadership of women's organisations and caused the eventual shift from political activism to social welfare. Palestine observes a conservative culture, but it was the seat of secular liberalisation in the Arab world in the period prior to the first intifada. The nationalist movement grew out of upper-middle class liberals. In fact, many of the women leaders Kawar studied espoused the importance of a secular nationalist movement. Between 1988 and 1989, however, the women's groups were met with conservative

backlash. What Kawar calls 'the veil affair'¹⁷, was a period when women, mostly in Gaza where Hamas had taken root, were forced to veil. This coercion was not written into law nor was it endorsed by the PLO. Initially, though, it was not opposed by the PLO nor did the women's organisations, based in the West Bank and Jerusalem, present a unified voice against the oppression of women. Women's activists in Gaza rejected the unofficial veiling, since they '...understood that the campaign was about the type of political and social future the intifada would lead to.'¹⁸ In 1989, after months of rampant discrimination and scare tactics, the PLO finally ended the campaign even if it was to be renewed with minimal success in 1990. This incident weakened the women's organisations and illustrated that nationalism could not be won at the expense of gender issues nor would gender issues ever follow the creation of a state. The two, political activation and gender equality, had to be realised simultaneously.

After the first intifada it was apparent that the national movement would not safeguard women's liberties and many in the women's organisations realised they could no longer ignore the gender inequalities within their society. Once Arafat returned to the Occupied Territories in 1994 and began appointing other exiled men and outsiders to government offices the gender imbalance was highlighted. 'The early stages of setting up self-rule confirmed that undoubtedly a deep tradition of sexism still prevails among the comrades in the national struggle, as evidenced by their initial appointments.'¹⁹ Aside from the appointment of Hanan Ashrawi as spokeswoman for Arafat during the peace process, which checked the gender box for the international community, few women were to be found in the PLO.

As the women's committees' movement died in the early 1990s, the fourth generation of academics started the women's centers movement. 'The central strategic goal of the women's centers movement is women's empowerment, and the agenda focuses on women's political education and women's rights.'²⁰ The fourth generation understood the failure of the earlier generations to further a rights agenda. Instead of working toward a rights agenda combined with the nationalist banner, the fourth generation has focused on women's issues and legal rights. Since women are still marginalised in the PLO and the Palestinian nationalist movement has yet to result in statehood, this approach has seen a decline in women's political and economic grassroots organisations. 'The mass activism that marked the women's movements' experience in the [first] intifada has largely been replaced by an NGO model of lobbying, advocacy and workshop-style educational and developmental activities....'²¹ The academic secular approach of the fourth generation is appealing to international organisations. Alienation from the PLO led many in the fourth generation to turn to NGOs for funding. The groups, already politically marginalised by the PLO, distanced themselves even more from the politics of the uncertain peace agreements in order to secure support and funding from the international community. 'This transformation has had contradictory effects on potentials for advancing gender equality in the transitional context.'²² Although the women's centers movement is led by feminists and is effective in reaching out to marginalised women in rural villages, the movement did not retain the grassroots mobilisation of the women's committees' movement that resulted in political and economic returns for the nationalist cause. Instead of giving women tools to fight the occupation, the women's center movement has prepared women for a democratic state that has not yet come to fruition. Although nationalism and rights

education are equally important, the women's movements in Palestine have been unable to supply both tools simultaneously.

The second intifada was a completely different experience than the first intifada. The hope of the first intifada culminated in 1993 on the White House lawn when Arafat and Rabin signed the Oslo accords. By late 2000, when the second intifada erupted, the hope of 1993 had diminished and was replaced by militarised fear. Not only did women's roles decrease in the second intifada, there were conditions present to heighten gender role stress.

Johnson and Kuttub draw contrast between the 'site of the struggle' in the first and second intifadas. 'The community, its street, neighborhoods and homes...'²³ was the site of the struggle. During the first intifada women, along with the rest of the community, were surrounded by the resistance. One could not avoid the first intifada. In contrast, due to the PLO's piecemeal control of the Occupied Territories, in the second intifada:

...the confrontations take place at border and crossing points between areas in the Oslo checkerboard... In this context, women's roles in direct resistance are minimal, given the absence of community context, the militarised environment and the differential impact of restrictions on mobility on women.²⁴

The militarisation of the second intifada versus the first intifada made the conflict more like a war than a struggle of resistance. 'The second intifada... is... closer to war, albeit an uneven one in condition of belligerent occupation, than it is to the 'low-intensity conflict' of the first intifada.'²⁵ The escalation of militarisation on both sides led to the decline of civil society in general. 'The greater level of militarisation and militarised violence, the less participation from women and the wider community.'²⁶ Whereas the first

intifada was the result of civil society growth and hope for state realisation of nationalist aspirations, the second intifada illuminated the broken dreams and repression of Palestinians during the Oslo period.

Just as the first intifada offered lessons to the early generations of women's leaders, the second intifada provided the women's centers movement with feedback. Their feminist agenda, sans national rhetoric and political involvement, was failing. By rejecting the previous generations' nationalistic discourse they had failed the essence of the women's struggle since 1948. The roles of women in the two intifadas mirrors the two approaches to feminist discourse in Palestine: the nationalist agenda and the gendered agenda. 'Many activists in the women's movement are deeply aware of the contrasts in women's roles in the two Palestinian intifadas – and clearly articulate the urgent need to develop new strategies that link their gender agendas to national goals and struggle.'²⁷

Beyond the need for a more unified agenda lies a deeper female struggle. When women are marginalised and banned from civil society, government, and, in the Palestinian case, from the peace process society as a whole suffers. With the steady decline of women's political networks, civil society in Palestine decreased. The instability and frustration of the Oslo period resulted in the second intifada. The lack of representation led to a decrease in grassroots political participation while political activism and representation relies on vibrant local civil society. This resulted in a weaker second intifada that did not force negotiations, as the first intifada had. 'Women's representation in the political arena is weakened by the absence of women's political or economic grassroots organisations....'²⁸ When women are weak, local and national communities are also weak.

A Palestinian activist of the fourth generation during the first intifada said, 'After all, if women on both sides of this conflict held real political power, we probably would have had peace a long time ago.'²⁹ How do women's organisations on both sides of the green line reclaim both the nationalist and feminist agenda? It is a daunting task but one that must be undertaken. There is no better time to usurp the dialogue. Mahmoud Abbas' PLO is slowly dying and Hamas is coming to a standstill with both the Israeli government and the PLO. This may be the beginning of the third intifada.³⁰ If that is the case, women must not let this intifada sink into despair. It is time to revive the grassroots women's committees' movements so those in the women's centers can put their rights training to use. Until the international community intervened during the Oslo period, the women of Palestine always found ways to organise around the obstacles of occupation. They can again harness their power to throw off the yoke of Israeli and international colonialism and insert themselves again as the leaders of their communities.

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