



Women of “Good Family”

Ellen Fleischmann, *The Nation and its “New” Women: The Palestinian Women’s Movement, 1920-1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003)

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The best thing the women are doing is declaring at every opportunity their desire to distance themselves from factionalism and quarrelling and to work for unity... Perhaps this may influence men and dampen if only a little their factional and clannish ardour.

— “The Women’s Movement”, *al Karmil*, 25 March 1935

Demonstration of the Ladies of Jaffa Yesterday—Magnificence, Organization and the Recitation of Nationalist, Fervent Speeches

— Headline in *Filastin*, 4 December 1947.

In her important and thoughtful study of the Palestinian women’s movement during

the British Mandate, Ellen Fleischmann contrasts the extensive coverage of Palestinian women, their movement and their issues in the Palestinian press of the day, including many contributions by women writers, with their almost total absence in histories of the Mandate. *The Nation and Its "New" Women* breaks this silence by inscribing "Palestinian women into their national narrative" (p. 3) through meticulous documentation, interviews with participants, and perceptive analysis.¹ But it does more. When women travel from Jaffa to Nablus in 1931 for a solidarity visit and rally after Mandate police fired into a large Nabulsi demonstration of men and women (p. 145) or a prominent Christian woman delivers a fiery nationalist speech in the Mosque of Umar while a leading Muslim woman does the same in the Holy Sepulchre in 1933,² the reader glimpses national bonds and identities in the process of creation.

This nation-making, however, had its exclusions as well as its solidarities. As Fleischmann rightly points out, the women's movement's muting of religious identity—well-illustrated in the ease of changing places as above—were rooted in the common class and educational experience of urban elite women. In Jerusalem in particular, the elite women who founded the Arab Women's Executive and the Arab Women's Association (AWA) in 1929 were often bound by ties of blood or marriage to the leaders of the Arab Higher Committee—a very closed circle indeed. And the shadowy presence of the nearly three-quarters of all Palestinian women who lived in villages is evoked by urban women activists mostly in "attitudes of both condescension and social responsibility toward village, peasant and poorer women," (p. 148) but rarely (or never) partnership. The more informal activism of peasant women, particularly notable in the Arab Revolt, lay outside the bounds of organization and had little place

in the women's movement's own narrative.³

Indeed, not all cities and not all elites were equal. Jerusalem was clearly the "centre of power" (p. 130), particularly in the women's movements' diplomacy and contacts with international organizations, including the Indian National Congress. The coastal cities of Jaffa and Haifa, however, tended to be more "original and militant in style, tone and tactics" (p. 151), with a particular focus on work on behalf of the many detainees incarcerated in Acre as the Arab Revolt took its course in the late 1930s.⁴ Jerusalem and the coastal cities thus tended to have the monopoly on representation and leadership, with the more provincial towns and cities having branches of the AWA but coming only rarely into the national picture.

Nonetheless, there is more to the story. Particularly in the women movement's turbulent first decade (1929-1939), as nationalist protest swelled throughout the early 1930s and the Arab Revolt erupted in 1936, forms of women's activism were quite fluid, and local leaders devised local tactics to mobilize women for nationalist activity. A rising middle class, including female students, also found a role: indeed, Fleischmann notes that middle class women, sometimes professionals, were often more active than members of the traditional elite. Nablus has its own intriguing history: a Society of the Arab Women's Union was founded in Nablus in 1921 (p. 109), well before the founding of the Arab Women's Association (of which Nablus also had an active branch) and sent delegates to the 1938 Cairo conference, as well as founding its own hospital in 1948. The early stages of the 1936 revolt mobilized women in diverse locations: Fleischmann records women's meetings and demonstrations in Tulkarem, Jenin, Qalqilya, Hebron and Beersheba, for example. (p. 128)

Although Jerusalem dominated in diplomacy, Haifa was the militant hotspot, due at least

partially to the radical leadership of Sadhij Nassar, a granddaughter of the Grand Bahai and wife (and sometimes co-editor) of Najib Nassar, editor of *Al Karmil*. Strike enforcement seemed to have been a speciality: in one incident, Nassar and other women, accompanied intriguingly by what a British report called “street Arabs”, smashed the windows of a non-striking bakery and the office of a British official. (p. 131) Nassar was finally arrested in March 1939 and detained at a women’s prison under the defence emergency regulations (another enduring feature of Palestinian life). A British official commented: “a sojourn of three months in a detention camp would be excellent. . . . Mrs. Nassar is an unmitigated nuisance and she should have been dealt with long ago.” (p. 132)

Both the forms and foci of women’s activism in the Mandate period resonate in the post-1967 “second wave” of the Palestinian women’s movement. Indeed, a reading of the present in the past is a temptation. There is something disconcertingly familiar about the constant flow of telegrams, petitions and memoranda sent to the British government, press or public, the League of Nations abroad or fact-finding commissions at home, dispatched “practically daily” (p.165) by activists in the Arab Women’s Association/ Arab Women’s Union. This mode of activism—what might be called “Appeals to Justice”—continues over half a century later with only slight changes in the address and with the computer replacing the fountain pen.

Other forms of public activity—from demonstrations to aid to prisoners—also have a contemporary feel, as does the strategy of both using and transgressing gender boundaries. Women’s presence in mixed demonstrations was a deliberate strategy (encouraged by men) to protect male protestors, and women consciously brought children to their own demonstrations

and evoked motherhood in their appeals. At the same time, surprised British officials, reporting on “the prominent part taken by women of good family” in mixed demonstrations in Jaffa, Jerusalem, and Haifa in 1933, noted that the women “did all they could to urge the male members of the demonstration to defy Police order” (p. 122). Rather deliciously, the same women then presented themselves demurely to the High Commissioner in Jaffa, declaring that the “traditions of Arab women,” and particularly Moslems, would “normally prevent them from calling on Your Excellency.” (p. 170) A turn in the 1940s towards bureaucratic institutionalization of the women’s movement and service-orientation (the dreaded word *maktab*, or office, appears for the first time in the Jerusalem Union) echoes a women’s movement trend of “NGOization” in the Oslo years—although we can still hope that another 1948 is not looming on the horizon.

While the Palestinian women leaders seemed more resistant to factionalism than their male counterparts (even when married to them!), the AWA finally split in 1938, reflecting both the prevailing Husayni-Nashashibi factional split, and perhaps other fault lines within the women’s movement. One issue, for example, seems to have been whether women should wear modern (Western) dress, an issue present in the politics of the Revolt, particularly its latter phase where rebels tried to enforce norms of behaviour and dress—attacking the male wearing of the tarbush and propagating the headscarf for women. The issue, however, was also entangled in discursive split in the women’s movement since its inception where a modernizing discourse of “women’s awakening” (and a concomitant call to end the “backwardness” of Arab women) coexisted rather uneasily with calls for women to defend men, home and family.

Cast in slightly different terms, this split remains a challenge for contemporary Palestinian women's movements, often dissatisfied with both sides of the coin, and strategically interested in overcoming its most important manifestation—the division between elite/middle class women and the majority. Like their counterparts in the Mandate, the overcoming of this divide has been most successful in periods of rising nationalist struggle, such as the initial period of the 1988 Palestinian intifada. And the spirit of the words (and deeds) of that died-in-the-wool radical, Sadhij Nassar, herself involved in efforts to organize peasant women, are still pertinent: "if women were really to liberate themselves.... It could never be achieved by a few upper class women doing social work." (p. 204)

Endnotes

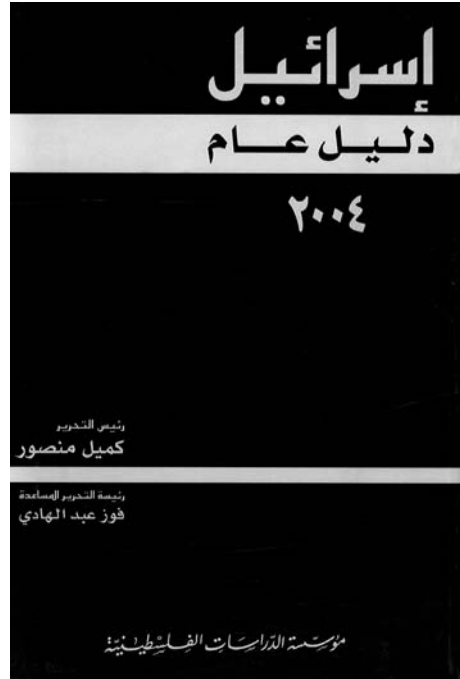
¹ Fleischmann deploys concepts of "female consciousness" and "relational feminism" to try to illuminate an indigenous Palestinian feminism and its relation to nationalism and colonialism.

² Joining in a national boycott of the visit of General Allenby to dedicate the new YMCA building in Jerusalem, a women's procession, marching in a "heavy downpour and intense cold", first heard Matiel Mughannam at the Mosque of Umar declare that the Arab nation would not accept the "injustice of this imperialist administration, and then marched to the Holy Sepulcher where Tarab Abd-al-Hadi denounced the "betrayal of the British" before Christ's tomb. (p. 121)

³ Fleischmann does discuss peasant women's activism and an interesting discussion may also be found in Swedenburg's essay on "The role of the Palestinian peasantry in the Great Revolt," in Pappé, ed. *The Israel/Palestine Question: Rewriting Histories*, (Routledge, 1999).

⁴ Acre also had an active branch of the AWA, led by Anisa al-Khadra and Asma Tuba, but its activities were less publicized, causing one writer in *al-Sirat al-Mustaqim*, to extol the union as "not inferior to the Jerusalem Union in its level of activity." (p. 150)

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