



THE EMERGENCE OF THE PALESTINIAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT, 1929–39

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In 1929, Palestinian women inaugurated their involvement in organized political activism with the founding of a women's movement. This article examines the first ten years of that movement, highlighting its contradictions, strategies, and achievements against the background of mounting political conflict and the Arab Revolt. Arguing that the movement, though not "feminist" in the contemporary sense, had a pronounced gender consciousness, the author shows how the women's implicit critique of gender norms constituted a major element in their oppositional strategies and tactics.

IN OCTOBER 1933, ARTHUR WAUCHOPE, the British high commissioner of Palestine, noted a "new and disquieting feature" in violent demonstrations taking place in Jerusalem and Jaffa: "the prominent part taken by women of good family as well as others." Reporting on the demonstrations, which resulted in the shooting deaths by police of twenty-six Palestinians, police protested that the women had assaulted them, kicked at the gates of government offices, and "did all they could to urge the male members of the demonstration to defy Police orders."¹ A few years later, on 29 July 1936, the newspaper *al-Difa'* reported that police in Acre attacked a group of demonstrating women, wounded several young girls carrying flags at the head of the procession, and arrested one Mrs. Hassun.²

These incidents show that, despite most historians' dismissive references to Palestinian women's activity during the Mandate period as "bourgeois," politically "unaware,"³ and "passive," these women had established an organized and often militant movement that was actively involved in social, political, and national affairs. Yet while the history of this women's movement remains marginalized⁴—and this at a time when writing on the contemporary political activities of Palestinian women has evolved virtually into a genre all its own, especially since the intifada—it in fact reveals much about Palestinian history in general. The evolution of the women's move-

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ment during the first decade of its existence reflected the ambivalence in Palestinian society about social transformations, changing gender definitions, and new constructions of Arab middle-class womanhood; about the relationship between the women's and the male-led nationalist movements; about middle-class women's role as "modern," future citizens in a nation-state; and even about the role of the colonial government.

The movement was also, arguably, the first articulation of Palestinian feminism. This early feminism defies easy analysis and has to be situated within the complex intersection of nationalism, feminism, and colonialism. Analogous to other women's movements in colonized historical contexts, Palestinian women did not define themselves solely by gender, nor did they perceive a sharp break between nationalism and feminism.⁵ The very *fact* of Palestinian Arab women *building*, sustaining, organizing, and even paying for a movement of their own, as opposed to reacting to events and then retiring into private life, constitutes a kind of feminist act when considered in its historical context.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE MOVEMENT

The "official" inauguration of an organized women's movement in Palestine occurred in the wake of the Wailing Wall incidents of 1929. The repercussions of the violence, which resulted in the deaths of 133 Jews and at least 116 Arabs, the arrest of 1,300 people (mostly Arabs), and the execution of three Arab men, had a profound effect on Palestinian society.⁶ The Palestinian national movement was galvanized by the riots. Initially targeting the British government and public opinion via delegations and written missives to London (and elsewhere), by the mid-1930s it was resorting to the militant tactics that led to the 1936–39 Arab Revolt.

It was in this context of escalating crisis that Palestinian women, responding to calls by the Arab Executive, the leadership of the nationalist movement at the time, decided to act by formally organizing their own self-consciously *political* movement. Charitable women's associations—established, funded, and run by women—had existed as early as 1910 and had filled important socioeconomic functions, particularly with the devastation and collapse following World War I.⁷ Palestinian women had also engaged early on in protests against British policies, though within a less organized framework. In 1920, for example, before the official onset of the Mandate, twenty-nine women from northern Palestine protested the Balfour Declaration in a letter to the chief administrator of the region, writing that "we Moslem and Christian ladies who represent other ladies of Palestine protest vigorously."⁸ Women participated in violent disturbances between Arabs and Jews that broke out in Jaffa in May 1921; held meetings, formed committees, and raised funds to support a delegation sent to London by the Arab Executive; and directly confronted the government in meetings, calling for independence and an end to Jewish immigration.⁹

But what happened on 26 October 1929 was of a different order: Palestinian women deliberately and self-consciously launched a *movement*, whose inaugural event was the convening in Jerusalem of the Palestine Arab Women's Congress. More than 200 women from all over the country attended the congress, which passed resolutions addressing the national problem and pledged to "support all resolutions, decisions, and demands of the Arab Executive."¹⁰ A smaller delegation absented itself from the congress to present the resolutions to the high commissioner at Government House, and upon their return all the participants held a demonstration in which they were driven in a convoy throughout the city, horns honking, visiting foreign consuls to whom they presented their resolutions. Finally, the women held a concluding session, where an Arab Women's Executive Committee (AWE)



The Palestinian women's delegation at Government House to present the Arab Women's Congress resolutions to the high commissioner. Second left is Matiel Mogannam, one of the movement's leaders.

was elected to execute and administer the congress's resolutions.¹¹ It is important to note that the congress activities were carefully planned in advance, showing the political sophistication of the organizers. The press was alerted beforehand. The AWE that was "elected" at the congress had actually been formed at preliminary meetings, which also drafted the resolutions that were "rubber stamped" at the congress.¹² Nor was the demonstration in the motor convoy a spontaneous event. The week before the congress, the organizers had announced their intention to demonstrate at Government House, but the high commissioner intervened, attempting to enlist "some of the Moslem leaders to dissuade the women from holding the demonstration." At first the men "declined to intervene," but, after the government threatened to stop the demonstration by force, they arranged to have it take

place, though without any speeches, in automobiles following a set itinerary and accompanied by policemen and soldiers.¹³

Although the resolutions of the congress and the AWE's subsequent activities focused primarily on the national issue, the movement clearly situated gender at the forefront of its political consciousness. One of the major goals of the congress was specifically to act as a catalyst for women all over Palestine to organize their own movement. In addition to the demands presented to the high commissioner, the congress resolved to participate in an "Arab women's national awakening [*nahda*] like other countries"; consider the congress the foundation of the women's movement in Palestine; make contact with other women's organizations in Egypt, Iraq, and Syria; unify the women's movement in Palestine by establishing Arab women's associations; encourage national trade and industry; and attempt to spread Arabic culture in Palestine.¹⁴

The gender consciousness of the movement's founders was muted, often inconsistent, and subtly subversive rather than explicitly "feminist" in the contemporary sense of the term, its gender critique often hidden within a manipulation of traditional gender norms. But it is important to stress that despite the charitable and socially oriented character of much of their work, the women explicitly conceived their movement in political terms, even while not considering themselves an auxiliary of the nationalist movement. By referring consistently to themselves as the *women's* movement, they self-consciously staked out a political position.

The AWE was the executive organ of the countrywide Arab Women's Association (AWA)¹⁵ that was launched by the October 1929 congress. The AWA's aims, as articulated in its founding bylaws, were to "elevate the standing of women" through economic and educational development and to assist "national institutions" by supporting any "enterprise" that would benefit the country economically, socially, and politically.¹⁶ Soon after the congress, the AWE called a meeting to organize the Jerusalem Women's Association as a branch of the AWA. Although affiliates were eventually established in Acre, Gaza, Haifa, Jaffa, Nablus, Nazareth, and Ramla, the Jerusalem branch was the dominant chapter and semiofficial center from which the AWE operated.¹⁷ Indeed, the distinction between the AWE and the Jerusalem AWA during the early 1930s was nebulous, since in practice the AWE in those early years constituted the leadership both of the women's *movement* in Palestine and the Jerusalem AWA.¹⁸

THE LEADERSHIP OF THE MOVEMENT

Sources differ on the exact membership of the Jerusalem-dominated AWE. Those who definitely belonged, having been mentioned in more than one source, are Tarab 'Abd al-Hadi, Katrin Dib, Shahinda Duzdar, Fatima al-Husayni, Khadija al-Husayni, Na'imati 'Alami al-Husayni, Anisa al-Khadra, Wahida al-Khalidi, Matiel Mogannam, Diya Nashashibi, Zahiyya Nashashibi,

Melia Sakakini, Zlikha Shihabi, and Mary Shihada.¹⁹ These women represented an interesting cross section of prominent and not-so-prominent families, the majority from Jerusalem. Indeed, most of the women involved in the women's movement were from the urban, educated, middle, and wealthier classes that constituted the elite in Palestine. They came from families whose men were merchants, landowners, *'ulama*, or professionals, such as teachers, lawyers, medical doctors, and civil servants in the Mandate government. A number of women on the AWE were professionals in their own right: Melia Sakakini, for example, was a teacher and school headmistress, and Mary Shihada wrote for her husband's newspaper, *Mirat al-Sharq*.

A significant number of the most prominent women leaders were either young and single or young and married.²⁰ Initially, married women were more visible as official spokeswomen, chairs of large meetings, speakers at demonstrations, and signatories of memoranda and telegrams. But the single women ultimately remained in the movement for longer periods and dominated the leadership positions to a large degree, as is illustrated by their lengthy tenures in executive positions. Long-term Arab Women's Union (AWU) president Zlikha Shihabi and AWA president Zahiyya Nashashibi, for example, were both unmarried, as was Nashashibi's predecessor, Shahinda Duzdar.

It is clear from the substance of the women's correspondence and contacts with the government that they were extremely well-informed about daily political developments as well as about the internal machinations of British diplomacy and Mandate politics. A distinctive attribute of the AWE was the connection between it and the (male) Arab Executive, which led the national movement until its dissolution in 1934 and subsequent replacement by the Arab Higher Committee. Five women²¹ on the AWE were married to members of the Arab Executive: Tarab 'Abd al-Hadi ('Auni), Na'imati al-Husayni (Jamal), Anisa al-Khadra (Subhi), Matiel Mogannam (Mughannam), and Mary Shihada (Bulos).²² Melia Sakakini, who was unmarried, was the sister of Khalil Sakakini, also a member of the Arab Executive.²³ The president of the AWE, Wahida al-Khalidi, was the wife of Husayn Fakhri al-Khalidi, elected mayor of Jerusalem in 1934 and a member of the Arab Higher Committee as of its creation in 1936. Other women were married to government officials who had access to power and information. Later, during the Arab Revolt, some of the women's husbands were imprisoned and/or exiled by the British.

Clearly the women discussed politics with their husbands, family friends, and male relatives and learned through them what was going on within the nationalist movement. Still, it is not justified, as some writers have done, to dismiss the women's leadership—and indeed the entire movement—as “merely” the relatives of the male nationalist leaders. Indeed, despite a certain degree of cooperation with the national movement,²⁴ the women's movement was keen to remain clearly separate, with its own meetings, demonstrations, and subsidiary institutions, and sometimes fought to protect its

distinct identity. For example, when the Nablus women organized a local chapter after the 1929 congress, men intervened in the meeting and attempted to take control of the funds the women had collected. The women immediately resolved that their organization would be independent and "never allow men to join," but would "only accept their useful suggestions and their valuable advice, as they would accept the same from the ladies."²⁵

The fact that the movement was limited to upper- and middle-class women is not surprising. The peasant women who constituted the overwhelming majority of the population during this period had neither the literacy skills nor the time to participate, and the middle- and upper-class women who dominated the movement did not actively recruit beyond their own ranks.²⁶ It must also be said that, above and beyond their genuine sense of social responsibility, the women's leadership was not without a certain condescension toward village, peasant, and poorer women. Matiel Mogannam revealed elite women's sense of political as well as social hegemony²⁷ when she described how the movement organized in the villages: "They brought the poor women to us and we would tell them you should do this or that to better yourself, your children."²⁸ Zahiyya Nashashibi described the AWA's work with village women as "spreading nationalist principles among the villagers [and] working toward raising their morale."²⁹

Despite the relative homogeneity in terms of class, there were certain "cultural" differences within the women's movement, and notably differences over such issues as traditional or "modern" (i.e., Western) customs or dress. A 1936 press interview with Matiel Mogannam is telling in this respect:

All English women think Arab women are uncultured. They believe they speak only Arabic, that they all wear veils and rush away at the sight of a man. How I wish I could take English women around to see my cultured Arab friends. How surprised they would be—European clothes, silk stockings, highheeled shoes, permanently waved hair, manicured hands.³⁰

This type of attitude was not representative of all the women in the movement and may even have occasioned some tension. Historical photographs of the leadership show some wearing face and/or head coverings.³¹

In terms of religious composition, the movement was decidedly nonsectarian. Both Muslims and Christians held leadership positions, though the Christians were better represented than their share of the population at large: The AWE counted four Christians among its ten to fourteen members.³² Nor was religion in any way an issue in the movement, as is clear from the press and documentary record as well as interviews. The "Muslim-Christian" tie

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was evoked repeatedly, and the movement constantly emphasized that “Muslim women share[d] . . . with their sisters, the Christian women” in the “national women’s awakening.”³³

Throughout the first half of the 1930s, the women had generally managed to transcend the dissensions that increasingly characterized the male-led national movement, whose effectiveness was seriously undermined by the bitter division over political tactics and, notably, the rivalry between the Husayni and Nashashibi factions. Indeed, the women’s movement had even been elevated in the press as exemplars of unity. An admiring 1935 article in *al-Karmil*, for example, commends the women for “distan[c]ing themselves from factionalism and quarreling” and expresses the hope that “Perhaps this may influence men and dampen if only a little their factional and clannish ardor.”³⁴ But the seams of harmony had already been strained before the Arab Revolt,³⁵ and the women’s movement, in an atmosphere of rising political tensions and with many of its leaders married or related to men allied with the competing factions,³⁶ could not but be affected.

By late 1938, the AWA-Jerusalem split into two groups: the Arab Women’s Association and the Arab Women’s Union.³⁷ Details about the split are elusive, and informants were reluctant to discuss it even almost sixty years after the event, indicating the power the myth of national unity still exerts within Palestinian national memory.³⁸ However, there was agreement that the fracture was related to the Husayni-Nashashibi rivalry, though some also suggested that a contributing factor may have been a “profound divergence between conservative and progressive tendencies within the women’s movement,” as reflected in conflict over the feminist versus nationalist content of the movement and manifested by disagreement over whether women should wear “modern” (i.e., Western) dress.³⁹ Whatever the causes, it would appear that the AWU, aligned with the Husayni faction, evolved into the more “political” of the two groups⁴⁰ and that it was this group that subsequently played the dominant role. At all events, despite the breach, actual enmity and hostility were muted, at least publicly, and women from both groups continued to work together.

LOCAL ORGANIZATION AND AFFILIATES

The various affiliates of the women’s movement were organizationally fluid and eclectic. Many local women’s organizations predated the 1929 congress. But the momentum of the congress resulted in conscious attempts to affiliate these already existing groups with the movement—initially as represented by the AWA—and to help found new chapters. The Jerusalem women, for example, dispatched a delegation to Nazareth in 1930 to help establish a group there, while the Haifa women’s group traveled to Jinin, Nablus, and Tulkarm in 1935 to do the same.⁴¹

Cooperative relations existed between the various organizations. Groups from one city would provide solidarity and mutual aid to others, particularly

after an incident, as when women's delegations from Jerusalem and Jaffa visited Nablus after violent demonstrations in 1931, delivering speeches and visiting the wounded with the Nablus AWA.⁴² Women's organizations from different towns would often join forces, as when the women of Jerusalem participated with the Jaffa women in the October 1933 demonstrations.⁴³ On the other hand, competition occasionally arose, particularly over the prominent role played by Jerusalem.

The Jerusalem AWA (and, after the split of 1938, the AWU) played a more diplomatic role in the overall activities of the movement. It met most frequently with government officials and visiting dignitaries and had a network of contacts with international organizations, such as other women's associations and nationalist groups like the Indian National Congress. It is unclear to what extent the Jerusalem organization directed and centralized the activities of the other groups in the 1930s, but clearly it dominated the national scene, particularly in terms of representing the movement externally. This situation appears to have continued after the split, with the more political AWU, sanctioned by the main party of the national movement, henceforth the main force. It would seem that most regional organizations operated (loosely) under its bailiwick.

Despite Jerusalem's lead, which was natural given its proximity to the seat of government and access to information from the corridors of Mandatory power, the other affiliates developed distinct identities and were sometimes more original and militant in their organizational styles. This was particularly true of the Haifa Arab Women's Union, led by the dynamic Sadiyah Nassar, wife of Najib Nassar, the editor and owner of *al-Karmil*.⁴⁴ The Haifa organization was distinguished for its radicalism, which resulted on more than one occasion in the arrest of its leadership for actions such as smashing shop windows and intimidating shopkeepers (in one incident pouring paraffin over the produce of vegetable merchants) who did not observe the 1936 general strike.⁴⁵ The Haifa AWU openly defied not only the British but also the male-led national movement. In 1933, for example, both the Islamic Society in Haifa and Musa Kadhim Husayni, head of the Arab Executive, bowed to government pressure and canceled plans for demonstrations to mark Balfour Day, calling instead for a day of silence. The Haifa AWU continued with its demonstration, however, carrying children with them (a favorite tactic) and taking them around to government offices and foreign consulates.⁴⁶

All the major cities and towns had fairly active chapters of the AWA/AWU, although the ones that received the most publicity were the Acre, Haifa, Jaffa, Jerusalem, and Nablus branches. The women in the coastal areas were particularly energetic in their work on behalf of detainees, whose numbers swelled during the Arab Revolt. The major detention camp was in Acre, and women from Acre, Haifa, Jaffa, and Ramla were tireless in their efforts to provide food and clothing to prisoners, demand releases and family visits, and protest death sentences. The coastal chapters of the AWA/AWU also were among the most militant. Jaffa women were arrested for curfew viola-

tions and sparked massive demonstrations of 5,000 people more than once.⁴⁷ The Acre group, which frequently coordinated its activities with the Haifa branch, held lively, massive demonstrations, particularly during the Arab Revolt.

Local leaders developed their own followings, achieving prominence beyond their regions. While competition existed, particularly when elections were held, the prolonged and sustained commitment of certain local leaders shows the stability of the local chapters and the movement as a whole. Leaders such as Haifa's Sadiyah Nassar and Miryam al-Khalil, Acre's Anisa al-Khadra and Asma Tubi, Jaffa's 'Adele 'Azar, Nablus' Miryam Hashim, and Jerusalem's coterie of stalwarts—Duzdar, Mogannam, Nashashibi, Sakakini, Shihabi—were distinguished for their activity over many years.⁴⁸

TACTICS, STRATEGIES, AND ACTION

The tactics and strategies of the women's movement were informed by its complex relationships to three entities: public opinion (both Palestinian and international), the male-led nationalist movement, and the British colonial government. The women were conscious of how they publicly presented both their cause and themselves as its champions, playing on what they understood to be the cultural assumptions (sexual, religious, and class) of these three entities and manipulating them for their own ends. The women could be "traditional" when it suited their purposes, yet they also projected a positive self-image constructed of their identity as modern, bourgeois citizens of a future state. Not surprisingly, their use of these different discourses varied depending upon the audience. When addressing Western and Arab public opinion, they projected the active, "faithful" woman citizen,⁴⁹ whereas, in their interactions with government authorities, they invoked an essentialized womanhood and "tradition."

One of their major activities was participating in demonstrations, mixed and segregated. In April 1933, the Jerusalem women, joining a nationwide boycott of the visit of General Allenby to dedicate the new YMCA building, staged a highly symbolic and emotionally charged demonstration during which a Christian (Matiel Mogannam) delivered a speech at the Mosque of 'Umar, and a Muslim (Tarab 'Abd al-Hadi) did the same before Christ's tomb in the Holy Sepulcher. Police noted the unusual presence at this protest of peasant women.⁵⁰

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Women's frequent participation in demonstrations signified their willingness to engage in "unladylike" and even violent behavior, thereby defying cultural norms that prescribed limited public visibility of women.

In mixed demonstrations, the women marched surrounded by men, confounding the British practice of separating the sexes during demonstrations so as to deal with the men by force while avoiding physical harm to the

women. The police were well aware of the demonstrators' tactical intentions, and following the 1933 demonstrations police depositions complained that "the women are brought into the plan of campaign solely for the purpose of embarrassing the Police."⁵¹ And indeed, during those demonstrations the government's worst fears were realized: the British were perceived as attacking defenseless women, provoking male outrage and upsetting "tradition."⁵²

As of 1935-36, as the strength of the women's movement developed, women increasingly staged their own, large, segregated demonstrations. This might have been an attempt to attract larger crowds of women to sex-segregated demonstrations, thus dramatizing the events and increasing their impact.

The women showed considerable sophistication in their use of the press, dramatizing their movement through, among other things, repeatedly emphasizing the novelty of women engaged in certain activities for the "first" time. The press eagerly picked up on this. Press reports of the 1929 congress, for example, all heralded the event as "the first time in history" Arab women had organized a women's congress or entered the world of politics.⁵³ Such phrasing came to distinguish the discourse about women in every situation, and articles proliferated about the "first Muslim woman dentist," the "first Arab woman to be conferred with the honor of arrest in Palestine," "the first time an Arab lady addressed [a particular] club," "the first time that Tulkarm ladies demonstrated," "the first time that Arab women in this district [Beer-sheba] shared men's struggle," and so forth.⁵⁴ (Analogous to the "first time" phrase, frequent use of the words "women" or "ladies" in headlines about demonstrations had a similarly sensational effect.) There are also strong indications that the women fed the press "inside" news. On the very morning that the 1929 congress was to take place, for example, *Filastin*-English published a detailed article about it that could only have come from prior briefings.

All the newspapers, regardless of political orientation, were enthusiastic partisans of the women's movement. A remarkable, mutually cozy relationship developed, and the press reported extensively on the women's movement. In May 1936, the first month of the six-month general strike, for example, there were more than fifty articles about women's involvement in *Filastin* and *al-Difa'* alone. The women's statements, telegrams, and other missives often were quoted *in extenso*. The women, for their part, praised and supported the press (even materially).

One of the shared agendas of the press and the women was the desire to project a positive image of the active "modern" (elite) Arab woman to garner sympathy and solidarity abroad. While this effort targeted the Arab world as well, it was especially aimed at the West, particularly the British public, which could influence the colonial government. An excerpt from the English-language version of *Filastin* expresses this aim eloquently:

It is gratifying to be able to inform the West and Westerners that an end is being put to their misconceptions of the Arab woman and her alleged slavish status. The Arab woman is not, as most Westerners think, a veiled creature hidden behind screens in voluptuous Hareems of wealthy Pashas and Beys. She is an enlightened and free citizen enjoying equal rights and privileges as her mate, and participating in his political activities.⁵⁵

The contrast between the effusive praise of the women's movement in the press and the relative silence on the part of the male nationalist leadership could indicate both more progressive views on the overall issue of gender among intellectuals, as represented by the press, and, perhaps, fears of a potential threat to male hegemony on the part of the nationalist leaders. At all events, newspapers that criticized the mainstream Husayni-dominated national movement simultaneously praised and encouraged the women's activities, even though many if not most of these activities explicitly supported the mainstream movement.⁵⁶

Indeed, the press was rife with comparisons between the women's and men's nationalist activities, to the detriment of the latter. One article noted during the Arab Revolt that the women sent more telegrams protesting British policies than the men. Another described how a women's demonstration in Haifa went to Government House "just as the ladies planned for it to, unlike the men's demonstration which never oversteps the government's boundaries." Yet another mentions a pamphlet sent out by Haifa women calling upon the men to unite, adding that "these women were the only ones who raised their voices against the government when some of the men were meeting with the district governor."⁵⁷

Another major activity of the women's movement involved the virtually daily dispatch of telegrams, letters, and memoranda to the British government, sympathizers in the British press and public, the League of Nations Permanent Mandates Commission, Arab kings and heads of state, and other women's organizations throughout the world. Their tireless recourse to written protest, besides reflecting their education and belief in the power of the written word, also reflects the somewhat naive faith—widespread among their class at the time—in "British justice."⁵⁸ The AWA, in its correspondence, tried to shame the British into living up to this high-minded concept.⁵⁹ But for all their missives, which generally were careful to differentiate between the "British public" or "nation" and the government in a kind of propaganda war, the elite women who ran the movement could not bring themselves to sustained expressions of hostility toward the British, revealing their ambiguous relationship with the colonizers and all that they represented.

Nonetheless, the women showed the same sophistication in their dealings with the British government that they displayed with the press. They understood the British government's self-image of embodying "British justice" and

utilized this trope to hoist the government with its own petard. They also exploited the British government's horror of upsetting the religious, cultural, and social status quo in Palestine. One of their major weapons was thus repeatedly to invoke transgressions against "tradition" and "religion," calling attention to incidents in which "sacred Arab traditions [were] violated, mosques desecrated and [the] Holy Quran trodden upon."⁶⁰

Not only did the AWA prey upon British concern for Muslim sensibilities, they also played the Christian card, appealing to Britain's Christian identity while at the same time implicitly (or even explicitly) comparing British rule unfavorably with previous, non-Christian authorities. In a meeting with the high commissioner in the wake of the 1933 disturbances, for example, Melia Sakakini declared, "I feel very reluctant as a Christian to express my deep indignation. . . . We lived under the Turks for 1,300 years and we were not molested. No such atrocities were committed then as are committed now."⁶¹

The most frequent issues raised by the movement, however, were transgressions against the "traditions" of seclusion and segregation, practices that this group rarely observed. The same ladies who had kicked the gates of government offices and stood on a balcony "inflaming" [*sic*] the (male) crowd during the 1933 Jaffa disturbances would demurely declare, at meetings with the high commissioner, that "the traditions of Arab women, especially the Moslems among them . . . would normally prevent them from calling on Your Excellency or any officer of Government."⁶² This particular line was used repeatedly to excoriate the government and turn accusations around; thus women could blame the government for "forcing" them to engage in protest activities that sometimes turned violent.

Similarly, the women referred to the "traditional rights" of Arab women "to live in dignity and away from the mixing with men."⁶³ By implying that tradition conferred upon them special rights, the women subversively transformed the ostensibly oppressive custom of sexual segregation into a "right," which contrived to make British violations of this custom seem barbarous and which called into question "British justice" and the moral authority that supposedly legitimized colonial rule. In so doing, they turned gender limitations upside down, converting them into a tactical weapon.

The British authorities, for their part, despite politely worded professions of respect for the "ladies," utilized their own manipulation of tradition to ensure that the women did not step out of line. Instead of directly restricting and controlling the women, the government frequently delegated the task of enforcement to Arab men. In employing the tactic of patriarchal collusion, the British government ironically coerced the men into upholding and enforcing not only traditional gender norms but also *its* own restrictions on women. The government's attempt to enlist "some of the Moslem leaders" to stop the women's planned demonstration at the time of the 1929 congress has already been mentioned. Another such instance took place in 1936, when the government, in trying to prevent the Jaffa AWA from holding a meeting, delegated officials to negotiate not with the women but with the

(male) national committee. Its attempt to force the national committee to prevent the public from mixing with the women when they entered and exited the meeting backfired, however, and a massive demonstration went forward.⁶⁴

The British government felt compelled to respond to international pressure produced by the publicity of the women's movement. Government files are studded with letters from groups responding to appeals by the women's movement concerning government measures. The government replied defensively, sometimes issuing special reports, as in the case of the 1933 incidents and the 1939 arrest and detention without trial of Sadiyah Nassar.⁶⁵

CONCLUSION

The brutal crushing by the British of the Arab Revolt in 1939 almost totally neutralized the Palestinian national movement, while the onset of World War II initiated a period of deceptive calm in Palestine that was to last until the mid-1940s. The women's movement, in keeping with the times, temporarily turned away from political activism and concentrated instead on social and developmental activities—founding medical clinics and schools for girls, as well as sports and literary clubs, and deepening its involvement with the pan-Arab women's movement. But as the Jewish-Arab conflict escalated after the war, the women's movement again found itself drawn into politics. By this time, however, the movement's leadership had become almost institutionalized, using its tighter organization to coordinate more closely with its constituent elements and the male-led movement in the various protests and in organizing medical and financial support for the fighters. With the chaos of the 1948 war, the women's movement, like most other Palestinian institutions, was fragmented and dispersed, as individual women got caught up in family and communal survival.

Given the political turbulence of the times and the primacy of the national cause, it is not surprising that the movement during this period was not "feminist" insofar as it did not strive for political, legal, social, and economic equality with men. Yet the women in the movement demonstrated their own indigenous feminism, manipulating gender norms in order to subvert and challenge power structures. While pushing against the boundaries within which gendered social practices confined them, they calibrated their militancy to the particular times of crisis to which they responded. Afsaneh Najmabadi has suggested that women's ostensibly conservative discourses in this period could be deemed simultaneously "disciplinary and emancipatory," accepting and in some cases embracing seemingly repressive ideas and practices and transforming them in the process for their own emancipatory purposes.⁶⁶ Palestinian women, in simultaneously articulating support for "tradition" and transgressing its norms, chose to utilize it as a tool that, ironically, empowered them to behave radically in the name of its defense.

The ten-year period from the movement's inception in 1929 until the end of the Arab Revolt was a turbulent, energetic, and heady era for the women's movement. Through this movement, Palestinian women of the Mandate years provided a kind of training ground for women to enter public activity. Some have argued that the way women organized in this period "would *not* have led to substantial gains in women's status in the long run."⁶⁷ I would argue the opposite; it is *precisely* the legacy of the historical women's movement that set a precedent for and enabled contemporary Palestinian women's activists to mark a place for themselves in nationalist and feminist politics.

NOTES

1. High Commissioner (HC) to Cunliffe-Lister (Secretary of State for the Colonies), 23 October 1933, British Colonial Office Correspondence (CO) 733 239/5, Part I; Inspector-General of Police to Chief Secretary, 14 October 1933, CO 733 239/5, Part II; HC to Cunliffe-Lister, *Palestine Gazette Supplement: Report of the Commissioner*, 7 February 1934, CO 733 346/8.

2. *al-Difa'*, 29 July 1936.

3. Ghazi al-Khalili, *al-Mar'a al-Filastiniyya wa al-Thawra* (Beirut: PLO Research Center, 1977), p. 80.

4. For a discussion of why this is so, see Rosemary Sayigh, "Femmes palestiniennes: Une histoire en quête d'historiens" *Revue d'études Palestiniennes*, no. 23 (Spring 1987), pp. 13-33; and the introduction in *A Social History of Women and Gender in the Modern Middle East*, ed. Margaret L. Meriwether and Judith E. Tucker (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999), p. 9.

5. Concepts of feminism have been dominated by Western definitions focusing on gender inequality without taking into account colonial situations in which "various systemic networks of class, race, (hetero)sexuality, and nation" intersect in a complex fashion. See Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism," in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 13.

6. Yehoshua Porath, *The Emergence of the Palestinian National Movement, 1928-1929* (London: Frank Cass, 1974), pp. 258-73.

7. For more on these and other early women's societies, see Asma Tubi, *Abtr wa Majd* (Beirut: Matba'at Qalalat, 1966); and Ellen Fleischmann, "The Nation and Its 'New' Women: Feminism, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Palestinian Women's Movement" (Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University, 1996), chap. 4.

8. Letter to the Administrator, O.E.T.A., from Arab Women in the North, 23 March 1920, Israel State Archives, RG 2 30/I.

9. Intelligence report by Col. Commandant J. Bryon and Captain C. D. Brunton, 12 May 1921, CO 733 13; Ann Lesch, *Arab Politics in Palestine, 1917-1939: The Frustration of a Nationalist Movement* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 205; *al-Karmil*, 17, 21, and 31 December 1921 and 8 November 1922.

10. Sir John Chancellor to Lord Passfield, Colonial Secretary, 31 October 1929, Papers of Sir John Robert Chancellor, Rhodes House, Bodleian Library, Oxford, 31 October 1929; *Mirat al-Sharq*, 28 October 1929. See Matiel Mogannam, *The Arab Woman and the Palestine Problem* (London: Herbert Joseph, 1937), pp. 70-75, for the complete list of resolutions.

11. Mogannam, *Arab Woman*, pp. 70-76; *Filastin*, 29 October 1929; *al-Strat al-Mustaqim*, 28 October 1929; *Mirat al-Sharq*, 28 October 1929; *al-Mawsu'a al-Filastiniyya*, vol. 2 (Damascus: Ha'iyya al-Mawsu'a al-Filastiniyya, 1984), p. 212; and Julie Peteet, *Gender in Crisis: Women and the Palestinian Resistance Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 44-47.

12. See *Mirat al-Sharq*, 23 October 1929, and *Filastin-English*, 26 October 1929.

13. Mogannam, *Arab Woman*, pp. 73–74; Sir John Chancellor to Lord Passfield, 31 October 1929; *Filastin*, 29 October 1929.

14. *Mirat al-Sharq*, 28 October 1929.

15. This group was also called the Arab Women's Committee. There are numerous discrepancies in the name of this group, possibly due to differences between Arabic and English or to inaccurate translations. The press, which along with Mogannam's book and British documents constitute the major written source on the women's movement, tends to use either al-Jam'iyya al-Nisa'iyya al-'Arabiyya (the Arab Women's Association) or Jam'iyyat al-Sayyidat al-'Arabiyyat (the Arab Ladies Association).

16. Mogannam, *Arab Woman*, p. 77.

17. Khadija Abu 'Ali, *Muqaddimat hawla al-Waqi'a al-Mar'a wa Tajribatiha fi al-Thawra al-Filastiniyya* (Beirut: General Union of Palestinian Women, 1975), p. 45.

18. By the mid-1930s, the AWE had ceased to have a separate existence, having been largely subsumed by the Jerusalem AWA.

19. See Appendix I in Fleischmann, "The Nation and Its 'New' Women," pp. 360–64.

20. Approximately five members of the ten to fourteen women in the AWE were unmarried. It is difficult to obtain accurate biographical information about women in this period, but the ages of some of the AWE members are known. In 1929, of the unmarried women, Shahinda Duzdar was 23, and Zlikha Shihabi was 26. Melia Sakakini, at 39, was older than most of her single colleagues. Of the married women, Na'imati al-Husayni was 34, and Matiel Mogannam was 29.

21. Peteet (*Gender in Crisis*, p. 48) writes that nine of the women were married to Arab Executive Committee members, but I could not confirm this after checking lists of the Arab Executive in Porath (*Emergence*, pp. 383–87) or in Bayan Nuwayhid al-Hut, *al-Qiyyadat wa al-Mu'assasat al-Siyasiyya fi Filastin, 1917–1948* (Beirut: Dar al-Huda, 1986), p. 866.

22. Though her last name should be transliterated as Mughannam (her husband's name was Mughannam Mughannam), I use the English spelling she used as author of her book to avoid confusion.

23. There is some confusion in the sources about when Sakakini became involved in the movement and therefore whether she was a member of the AWE. Several scholars claim that it was she and Shihabi who founded the Palestinian women's union in 1921, but none cites a source. See Abu 'Ali, *Muqaddimat*, p. 44; Nuha Abu Daleb, "Palestinian Women and Their Role in the Revolution," *Peuples méditerranéens*, no. 5 (October–December 1978), p. 36; al-Khalili, *al-Mar'a al-Filastiniyya*, p. 77; Peteet, *Gender in Crisis*, p. 44.

24. The relationship between the Palestinian women's movement and the nationalist movement is little documented either in primary or secondary sources, one exception being Akram Zu'aytir's report on the 1938 Eastern Women's Conference in Cairo, in *Yawmiyyat Akram Zu'aytir: al-Haraka al-Wataniyya al-Filastiniyya, 1935–1939* (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1980), pp. 397–98, 451, 471–76. *al-Mawsu'a al-Filastiniyya* (vol. 2, pp. 211–19) makes sweeping statements about women being a constituent part of the national movement, but without citing primary sources. Interestingly, historical memory concerning the extent of cooperation differs according to gender. Men who were interviewed tended to downplay or even deny coordination between the movements (author's interviews with Raja al-'Isa and Hasan Istambuli), while women interviewed contended that the men encouraged the movement, sometimes combining forces and coordinating activities (author's interviews with Samira Khuri, Madiha Nusseibeh, and Samah Nusseibeh). The evidence would appear to bear out the women's claims. See Fleischmann, "The Nation and Its 'New' Women," chap. 6.

25. *al-Sirat al-Mustaqim*, 24 November 1929.

26. When I asked Samah Nusseibeh, president of the Arab Women's Association in 1993, about the AWA's membership practices during the Mandate, she replied, "It was open to the public, but . . . no one was interested in joining the society except the . . . well-known notables." Interview, Jerusalem, 23 November 1993.

27. Peteet, *Gender in Crisis*, p. 56.

28. Mogannam, interview with Julie Peteet and Rosemary Sayigh, Washington,

DC, 10 August 1985. I warmly thank them for allowing me to use this interview.

29. *Jam'iyyat al-Sayyidat al-'Arabiyyat al-Quds*, pamphlet prepared by Yaqub al-'Ansari and Ibrahim al-Husayni (Jerusalem: 1980), p. 19.

30. *Palestine Post*, 7 December 1936.

31. Among the Jerusalem leadership only a minority used such coverings, but women in areas such as Nablus and Tulkarm, for example, tended to be more conservative in their dress. There was also a certain differentiation in matters of dress by age.

32. They were Katrin Dib, Matiel Mogannam, Melia Sakakini, and Mary Shihada.

33. *al-Difa'*, 15 May 1936; *al-Jami'a al-'Arabiyya*, 16 April 1933.

34. "The Women's Movement," *al-Karmil*, 25 March 1935.

35. See, Peteet, *Gender in Crisis*, pp. 48-49; Rosemary Sayigh, "Palestinian Women: Triple Burden, Single Struggle," *Peuples méditerranéens*, nos. 44-45 (July-December 1988), p. 249. For more about women's role in the revolt, see Ted Swedenburg, *Memories of Revolt: The 1936-1939 Rebellion and the Palestinian National Past* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); and Fleischmann, "The Nation and Its 'New' Women," pp. 204-26.

36. Of the AWE members, Na'imati al-Husayni's husband, Jamal, was aligned with the Husayni faction, while Matiel Mogannam's husband was secretary of the Nashashibi-dominated National Defense party. The affiliations of the husbands of other AWE members were as follows: 'Auni 'Abd al-Hadi, Istiqlal; Subhi al-Khadra, Istiqlal; and Bulos Shihada, sympathetic to the National Defense party. Porath, *Emergence*, pp. 383-87; al-Hut, *al-Qiyyadat wa al-Mu'assasat*, p. 866. Other AWE members from the two rival *hamulas* included Fatima al-Husayni, Khadija al-Husayni, and Zahiyya Nashashibi; Diya Nashashibi may have been an AWE member. All of these women were single.

37. The actual date is difficult to ascertain, since women from the different groups apparently worked together on and off even after the split.

38. See Swedenburg, *Memories of Revolt*; and Ellen Fleischmann, "Selective Memory, Gender and Nationalism: Pales-

tinian Women Leaders in the Mandate Period," *History Workshop Journal* 47 (Spring 1999), pp. 141-58.

39. Sayigh, "Palestinian Women," p. 250.

40. Interviews with author: Salma Husayni, Jerusalem, 19 April 1993; Sa'ida Jarallah, Jerusalem, 19 April 1994; Amina al-Kadhimi and Hasan Istambuli, Jerusalem, 22 April 1993; Madiha Nusseibeh, Jericho, 25 April 1999. Major leaders who remained with the AWA were Shahinda Duzdar, Matiel Mogannam, and Zahiyya Nashashibi; those who were allied with the AWU were Melia Sakakini and Zlikha Shihabi.

41. *al-Jam'ia al-'Arabiyya*, 1 January 1930; *al-Strat al-Mustaqim*, 14 March 1935.

42. *Filastin*, 27 and 29 August 1931. This mutual aid was typical; the Haifa AWU sent aid to victims of violence in Nablus via the Nablus AWU in 1939 during the Revolt, for example.

43. *Filastin*, 27 October 1933.

44. Though Nassar was apparently never president of the Haifa AWU, holding instead the position of secretary, she dominated the organization.

45. Telegram from the HC to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 6 June 1936; diary of Sir Thomas Scrivenor, 23 April 1938, papers of Scrivenor, Rhodes House, Oxford; *Palestine Post*, 7 June 1936 and 24 and 26 April 1938.

46. *al-Karmil*, 8 November 1933.

47. *Filastin*, 28 January 1939 and 14 May 1936; Daily Intelligence Summary, CID, 1 August 1938, Central Zionist Archives (CZA), S25 22732.

48. It should be noted, however, that this stability was at the expense of democratic structures; the fact that so many of the leaders were continuously reelected hints that their dominance left little room for other women to advance to leadership positions.

49. Matiel Mogannam, in a speech delivered to a mixed audience of Arab women and British officials' wives. *Filastin-English*, 1 August 1931.

50. Mogannam, *Arab Woman*, pp. 93-100; CID Report, 22 April 1933, Foreign Office (FO) 371 16926.

51. Police Dispositions for Friday, 27 October 1933, Secret Dispatch 3/99/s, J. M. Faraday Papers, Middle East Center, St. Antony's College, Oxford.

52. The Arab Executive complained to the government about women being struck by police, who compiled a special report in response to their grievances.

53. "First Time in the History of Palestine—Conference of the Arab Ladies," *Filastin*, 29 October 1929; "For the First Time in History," *Filastin*-English, 2 November 1929; *Mirat al-Sharq*, 28 October 1929; *al-Sirat al-Mustaqim*, 28 October 1929.

54. *Filastin*, 4 September 1932, 2 May 1939; *al-Sirat al-Mustaqim*, 15 November 1929; *Filastin*, 4 May 1936; *al-Difa'*, 4 May 1936.

55. *Filastin*-English, 26 October 1929.

56. For the somewhat Byzantine relationships between the press and the different national factions, see Yehoshua Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement: From Riots to Rebellion, 1929-1939* (London: Frank Cass, 1977), pp. 65-66, 71; Anonymous Analysis of the Arabic Press (n.d., probably the late 1930s), CZA S25 22760; and Aida Najjar, "The Arabic Press and Nationalism in Palestine, 1920-1948" (Ph.D. diss., University of New York-Syracuse, 1975).

57. *al-Difa'*, 11 October 1937; *al-Sirat al-Mustaqim*, 25 January 1934 and 15 April 1935.

58. *Filastin*, 21 December 1944, for example, writes of the "world famous . . . democratic justice, which was and still remains, the fundamental British generous character."

59. A telegram sent during the Arab Revolt to a sympathetic English woman reads in part, "Traditional British justice

nowhere, confidence lost; hopes frustrated . . . entreat you in the name of humanity to put an end to Chaos and Tyranny; protect British honor; don't break Arab Moslem friendship forever." Telegram from the Arab Women Committee [sic] to Miss Farquharson, 1 July 1936, CO 733 313/6.

60. Letter to the HC from the Arab Women's Committee, 25 July 1936, FO 371 20929.

61. Interview, CO 733 239/5.

62. Interview, CO 733 239/5, Part II; Inspector-General of Police to Chief Secretary, 14 October 1933, CO 733 239/5, Part II.

63. *Filastin*, 11 July 1936.

64. *Filastin*, 14 May 1936; *al-Difa'*, 14 May 1936.

65. For more on this incident and about this unique woman, see Fleischmann, "The Nation and Its 'New' Women," pp. 220-22.

66. Najmabadi is writing about Iranian women in the early twentieth century, but her ideas are suggestive for other societies as well. Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Crafting an Educated Housewife in Iran," in *Re-making Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, ed. Lila Abu-Lughod (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 113-15.

67. Orayb Aref Najjar, "Between Nationalism and Feminism: The Palestinian Answer," in *Women Transforming Politics: Worldwide Strategies for Empowerment*, ed. Jill M. Bystydzienski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 144. Emphasis in original.