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Pal^estine

For Palestinian Feminists, Liberation Has 2 Meanings

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New coalitions of women are shaping the future of activism and gender equality in the Gaza Strip.

"I am here because I heard my town call me, and ask me to maintain my honor." Fifty-seven-year-old Um Khalid Abu Mosa spoke in a strong, gravelly voice as she sat on the desert sand, a white tent protecting her from the blazing sun. "The land," she says with determination, "is honor and dignity."

She was near the southern Gaza Strip town of Khuza'a, the heavily fortified barrier with Israel in plain sight and well-armed Israeli soldiers just a few hundred meters away. Abu Mosa's left arm was wrapped in a sling fashioned from a black-and-white-checked kuffiyeh, or scarf, and a Palestinian flag. Israeli soldiers had shot her in the shoulder with live ammunition on March 30 as she approached the barrier to plant a Palestinian flag in a mound of earth. The bullet is still lodged in her collarbone. Three weeks later, however, she's back at the Great Return March, a series of protests organized around five encampments stretching along a unilaterally imposed Israeli buffer zone on the 37-mile barrier between the Gaza Strip and Israel.

The Return March, which has just ended, was unique in recent history in Gaza for a number of reasons. Palestinians there are known for engaging in militant resistance against the Israeli occupation and also for the internal political split in their ranks between two dominant factions, Fatah and Hamas. Yet, in these weeks, the March has been characterized by a popular, predominantly nonviolent mobilization during which Gaza's fractured political parties have demonstrated a surprising degree of unity. And perhaps most noteworthy of all, women activists have played a visibly crucial role in the protests on a scale not seen for decades, possibly indicating what the future may look like when it comes to activism in the Gaza Strip.

The Return March began on March 30, or Land Day, commemorating the 1976 killings of six Palestinians inside Israel who had been protesting land confiscations. The March was slated to end on May 15, the 70th anniversary of the Nakba, Arabic for "catastrophe." The term is used to refer to the 1948 war that led to the creation of Israel and the displacement of approximately 750,000 Palestinians, as well as the depopulation of more than 450 Palestinian towns and villages. Seventy percent of Gaza's blockaded population is made up of those who fled or were expelled from their lands and villages during the Nakba or their descendants. The vast majority of those participating in the Great Return March, including Abu Mosa, know those native villages only through family lore, yet their yearning to return is visceral.

During the March, 125 Palestinians were killed and a staggering 13,000 wounded. Abu Mosa saw many fellow protesters wounded or killed, especially on May 14, the day the Trump administration opened its new embassy in Jerusalem when the protests escalated and some participants attempted to break through the barrier.

On that day alone, Israeli forces killed 62 Palestinians and injured 2,700 more. "Don't ask me if someone close to me has been injured or killed," Abu Mosa says. "All the protesters are my relatives and friends. We became one family." After the carnage of May 14, the grassroots committee organizing the March decided that the protests had to continue. The killings continued as well. On June 1st, a 21-year-old woman volunteer paramedic was, for instance, shot in the chest and killed.

For Abu Mosa, a schoolteacher and mother of six, the March centers entirely on her dream of returning to her native town of Beer Sheva. And in its wake, she insists that she will go back, "and on my way, I will plant mint and flowers."

Much like Abu Mosa, 20-year-old Siwar Alza'anen, an activist in an organization called the Palestinian Students Labor Front, is motivated by a deep desire to return to her native village. She is also marching "to send a message to the international community that we are suffering a lot, we are living under pressure, siege, pain, poverty."

The Great Return March and the first intifada

A small Palestinian flag flutters on the edge of Samira Abdelalim's desk in Rafah, the southernmost town in the Gaza Strip. Forty-four-year-old Abdelalim serves as the director of the women's department at the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions. Her steely eyes are framed with a simple navy-blue headscarf. Abdelalim hopes the Great March of Return will peacefully achieve the right of return to her people's villages, self-determination, and the possibility of living "in peace and freedom" but she's realistic, too. "I know that the occupation will not end in one day," she says, "but by cumulative work."

Iktimal Hamad is on the Supreme National Commission of the Return March, the only woman among the March's 15 lead organizers. Sitting in her Gaza City office, her light brown hair pulled into a tight bun, she speaks about her own double agenda—to end the Israeli occupation, but also to promote equality for women in Gaza. "Women can play a prominent role in the liberation of Palestine, because they are integral to the Palestinian community," she tells us.

Abdelalim leads the March's women's committee in Rafah, one of five with 15 members for each of the encampments. With her fellow committee members, she organizes the women in the March, arranges logistics such as water and buses, and plans youth-empowerment and cultural activities.

Her own activism began during the first Palestinian intifada (Arabic for "shaking off") or "uprising" and she insists that the goals and methods are the same in the present set of demonstrations. The first intifada began in 1987 and was characterized by a highly coordinated, unarmed mass-mobilization against the Israeli occupation. Widespread acts of civil disobedience included strikes, boycotts, the creation of "underground" schools, grassroots projects to develop economic independence from Israel, and mass demonstrations. Women were that uprising's backbone.

"The masters of the field are the protesters," Abdelalim says of both then and now. "In the first intifada, women and men used to stand shoulder to shoulder beside each other, struggling together."

Abu Mosa, who is typical of many women in Gaza in not having been politically active in more than 25 years, tells us that the Return March brings back her memories of that earlier period. Even the smell of tear gas makes her nostalgic. "I feel this March is the first intifada."

Hamad was also a young activist during the first intifada. Now 51, she remembers how women were "the vanguard" of that uprising. "There was a unified women's council in 1989 and this council had the responsibility of the streets," she recalls. Women led demonstrations and sit-ins, distributed leaflets, created neighborhood committees, and participated in a unified women's council. They even worked together in remarkable unity, whatever political faction they belonged to.

Women's Activism After the First Intifada

The first intifada ended with the signing of the Oslo Accords, a peace agreement negotiated in secret between the

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government of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Made up only of Palestinians in exile, the PLO negotiation team was all male.

The Oslo Accords led to the creation of the Palestinian Authority and the return of the exiled PLO leaders to the West Bank and Gaza. Many of the grassroots activists who had led the uprising were promptly marginalized in the formation of new leadership structures—and women were excluded altogether.

According to Samira Abdelalim, the trajectory of the struggle, and particularly the role of women, then shifted radically. There was now an armed, institutional authority governing a traditional, patriarchal society. “The male societies refused to include women in the decision-making units, and denied women’s [engagement] in policies and plans,” she explains. So, rather than confronting the Israeli occupation, Palestinian women began agitating for social, political, legal, and economic rights within Palestinian society. Abdelalim and other women activists organized around the task of creating laws to protect women from honor killings—that is, the murder of a female family member when she is perceived to have brought shame upon the family—and to prevent gender-based male violence.

The Oslo process was supposed to culminate in agreements on a set of thorny “permanent status” issues between Israel and the Palestinians. These issues included Jerusalem, water rights, border delineation, settlements, and refugees. However, trust in the process continued to erode over the years and the “final” status negotiations, held in the summer of 2000, collapsed, setting the stage for the second intifada, which erupted on September 29 of that year.

Though that uprising initially began with large-scale demonstrations reminiscent of the previous one, it quickly turned toward armed resistance. According to political scientist Marie Principe’s research for the United States Institute for Peace, nonviolent movements create openings for a wide range of people, including women, children, and the old, to get involved in a way that violent campaigns don’t. Due to the armed nature of the second intifada, the space for the involvement of women, in particular, began to shrink radically. In this period, according to Abdelalim, women activists refocused their work in the international arena, attempting to expose the violence of the occupation to the world through documentation, media reports, and international conferences.

This sort of activism, however, was predominantly open only to women from a higher socioeconomic class—those, in particular, who worked for NGOs, had access to university education, and had some ability, however restricted, to reach the outside world, whether through travel or the Internet. Many of the women who had been out on the streets during the first intifada were left without roles to play.

In 2006, Hamas (an Arabic acronym for Islamic Resistance Movement) won the Palestinian legislative elections over the previously dominant Palestinian National Liberation Movement, or Fatah. Some Gaza-based leaders of Fatah then sought to oust Hamas (with US backing), leading to a bloody internecine civil war on the Strip in which Hamas violently gained control in 2007.

The Hamas-Fatah divide became a new focal point for women activists in Gaza. In those years, women generally called for Palestinian unity, remembers Abdelalim, insisting that their enemy should be the Israeli occupation, not a competing Palestinian faction. The official reconciliation negotiation team (which signed multiple unity agreements starting in 2011 that were never implemented) did not include women. Abdelalim and other women activists nonetheless held weekly demonstrations to protest the internal split in Gaza, even drafting a joint statement by women on both sides of the political divide calling for national unity.

Under the Hamas regime, however, the situation of women only continued to deteriorate. “Hamas took us back decades,” says Iktimal Hamad, noting the regime’s desire to impose Islamic Sharia law in place of the Palestinian law

in force on the West Bank. “ Hamas doesn’t believe in equality between women and men,” she says bluntly.

Palestinian society has indeed grown ever more religiously conservative over the past decades, especially in Gaza. Siwar Alza’anen remains among a small minority of women in that imprisoned strip of land who do not cover their hair. She admits, though, that most women in Gaza have little choice but to adhere to restrictive societal norms in dress and culture. They generally can’t even leave home without the permission of a male relative. Abu Mosa remembers protesting during the first intifada alongside women with uncovered hair who were wearing short skirts. “ Now they ask girls to wear head scarves at the age of 12,” she adds with obvious disapproval, though she herself does cover.

Yet throughout those repressive years, Hamad points out, women continued to play a central role in the Palestinian struggle through family education. Women were the mothers of the martyrs, the wounded, and the prisoners. A woman, as she puts it, remains “ half of the community and the community is not complete without her contribution.”

Women Begin to Reclaim Their Activist Roles

Abdelalim and Hamad are hopeful that the current protests indicate a new phase for women’s activism in Gaza and may provide a path to greater gender equality. “ What happened in this Great Return March is that women reclaimed their large role in the Palestinian struggle,” Abdelalim says. As Hamad observes, the number of women involved increased each Friday. In fact, according to Abdelalim’s estimate, women made up about 40 percent of the protesters, a remarkable figure given the history of these last years.

Because the protests are unarmed and popular in nature, men have even supported women’s involvement. Hamad is organizing for the first time not just with men from the national secular movements but from the Islamic movements as well, and she feels respected and appreciated by them.

Still, Abdelalim insists that women have never simply sat around waiting for men’s permission to act. “ We’ve always claimed our role in the struggle,” she says.

Abdelalim, Hamad, Alza’anen, and Abu Mosa all spoke with pride about the unity exhibited during the Great Return March. As Hamad put it, “ In spite of the internal political split, we succeeded in embodying the unified struggle.”

“ No one raises the flag of their political faction,” adds Alza’anen. Instead, the chants for Palestine send a message of unity both to Palestinians and to the world.

Women’s participation in the March boosts their self-confidence, says Abdelalim. “ The march broke the wall of silence between the women and [the rest of our] community,” she insists. And she’s convinced that this new sense of power will lead women to struggle to take part in decision-making on a larger scale, while becoming more courageous in demanding their rights. After marching at the border side by side with her father, her husband, her brothers, no young woman will be content to “ stay at home waiting for men to give her small benefits.”

All four women hold expansive visions of what they want their national struggle to yield. Abdelalim says that she is “ fighting to guarantee the best future” for her children. She wants her people to be free in their homeland. She imagines children playing with joy instead of fear and a future world lacking refugees, hunger, or war-related disabilities. “ The future means young men and women singing, dancing, building their homeland,” she muses.

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For Abu Mosa, “the future is hope and love for the homeland.” In her dream of the future, she describes an old man, right of return fulfilled, wiping away his tears so many years later. Her vision also has space for non-Palestinians. “I have no problem with Jews. If they visit me, I will host them in my house, and they can live in my country.” But, she adds, she will not tolerate the presence of the Zionists who displaced her family.

Alza’anen hopes the losses sustained during the March will not be in vain. The killings “motivate us to keep walking in the same direction, that our determination and intention will not collapse.”

Hamad is convinced that the liberation of Palestinian women is dependent on the national liberation that the Great Return March embodied. “Women,” she says, “will always be in the front lines of our national struggle.”

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