

## **The Fate of Palestinian Women's Organizations in the Naqba of 1948**

**Tajread Keadan<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

The study examines the fate of Palestinian women's organizations during the period of the Naqba (lit., catastrophe), or 1948 Palestinian exodus, how they operated prior to this national trauma and how they operated afterwards. *Inter alia* the study shows that Palestinian women's organizations were well-established in the Arab political landscape and fought for gender equality whilst also collaborating with Arab women's organizations in other countries. The organizations supported the struggle against British colonialism and the Zionist movement. However, they abstained from direct involvement in the divisive and conflictual Palestinian national politics. During the Naqba, a shift occurred in the character and orientation of women's organizations – they abandoned the feminist and gender struggle and became aid organizations supporting Palestinian men at war, their focus pivoting to the political level and the social and national collectivity, all in the aim of helping the Palestinian and Arab cause and those in need in the community. Following the 1948 War, the Organization of Democratic Women in Israel (Hebrew acronym: ANDI, later TANDI – Movement of Democratic Women in Israel) was in the forefront of the Arab community's rehabilitation, in large part due to its unifying ideological character, which served as a basis for its long-term survival. The organization vigorously took up the task of helping Palestinian Arab society in Israel to rise from the ashes. However, the gender radicalism of the pre-1948 era remained in the background as the duty of standing by Palestinian men through the crisis that had befallen them took precedence over feminist causes. General surveys written on women in Palestinian society heretofore have tended to skip over the period of the Naqba in 1948 and the Military Government under which Arab citizens of Israel lived until 1966. The article finds that most of the Mandate-era Palestinian women's organizations did

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<sup>1</sup> Al-Qasemi Academy.

not survive the 1948 War with the exception of the Organization of Democratic Women in Israel, which as aforementioned became, at least in the short term, an organization focused on general recovery in the community, but later increasingly oriented toward addressing issues facing Arab women in Israel specifically and women's rights causes in general within a communist ideological framework.

**Key Words:** Palestinian Women's Organizations, Israel, Palestine, Palestinian Arab Society, Naqba, 1948 Palestinian Exodus, Movement of Democratic Women in Israel, Organization of Democratic Women in Israel, British Mandate, Military Government, Zionism, Palestinian Nationalism, Arab Feminism

## Introduction

The present study examines the fate of Palestinian women's organizations during the period of the Naqba (lit., catastrophe), or 1948 Palestinian exodus, and the factors contributing to this fate within the complex political, social and economic reality of the time. Among its aims is to determine what impact the Naqba had on the politics of Palestinian women's organizations, as well as how it affected gender relations, the economic situation, and women in general in the Palestinian Arab community. The study looks at Palestinian women's organizations before the establishment of the State of Israel, the fate of the Arab population of Palestine in the Naqba, and the destiny of the Palestinian women's organizations that operated under the Mandate during and after the Naqba. As prior studies on women in Palestinian society, such as those by Darraj (2004) and Abdo (1995), have tended to neglect the period of the Naqba through the years of the Military Government (1948-1966), the current study aspires to help fill in certain lacunas in the research literature.

## **The Political Situation Among the Arabs of Palestine in the Mandate Period**

Palestinian politics in the Mandate period were shaped to a large extent by deepening rifts within Palestinian nationalism and the Arab elites, and particularly between the major Jerusalemite families: the Huseinnis, whose politics became increasingly anti-Zionist and anti-British, on the one hand, and the Nashashibis, who assumed a more moderate and accommodating stance to Zionism and the colonial regime, on the other hand. In 1921, Hajj Amin al-Husseini, a scion of the former notable family, was appointed Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and president of the Supreme Muslim Council, positions he used to promote an anti-Zionist agenda, and establish himself as perhaps the foremost Palestinian nationalist leader. An even more militant competitor of Husseini in this regard was Izz ad-Din al-Qassam, who advocated and led violent resistance against Zionism and the Mandate, eventually launching a rebellion in 1935 that ended in his death but contributed to the start of the Arab Revolt of 1936-1939. While the Arab Revolt fueled the nationalist cause and legend, it resulted not only in further inner discord but the decimation of much of the Palestinian leadership, fighting force and male population, which in turn played a critical part in the lopsided Palestinian defeat and exodus in the 1948 War.

## **Palestinian Women's Organizations Prior to the Establishment of the State of Israel**

Between 1910 and 1947, Arab women founded a wide variety of charity, religious and community associations, women's societies, athletic clubs, girl scout movements, student organizations and labor unions (Fleischmann, 2003). This growing participation of Arab women in public life was part of a global trend that began at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and stemmed from two major factors: expansion of education among women of the upper classes, and

processes associated with the industrial revolution and urbanization, which led to the emergence of a middle class with the financial means to devote time and money to society. In Palestine and neighboring Middle Eastern countries, this burgeoning activity among women was dubbed the Women's Awakening (Ibid.), and presumably inspired the name of the first incarnation of the Movement of Democratic Women in Israel (TANDI): *Al- Nadha Al-Nisa'iya* (Women's Awakening).

In 1903, a group of affluent Arab women headed by Nabiha al-Maliki founded in the city of Acre what appears to be the first Palestinian women's charity association, the Orthodox Relief Society, which operated until 1916. Subsequently, in 1910, the Orthodox Orphan Society was founded in Jaffa, which cared for orphans of all religions (Aws Daoud, 2013). As the names imply, benevolent societies of this kind during the late Ottoman period tended to be established by Christian women. The Balfour Declaration in 1917, however, precipitated a significant change in the nature of Arab women's activity, which became increasingly oriented toward aims slightly less benevolent: opposition to Zionism and the British occupation, that is, toward nationalistic political aims (Fleischmann, 2003).

In 1929, Zalikha al-Shihabi and Milia al-Sakakini co-founded the Arab Women's Society in Jerusalem, later reorganized as the Arab Women's Union (AWU), after attending the Palestinian Arab Women's Congress, the first Palestinian women's political meeting on a national level, in October of the same year (Abu Bakr, 2015). In keeping with the Congress' resolutions, the Arab Women's Society sought to accomplish the Palestinian national aims of resistance against Zionism and British rule. Similar women's organizations were subsequently set up in other cities – Acre, Haifa, Nazareth, Ramleh, etc. – often called Arab Women's Committees. The Arab Women's Executive Committee (AWEC) was also established as a follow-up to the Congress' resolutions,

servicing as a parliament of sorts for Palestinian Arab women, in which decisions were made on the issue of Arab women's status, and developing into the most dominant organization among Palestinian Arab women. It was also in 1929 that Palestinian women consciously began using the term "women's movement." The AWEC placed on its agenda such matters as equality between the sexes, economic development, promotion of Arab culture and establishing relationships with women in neighboring Arab countries (Fleischmann, 2003).

Salwa Srouji of Nazareth, one of the founders of TANDI, said in a personal interview that she recalls many organizations in the mold of the Orthodox Relief Society and that she was told of a women's organization in Jerusalem that held demonstrations against the British and the Jews (Sarouji, 2015), thus implying an interlacing of social welfare and national political objectives. However, the picture that emerges from conversations with Palestinian women who lived through the period regarding the aims of Arab women's organizations in Mandatory Palestine is a mixed one. For instance, Samira Hourri, another feminist activist and co-founder and longstanding chairwoman of TANDI, recalled that in the 1940s, as a student in the teachers training program at the Women's Training College in Jerusalem, she attended lectures by members of the AWU and even joined in demonstrations with them. In Hourri's words:

I was a young girl and heard a lot about the movements during the time of the British who demonstrated, and the teachers at school would tell us about women's history, but I did not learn that they demonstrated for their rights. Generally speaking, the nuns had many associations that received contributions and whose main objective was to help the poor or orphans (Hourri, 2014).

Another TANDI activist, Nabihah Marcus of Kafr Yasif (an Arab town north of Acre), cast doubt upon the feminist agenda of the women's

organizations of the Mandate period: “It is true they demonstrated, but I never once heard that they demonstrated for women’s rights or equality but rather only for land” (Marcus, 2015).

In a 1949 survey on the condition of Arab women in Israel published in *Kol HaAm*, the Hebrew language daily newspaper of the Israeli Communist Party- Maki, Lulu Sabagh, secretary of *Al- Nadha Al-Nisa’iya*, the precursor organization to ANDI/TANDI, wrote: “Many associations sprung up in the country during the Mandate Period in Eretz Yisrael: women’s social work and charity organizations, as well as religious associations and clubs.” However, she levels criticism at these organizations for being indifferent to the political situation and for not having an impact on society in that regard (Sabagh, 1949). Noteworthy is the hindsight that figures in the various testimonies, as well as the apparent contradictions between them. For instance, while Nabiha Marcus claims that the pre-1948 women’s movements were mainly politically-oriented and that they disregarded social or feminist issues, Sabagh suggests just the opposite, that the organizations were precisely apolitical.

In this context Sabagh mentions that there was a political movement at the time called the Arab Women’s League, but that it was “reactionary,” and that from her perspective no *democratic* women’s movement existed in the country during the Mandate period. It is important to stress that Sabagh is writing for the newspaper of the communist movement in Israel, which explicitly sought to enhance Arab women’s political consciousness and capacity to fight for their rights and not merely their existence. By contrast, in the pre-State era, “Arab women never raised slogans concerning their rights: the right to equal pay, the right to vote in municipal elections and so on” (Sabagh, 1949).

Thus, it can be inferred from the testimonies above that prior to 1948 Palestinian Arab women’s organizations devoted themselves mainly to aiding

the needy and/or advancing the militant political aims of the Palestinian national movement, and that at best they dabbled in issues related to women's equal rights.

However, Manar Hasan shows, Fakariah Siddiqui boldly thrust the question of women's rights into the heart of Palestinian public discourse, while indirectly pointing to the role of the press. After challenging patriarchal norms by choosing to appear in public without a veil, and leveling criticism against the Palestinian press for its inadequate attention to gender issues, dozens of articles were published on the subject – many of them on the matter of the veil and expressing support for removing it in public (Hasan, 2017).

Izzat Daraghma discusses the history of Palestinian civil society organizations and women's associations in Mandatory Palestine and the West Bank and Gaza, and their development between 1903 and 1990. He concludes that these organizations were insufficiently developed to enable them to truly advance Palestinian women's status. Indeed, according to Daraghma, Palestinian women's status in the West Bank and Gaza actually deteriorated significantly over this period. He suggests that the state of Palestinian women's organizations is one of the manifestations of this decline, as their activity receded from the political sphere (Daraghma, 1991).

There is also considerable evidence suggesting that during the pre-State period cooperation tightened between Palestinian women's organizations and Arab women's organizations outside of the country, primarily through personal visits or participation in Arab women's congresses, which espoused sorority and unity between Arab women. It is important to mention in this context the participation of Palestinian delegations in congresses organized by Huda Sha'arawi, founder and leader of the Egyptian Feminist Union in Cairo. This phenomenon of course goes hand in hand with Pan-Arabism and the intervention

of Arab countries in the Palestinian problem. Even Izz ad-Din al-Qassam sent a women's delegation led by his own daughter to Huda Sha'arawi to strengthen cooperation and encourage women to operate on the Pan-Arab level to put an end to the collaboration between the British Mandate and the Jewish Yishuv in Palestine (Asfour, 2000).

By 1938, Huda Sha'arawi and the Egyptian Feminist Union had been persuaded to sponsor the Eastern Women's Conference for the Defense of Palestine in Cairo, which again prioritized nationalist issues over feminist concerns. A delegation of twenty-seven Palestinian women of the cultural and social elite attended the conference and succeeded in placing the Palestinian cause and the danger posed by Jewish settlement on the Pan-Arab agenda. According to Asfour, the Eastern Women's Conference for the Defense of Palestine marked the inauguration of the Arab feminist movement and is considered the first national assembly of Arab women (Ibid.).

In 1944 the Arab Women's Union's annual conference in Cairo was dedicated to a discussion of the situation in Palestine. However, the historical process that began with the Arab Revolt of 1936-1939 and reached its culmination in the 1948 War meant that the Palestinian national movement was beleaguered, and that the women's movement's orientation was shifting more toward social objectives. Accordingly, it began to establish clinics, schools for girls, clubs for learning how to read and write, and so on (Fleischmann, 2003).

With the declaration of the State of Israel and the outbreak of war, which led to the Naqba of 1948, Palestinian Arab women's organizations reverted to their national political agenda. Women enlisted in the war effort, bearing much of the responsibility for providing support to the armed resistance mainly undertaken by men. Such activities included selling or trading valuables for arms, supplying food, medical assistance and intelligence to the fighters, and an



array of auxiliary functions, although female militias such as Zahrat al-Uqhawan ('Chrysanthemums') also took an active part in the fighting. Temporary suspension of activities aimed at women's advancement was regarded as a national and political duty (Ibid.). In sum, Palestinian women's organizations did not stop operating during the war but rather shifted their focus to collective Palestinian national needs.

### **The Naqba and its Impact on the Arab Community**

Militarily, the Naqba affected all parts of Mandatory Palestine, urban and rural areas alike. Politically, Palestinian Arab society was divided into three groups: those who fled or were expelled to neighboring countries, those who migrated to locations that fell within the eventual borders of the new State, such as Nazareth, and those who remained on their land. Women's experiences varied but almost all suffered from severe deprivation and even trauma. Virtually all social strata in the Arab population were hurt economically. Socially, for those who were forced to leave, the traditional social structure based on land was destroyed, and education became a means of survival and even advancement. On the other hand, for those who remained, the traditional way of life changed very little. A certain shift occurred perhaps in terms of patriarchal values as a result of the emasculation of the male population and leadership during the Naqba and the increasing reliance on women. However, similar trends are seen throughout the world in times of war and migration and are normally transient. In any event, during the war and in its immediate aftermath, neither Palestinian men nor women had the financial or emotional capacity to engage in organizations other than to meet basic needs.

## **Life Stories of Women in the Shatila Refugee Camp in Lebanon**

In the early 1990s, anthropologist Rosemary Sayigh documented the life stories of 18 Palestinian women between 28 and 90 years of age living in the Shatila Refugee Camp in southern Beirut, Lebanon. The women belonged to three generations: “the generation of Palestine,” who were born and married in Palestine; “the generation of the Naqba,” who were born in Palestine but grew up in the diaspora; and the “generation of the revolution,” who were born in Lebanon and grew up after the “liberation” of the camps, as she puts it, in 1969. The women’s social and economic background varied. The major difference she found between the generations was in education: none of the women born before 1942 had a formal education, while the younger women had finished high school and gone on to college. Work outside the home varied accordingly. For women born in Palestine, the 1948 exodus was a primary event relative to the four decades that followed. Sayigh notes that the significance of the memory of leaving Palestine is retrospective, and the result of the construction of collective memory. For example, in one case – the story of the Hajra – it was evident to Sayigh that the narrative had been refined through frequent repetition among family and neighbors (Sayigh, 1998).

The older women Sayigh spoke with tended not to relate to national politics in their narratives but rather to such matters as collaborators or internal disputes – topics that Palestinian nationalist narratives generally suppress. Accordingly, these women’s stories contribute more to a social history than to a political one. The gender dimension varies between the generations: the elder women were first-hand witnesses and victims of the Palestinian tragedy, which they experienced as young women and mothers. Based on their stories, Sayigh divides the women into three categories: the “struggle personality,” marked by heroism and resourcefulness, the “challenge/confrontation personality,” who

transgressed the boundaries of the gender regime, and the “witness to tragedy”, a more passive type (Savigh, 1998).

According to Abassi, in the wake of the Naqba, Arab society was preoccupied with recovery and suffered from a lack of basic services and conditions of acute poverty. Many refugees migrated to Nazareth, which placed a great burden on the city that had been a center of women's activity since the early 20th Century (Abassi, 2010).

### **The Fate of Women's Organizations in the Naqba of 1948**

The Naqba, the most profound national crisis in the history of the Palestinian Arab population, silenced to a certain extent both the feminist discourse and the militant national political discourse that marked the activity of Palestinian women's organizations under the Mandate (Fleischmann, 2003). The main branch of the Arab Women's Union (AWU) in Jerusalem served as a *de facto* headquarters and center of gravity around which this activity revolved up until the 1948 War. It is important to point out that during this period several attempts were made by men to usurp the women's movement and to channel the funds it raised toward national political ends. Subsequent to such an attempted coup in Nablus, the movement forbade men from applying for membership and opted to restrict recruitment to women exclusively (Ibid.)

Palestinian women operated throughout the Naqba alongside men, transcending the bitter rifts and differences of opinion within Palestinian society, which as aforementioned stemmed in part from the enmity between the leading clans, and primarily the Husseinis and the Nashashibis. Remarkably, women from these families cooperated fully within the women's organizations, operating side-by-side in every type of activity (al-Halili, 1981).

During and after the 1948 War, Palestinian women leaders fled the country or were expelled with their families. In Jerusalem and the West Bank, women operated in philanthropic frameworks to assist Palestinian refugees whose numbers were ever growing, founding six women's organizations for this purpose, while groups of women leaders who moved with their families to Lebanon and Egypt organized Palestinian women's activity in these countries (al-Halili, 1981).

Male and female Arab leaders were equally subject to expulsion and exile during and after the Naqba of 1948. Once they left, virtually all the women's efforts were devoted to fulfilling the existential needs of their families and ensuring their survival whether in new countries or within the Green Line. The nature of the activity once again shifted from the collective space to the private and family domain (Fleischmann, 2003).

Due to the violent conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians in 1948, and the marginality of women's organizations in the general context of Arab society, the family became the focus of both social and national solidarity, and women assumed the duty of cultural preservation and transmission, as traditional patterns became further reinforced with the Israeli military conquests during the war. This occurred in part because during the conflict and its immediate aftermath Israeli forces used heads of the hamulas (clans) as mediators between themselves and the local Palestinian Arab communities. The sheikhs did the Israelis' bidding, supplying intelligence, recruiting agents for cross-border operations, etc. and in exchange, mukhtars, often chosen from the hamulas regarded as more loyal to the State, were appointed to run villages. As the Naqba had left Palestinian society in a state of utter disarray – socially, politically and economically – the clan structure proved best suited to establish order and fulfill the needs of the local communities. Women, of course, ended up paying the heaviest price for this system of rule (Herzog, 2003).

Hannah Herzog argues that a relationship exists between the presence of an ongoing conflict within a society and intergender unity in times of acute crisis, such as the Naqba of 1948, and that only after collective goals are achieved and the crisis passes can social equality between men and women be placed on the bargaining table again. However, the Naqba also served as a smokescreen through which Palestinian women shattered glass ceilings, for, as Mira Tsorref notes, while in the wake of the national defeat in 1948 Palestinian men sunk into the abyss of disgrace, Palestinian women made major strides, providing aid to Arab women in distress and their families and offering them occupational training. Accordingly, Fadwa Tuqan, the renowned Palestinian poet, who traced the changes that took place in Palestinian women's status in Nablus after 1948 on a micro-level, that is, in their intimate personal and family environments, notes that: "When the roof fell in on Palestine in 1948, the veil fell off the face of the Nablus woman" (Tsorref, 2004).

In an interview with Yosef Elgazi, Tuqan argues that oppression and coercion are the seed for creating a dichotomous structure of capitulation and rebellion at one and the same time, which finds its ultimate expression in the shattering of gender boundaries that came with the Naqba of 1948. Of her mother, Fawziyya Amin Asqalan, she writes:

My mother was the first woman of her generation in Nablus to remove the veil. And from that moment on she began to inhale the fresh air of liberty, for time had already gathered up the old, conservative generation in the family. My heart would fill with joy to behold her vitality swell with her unbinding from the fetters of confinement in the prison of contemptible tradition (Elgazi, 1993).

## Conclusion

In sum, the present study shows that the shape, character and orientation of Palestinian women's organizations changed significantly during the Naqba. The organizations abandoned the feminist struggle that marked their activity in the Mandate period, in which they worked together with Arab women's organizations in other countries such as Egypt to advance feminist causes and the status of Arab women across the region. With the onset of the 1948 War and the Naqba, however, the nature of their activity changed as they were called upon to fulfill aid and auxiliary functions in support of Palestinian men on the front lines and virtually their entire focus shifted to the political, national-collective level. Furthermore, the study's findings suggest that the organization's feminist objectives and the quest for equality became obscured, overshadowed or sidelined in the face of national political callings and crises, which required them to put women's rights issues aside and rally behind the men sacrificing their lives for the collective Palestinian national cause.

The one Palestinian women's organization that survived the war was the Organization of Democratic Women in Israel (ANDI), which was the first to organize and take an active role in rehabilitating post-Naqba Arab society, with a special focus on assisting women in a variety of areas affecting their lives. The organization's committed activists, ideological orientation and affiliation with the Israeli Communist Party (MAKI) proved significant in that they all contributed to organizational solidarity and served as a foundation for its long-term survival. The fragmented, chaotic and shell-shocked state of Palestinian Arab society in general, and the vulnerable position in which many women found themselves specifically, in the wake of the Naqba created an urgent need for action, and the women of ANDI rose to the occasion. They adapted quickly to the new reality, recognizing and fulfilling needs on the ground, such as finding work for women, enhancing their employability, and stabilizing their existential

condition, addressing public health issues, establishing day care centers and kindergartens, etc., thus contributing to the reconstitution of Palestinian Arab society as a whole in the post-Naqba era (Keadan, 2018). Perhaps the most important conclusion of the present study, therefore, is that through ANDI, the Palestinian women's movement returned to its original calling, receding from the national political struggle and reembracing a more social, benevolent, feminist and personal one.

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