
GENDER AND MIDDLE EAST POLITICS

— SIMONA SHARONI —

Long before the 1991 Madrid peace conference was under way, Palestinian and Israeli women engaged in a series of international conferences, unnoticed by the gender blind international media. These conferences were designed to alert the international community to the serious need for conflict resolution initiatives in the region and to develop feminist frameworks for peace building in the Middle East.¹ More recently, while the international media made Palestinian spokeswoman Hanan Mikhail-Ashrawi a media celebrity, many failed to recognize that the participation of prominent Palestinian women at the Middle East peace talks in 1991-92 was not simply an act of tokenism. It marked the entry of women — articulating explicit feminist agendas for peace-building in the region — into the arena of Middle East and international politics.²

The separate and joint struggles of women in Israel and Palestine confirm that women in different parts of the Middle East are gradually becoming aware of the explicit and implicit ways in which gender is embedded in the politics of the region as in international relations. One way of uncovering the relationship between gender and politics in the Middle East is to introduce feminist perspec-

1. For more on the joint conferences of Israeli and Palestinian women, see Naomi Chazan, "Israeli Women and Peace Activism" in Barbara Swirsky and Marilyn Safir, eds., *Calling the Equality Bluff: Women in Israel* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1991); and Yvonne Duetsch, "Israeli Women: From Protest to a Culture of Peace," in Deena Hurwitz, ed., *Walking the Red Line: Israelis in Search of Justice for Palestine* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1992).

2. See Christine Sylvester, "The Emperors' Theories and Transformations: Looking at the Field through Feminist Lenses," in Dennis Pirages and Christine Sylvester, eds., *Transformations in Global Political Economy* (London: Macmillan, 1990); Anne Sisson Runyan and V. Spike Peterson, "The Radical Future of Realism: Feminist Subversions of IR Theory," *Alternatives*, Vol. 16 (1991): 67-106; Rebecca Grant and Kathleen Newland, eds., *Gender and International Relations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); V. Spike Peterson, ed., *Gendered States: Feminist (Re)visions of International Relations Theory* (Boulder, CO: Lynn Rienner Publishers, 1992); Ann Tickner, *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

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tives and highlight views and voices that have been marginalized or excluded from most accounts of Middle East politics.

The emerging body of feminist scholarship in international relations — which includes critiques of states and their practices, international politics, and dominant political discourses — opens up space for the rethinking and reformulation of central concepts such as peace and security. But, in order to do that, feminists must first call into question a few of the underlying premises of conventional scholarship on international politics. As Carol Cohn so eloquently puts it:

[F]eminists, and others who seek a more just and peaceful world, have a dual task before us—a deconstructive project and a reconstructive project that are intimately linked. Our deconstructive task requires close attention to, and the dismantling of, technostrategic discourse. The dominant voice of militarized masculinity and decontextualized rationality speaks so loudly in our culture, it will remain difficult for any other voices to be heard until that voice loses some of its power to define what we hear and how we name the world — until that voice is delegitimated. Our reconstructive task is a task of creating compelling alternative visions of possible futures, a task of recognizing and developing alternative conceptions of rationality, and a task of creating rich and alternative voices — diverse voices whose conversations with each other will invent those futures.³

To challenge the dominant voice of “militarized masculinity,” the present article seeks to elicit new definitions of central concepts such as “peace” and “security” based on the lives and struggles of women in the Middle East. As for “decontextualized rationality,” working within the space opened by feminist scholars such as Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway, this article stresses the need for “situated knowledges.” “Situated knowledges,” according to feminist thinkers, is the feminist alternative to “decontextualized rationality.” Situated scholarship is context specific and politically committed, therefore challenging ma(i)nstream knowledge claims which tend to hide behind notions of “neutrality” and “universality.” To put it differently, feminist scholars argue that situated knowledges represent “a view from somewhere” as opposed to “a view from nowhere.”⁴

Articulating feminist perspectives on peace building in the Middle East is a particular attempt to highlight views from somewhere. In other words, this article does not intend to simply add gender as another category in social science research as applied to Middle East politics. It involves uncovering the web of

3. Carol Cohn, “Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals,” in Linda Rennie Forcey, ed., *Peace: Meanings, Politics, Strategies* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 64.

4. See Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (1988): 575-599. See also Sandra Harding’s *The Science Question in Feminism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1987) and *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women’s Lives* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991).

gendered politics in the Middle East as it relates to the broader context of global politics. Furthermore, looking at Middle East politics through feminist lenses implies taking into account the life experiences, voices, and ongoing struggles of women in the region as primary locations from which concepts such as “security” and “peace” need to be rethought and redefined. Thus, this article intends to demonstrate how feminist perspectives to peace-building in the Middle East — grounded primarily in the separate and joint struggles of Palestinian and Israeli women against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip — can offer alternative frameworks for theorizing and engaging with Middle East politics.

Gender and the Politics of Representation

In the Middle East, as in many other places across the globe, despite the fact that women have been raising their voices and organizing for social emancipation and political change since the beginning of this century, the stories of our lives and struggles have been marginalized and written out of conventional scholarship on Middle East politics.⁵ Middle Eastern women are usually portrayed in academic studies and in the media as passive victims with little or no attention paid to our struggles to achieve control over our lives and social and political change in our societies.⁶

However, recently, alternative accounts committed to telling the untold stories of Middle Eastern women’s life experiences and struggles for social and political change are emerging. These accounts challenge the passive stereotypical portrayals of Middle Eastern women, which have dominated the media and

5. My use of the word ‘our’ in this context is intentional. My identity and political positions have been shaped primarily in Israel, in a political climate that prevented me from learning about the struggles of my sisters across the border and from coming to terms with my Middle East identity. But, despite systematic attempts to control my identity through the imposition of sovereign national boundaries and construction of essentialized “enemies,” coming to terms with my feminist identity, my commitment to the struggle to end the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and the pursuit of a doctoral degree in conflict analysis and resolution have enabled me to write and speak out against injustices committed by the Israeli government in my name. Gradually, I began to see the connections between the violence of war and occupation and the increase in violence against women in Israel. I also had the privilege of collaborating with other Middle Eastern feminists, particularly Palestinian women, on numerous projects. These experiences have enhanced my commitment to the eradication of gender inequalities as well as other forms of oppression, injustice, and inequities in the Middle East. It is with this sense of commitment and responsibility to our separate and joint struggles that I write this paper, recognizing that being able to use my voice to share my perspective is in itself a privilege that many of my sisters in Israel, as in other parts of the Middle East, are still struggling for.

6. Although the terms “Middle East” and “Middle Eastern women” are used extensively throughout this paper, I agree with Marnia Lazreg that “North African and Middle Eastern societies are more complex and more diverse than is admitted, and cannot be understood in terms of monolithic, unitary concepts.” Marnia Lazreg, “Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing as a Woman on Women in Algeria” in Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox-Keller, eds., *Conflicts in Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 337. When I use the terms “Middle East” and “Middle Eastern women” as analytical and political categories, I do so (and not without hesitation) to subvert their dominant meaning both in academic scholarship and in international politics.

most academic scholarship on the region.⁷ But to undermine the power of stereotypical images in popular culture, it is not enough to record women's voices and perspectives and contrast the stereotypical images of passive women with the new essentialized images of the Middle Eastern "superwoman." Instead of replacing one set of stereotypical images with another, one has to listen to the multiplicity of voices among Middle Eastern women and to the complexities, contradictions, and changes in the struggles of women in the region. Furthermore, we need to critically examine the social construction of these images and to uncover the political agendas behind them.⁸

Algerian feminist Marnia Lazreg provides a good example of how to engage in these tasks. By situating the representations of Middle Eastern women in the broader context of international relations in the region, Lazreg calls attention to the political agendas behind the stereotypical portrayals of Middle Eastern women. She points out that "the intense current interest in 'Middle Eastern women' is occurring at a time when the 'Middle East' has been neutralized as a self-sustaining political and economic force."⁹ According to Lazreg, the portrayals of Middle Eastern women — as inferior and primitive on one hand and as veiled passive victims on the other — have been contrasted explicitly and implicitly with images of women and men in the so-called modern West. In other words, the stereotypical depiction of Middle Eastern women has been used to justify the existing power disparities between North and South (or East-West) in the international political arena.

Along the same lines, feminist examinations of American media coverage, such as that of the recent Gulf War by Cynthia Enloe, underscore the political consequences of the juxtaposition of an archetypal veiled Arab woman with an American woman soldier.¹⁰ Enloe demonstrates how "by contrasting the allegedly liberated American woman tank mechanic with the Saudi woman deprived of a driver's license, American reporters are implying that the United States is the advanced civilized country whose duty it is to take the lead in resolving the Persian Gulf crisis."¹¹

The same powerful subtext was at play during the Iranian Revolution of 1979 when millions of Iranian women stepped into the political arena. But the Western media did not display the range of political activities carried out by

7. See Evelyn Accad, *Sexuality and War: Literary Masks of the Middle East* (New York: New York University Press, 1990); Deniz Kandiyoti, ed., *Women, Islam, and the State* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991); Bouthaina Shaaban, *Both the Right and Left Handed: Arab Women Talk about Their Lives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Fadwa Tuqan, *A Mountainous Journey: An Autobiography*, Olive Kenny, trans. (London: The Women's Press, 1990); Kitty Warnock, *Land Before Honor: Palestinian Women in the Occupied Territories* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1991); Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, eds., *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Julie Peteet, *Gender Conflict: Women and the Palestinian Resistance Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

8. For a broader discussion of these issues, see my article, "Politics in the Middle East: Toward Theorizing IR from Women's Struggles," *Alternatives* (February 1993).

9. Marnia Lazreg, "Feminism and Differences," 343.

10. Cynthia Enloe, "Women and children: Making Feminist Sense of the Persian Gulf War," *The Village Voice*, 25 September 1990, 30-31."

11. *Ibid.*, 30.

Iranian women during the revolution, nor did it examine the motives behind the massive political mobilization of Iranian women.¹² Instead, reporters used the images of veiled Iranian women demonstrating against the Shah, contrasted with “modern” and “liberated” American and European women. These stereotypical images helped reinforce differences between “us” and “them,” “modern” and “primitive,” “secular” and “religious.” These juxtapositions were essential in order to mobilize public opinion in the United States and in Europe against the Islamic revolution and in support of continued U.S. intervention in Iranian politics. Nevertheless, the media as well as Western policy makers failed to notice that Iranian women did not show obeisance to the stereotypes. Tohidi stresses that:

[M]any Iranian activists at the time, both women and men, considered the veil part of the superstructure or a secondary phenomenon which bothered only Western feminists or a few Iranian women intellectuals. The immediate concern was to rid the country of the Shah’s regime and his imperialist supporters. . . . [M]any women, even nonreligious, nontraditional, and highly educated women, took up the veil as a symbol of solidarity and opposition to the Shah.¹³

Conventional scholarship on Middle East politics omits the complex and detailed accounts which are required to challenge the crude juxtaposition of veiled Middle Eastern women with “liberated” Western women and to expose the political agendas behind the excessive use of such stereotypical images. Another case in point is the military coup in Algeria following the national elections in December 1991. Immediately after it became clear that the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won the elections, the Western media was mobilized again. Discourses of democracy, human rights, and women’s rights were juxtaposed with the “threats of fundamentalism.” The assumption was that the FIS stands in direct opposition to women’s rights. Women’s support for FIS as well as the fact that FIS won in a democratic election were ignored. Under the pretext of ensuring the “stability” of the Middle East — which is essential for the unchallenged economic and political hegemony of the United States in the region — the U.S. government supported the military coup.

The interplay of gender and politics in this particular example surfaced only in a few alternative accounts. These accounts stressed that the relative high support FIS had among lower and middle class Algerian women was motivated by two related reasons: the crucial community services that FIS provided (which addressed some of the issues confronting women) and the ominous effects of economic restructuring plans on women’s lives.¹⁴ For example, Algerian social-

12. Nayereh Tohidi, “Gender and Islamic Fundamentalism: Feminist Politics in Iran,” in Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, eds., *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 251-252.

13. *Ibid.*, 251-252.

14. See Shafla Jemame, “Women Fight Exclusion and Poverty,” *International Viewpoint*, No. 220, 20

ist feminist Shafla Jemame was among the few who pointed out a direct relationship between global intervention in Algeria, state policies, and women's lives. Grounding her analysis in specific examples from women's lives, Jemame called attention to some of the direct implications of Algeria's economic dependency on the West: an unprecedented rise in unemployment, a steep decline in purchasing power resulting from the government's decision to abolish subsidies on basic necessities, the shortage in housing, and the cuts in health care programs that used to be free. Jemame's critique stresses that "the subjection of the government to the IMF's dictates will only serve to make reactionary ideology of the fundamentalists more popular."¹⁵

Understanding the hidden political agendas behind stereotypical portrayals of Middle Eastern women and the connections between the projected images of women in the region and the political economy of foreign interventions in the Middle East is crucial to feminist attempts to alter the gendered politics of the region and articulate alternative scenarios for peace and justice. By taking into consideration Middle Eastern women's perspectives on political developments that impact their lives, we may gain insights into the subtexts and unwritten agreements of international politics in the Middle East. That is, detailed accounts of women's resistance and struggles to influence the course of politics in the Middle East hold the potential to map alternative feminist interpretations of peace and security.

Rethinking Peace and Security

The conventional meanings assigned to the concepts peace and security have been for the most part grounded in an understanding of political life as a matter of government institutions and policies; competition between states and parties over interests, needs, or values; and clashes of powers and ideologies. Thus, the meanings of peace have been limited to the absence of war and the understandings of security to "national security." As a result, a broad range of issues, voices, and perspectives, as well as particular constituencies, have been excluded from the dominant discourses of peace and security and from the conventional understandings of political life. Women represent a particular example of such exclusion.¹⁶

In the past decade, feminists have called into question dominant interpretations of peace and security that dehumanize the issues and people affected by wars and protracted conflicts by limiting the meanings of peace to the absence of war, thus narrowing the discussion to strategic discourses, military terminology, and imperatives of "national security."¹⁷ At the same time, women around

January 1992, 5-6; and Hannah Davis, "Taking Up Space in Tlemcen: The Islamic Occupation of Urban Algeria: An Interview with Rabia Bekkar," *Middle East Report*, No. 179 (November/December 1992): 11-15.

15. *Ibid.*, 5.

16. See Ann Tickner's work, especially the chapter, "Man, the State, and War: Gendered Perspectives on National Security," in *Gender in International Relations*.

the world have been raising serious concerns with the overwhelming priorities of states to invest funds and energies in armies and in the military industrial complex and then to rely upon the threat or use of military violence to "protect" their collective citizenry.¹⁸ Along these lines, feminists have recently argued that states quite often use appeals to the need for security to justify the most blatant military campaigns and territorial expansions. In other words, the more a government is preoccupied with what it calls "national security," the less its citizens — especially women — experience physical security.¹⁹

Despite the fact that most women around the world have not been exposed to feminist critiques of "national security," many have arrived at the same conclusions in the context of their struggles to survive in the face of violence and destruction. Women in the Third World countries — during periods of conflict such as the Gulf War or in conflict-torn regions such as South Africa, Northern Ireland, and the Middle East — have established and utilized women's forums, groups to forge alternative interpretations of political life, peace, and security and to challenge the stereotypical portrayals of women as passive victims with no political agency.²⁰

Recently, there is a growing skepticism among women in the Middle East concerning imperatives of "national security." This is partially because in most countries throughout the region, governments have used the Arab-Israeli conflict as a major excuse to institutionalize "national security" as a top priority, thus relegating all other social and political problems, including women's plights for emancipation and equality, to secondary status. But these are not the only implications of the doctrine of "national security" for women's lives; in most countries in the Middle East, defence budget expenditures consume the largest portion of the states' budget because the future of the state is portrayed by most governments as depending on the strength of the military.²¹

17. See Carol Cohn's article, "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defence Intellectuals," and Ann Tickner, *Gender in International Relations*.

18. See Adrienne Harris's and Ynestra King's edited anthology, *Rocking the Ship of State: Toward a Feminist Peace Politics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989); Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); and Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989).

19. See Cynthia Enloe's work, especially *Does Khaki Become You? The Militarization of Women's Lives* (London: Pluto Press, 1983) and *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases*. See also Robin Morgan, *The Demon Lover: On the Sexuality of Terrorism* (New York: Norton & Company, 1989). For a discussion of the implications of imperatives of "national security" to women's lives in Israel, see my articles, "Every Woman is an Occupied Territory: National Constructions of Gender and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (November 1992); and "Homefront as Battlefield: Gender, Military Occupation and Violence Against Women and the Israeli Occupation," in Tamar Mayer, ed., *Women of the Occupation: The Impact of Israeli Military Occupation on Jewish and Palestinian Women* (London: Routledge, forthcoming, 1994).

20. For particular examples, see Evelyne Accad, *Sexuality and War: Literary Masks of the Middle East* (New York: New York University Press, 1990); Deniz Kandiyoti, ed., *Women, Islam and the State* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991); Julie Peteet and Barbara Harlow, "Gender and Political Change," *Middle East Report*, No. 173 (November/December 1991) 4-8; Kumari Jayawardena, ed., *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London: Zed Books, 1986).

21. This assertion is based on a panel discussion at the annual conference of the National Organiza-

To challenge state's priorities, women in the region have recently begun to articulate connections such as those between the increase in military spending and the economic hardship faced by women across the region and between violence against a projected "enemy" and violence against women and other nonprivileged citizen groups within and across state borders.²² These newly articulated connections provide the general framework for most feminist perspectives on peace-building in the Middle East. Feminist frameworks for peace in the Middle East seek to uncover the gendered dimensions hidden in the dominant meanings of peace and security which are grounded primarily in the imperatives of "national security."

The frameworks of rethinking peace and security in the Middle East emerged out of the ongoing multi-faceted struggles of women in the region. Consequently, they are grounded in the assertion that questions of war and peace are inseparable from questions of development, environmental and ecological degradation, gender, race, and class inequalities, abuses of human rights, and attacks on cultural identities. This comprehensive reformulation of peace and security has its roots in the history of women's struggles in the region. Throughout the years, Middle Eastern women have learned from bitter experiences that even when changes have occurred in the social and political platforms of states or national liberation movements — enabling women to take new economic and social roles — such reforms did not challenge the basic systems of gender inequalities.²³

To overcome these setbacks, women in the Middle East have recently engaged in direct challenges of the distinctions between "public" and "private" and between "politics" and narrowly defined "women's issues," asserting that all issues are women's issues and that "women's issues" are profoundly political.²⁴ Based on these assertions, women in the Middle East have stressed the importance of developing social and political strategies to mobilize and intervene in local and global politics in ways that will advance specific women's interests as well as ongoing struggles for emancipation and equal rights. More specifically, Middle Eastern women have mobilized around issues such as their legal status and political rights, education, health care, and employment opportunities.²⁵ By

tion of Women (NOW) in January 1992 in Washington, DC. The panel focused on the interplay of gender and politics in the Middle East and included women from Jordan, Egypt, The West Bank and Gaza Strip.

22. See Evelyne Accad, *Sexuality and War*; and Simona Sharoni, "Every Woman is an Occupied Territory," and "Homefront as Battlefield."

23. For specific examples, see Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1991); Deniz Kandiyoti, *Women, Islam and the State*; Liela Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); and Neyera Tohidi, "Gender and Islamic Fundamentalism."

24. See Liela Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*; Judith Tucker, ed., *Arab Women: Old Boundaries, New Frontiers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, forthcoming 1993).

25. See the special issue of *Middle East Report*, "Gender and Politics: Are the Changes for the Better?," No. 173 (November/December 1991). See also Suba Sabbagh and Ghada Talhami, eds., *Images and Reality: Palestinian Women Under Occupation and in the Diaspora* (Washington, DC: The Institute for Arab Women's Studies, 1990); Ramla Khalidi and Judith Tucker, *Women's Rights in the Arab World* (Washington, DC: MERIP, 1992).

challenging the artificial distinctions between “women’s issues” and “politics” and forging new spaces for social and political mobilization, women in the Middle East have engaged, sometimes without intending to, in questioning the primacy of national sovereignty and geographic borders. One way of challenging such boundaries is to forge women’s alliances that transcend religious and national divides.

Challenging the Boundaries: The Emergence of Women’s Alliances

Feminist interpretations of international politics highlight numerous examples of alliances between women around the world and stress the ability of women to overcome boundaries of nationality, religion, and class and to unite around common causes such as the opposition to war and militarization.²⁶ Two particular examples come to mind in the context of the Middle East: Lebanese women who have crossed the demarcation line in Beirut and the joint march “Women Go for Peace” of Palestinian and Israeli women from West to East Jerusalem. Evelyne Accad describes the demarcation line in Beirut as “the most desolate, depressing, and often dangerous spot in the city,” thus calling attention to the significance of the symbolic act of crossing this line:

Most of the time they go on foot, since only a few cars that have a special permission are allowed through. They go because they are convinced that by this gesture, real as well as symbolic, Lebanon’s reunification will take place.... Women’s friends who cross the demarcation line, defying weapons, militia, political games ... walk assuredly through apocalyptic space ... conscious that their march is not an ordinary one, that their crossing is a daring act, important to Lebanon’s survival.²⁷

A similar act of border crossing in yet another divided city in the Middle East took place in Jerusalem in December 1989. Six thousand Palestinian, Israeli, European, and American women participated in a peace march from West to East Jerusalem, calling for Israeli negotiations with the PLO, a two-state solution with security guarantees for all, respect for Palestinian human and political rights, and an immediate end to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.²⁸ However, unlike the women in Lebanon who marched to challenge the rigidity of the demarcation line in Beirut, the women’s march sought to redraw the Green Line. Women wore green scarves to “symbolize the Green Line between Israel and Palestine,” a symbolic act that calls for the establishment of

26. See Lisa Albrecht and Rose Brewer, eds., *Bridges of Power: Women’s Multicultural Alliances* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1990).

27. Evelyne Accad, *Sexuality and War*, 2.

28. See the chapter, “Women Go for Peace,” in Penny Rosenwasser, *Voices from a ‘Promised Land’: Palestinian and Israeli Peace Activists Speak Their Hearts* (Williamantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1992); Yvonne Deutsche, “Israeli Women.”

a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, alongside Israel.²⁹ According to one participant in the march,

It is good and very interesting [that] ... many women from all over the world gathered to say, "Stop the occupation — we want to live together and establish a Palestinian state, we want to live together! ... [W]e want to live in peace."³⁰

The women's march, which was jointly organized by Palestinian and Israeli women, demonstrated the potential of women's alliances. But women's alliances in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should be seen not as an end, but rather as a means in a broader struggle. In other words, the separate and joint initiatives of Palestinian and Israeli women to end the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip became the setting for the articulation of feminist frameworks for peace and security in the Middle East. But these alliances are a relatively new phenomenon that did not exist prior to the Palestinian Uprising, known as the *intifada*, which began in December 1987.

The *intifada* represented a crucial turning point in the political mobilization of Israeli and Palestinian women. Palestinian women have been at the forefront of the *intifada*, expanding already existing organizations such as the Women's Work Committees, utilizing them to build an economic, social, and political infrastructure for the future Palestinian state.³¹ Furthermore, Palestinian women have pointed out that their participation in the struggle for self-determination and statehood is not limited to the national agenda, thus, insisting upon placing their demands for women's liberation and equal rights on and alongside the national agenda.³²

On the other side of the conflict, while the majority of Israeli society (including larger segments of the nominal male-dominated peace movement) failed to grasp the message and challenges of the *intifada*, the Palestinian uprising

29. Penny Rosenwasser, *Voices from a 'Promised Land'*, 75.

30. *Ibid.*, 75.

31. The Women's Committees are the backbone of the Palestinian women's movement. Although the committees were already active prior to the outbreak of the *intifada*, the Uprising resulted in significant changes both in scope and ideology. The committees' pre-*intifada* framework consisted of a two-stage process of national liberation now and women's liberation later. With the outbreak of the *intifada*, women continued to address specific "women's issues," such as child care, female literacy, and women's legal rights, but with an emphasis on the interconnectedness of women's liberation and national liberation. The four women's committees affiliated with the four major factions of the Palestinian popular movement coordinate their activities through The Higher Women's Council set up in December 1988. For a detailed discussion of the Palestinian women's movement and the *intifada*, see Phillipa Strum, *The Women are Marching: The Second Sex and the Palestinian Revolution* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1992); and Joost Hiltermann, *Behind the Intifada: Labor and Women's Movements in the Occupied Territories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

32. See Nahla Abdo, "Women of the Intifada: Gender, Class and National Liberation," *Race & Class*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (1991): 19-34; Suha Subbagh, "Palestinian Women Writers and the Intifada," *Social Text*, Vol. 22 (Spring 1989): 1-19; Samira Haj, "Palestinian Women and Patriarchal Relations," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 17, No. 4, 761-778; and Phillipa Strum, *The Women are Marching*.

triggered an unprecedented level of political activism among Israeli women. This prompted the establishment of women's groups such as Women in Black, Women for Women Political Prisoners, Women Against the Occupation (Shani), and the Women and Peace Coalition. All these groups took clear positions against the occupation and organized numerous activities to voice their dissent. These activities had two major goals: to mobilize public opinion against the occupation in Israel and abroad and to build bridges of solidarity with Palestinian women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.³³

The *intifada* also created better conditions for cooperation between Jewish women and Palestinian women who reside in Israel and in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.³⁴ These new and fragile alliances take the shape of joint protests, solidarity visits, and conferences. Most alliances and encounters between Palestinian and Israeli-Jewish women challenge the primacy of national identities and the rigidity of sovereign boundaries. For example, Hannah Safran, an Israeli-Jewish feminist, peace activist, and a founding member of Women in Black in Haifa, alludes to the political significance of collaborative solidarity work:

In the sociopolitical context there are many forces that work to keep us separate and the joint protest enables the building of a common ground, opens a dialogue. There is a process of trust building. They [Palestinian women] know that we are their allies, that we do not represent the Israeli government. Our persistence in the vigils makes us more credible to the Palestinian women.³⁵

But the emerging alliances between Palestinian and Jewish-Israeli women face constant challenges. As Palestinian feminist scholar and activist Rita Giacaman reminds us:

Bridges cannot be built in a vacuum. Not every woman will agree with another woman. Sisterhood is not necessarily global. For sister-

33. For a detailed analysis of the Israeli women's peace movement, see my doctoral dissertation, *Conflict Resolution through Feminist Lenses: Women's Perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University, May 1993. See also Naomi Chazan, "Israeli Women and Peace Activism," in Barbara Swirsky and Marilyn Safir, eds., *Calling the Equality Bluff: Women in Israel*; Gila Svirsky, "Women in Black," in Rita Falbel, Irena Klepfisz, and Donna Nevel, eds., *Jewish Women's Call for Peace: A Handbook for Jewish Women on the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict* (New York: Firebrand Books, 1990); *New Outlook*, special issue, "Women in Action" (June/July 1989); and Rachel Ostrowitz, "Dangerous Women: The Israeli Women's Peace Movement," *New Outlook*, Vol. 32, No. 6/7 (June-July 1989): 14-15.

34. One should not confuse my references to Palestinian women who reside in Israel with references to Palestinian women who live under occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. There are close to a million Palestinians who hold Israeli citizenship but are treated as second-class citizens. For a discussion of the relationship between Jewish women and Palestinian women who reside in Israel within the women's peace movement in Israel, see Nabila Espanioli, "Palestinian Women in Israel Respond to the Intifada," in Barbara Swirski and Marilyn P. Safir, *Calling the Equality Bluff: Women in Israel*, 147-161.

35. Interview with Hannah Safran, May 1990, Haifa, Israel.

hood to be global certain predispositions need to be met.³⁶

To even begin to imagine how to construct bridges between Israeli-Jewish and Palestinian women, women on each part of the divide need to develop critical consciousness of where we stand in relation to the divisions between us. For example, Hana Safran points out that:

Before the intifada there was a fear amongst feminists that were interested in building bridges of solidarity with Palestinian women; those of us who were aware that feminism as we practice it emerged in a Western context, we were afraid of imposing our "way of life" on Palestinians who carry a struggle which emerged in a completely different context than ours. There wasn't enough knowledge about their struggles and their local unique definitions of feminism. Our fear was of patronizing in cooperation.³⁷

This example alludes not only to the differences between various frameworks that Palestinian and Israeli women utilize, but also to the ways in which discourses of "us" versus "them" and states' ideologies and policies aimed at "divide and conquer" made solidarity work across the national divide very difficult and very limited prior to the outbreak of the *intifada*.

Making the Links

In addition to creating better conditions for solidarity, the *intifada* also triggered the emergence of feminist voices in Israel and Palestine, linking narrowly defined "women's issues," such as violence against women, discrimination in the workplace, women's health, and reproductive rights, to the sociopolitical contexts within which they unfold.

On the Palestinian side, the Women's Studies Committee at the Bisan Research and Development Center in Jerusalem organized a special conference entitled, "The Intifada and Some Women's Social Issues." The conference took place in Jerusalem on December 14, 1990 with the participation of more than 400 women, including grass roots activists, academicians, and researchers. According to the organizers:

The aim of the conference was to provide women from a variety of political and ideological streams with an opportunity for discussion and dialogue, for the expression of their suffering, their national and social problems as women; and to propose appropriate solutions and encourage the establishment of independent committees and insti-

36. Conversation with Rita Giacaman, Mah Nasar, and Eileen Kuttab, June 1991, Occupied West Bank, Ramalla.

37. Interview with Hannah Safran, May 1990.

tutions to follow up on these problems and to try to carry out some of the proposed solutions. An additional aim of the conference was to contribute to the development of the role of Palestinian women in society, in the face of negative social phenomena which constitute a hindrance to the development of the Palestinian women's movement as well as to the advancement of women in every field economic, social, political, and cultural.³⁸

Another attempt to link the oppressive context of the Israeli occupation and its implication for Palestinian women's lives in the West Bank and Gaza Strip took place on July 18, 1991. The Palestinian Women's Studies Center on the West Bank held a conference on domestic violence, which 100 women attended.³⁹

On the Israeli side, too, feminists began to see the connection between "women's issues" and the broader political context. For example, following her participation with Palestinian women at an international women's conference in Brussels entitled, "Give Peace a Chance — Women Speak Out," Rachel Ostrowitz, a long-time feminist, peace activist, and editor of *Noga*, the only feminist magazine in Israel, linked the oppression of Israeli women with the oppression of Palestinians:

Our oppression is not acceptable nor is the oppression of others.... We, the women of the Israeli peace movement, will not allow our senses to be numbed by the daily killings. We will not accept oppression, discrimination, or exploitation as part of our political system. ... We won't give up, or shut up, or put up with the current version of reality.⁴⁰

With the unprecedented increase in violence against women and children since the outbreak of the *intifada*, and especially in the aftermath of the Gulf War, more feminists and peace activists in Israel realize that militarism and sexism are closely interconnected and, thus, women's liberation and the eradication of gender inequalities depend on the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For example, some Israeli feminists argue that the construction of Israeli masculinity is linked to the militarized political climate in Israel and the region. They demonstrate how the institutionalization of "national security" as a top priority in Israel contributes to gender inequalities on one hand, and legitimizes violence against Palestinian women on the other.⁴¹

38. See the report published by the Women's Studies Committee at the Bisan Center, *The Intifada and Some Women's Social Issues: A Conference Held in Al-Quds Al-Sharif/Jerusalem on December 14, 1990* (Jerusalem: Bisan Center, 1991).

39. For more details on this conference and on other initiatives, see the conference report, "Women's Studies Centre Holds Conference on Domestic Violence Against Women," *Al-Mar'a* Vol. 6 (1991), 12.

40. Rachel Ostrowitz, "Dangerous Women," 14-15.

41. For a detailed discussion of these issues, see my articles, "Every Woman is an Occupied Territory" and "Homefront as Battlefield."

However, violence is not treated as a set of practices men are born with, but rather as a way of coping that is acquired and reinforced through education and social interactions which inform and shape the individual and collective identities and experiences of Israeli men. Thus, the social construction of masculinity in Israel has to be addressed in its historical context, especially in light of the Holocaust and the creation of the Jewish state. Accordingly, the state of Israel can be seen as a reassertion of manhood, justified by the need to end a history of weakness and suffering by creating an image of an Israeli man who is exceedingly masculine, pragmatic, protective, assertive, and emotionally tough. Evoking images such as "a nation under siege," surrounded by enemies that threaten to throw the entire population into the sea, Israel's Zionist ideology made "national security" a top priority, giving rise to the centrality of the army and its practices in all spheres of Israeli life and thus offering the "new" Israeli men a privileged status in Israeli society.⁴²

In Israel, for example, the national project of creating unity in the face of the "enemy" has been grounded in colonial, Orientalist, and sexist relations of power.⁴³ In other words, since one of the primary objectives of the Israeli doctrine of "national security" has always been to build a cohesive united front, "national security" policies have been used not only to justify Israeli militaristic and expansionistic political projects, but also to legitimize and reinforce existing inequalities among Israeli citizens along lines of gender, nationality, birth, place, ethnicity, class and political affiliation. For example, resistance attempts on the part of grass-roots social movements representing Israel's second, third, and fourth-class citizens — women, Jews from Arab and North African countries, and Palestinians who hold Israeli citizenship—have been often dismissed under the premise of security concerns. These populations have been asked to accept the fact that, until the Arab-Israeli conflict is resolved, their grievances must be put on hold.⁴⁴

The surge of grassroots political activism and feminist awareness among women in Israel and in the West Bank and Gaza Strip has opened up space for the exploration of new connections between concerns traditionally defined as "women's issues" and broader political, social, and economic problems of the

42. For a critical discussion of the social construction of masculinity in Israel, see my articles, "Militarized Masculinity in Context: Cultural Politics and Social Constructions of Gender in Israel," paper prepared for the annual meeting of the Middle East Studies Association, Portland, Oregon, October 1992; and "To Be a Man in the Jewish State: The Sociopolitical Context of Violence and Oppression," *Challenge*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (September/October 1991), 26-28.

43. "Orientalism" refers to the view that the "Orient" is antithetical to and radically different from the West. For an in-depth examination of the social and political implications of orientalism, see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979). For more on the representation of Middle Eastern women, see Zjaleh Hajibashi, "Feminism or Ventriloquism: Western Presentations of Middle Eastern Women," *Middle East Report*, Vol. 172 (September/October 1991): 43-45. See also Judy Mabro, *Veiled Half Truths: Western Traveller's Perceptions of Middle Eastern Women* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991).

44. See Ella Shohat, "Sepharadim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims," *Social Text*, Vol. 19/20 (1988): 1-35; and Shlomo Swirsky, *Israel: The Oriental Majority* (London: Zed Books, 1989). See also my article, "Is Feminism a Threat to National Security?," *MS* (January/February 1993): 18-22.

region. The crucial connections that women in the region have begun to address include those between gender, race, class, and sexuality on one hand, and between militarism, sexism, and violence against women on the other.

Conclusions

Conventional scholarship on Middle East politics tends to ignore feminist interventions such as the ones described in this article. This is no doubt related to the fact that the majority of such scholarship is produced by white privileged men. In recent years, feminists have called attention to the striking absence of women's voices and perspectives on the political arena and in academic disciplines such as peace studies, conflict resolution, and international relations. Furthermore, feminist scholars and women around the world have engaged in rethinking central concepts to the study of international politics. But women's struggles for voice and visibility represent only one step in a long and difficult journey to articulate and implement feminist perspectives.

In order to mobilize women's movements in the Middle East around feminist projects directed at advancing the prospects for peace, women and other progressive movements in the region have to take on the following tasks: 1) to eliminate the artificial distinctions between narrowly defined "women's issues" and the politics of war and peace; 2) to develop the necessary struggles, resources, and coalitions that will enable us to move from the margins of local and global political arenas to all centers of political power; 3) to recognize and address differences in power and privilege among people; and 4) to engage in laying the groundwork for coalition politics that transcend national sovereignties and encourage women's movements and other progressive social movements in the region to expand their collaboration on particular issues, including the long term process of peace building in the Middle East.

In sum, in the Middle East, as in many other places across the globe, for peace to become real and concrete, it needs to relate to people's life conditions, hopes, and fears. In other words, peace has to emerge from the concrete life experiences of people, not the goals of outsider politicians or academic scholars, no matter how noble their intentions may be. Peace and security in the Middle East cannot be reached through agreements signed by heads of states and approved by the international community, but rather through ongoing processes and multiple struggles to develop and implement comprehensive frameworks of social and political change that will advance the chances of reaching lasting and just peace in the region. To move in this direction, women in the Middle East need to build on their experiences in women's alliances and forge solidarities with other disenfranchised social groups. That is, women have to search for creative ways to link their struggles for women's liberation with other political struggles. Such potential alliances are likely to map new avenues for struggles designed to transform the Middle East into a safe and peaceful place for all people.



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