



Resistance, Repression, and Gender Politics in Occupied Palestine and Jordan

Frances S. Hasso

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Review by

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Frances S. Hasso, who self-identifies as an Arab American feminist of Jordanian and Palestinian heritage, spent six months during the early years of the first Intifada interning with the Palestinian Federation of Women's Action Committees (PFWAC). This experience proved to be pivotal for Hasso. The PFWAC was known to be active in feminist and nationalist politics and Hasso was put on a newly formed three-member Production Committee to evaluate and make recommendations to strengthen the organization's five income-generating projects. She made a survey of women employees of PFWAC income generating projects that focused on the influence of the women's paid work on gender status in which she found that women's roles in the Intifada were less central than reported in the media, and that men remained in charge of the nationalist movement. She returned to the US disappointed that the gender question was so easily set aside by the male nationalist leadership.

Hasso again worked in the Occupied Palestinian Territories in the early 1990s, but no longer participated in PFWAC activities. In the mid 1990s, however, she interviewed the same women employees of the PFWAC income generating projects, this time for her dissertation. During the course of six years, their ideas about marriage, child rearing, work, and political activity had changed, and they had acquired a new sense of feminist subjectivity.

She then conducted interviews with women and men who were or had been active in leadership positions in the PFWAC or the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). In



2000, she returned to Jordan, Syria, and the Occupied Territories to study gender dynamics in branch units of the DFLP. This book is the result of her decade of research. It is an insightful study, not only of a transformation in the women workers' consciousness, but of the history of the Palestinian nationalist movement itself. She demonstrates that the authoritarian Jordanian state and the authoritarian Israeli occupation produced different models of opposition. In Jordan, almost half the population worked for the state and this hindered the development of autonomous political organizations. In the Occupied Palestinian Territories, however, the entire Palestinian population opposed the Israeli military government. This enabled leftist organizers to develop a successful model of mass-based mobilization that was democratic, flexible, and decentralized. Women were able to organize themselves and to play a much larger role in public life than in previous years.

After the 1970-71 Civil War in Jordan, however, there was a backlash against women fighters in the Palestinian resistance. To discredit them, the Jordanian regime accused them of illicit sexual relations. While Jordanian society became more conservative, the DFLP remained generally inclusive of women. Hasso was able to interview Nayef Hawatmeh, the leader of the DFLP, in Damascus in 2000. Hawatmeh is of Christian Jordanian heritage which, as Hasso states, complicates the identity politics at work. Hasso skillfully incorporates excerpts from her interviews with Hawatmeh throughout the book. While the DFLP incorporated a Marxist line, he was a militant pragmatist committed to liberating Palestine by any means. This meant including women in order to build a mass movement.

DFLP women were successful in mobilizing women in the West Bank and Gaza, where they organized sewing and weaving classes and cooperatives where women could buy, sell, or trade merchandise. The tension between nationalist and feminist objectives, however, remained, with women's interests in reforming unequal marriage, divorce, child custody, or inheritance laws subordinated to nationalist goals. During the first Intifada, power struggles between men elites ultimately disillusioned and marginalized many activist women.

The book makes it clear that the Palestinian political organizations faced a nearly impossible situation. After 1971, they were forced to operate far from major Palestinian population centers and were beset with centrifugal tendencies that undermined state building. The reader is left with an appreciation not only of



the many challenges facing women and men activists, but also respect for how much they have overcome. Hasso concludes by stating, “The challenge in the present is how to invigorate (women’s activism) under the debilitating conditions of Israeli occupation, unaccountable or authoritarian state rule, or legalized disenfranchisement of diasporic communities. Intertwined with these state-produced obstacles is the patriarchal impulse that is too often comfortable for many men activists otherwise committed to progressive and democratic societies. To what extent will they fight for the inclusion and dignity of their women comrades, fellow citizens, sisters, mothers, daughters, and friends? (p.194-195).” In response to the information in this complex and fascinating book, the reader might answer that the women themselves will find ways to insist on their inclusion.