Chapter 11

Reproducing a Culture of Martyrdom

The Role of the Palestinian Mother in Discourse Construction, Transmission, and Legitimization

Michael Loadenthal

Introduction

Nestled between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank is the state of Israel, which since 1967 has occupied the Palestinian territories. After decades of failed negotiations, the Jewish state now competes with Palestinian militants and paramilitaries in an ongoing cycle of retaliatory violence. The West Bank, the larger of the Palestinian territories, is currently segmented into ever-shrinking enclaves of land, separated by military installations, Israeli settlements, and the vast infrastructure designed to control the Palestinian populace and guarantee the safety of Israeli citizens. As a result of the conflict, Palestine is host to a variety of Palestinian paramilitary, militant, and terrorist groups. These groups have large-scale social service, political, religious, media, and military wings—and while some are Islamist, others are secular nationalists or have their roots in anticolonialist leftist movements. Groups like Islamic Jihad—an Islamist paramilitary group—and Fatah—the ruling secular nationalist party—compete for popularity by waging a bloody war with the state of Israel fought through both military strikes and the rhetoric of propaganda.
The Gaza Strip is far smaller than the West Bank and shares a border with Egypt. In the summer of 2005, the Israel Defense Forces withdrew its military forces from the Strip, and the government of Ariel Sharon organized the evacuation of all Israeli settlers. The Gaza Strip, like the West Bank, is made up of small towns, rural villages, tightly packed cities, and large refugee camps. There is mass unemployment and poverty as the population attempts to build a viable state after more than four decades of harsh occupation. The Gaza Strip is regarded as more religious and destitute than the West Bank, exuding the graphic images of martyrs’ parades and helicopter missile strikes. In lock step with the conflict, both the Gaza Strip and West Bank have witnessed religious reinvigorations as the conflict has dragged on.¹ Within Gaza, the Islamic Resistance Movement, known popularly as Hamas, garners a great deal of support and for many surpasses the Fatah-aligned Palestinian Authority in legitimacy. Hamas has grown to be the most popular militant group in the Palestinian territories and operates a wide network of social and religious institutions as well as an armed wing, known as the Ezzedeen al-Qassam Brigades. The Brigades has regularly engaged in paramilitary and terrorist attacks against the Israeli military and citizenry and organizes frequent military parades and political rallies. Hamas has a formidable presence in both Gaza and the West Bank, and it has elected members to all levels of local government. Hamas is strongest in the Gaza Strip, while Fatah along with its main armed wing, the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, is strongest in the West Bank. Since the first Palestinian intifāda (uprising or shaking off), Fatah and Hamas have competed for the people’s support. Throughout Palestinian society, great diversity in class, religious background, and education exist, making the intifada one of the most constant socializing forces.

The most recent uprising, known as the al-Aqsa Intifāda, began in September 2000 and has been more dominated by religion than prior uprisings. While some military organizations such as Hamas’s armed wing state in public communications that the al-Aqsa uprising is continuing,² many conclude that the period of the second intifada ended around 2005. The end of this period can be marked by the death of Yasser Arafat in 2004, Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip,³ and the Sharm el-Sheikh peace talks⁴ in 2005, or the armed clashes between Hamas and Fatah security forces⁵ in 2006. Despite the difficulty with marking its end, the al-Aqsa Intifāda is noted for the influx of religious overtones attributed to the rise of Islamists movements such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad. As such, the culture of the intifada has increasingly centered on jihadi martyrdom, as the influence and popularity of