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Christina Pratt

*Dominican College of Blauvelt*

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# A Tale of Two Hannas: Observations on Israeli and Palestinian Women's Resistance to Occupation (1991–1995)

CHRISTINA PRATT

Dominican College of Blauvelt and  
New York University School of Social Work  
at Orangeburg, New York

*An observer reviews the successes and failures of grassroots strategies of non-violent resistance to military occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Particular attention is paid to the role of women's groups and peace organizations in Israel as well as in Israeli Occupied Arab Territories.*

In the Middle East, the Gulf War and its aftermath have all but decimated grassroots peace organizations, since to protest the war or Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza is tantamount to the abandonment of the right of sovereign Israel to exist.

Central to the unrelieved tensions in this increasingly un-Holy Land, are the legends of martyrs imprinted in the cultures of Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Commentators on the Middle East crisis, however, point to the essential, fundamental dispute over land, and more critically, water; not religion. The land, about the size of Maryland, invites sentiments and acts of righteous entitlement on behalf of Israelis, Palestinians and Fundamentalist Christian groups (Peretz, 1991).

To Jews, major holy places in Jerusalem include the Tombs of Absalom, David and Rachel, the Wailing Wall, numerous ancient and modern synagogues and the Cemetery of Martyrs and Heros on the Mount of Olives. To Jews, internationally, Israel serves as the psycho-spiritual container and terra firma, that assures that never again will there be powerlessness and victimization. Never again will there be refugees denied sanctuary. Daily reminders of the Holocaust punctuate the mandate of Israel—Never Again (Silverberg, 1991).

For Muslims, Jerusalem carries a sacred association with Islam, its prophet Abraham, his descendants, the nearness of the

Prophet Mohammed and his nocturnal journey from Mecca to the Aksa Mosque in Jerusalem, from where he took his mystical night flight to heaven (miraj). The Temple Mount and the Dome of the Rock (Haram al-Sharif, in Arabic) sit upon the hill traditionally identified with Mt. Moriah, on which God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. The first temple was built here by King Solomon in the 10th century, B.C. The second temple, built in 516 B.C., and enlarged by Herod the Great shortly before the birth of Christ, is remembered by Christians as the backdrop to Jesus' passion. According to Muslim legend, however, Haram al-Sharif (Noble Sanctuary) surrounds Abraham's altar, where he almost sacrificed Ishmael, his son by Hagar, not Isaac, as Jews and Christians believe.

To Christians, the holy shrines of the Testaments, Old and New, lend tangible evidence of the Holy Sepulchre, the Garden of Gethsemani, the Mount of Olives, the stations of the cross, the virgin birth, the apostles and the women of Christ—Anne (a.k.a. Hannah), Mary, Mary Magdalene. To certain Christian fundamentalists, (including David Koresh of Waco, Texas) the Messiah is restrained in His return until the third temple is readied—its construction site is identified as the Muslim holy of holies—the Dome of the Rock. This was the site of extreme violence on October 8, 1990, when 21 Palestinians were killed and 150 injured by Israeli security forces as Gershon Solomon's "Temple Mount Faithful" were resisted in their attempt to enter the al-Aksa mosque and place a cornerstone for the building of the third temple. Today, according to *The New York Times* (9/3/91), "archeology, religion and politics are on a collision course", as Israeli right wing, "Temple Mount Faithful" sue the Waqf (Muslim Religious Council) for the rights to fulfill the "aim . . . to build a new temple." The politics of the suffering victim permeate histories of martyrdom and resistance on all three religious fronts.

One Israeli view, popular since the Begin era, exempts Israel from any moral judgment. The notion that the non-Jewish world is a hostile world is deeply imprinted. Long histories of Jewish suffering under non-Jewish domination dating from anti-semitic Greeks, Romans, Christians, up to the horrific Holocaust, confirm the idea that non-Jewish Esau hates Jacob of Zion. Palestinian nationalism, pan-arabism and the proximity of historically hostile

Arab neighbor-states amount to the same story over again, that in every generation someone rises up to destroy the Jewish people. Therefore, to criticize the abuses of Israeli power, military force and occupation in Arab territories is to collaborate with Hitler. Entitlement, moral immunity and moral exemptions underscore the politics of survivorship and victimization. (Silverberg, 1991)

From the left of the Israeli political spectrum, there is a call for balance, maintenance of commitment to Jewish survival without the sacrifice of humanism and caution not to be blind to, nor blinded by the Holocaust. For Jews, the knowledge and experience of the heart of oppression calls for care that victims not become victimizers. Israeli commentators on the hard left identify military force in the Occupied Territories as "Judaeo-Nazi." (Spiro, 1991)

Fueled by Iraqi missile attacks during the Gulf War, secular humanists on the left and the orthodox on the right are influenced by the injunction that to criticize Israel, in any form, is to abandon the 6 million victims of the Holocaust, of which 1½ million were children. (Miller, 1991)

### Two Hannas

This prologue serves as context for the story of two Hannas. Channa Knaz (pronounced Hanna) is an activist in Women in Black, an Israeli peace organization sharing an affinity with the Black Sash movement to end Apartheid in South Africa. Channa is a longstanding member of the historic Kibbutz Gan Sh'muel. Hanan (pronounced Hanna) Mikhail Ashrawi of Ramallah (West Bank) is a prominent Palestinian voice at the international level. She is a professor at Bir Zeit University with service as Dean of Humanities. In 1995, Professor Ashrawi leads the Palestinian Independent Commission for Citizens' Rights (PICCR), an independent ombudsman organization.

Women in Israel and women in the nascent Palestinian nation are quick to agree that regional traditions of gender segregation provide powerful barriers to feminist ideals of equal status and value. On one hand, the social experiments of the Kibbutzim movement, born to serve as an antidote to racism and classism, never revolutionized the secondary status of women. At the same

time, Palestinian women continue to fight on two fronts: resistance to Israeli occupation and to the daily social harassment and legal discrimination imposed on women in most Arab countries. (Antonius, 1983)

### Women in Black

In January, 1988, seven women dressed in black, carrying signs in the shape of a hand which read, "End the Occupation," began to stand in the squares of Jerusalem. Other women joined—mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters of men conscripted to occupy, repress, kill and be killed in arab territories. Hundreds joined Women in Black and spread thirty separate Friday vigils throughout Israel. Standing alone, female protesters sustained a consistent presence of non-violent resistance to the occupation. During the Gulf War, membership fell sharply. Passers-by react harshly to the four dozen Women in Black gathered at Tzfat (France) Square in Jerusalem. Verbal abuse, pornographic and homophobic in content, inflicts regular injury. Counterdemonstrators memorialize Rabbi Meir Kahane and renew demonized images of Palestinians as terrorists. Hecklers demand that Women in Black get out of Arafat's bed and "go home and prepare the Sabbath." When asked how male family members react to their activities, Channa Knaz reminds the listener that women, historically and sociologically, have endured harassment more successfully than men have. The one occasion when sympathetic men joined the Friday vigil resulted in fist fighting among male sympathizers, hecklers and counterdemonstrators. Since Israeli men freely carry automatic pistols and rifles, it is a modern miracle that no victims have been claimed in these reactions to the non-violent demonstrations for peace. Awarded the Aachen Prize for Peace earlier this year, Women in Black find new sources of institutional and international recognition. Solidarity groups throughout the U.S, Europe and Australia support their message, "End the Occupation!" (Sachs, 1991; Schwartz, 1991; Shalom, 1991)

Channa Knaz reports that Israeli army service, once heroic and honorific for those who serve, as well as for their families, is now a topic of tense silence in family life. The economic, political, social and psychological injuries incurred by military occupation are reminiscent of the American Viet Nam syndrome.

Documented rates of family violence, sexual dysfunction, suicide and violence among the military soar, particularly during stepped up military retaliation against the desperate Palestinian hope for Saddam Hussein as liberator. (Knaz, 1991; Jerusalem Post, 1991)

Ideologically hand in hand with Women in Black, the Yesh Gvul (There is a Limit) movement of conscientious objectors to army service in the occupied territories enjoys the support of some 600 army reservists. Outspoken leadership of both Women in Black and Yesh Gvul are faced routinely with incarceration, court martial, secret police harassment and termination of employment. Both groups are identified by the ruling party as "self-hating Jews who blemish the beautiful face of Israel." (Spiro, 1991)

Twenty-seven years of occupation brings Israel a collective colonial mentality, with racism more apparent and palpable. "All organs of the State have become a prolonged arm of the occupation," reported one member of Yesh Gvul. "Palestinians are the Jews of the Arab World." (Spiro, 1991)

### Resistance to Occupation

Among Palestinian women, Hanan Mikhail Ashrawi is a powerful voice for statehood, human rights and peace. She knows the daily experience of collective punishment, land confiscation, curfew and detention without trial that are the conditions that deteriorate life rapidly. Human rights violations have accelerated since the Intifida (Uprising) with military repression high during and since the Gulf war. For Palestinian women, the near quarter century of occupation has necessarily thrust them into political situations. Their roles and the very function of the family itself have evolved. The Palestinian woman's role has stretched to include numerous encounters with the army, military courts, prisons and police. This political woman is the consequence of both the detention and death of Palestinian men and a new consciousness that attends access to education. (Jawwad, 1990)

Despite handicaps wrought from traditions that deny women access to power, wealth, land tenure, and institutional or legal authority, women have assumed activist political authority, roles usually associated with men. They distribute clandestine leaflets, inform shopkeepers of strikes, risk lives during curfews and defy

soldiers in mothers' attempts to interfere with Israeli military abduction of sons, brothers, husbands, or fathers. (Davies, 1987) Bitter coffee, once an accompaniment to funerals, is now strongly sweetened, like the celebratory beverage of weddings, to signify the honor for the martyr. Mothers are called to rejoice at their sons' martyrdom—"All youths are your children". (Giacaman, 1989) Elder women in black peasant dresses brightly embroidered in Palestinian folkloric tradition, stand side by side with their veiled, younger sisters, in western dress and wrestle with terrified 19-year-old Israeli soldiers to free their boys from the military grip.

Channa Knaz recalls a medical aid visit to a Palestinian village in the West Bank. There, she sat with another nurse, like herself, who spoke of a recent time, when the village was under siege by Israeli troops. Palestinian counterforces outnumbered the military on one particular street. Outside her window, the woman saw a retreating group of soldiers; one young soldier frozen in the reversal of plans, stood alone sobbing. At great risk to herself, she rescued the young Israeli who faced certain death by Palestinian resistors—another Palestinian mother's tale. (Knaz, 1991)

Nablus is the largest city on the West Bank. It is identified by the Harvard Student Agencies Guide to Israel and the West Bank as "a candidate for the intellectual and administrative capital of the unborn Palestinian nation." At the Al-Ittihad Hospital in Nablus, (a facility established by The Arab Women's Union in 1921) a Norwegian nurse in volunteer service reported on the impact of the occupation on Palestinian women. There has been a sharp peak in the rates of: attempted suicide; alcoholic intoxication (formerly not evident); traumatic stress syndrome; and pervasive depression. Palestinian women often bury their familial dead before the official census of casualties is tallied. Called upon to celebrate the martyrdom of male kin, Palestinian women are denied license to mourn. (Goldering, 1991; Jawwad, 1990)

The accelerated activism of younger and elder Palestinian women rallies around the mothers' appeal to soldiers—"He is my son!" Hanan Mikhail Ashrawi, in her poem, "Demonstration," reminds all Palestinian women, "Mother of the martyr rejoice, All youths are your children."

Palestinian women, particularly those not politically or organizationally identified with a particular nationalist group, have

extended their traditional role and have transformed their family responsibilities to include the entire village or refugee camp. Here, where community is closely bound together, the community as family is defended by mothers in this time of sustained crisis. The common refrain, "He is my son!" echoed by women who struggle with soldiers to reclaim young men from beatings and detention, has become the protest chant of women. One elderly woman in Ramallah defied curfew to get hold of and smother in a huge embrace, a boy being beaten. "He's my son!" she cried. "Liar!" the soldier, still in his teens, shouted. "How can you be his mother?" "They are all my children!" the elder woman wailed. (Giacaman, 1989)

Attending funerals, the equivalent of a demonstration, has become a women's resistance act. Women have also been involved in smuggling food and provisions into refugee camps under curfew. As such, confronting soldiers during night raids and defiance of curfew contribute major sustenance to the uprising against occupation. (Said, 1986; McDowell, 1989)

These types of Palestinian women's activism are partially reflected in the gloomy statistics of deaths, injuries, detentions and deportations. Of the fatalities during the first three years of the Intifada, statistics range from 918 (U.N.) to 973 (AL-HAQ) Palestinians killed by Israeli soldiers and settlers. Of these, 12% were women and 24% were children under the age of 16. (Center for Policy Analysis on Palestine, 1991) In 1990, Palestinian deaths (n=399) outnumbered Israeli military and civilian fatalities (n=15) in the territories, 27 to 1, (Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University). In 1995, following a year of Islamic militancy in the form of four bomb attacks against Israeli citizens, Palestinian deaths outnumbered Israeli by 10:1. At least 112,000 Palestinians have been injured seriously enough to require hospitalization. Most wounded, however, do not seek medical care for fear of army retribution while under treatment.

Amnesty International, documents the denial to and obstruction of medical treatment by military authorities as a frequent occurrence (1990-1995). The Swedish Save the Children Fund reports that 39% of the 227 children killed during the first 30 of the 44 months of the Intifada died because medical treatment was delayed or obstructed by military personnel (1990). UNWRA



staff have conducted epidemiological studies on the effects of exposure to CS—type tear gas, which has lethal effects in enclosed spaces. The gas is fired directly at people and into houses, schools, hospitals, mosques and churches. The Israeli human rights group, B'Tselem, reported in 1990 that at least 1,890 Palestinian women miscarried pregnancies after inhaling tear gas. The UNWRA (United Nations Works and Relief Agency) maternity and child health clinic in Gaza and the Al-Ittihad Hospital in Nablus were both gassed by Israeli troops during this past year. One American academic observer experienced, first hand, the effects of tear gas upon entering Manger Square from the Crusader built Cathedral of the Nativity in Bethlehem, this August. Hours of strong abdominal pain attested to the gas' virulent composition. Because the chemistry of this gas has not been identified, no antidote is available to Palestinians.

The infant mortality rate of Palestinians in the occupied territories (70/1000) is greater than six times the rate of infant mortality for Israeli Jews (10.7/1000), rivalling Kenya (60/1000), and Ghana (98/1000). Rates of child malnutrition range from 1 out of 3 of all children under age 3, to a documented 41% of 209 children studied, under age 3, from Palestinian villages near Jerusalem, as reported by Rita Giacaman.

Parasitic infection complicates pervasive malnutrition. (Abu-Said, 1991) In Gaza, there is not sufficient clean water; open ditches of sewage run from refugee camps through streets to the Mediterranean Sea. The stench is powerfully debilitating. Gaza, one of the most densely populated areas on earth, has an average per capita income of approximately \$450-per year. Twenty-five percent of Gazans do not have immediate access to running water. Since the Gulf War, borders have been closed and Gazan farmers, like Palestinian farmers in the West Bank, under curfew, have not been able to irrigate, harvest or market their crops, reducing earnings from agriculture by 25%. Gazan homes are regularly demolished or sealed, either for lack of building permits, or for alleged security offenses by family members. Demolition of homes by dynamite and bulldozer number 1,860. Left homeless, the typically large Palestinian family faces greater health risks and consequences by doubling up in the temporary shelter

of friends or in tents erected beside their demolished homes. (Peretz, 1990)

The Center for Rapprochement in Beit Sahour has been nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. The Christian village of Beit Sahour overlooks Shepherd's Field where, in New Testament lore, angels exclaimed, "Peace on Earth, Good will toward Men." (Luke, 2, 14). Here, pressures for peace involve non-violence, tax resistance, and the development of parallel services at the grassroots and self-help level. The development of parallel health care, small businesses and administrative services join in a commitment to ongoing dialogue with Israelis from West Bank settlements as well as from Israel. However, few Israelis come to Beit Sahour to talk peace.

On August 3, 1991, a diverse group met at the Beit Sahour Rapprochement Center. This group consisted of ten Palestinian men of various professions, ten American male professors, two British women representing law and film, three female academics from the U.S. and one Palestinian woman, an immunologist. They exchanged ideas on non-violent resistance in light of heightened Israeli military force. The sole Palestinian woman, in an exhausted appeal, confronted her foreign interviewers, saying, "Let me ask *you* a question. Americans and Europeans visit us all the time, and listen to evidence of unequal treatment under the law and *nothing changes*. Economic aid from the U.S. to Israel, \$10 billion expected this September, continues to support settlement policy and military occupation. What can you do to influence the American media to pay attention to the crisis of Palestinians under Israeli occupation?" One response to this plea from the American delegation was offered by Congressional candidate, Dolores Sandoval, Professor, University of Vermont. She suggested that to court the U.S. media, a dual approach is necessary for Palestinians. "Spotlight Hanan Mikhel Ashrawi, who, in many ways, is far more attractive than Yasser Arafat, and consult with slick "Madison Avenue" public relations types." In any case, Palestinians are hard pressed to compete with the Israeli public relations machine in the U.S.

For most grassroots organizations in the West Bank and Gaza, strategies of non-violent resistance include: the boycott of Israeli goods and transportation; strikes; resistance to taxes, the military,

subpoenas and settlers; and the filling of jails. There is a commitment to make occupation expensive for the occupiers, and to create a national, political and religious identity for Palestinians. (Awad, 1985)

### Palestinian Authority

Today, in 1995, one year after assuming responsibility for Gaza and Jericho, the Palestinian Authority (PA), the interim self-governing authority for Palestinians in the occupied territories, chaired by PLO Chairman, Yasir Arafat, despite positive action on human rights, is criticized by Middle East Watch (Feb., 1995) and Amnesty International (1994, 1995) for its sweeping and arbitrary political arrests, censorship and failure to credibly investigate suspected abuses.

At the same time, Israel continues to control the lives of Palestinians in self-rule areas. Twenty-seven years of occupation cannot be underestimated. Israeli soldiers based in Gaza continue to restrict Palestinian freedom of movement, negatively effecting the economy and imposing restrictions indiscriminately, considered a form of collective punishment. Workers have lost jobs, university students have been forced to miss semesters, and the lives of thousands of persons with businesses in Jerusalem and the West Bank have been disrupted. (Middle East Watch, 1995)

In 1995, the Palestinian Authority is confronted with the challenge of governing a population restive after twenty-seven years of military occupation. It is underfunded, and its powers are limited by the Israeli-PLO agreements. The two territories (Gaza and Jericho) under its aegis are separated by the State of Israel, which does not permit easy access between the two. Palestinian security forces lack experience, training and equipment for ordinary police functions. These handicaps, however, do not fully excuse the emerging patterns of human rights violations, nor failure to take action to protect rights.

The Palestinian Authority is under enormous pressure from Israel, the United States and others to eliminate attacks by militant groups and factions under their jurisdiction. In 1994, bombings of a bus in downtown Tel Aviv and Israeli towns of Afula and Hadera killed a total of thirty-four persons. On July 24, 1995, seven Israelis

died on a Tel Aviv bus, as a result of another Palestinian suicide bombing. The attack came on the day before negotiators were to have secured an agreement on extending Palestinian self-rule to most of the West Bank. Condemned by Israelis and Palestinians, terrorist acts of suicide bombings threaten livelihoods and peace in both areas forestalling the promise of Palestinian self-rule. (New York Times, 7/25/95)

Ultimately, the security of Israelis and Palestinians is interdependent. Most people in both communities are convinced of the futility of endless conflict and have expressed a willingness to live in peace as neighbors.

### Conclusion

One sign of hope is that Israeli and Palestinian women persevere in their dialogue, in their mutual respect, and in their deep desire for an end to hostilities. This proves, beyond a doubt, that cooperation, as women, influences positive and constructive social change. These are lessons, however unfortunate, from which the parties of the Middle East conflict, have yet to recognize and learn. Mordechai Bar-On, former Member of Knesset, Ratz Party, and current activist in Peace Now, in an interview in Jerusalem on August 4, 1991, asserted, that in the end, "Peace does not come by the wisdom of women but by the conditions that prevail."

The great political philosopher, Hannah Arendt, once remarked that it is far less important for the political thinker to tell others "what is to be done" than to help others "to think what we are doing." Women's stake in the peace process is great. Today, Palestinians, Arabs in general, and Israelis alike, look to the U.S. as mediator/liberator. To follow the path of the Hannas is destined to reap benefits of increased tolerance, caring citizenry and certain community, all of which are critical for harmonious co-existence. (Elshtain, 1990)

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### Note

(1) Content for this article came in part from the following observations and regional print media:

- August 3, 1991* - Dehaishe Refugee Camp, Hebron; Ramallah area
- August 5, 1991* - Al-Itihad Hospital, established by the Arab Women's Union of Nablus (c. 1921); Nablus area
- August 10, 1991* - Gaza; United Nations Works and Relief Agency Clinics (UNWRA). Gaza area
- Arab councils to strike if urgent help is not received. (1991, August 8). *Jerusalem Post*, p. 12.
- Minority communities discuss unequal health care. (1991, August 7). *Jerusalem Post*, p. 12.
- Soldier commits suicide. (1991, August 2). *Jerusalem Post*, p. 20.
- Settler gets four months for murder. (1991, August 20). *Jordan Times*, Amman, p. 1.
- Three jailed for refusing areas' duty. (1991, August 7). *Jerusalem Post*, p. 10.
- Woman runs amok on flight. (1991, August 7). *Jerusalem Post*, p. 12.
- Women of the wall sue rabbi of the wall. (1991, August 8). *Jerusalem Post*, p. 3.

Christina Carver-Pratt observed Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1991. The Middle East Council of Churches coordinated the study/tour offered through the Joseph J. Malone Faculty Fellows Alumni Program—National Council on U.S./Arab Relations, Washington, D.C.