

Arab Women and the Attack of September 11, 2001

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Major political upheavals always affected women, though changes in their lives are rarely linked to the primary cause. This was true of women's status in the Arab World where foreign policy issues, militarization, the spreading threat of war, and any such destabilizing factors inevitably affected women's lives and attitudes. Although not commonly viewed as political actors, Arab women nevertheless influence public opinion in their own countries directly through the expression of their own views and indirectly through their involvement in protest movements. Women also have an enormous impact on public opinion through their own suffering which dramatizes their role as mothers, sisters, wives and daughters, or simply as the weakest members of society. Clearly, the success of the Israeli military in disrupting the security of the Palestinian family and thereby inflicting pain on women and children have influenced Palestinian public opinion. Moreover, the deterioration of a country's standing in the world-wide global community of states, such as what Saudi Arabia experienced as a result of its citizens' involvement in the attacks on the US on September 11, was bound to have a serious impact on all sectors of Saudi women. Thus, political passivity which has historically characterized women's roles in the traditional states of the Arab World, such as Saudi Arabia, has been shattered forever. To measure the subtle mobilization of this traditional segment of

Arab women is not difficult, since they are currently involved as the secondary supporters of a variety of protest movements targeting their own government and that of the US. What is a challenging task, however, is to identify the nature of these public protests in a secretive political environment that was always hostile to any expression of mass political nature. Sometimes, as in the case of the women's reaction to Saudi Arabia's involvement in the Arab coalition against Iraq during the Gulf War identifying the signs of this protest was difficult. For instance, only some observers were able to link the short-lived women's attempt to drive cars in the Kingdom as the tip of the subsequent general reform movement which demanded changes from a government that suddenly welcomed foreign troops to its soil. The reform movement which resulted from the severe shock of witnessing Saudi willingness to bend its rules in order to accommodate the American military build-up in the region apparently spanned all sectors of Saudi society. At first, no one anticipated the creative way in which women sought to express their utter dissatisfaction with the rules and regulations governing their lives in this strict Muslim society.

Therefore, analysts must be able to interpret correctly all the signs and ascertain linkages between the women's public behavior, their declared views, and their painful mobilization for participation in national politics. Similarly, the tragic events taking place in Palestine today as a result of the expansion and entrenchment of the Aqsa intifada should be interpreted in a wider context than the familiar lamentation for the suffering and sorrows of Palestinian society and its women. Here, just as in the Saudi case, there are subtle linkages and nuances that must be made in order to gauge the depth of the Palestinians' political dilemmas as a result of the September 11 attacks on the US. In the case of Palestinian women, this maybe just as difficult as arriving at an accurate assessment of the limited and gradual mobilization of Saudi women following the same

attacks. The reason for this difficulty is the permanent state of mobilization in which Palestinian women find themselves as a result of the utter lack of security in their lives and the precarious existence of the male population itself. The historical perception Palestinian female involvement so far has obscured nuances and novel phenomena affecting the lives of women during the Aqsa intifada, particularly following the attacks on the US. Therefore, to focus on the two most traditional and most radicalized sectors of Arab women simultaneously is bound to produce surprising results but necessary juxtaposed conclusions pertaining to the entire state of Arab feminism today.

It is well known that the Saudi regime frowns strongly on any unauthorized attempts to have an input in public policy, be that domestic or foreign. Thus, when demonstrations erupted in some parts of the Kingdom in recent months, official reaction was severe and utterly predictable. As in the past, the harshness of the government's crack down on public expression of protest was unrelated to the legitimacy of the protesters' cause. This was simply a non-representative system of government where decision-making has always been conducted in secrecy and within the limited ruling circle of the monarchy and its secular and religious advisors. One step towards modernization in recent years, however, has been official tolerance and authorization of some freedom of the expression and debate on the pages of the official press. The print media has recently proliferated into English-language papers such as **Arab News** and papers that are published in Britain such as **Al-Sharq al-Awsat**. Several Arabic-language newspapers are also published in the Kingdom such as **Okaz, Al-Riyadh, Al-Watan,** and **Al-Jazirah**. The proliferation of the Saudi media has inevitably diminished some of the secretiveness of the conduct of politics and served to disseminate the official version of the news, as well as allow for a limited and sanitized airing of the public's views. Significantly, women's

voices are increasingly being heard on the pages of these papers. Some of the women's views have been surprisingly harsher than their male counterparts and more condemnatory of the US and official Arab apathy. Thus, while absent from public demonstrations, women have not been absent from the pages of newspapers. Perhaps due to the traditional patronization of women, they were allowed to express almost seditious views while men's voices remain muffled and subdued. Women appear to enjoy a certain license which sometimes permits the expression of extravagant views.

When the Aqsa intifada began to take a severe toll on Palestinian lives, Palestinian property and the very existence of the Palestinian National Authority, the reaction in Saudi Arabia's streets was swift and overwhelming. But so was the reaction of the authorities. For instance, the organizer of a large pro-Palestinian demonstration which took place in Dhahran, center of the oil industry in the Eastern Province, was immediately ordered arrested by the Deputy Interior Minister, Prince Ahmad. The organizer, whom the prince called an insane person on the testimony of his own family, turned out to be a well-known university professor by the name of Abdul Hamid al-Mubarak. His other offence apparently consisted of giving an interview to al-Jazirah television network and heading a group called the Popular Committee for the Support of Palestine.¹ What brought on this reaction from a government that was openly supportive of the Palestinian cause was simply fear of degenerating into verbal attacks and calling for sanctions against the US. Although the Saudi paper gave no hint of the type of slogans heard during the demonstration, clearly reports of other Gulf-area events were sufficiently alarming to raise fears in the Kingdom. For instance, pro-Palestinian demonstrations in Bahrain have taken a decidedly anti-American turn, where a petrol bomb has been hurled at the American embassy and calls for the removal of the American Ambassador were heard.

Bahrain was an unexpected site for these popular explosions since the country was the base for the US Navy's Fifth Fleet and was designated by the Bush administration as a "major non-NATO ally." In the Omani capital of Muscat demonstrators chanted, "God curse America," and in Kuwait, the American flag was burned.²

The Saudi authorities succeeded in a very short time in channeling this popular anger to an organized form of philanthropy in order to deflect any criticism away from the US. Prince Sultan, second deputy Premier and Minister of Defense and Aviation, was quoted in the press as saying that protest rallies will not solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, nor will it help the Palestinians in any shape or manner. He urged Saudis and all Arab states to plan massive telethons, to be carried out in the Kingdom under the auspices of the Saudi Committee for the Support of Al-Quds Intifada. The Committee was created by King Fahd, the reigning monarch, in order to raise donations for the Palestinian struggle.³

Anti-American feelings, however, were clearly present and palpable on the pages of Saudi papers following the attacks on America. Most of these attacks were voiced by women columnists and journalists and were echoed clearly in subsequent articles against US support for Israel and its collusion in the Israeli attacks on Palestinians. The linkage between the US condemnation of Saudi terrorists and Islamic terrorism in general and US support for Israel was evident in many articles. The male editor of the English language **Arab News**, Jamal Khashoggi, wrote a scathing condemnation of the attempted monopoly of the US on the definition of terrorism. His starting point was a quotation of

President George W. Bush's statement: "I mean what I say when I call upon the Arab World to strongly condemn and act against terrorist activity." The author complained that the President was not calling for anything specific. The author explained that Arabs have

condemned terrorism unequivocally, but apparently this was not enough since what Bush had in mind was something else, namely Arab condemnation of acts of resistance to Israeli occupation in all of its forms. The author concluded that the problem revolved around different interpretations of the word occupation. The Americans even consider Saudi Arabian efforts to organize telethons and collect donations to the Palestinians as support for terrorism, whereas the Saudis consider all assistance to the Palestinians a “noble duty.”⁴

Women writers were more vehement in their attacks on the US and bristled with anger when they were forced to defend themselves and their society against the charge of terrorism. Women writers and journalists have become more acceptable in recent years due to the pioneering efforts of certain female trailblazers. For instance, the newspapers recently applauded the award-winning work of a female journalist, Nahed Bashatah, who wrote in the Kingdom’s Arabic press. Her speciality was emphasizing issues pertaining to women, such as domestic violence and women’s perception of their career choices. She described herself as someone who successfully reconciled her roles as a career woman and a traditional wife and mother. She held a Bachelor’s degree in Social Work from King Saud University and was completing an M.A. in Anthropology from Ain Shams University in Egypt. Her goal, she said, was to publicize the intellectual attainments of women as a way of encouraging them to stay actively involved in the Kingdom’s public life.⁵

Female columnists in Saudi Arabia, however, turned out to be more militant than traditional when it came to their views of the US. Nourah Abdul Aziz al-Khereiji in a column on April 2, 2002, questioned the very essence of the definition of terrorism advanced by the US and Israel. “What about American atrocities in Afghanistan,” and US unconditional support for Israel’s war on the Arabs? She added, “In fact, both American and Israeli atrocities have prepared

the ground for the birth of a million other Osama Bin Ladens.” She accused President Bush of acting as though he was the ‘Mufti’ (religious authority) of a religion not his own, especially when he issued the startling opinion that the suicide bombers were not martyrs. Only Muslim scholars can issue such an opinion, and as as they were concerned Palestinian suicide bombers were martyrs.⁶

A female professor of English was even more vehement in protesting President Bush’s condemnation of Palestinian acts of resistance as terrorism. She began by emphasizing that the US is directly involved in recent Israeli attacks on Palestinian towns despite the absence of the US military from the battlefield. She then directly attacked Bush’s denouncement of Saudi state organizations, charities, religious institutions and educational groups as instigators of anti-US sentiment. Going on the attack, she called on Bush to remember the hatred and racism of the Ku Klux Klan, the Waco militants, the Zionist-controlled American media, radical American senators, the Congress, and American and anti-Arab journalists like George Will. She added that Saudis are no longer anxious to attend American schools or universities or even visit Disneyland or Universal Studios as tourists. She concluded with the following words: “What we care most for is our faith, our dignity, and our sacred home land.....I am not afraid. I dare to speak.”⁷

Criticism of America’s terrorism was expressed as early as January, 2002. Again, the following brave verses were penned by a female poet in a poem titled: “A Shattered Reality.” Writing in the voice of an Afghani child, the poet addresses the father: “Dad, Dad, why are we starved always?/ Why are we so ragged and shoeless?/ Is it true, dad, we are bad? Is it true our faith is wrong?/ Is it unlawful to be from Afghanistan/? Or is it against the law,/ to have a faith/ in Islam?” The poet adds in the boy’s voice: “Regularly, everyday Dad, / I’m taught a lesson by

their bombs/ and I'll get my diploma out of their school/ In how to kill with no gloom? When I grow up, Dad/....I'll kill them all/ Their Children, teens and old.”⁸

Saudi women also shattered some taboos in the wake of terrorist attacks on the US. It is indeed a rare occasion when Saudi papers in general publish anything remotely connected to a sexual topic. But the Saudi English-language daily, **Arab News**, quoted a piece from the Arabic paper **Al-Jazirah** in which an unidentified woman made a suggestion during a television interview that all married Arab women should refuse to share the conjugal bed with their husbands. The fact that Arab males failed to stand up to Israel to force an end to Israeli atrocities in Palestine and confined themselves to crying, wailing, and brave slogans during demonstrations deserves a bold response. The woman, who declared Arab manhood dead and buried, also criticized Christian Arab males for the same offense.⁹ Another woman dared broach the idea of economic sanctions against the West, a subject of enormous political sensitivity in the Kingdom. A photographer by the name of Reem Mohammad al-Faisal, expressed great distress as she ritually watched episodes of carnage being reported from Palestine day after day. Since Israel is recognized by much of the world as a criminal state and the US was its accomplice, and since the West and the rest of the world are absorbed in their own problems, why are the Arabs immobilized, she asked? Arabs and Saudis knew as they watched news of the media what Sharon had in mind, but where are the demonstrations, where is the Arab League of States to stop Palestinian blood-letting, she wondered? Why are not the Arabs using their own economic, cultural and political influence to pre-empt the Israeli violence? Since the West has given Israel unconditional support for the last fifty years, how can we explain Arab indifference? Then she wrote: “My friends tell me the Arabs are dead but I say not. The dead are innocent of whatever

happens on this earth.” She stressed that Arabs can create their own fate and cannot be absolved for acquiescing in Israel’s crimes.¹⁰

But women did not stop at exhorting men to action. They themselves proved their commitment to the Arab cause of Palestine by their various acts and deeds. During the three-day telethon which the government sponsored in support of the victims of the Israeli Army, royals, Islamic scholars, businessmen, expatriates and women contributed to the campaign. The authorities correctly anticipated the emotional involvement of many nationals in the campaign to aid Palestine through participation in the telethon. Women, typically, donated their personal jewelry. Princess al-Jawhara bint al-Ibrahim, King Fahd’s wife, donated 3 million Saudi Riyals to the fund and some women contributed the value of their dowries. Islamic scholars who called on people to give generously referred to the Palestine question as Islam’s first cause. Saad al-Beraik, an Islamic scholar, exhorted merchants to give generously irrespective of US threats to investigate Islamic contributions to terrorism, saying that the US regards all giving as financing terrorism whether the Saudis give generously or not.¹¹

Not only were the Saudi contributions the expression of a great deal of zeal for the Palestinian cause, but the Saudi dailies carried several stories of female participation in fund-raising campaigns in neighboring countries in similar glowing terms. It was reported, for instance, that Shaykha Fatima bint Mubarak, wife of Shaykh Zayed, the ruler of the United Arab Emirates, who herself served as the Chair of UAE Women’s Federation, donated 12 million dirhams during the UAE’s telethon. Women of the UAE also contributed jewelry and other valuables.¹² Women’s contributions to various fund-raising campaigns in the UAE at one point took on an unusual turn when they participated in the efforts of Medecins sans Frontiers to raise funds for their projects in Palestine. Under the auspices of the Minister of Higher Education in

Abu Dhabi, one of the Emirates' federated states, a marathon for women and children under the slogan of "Fe al-haraka baraka" (exercise is a source of blessing) saw hundred of nationals run along Ras al-Akhdar Beach decked in their native clothes and carrying placards and flags.¹³ In another instance, the papers reported that a Saudi man and a UAE woman each pledged a kidney for the Palestine cause, while Saudi children offered to donate their slingshots to Palestinians of similar age.¹⁴

Perhaps the greatest contribution of Saudi women was their participation in boycott movements which spread to all corners of the Arab World. News of boycott movements led specifically by women filtered in at first from Bosnia. Apparently, posters were posted by women in Sarajevo calling on all people to boycott products of companies which supported Israel by displaying the logos of 64 international corporations. No one seemed to recognize the organizers' name, Islambosna, or their ties to other international and Islamic organizations.¹⁵ A previous boycott campaign was also mounted in Egypt and fanned out throughout the Arab World. The boycott targeted Israeli goods and American interests which knowingly supported Israel. Among the targeted products were Coca Cola and a whole variety of pharmaceutical products amounting mostly to popular brands of cosmetics. In Egypt, the movement often passed out pamphlets which proclaimed, "Boycott a product, save a Muslim." The campaign was based on a sophisticated research effort which investigated the Israeli origins of products imported from the Third World. People were urged to switch to European goods where possible. Although fast-food franchises were the hardest hit, with sales at Kentucky Fried Chicken and McDonald's outlets in Muscat falling by 45% and 60% respectively, everything American suffered. In Egypt, this branch of American imports suffered the most with a loss of 20% after Israel's invasion of the West Bank. This was a meaningful loss in a country with 562 fast food

restaurants. One reader wrote to a paper in Bahrain: “The American offensive against what they say is terrorism was in Afghanistan yesterday, is in Palestine today and we don’t rule out Baghdad being the target tomorrow, followed by Syria and Lebanon. For this reason, we are boycotting all US products.” Cigarettes were also targeted in some countries, with people switching from Marlboro to French brands. In Saudi Arabia, the targets of the boycott were supermarkets stocked with American imports. According to a sales manager in a Jeddah supermarket called Bin Dawood, the sales of Coca Cola were down by 60%, and Pepsi Cola by 45%. He also reported a loss of 33-35% of the sales of Proctor and Gamble products, as well as baby diapers. The Arab boycott movement, however, was not without its critics. US officials in the region downplayed its significance by claiming that as a mass and grassroots movement, it could not affect the sales of capital goods such as wheat. Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, a Saudi billionaire and respected economic authority, argued that the boycott movement was totally ineffective in that it failed to hurt the US economy. He said that it was the Arabs who benefit more from extended economic relations with the US because “the trade balance between the Arabs and the US is in our favor.” He elaborated by explaining that US trade with the Arab World was no more than 3% of the American total trade volume. The Arabs should concentrate on influencing American public opinion, he said. He pointed to the fact that Israel succeeded in manipulating the events of September 11, to its advantage by branding all Arabs and Muslims as terrorists, then proceeded to war on the Palestinians and massacring them unchecked.¹⁶

Saudi women were further sensitized to the issue of boycotts and their own economic power as consumers by press reports of boycotts targeting the American cosmetics industry. This movement began in the US by identifying American corporations which support the Israeli Government of Ariel Sharon. These included such brand names as Estee Lauder, Aramis,

Clinique, Aveda, and perfumes under the names of Tommy Hilfiger, Donna Karan, and Kate Spade. This campaign was reminiscent of the Arab League's boycott of Israeli products and its secondary boycott of companies which maintained business relations with Israel. Lasting from 1945 until its cancellation in the Taba Declaration of February, 1995, which was signed by Egypt, Jordan, and the Palestine National Authority, the boycott was often honored in the breach. Countries like Morocco, Qatar, and Oman even negotiated trade agreements before signing a peace agreement with Israel. Whereas in the past, the US imposed penalties on companies which observed the boycott, it is finding it difficult to do so under current world-wide conditions. The world-wide call for the boycott of Estee Lauder cosmetics are harder to check simply because no foreign government or legally constituted body are responsible for this movement. Indeed, the boycott demands are issued on the internet through e-mail messages which publicize the essential facts about Estee Lauder. These include the fact that the head of Estee Lauder, Ronald Lauder, an American citizen, also heads several conservative groups in the US which could be identified as the core lobbying group on behalf of Israel. These include the Jewish National Fund and the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations. Officials of the US Department of Commerce, however, declared that their anti-boycott compliance section is hardly interested in these matters.¹⁷ The role of women in advancing these boycott campaigns is significant both as participants and planners. Saudi women were influential in these campaigns because of their own economic power, which amounted to a 30% share of the total investments in the Kingdom.¹⁸ News of women planners of the boycott movement in other Arab countries were well-publicized, such as the role of Nisrine Mansour who led a Lebanese boycott organization called Act Now.¹⁹

In the case of Palestinian women, who are normally placed on the opposite end of the spectrum of female political activism in the Arab and Muslim World, the attacks on the US resulted in further negation of their image in the West. Having coincided with the intensified state of Al- Aqsa intifada which saw Palestinian women participate even as suicide bombers, the entire revolutionary feminine struggle in Palestine was severely distorted. Hardly present in this intifada except as innocent victims of organized Israeli military violence, Palestinian women were not visibly present as in the first intifada of December, 1987. Instead of receiving sympathetic treatment on the pages of the Western media, they became synonymous with the violent attacks of suicide bombers on Israeli civilians. This type of involvement typically made the media ignore the deplorable state of affairs in the West Bank and Gaza which led to women's recruitment or volunteering for these violent acts. A close look at women's lives and the immediate background of those who became suicide bombers tells a story of extreme dehumanization, suffering, and loss of hope. An interview with a fourteen-year old resident of Dheisheh, one of the West Bank's refugee camps, revealed her distinct motives for aspiring to become such a bomber. She was touched apparently by the suicide bombing incident involving her friend and neighbor, the eighteen-year old Ayat al-Akhras, who blew herself up at a Jerusalem supermarket and killed 2 Israelis with her. Apparently, as in most such cases, Ayat gave no indication of her deadly intent, neither to her father, Samir al- Akhras, nor to her fiance, Shadi Abu-Laban. The father of the fourteen-year old, Awad Oudeh, found himself in the unimaginable position of having to dissuade his daughter from undertaking a similar mission. Shireen's words which camouflaged her pain at living the tragedy of her friend, simply said that if Sharon described all Palestinians as terrorists, the Palestinians will have to live up to this accusation.²⁰

In the few cases when Palestinian mothers knew of their children's intent to commit acts of suicide bombing, they were helpless to stop it. This revelation was made months after Wafa Idris, the first woman to undertake such a mission in January of 2002. Despite the clear horror and terror etched on mothers' faces which were caught on camera when they were confronted with the news of their children's deeds, the news media continued to emphasize the mothers' role as conscious nurturers of terrorists. This was a gross misrepresentation of the realities of the case, considering that the pain was generated first in reaction to their human loss, and secondly, in fear of the inevitable Israeli reprisal which will be visited on them as punishment once the identity of their children was revealed. Mothers of suicide bombers usually carried more than their share of the pain since they were often helpless to dissuade a child from undertaking such an operation. In her chilling and penetrating article on the recruitment of suicide bombers, the Lebanese writer Hala Jaber also interviewed one mother whose son informed her of his selection for such a mission one month in advance. She lived for one month torn between her tears and her inability or emotional incapacity to dissuade him from this deed. She could only repeat to the reporter, "My heart is not made up of stone." Jaber clearly conveyed the impression that no mother was capable of reversing the cumulative effect of group pressure or religious and political indoctrination which went into the making of suicide bombers. More importantly, Palestinian mothers were incapable of reversing the dehumanization of sons and daughters caused by years of abuse, humiliation, and torment as the result of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.²¹

Clearly, the terrorist attacks on the US proved to be a valuable opportunity for the Israeli propaganda machine which began equating resistance to Israeli occupation with attacks on innocent American civilians. The distortion was so great that the American First Lady, Laura

Bush, called on Palestinian women and mothers to disengage from terrorism or the nurturing of terrorists. Painting the entire intifada as a huge terror campaign against law-abiding Israel, resulted in hardening both the Palestinian and American positions. While Palestinian women were largely victims rather than political actors in Al- Aqsa intifada did not help their case for they were made accountable for deeds of their sons and sometimes their daughters.

In conclusion, it is easy to see how the Palestine issue and the intensification of the intifada became the catalysts for anti-Western and anti-US feelings in Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf states. It should be noted also that this public outcry against Israel and its ally the US was a somewhat latent reaction to US accusations caused by the terror attacks on the US. It is very clear also that the Saudi public, especially the women, vented off steam against the US not only because of Palestine but also as a result of their own humiliation following September 11. For Saudi women, nevertheless, Al- Aqsa intifada proved to be an opportunity for empowerment and partial mobilization in the public arena. For Palestinian women, however, the broad brush of terrorism may have changed their image from feminists to terrorists, certainly a significant loss on the barometer of world public opinion. Yet, given the overwhelming international outcry against Israeli atrocities and their attacks on Palestinian cities, the cause of Palestinian women is bound to recover. After all, how long can Israel hide the realities of the occupation? The ability of Middle East violence to create hatred for the West, or in other words, the suffering of Palestinians as a catalyst for widening the range of terrorist attacks against the West in general was clear even to former President Bill Clinton. In a speech in Tokyo in May, 2002, Clinton said: "The big threat today to the peace of the world that is stoking all this terrorism is this continuous violence in the Middle East."²² Clearly, for the Saudis at least, the war against

Palestinians is seen as a second wave of America's war on Muslims under the guise of the war on terrorism.

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ENDNOTES

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 - ⁴ Jamal Khashoggi, "Where We Differ with Americans," **Arab News**, Vol. 27, No. 136 (April 12, 2002), 1.
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 - ⁶ Nourah Abdul Aziz al-Khereiji, "We should Do More than Donate to Palestinians," **Arab News**, Vol. 27, No. 136 (April 12, 2002), 3.
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