

A Book Review: Women at Crossroads: Palestinian Women's Movements Between Nationalism, Secularism and Islamic Identity

Kitap Değerlendirmesi: Kavşakta Kadınlar: Filistin Feminist Hareketleri Ulusalçılık, Laiklik ve İslami Kimlik Arasında

Yaz. Islah Jad, *Palestinian Women's Activism Nationalism, Secularism, Islamism*, Syracuse University Press, 2018, 260 Sayfa.
ISBN: 978-081-565-459-9

Dalal Bajes¹ 

Abstract

This book by Islah Jad explores the evolution of the Palestinian feminist movement, examining its intersection with nationalism, secularism, and Islamism. Jad highlights the complex dynamics Palestinian women face as they balance advocating for gender equality with participating in national resistance. The study traces the impact of colonialism, internal political struggles, and international influences on women's organizations from the British mandate to the post-Oslo period. It also examines the roles of secular and Islamic feminists, reflecting on their divergent visions for women's rights. The book traces the impact of the political split between the West Bank and Gaza in 2006, highlighting the differing feminist strategies in each region. While the West Bank focused on legal reforms and women's rights, Gaza prioritized resistance and self-reliance. Despite these efforts, women on both sides reinforced the political divide rather than working to heal it. Jad critiques the emphasis on state-building and international frameworks, arguing that these approaches failed to foster democratic foundations or strengthen the national liberation struggle. Ultimately, Palestinian women's political engagement remains fragmented, with limited collaboration across political divides.

Keywords: Palestine, Secularism, Nationalism, Islamism, Women.

Öz

İslah Jad tarafından kaleme alınan bu kitap, Filistin feminist hareketinin dönüşümünü söz konusu hareketin milliyetçilik, sekülerlik ve İslamcılıkla kesişimi üzerinden inceliyor. Jad, Filistinli kadınların toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği savunuculuğuyla milli direnişe katılma arasında denge kurarken karşılaştıkları karmaşık dinamiklerin altını çiziyor. Çalışma, İngiliz manda döneminden Oslo sonrası döneme kadar kadın örgütleri üzerindeki sömürgeciliğin, iç siyasi mücadelelerin ve uluslararası etkilerin izini sürüyor. Ayrıca, seküler ve İslamcı feministlerin rollerini ele alarak, kadın hakları konusundaki farklı görüşleri yansıtıyor. Kitap, 2006 yılında Batı Şeria ve Gazze arasındaki siyasi bölünmenin etkisini izleyerek, her bölgedeki farklı feminist stratejilere vurgu yapıyor. Batı Şeria yasal reformlar ve kadın haklarına odaklanırken, Gazze direniş ve öz yeterliliği önclemiştir. Bütün çabalara rağmen, her iki taraftaki kadınlar da siyasi bölünmenin ıslahına çalışmak yerine, bölünmeyi pekiştirmişlerdir. Jad, devlet inşası ve uluslararası çerçevelere yapılan vurguyu eleştirerek, bu yaklaşımların, demokratik temelleri geliştirmekten veya milli kurtuluş mücadelesini desteklemekten aciz olduğunu savunuyor. Sonuç itibarıyla, Filistinli kadınların siyasi katılımı parçalanmış olup siyasi bölünmeler arasında sınırlı bir işbirliği bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Filistin, Kadın, Laiklik, Milliyetçilik, İslamcılık.

Atıf/Citation: Dalal, B. (2024). Women at Crossroads: Palestinian Women's Movements Between Nationalism, Secularism and Islamic Identity. *KADEM Kadın Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 10(2), 741-754.

¹ Doktora Öğrencisi, İbn Haldun Üniversitesi, dalalbajes@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0001-7298-7113.

This comprehensive study, authored by Islah Jad, an associate professor in the Department of Cultural Studies and the Institute of Women's Studies at Birzeit University, covers 322 pages. Jad, known for her extensive research and publications on the evolution of Palestinian women's political participation and the Palestinian women's and feminist movements, structures the study into four chapters, along with an introduction (theoretical framework), conclusion, and appendices.

The study begins by framing the role of women's movements in Palestine, which are faced with two main tasks simultaneously: continuing the national struggle and contributing to state-building (post-Oslo)¹, while also advocating for women's rights. This includes two distinct agendas—one old, 'mobilization and liberation,' and one new, 'empowering women and achieving equality' (p. 12). Another dimension of this dilemma is the shift in the role of the NGO sector after Oslo, which pressured women's movements to shift their agendas from combining national struggle with women's liberation to focusing on state demands for women's rights. This weakened the recruitment capacity of secular organizations and stripped their activities of political character (p. 13). Additionally, two contrasting images of women emerged: the image of 'modern' secular women advocating for civil society and the image of 'Islamic' women, whom secularists view as 'moving tents,' conservative, backward, and hostile to women's rights and freedom. Conversely, Islamic discourse depicts the Islamic woman as selflessly committed to aiding her people under occupation, whereas the secular woman is characterized as demanding from her community while disregarding their suffering (p. 14).

One of the author's main conclusions is that gender roles, relations, and women's rights within Islamic movements are not fixed; instead, they are evolving alongside the activities and shifting identity of the women's movement. The specifics of women's rights in these movements are influenced by internal factors, including the dynamics of the Islamic movement, the position of women within its hierarchy, and their ability to establish an independent agenda. External factors, however, are related

¹ Oslo Accord: The peace agreement signed between the PLO and Israel, under which Israel recognizes the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinians in exchange for the organization's recognition of Israel's right to live in security and peace as a state.

to the secular framework within which they operate, encompassing the discourses and activities of secular women's movements. The form and status of feminism as developed by Islamists, is connected to the degree of intellectual engagement and interaction with the broader secular framework in which they operate (p. 17).

In the first chapter, the author presents the historical context of the Palestinian feminist movement within the political history of Palestinian struggle. She examines the paradoxical image that the national movement portrayed of women—as both 'advocates of modernity' and agents of urbanization on one hand, and as symbols of their people's 'honor' and traditional social patterns on the other. In the former role, feminism was given space to grow and emerge, while in the latter, women were confined to a private sphere under male guardianship. This chaotic situation mirrors similar dilemma in other nationalist movements across the so-called 'Third World' countries (p. 22).

In this chapter, the author discusses women's activism under British occupation (1918-1948), describing the feminist movement of this period as lacking a cohesive vision regarding gender, as it was essentially an extension of the broader Palestinian national movement with its various factions (p. 24). Women's movements during this time originated from charitable efforts, such as aiding the poor and sick, and educating girls, which emerged in response to the deteriorating political situation due to British colonial policies and their brutal repression of Palestinian uprisings. This led to the founding of the Arab Women's Union in 1930 (p. 27). Leadership within women's organizations was largely determined by women's socioeconomic background and exposure to Western culture, which, for example, prevented Maimouna, daughter of Sheikh Izz al-Din al-Qassam, from leading women's organizations at that time, as she did not belong to the elite class (p. 28). During this same period, as peasants led revolts and jihad, this was also reflected in the attire of both men and women from urban and elite classes: men were required to wear the traditional peasant *kufiya* instead of the *tarbush*, and women were expected to dress modestly (specifically with the *hijab*), following the example of their '*mujahida* sisters' in the villages, rather than adopting British or Western-style clothing (p. 29).

With the emergence of the Palestine Liberation Organization and the transition from a mindset of “Palestinian belonging” to “Palestinian solidarity,” the emphasis on sacrifice as a form of “giving” remained steadfast. This was in opposition to the prevailing call for women’s rights, perceived as a “demand” that contradicts the essential sacrifices needed during this pivotal phase of occupation (p. 31). At the beginning of its establishment, the organization was not concerned with gender issues and advocated, through its two main currents—Fatah, which represents the national dimension, and the Popular Front, which represents the leftist dimension— the complete integration of the women’s movement into the national struggle as a priority, leaving no room for women to articulate their demands for gender empowerment (p. 32). With the increasing pressure from women participating in the revolution, they proposed a new personal status law (family law) based on the principle of equality. However, it sparked heated controversy and could not be discussed due to the invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the fragmentation of the organization’s institutions, and the displacement of its members to various areas. This law was not brought up again until after the Palestinian Authority entered the Palestinian territories following the Oslo Accords in 1993 (p. 35).

As for the political effectiveness of women’s movements under Israeli occupation since 1967, Israel has prevented any form of national mobilization among Palestinians in the occupied areas of the West Bank and Gaza. However, the Palestinian National Front, consisting of the Jordanian Communist Party, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Fatah, and the head of the General Union of Palestinian Women, succeeded in applying a Palestinian national approach in confronting Israeli and Jordanian opposition (given that the West Bank was under Jordanian administration despite being occupied by Israelis). The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) established its presence and representation of Palestinians during the municipal elections of 1976, which would not have been successful without the expansion of the electorate for the first time to include tens of thousands of women and youth. There was a distinction made between the traditional leadership, termed “reactionary,” and the leftist “progressive” leadership, which helped women determine where and how they could be politically active during that period (p. 38).

It can be considered a period of women's influence through new forms of national mobilization, represented by the sectoral divisions of labor unions, volunteer labor organizations, and women's and feminist organizations affiliated with the Palestinian factions of the PLO. During this time, they vested all their efforts to join the structure of the General Union of Palestinian Women, headed by Samihah Khalil.

The Women's Action Committees were a strong mass women's organization from the late 1970s until the early 1990s, and their program included ensuring women's equal rights to men's rights in the public sphere and political participation. By the mid-1980s, the organization had established a wide network of kindergartens and nurseries, in addition to employing several teachers and administrators, based on the philosophy that children are a social responsibility if we want to engage women more in the struggle (pp. 40-41).

In the second chapter, the author studied the Post-Oslo era, stating that positions towards various policies, including gender policies, were redefined based on the structure envisioned of the state. At this stage, the author believes that women's activism did not represent all women; but rather, it represented conflicting power relations and fluctuating positions. Women's movements assumed there would be a normative situation for the Palestinian Authority following the imagined independence, but this was not the case. The concept of citizenship, in the minds of feminists after Oslo, represented a dilemma between the hoped-for and the available (pp. 51-52). Feminists also found themselves in a 'catch-22'², caught between two bitter choices: either to remain silent about the Palestinian Authority's violations and its repression of unions and social movements in order to secure some gains on the feminist agenda, or to ally with those groups and take a critical stance against the Authority's practices, which could lead to similar reprisals from the Authority against their activities (p. 59). At this point, the definition of the "other" changed; the Israelis, who had been the enemy from the 1960s to the 1980s, became the "Islamic" opposition to Oslo. In this stage, one of the contradictions was the conflict between the duality of promoting procreation and at the same time

² The term catch 22 refers to an impossible situation where you are prevented from doing one thing until you have done another thing that you cannot do until you have done the first thing.

limiting it. The Authority reinforced the image of the fertile, sacrificing woman, considering her essential to the national struggle, given that part of the conflict is demographic. Meanwhile, in other contexts, it adopted the discourse of donor countries, which encouraged limiting population growth and reducing birth rates (p. 64).

More importantly, this phase created fertile ground for studies of emerging phenomena such as “femocracy,” referring to a segment of feminist activists who worked at the heart of the Authority. The hypothesis is that women’s entry into the political sphere and political institutions does not necessarily equate to feminist policies. During this period, women’s non-governmental organizations flourished, managed by “old” activists who found themselves neither in the femocracy nor in decision-making positions within the corridors of power (pp. 71-74).

Here, we discuss the role of the General Union of Palestinian Women, of which last elections were held in Tunisia in 1985. The Union worked on rebuilding its branches in the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza, each of which had its weaknesses that led to poor performance, limited impact, and an inability to keep pace with the rising Islamic women’s power during that period.

It was evident that the Union’s financial dependence on the Authority was seen as clear evidence that the Union had become merely a facade for the Palestinian Authority. The situation of the Union exemplified how “ready-made recipes” for improving the conditions of women and developing their status were ineffective. All of this, along with other intended and unintended factors, helped propel the elite women professionals from the middle class to the forefront at the expense of rural and displaced activists. It also led to the fragmentation and weakening of all mass organizations and movements in the occupied territories, including the women’s movement (pp. 79-83).

The Palestinian feminist movement, during this phase, specifically towards the end of the five years following the Oslo Accords, felt a weakening of its capacity for mobilization and organization. This was evident in the well-known confrontation between its elite, which formed a “mock parliament” that sought to change the personal status law in 1998, and wide segments

of Palestinian society. This experience developed an awareness amongst some women's organizations of being drawn into open confrontation with the Islamic movement, which had a high capacity for mobilization and mass organization. This experience led to lessons learned, namely that any initiative to change the personal status law completely exceeds the capacity of a single group or organization, and that such initiatives require planning in collaboration with all allies and the need for broad-based coalitions that include grassroots connections within society (p. 101).

In the third chapter, the author attempts to explore the discourse, structure, and gender-related ideologies specific to the Islamic movement in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The author posits that this discourse and structure have been in a state of constant change since the late 1970s, and that they have been shaped as a reaction to secular feminist movements (pp. 105-106).

The author addresses three main theoretical orientations regarding Islam and gender issues. The first orientation suggests that there is a dynamic interaction between religious texts and women's rights through the strategies of resistance, adaptation, and compromise that women use in situations of oppression or dependency. The second group contends that there is no possibility for diverse readings of gender within Muslim societies and that there is no space for negotiation between gender and religion. The third group argues that women's rights have been enhanced and supported by the Islamic movement in Palestine (p. 113).

The infrastructure of the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine played a significant role in attracting and recruiting women into the Islamic movement, starting with universities, extending through mosques, and including educational circles within them. The decline of the Palestine Liberation Organization and the ability of the Islamists to reconstitute themselves as a national movement (rather than an international one like the parent group, the Muslim Brotherhood) were crucial factors in the growing popularity of the movement. Similarly, the success of the Islamic Revolution in Iran contributed to this trend; however, according to the author, the military wing of the movement had no place for women (pp. 134-147).

In 1995, the movement established a political party called the Salvation Party, which for the first time in the history of the Muslim Brotherhood used the language of “rights” for different social groups, particularly women and workers, who had rarely been the focus of the Brotherhood’s activities. In this party, the image of women as mothers, obedient wives, and political activists was presented—an issue that nationalist and secular women continue to struggle with. The party and its women’s circle opened doors for the “new Islamic woman,” characterized by higher education, eloquence, commitment, and modernity (pp. 150-151).

The party’s Shura Council includes 15.3% women, and the political bureau has the same percentage of women. In contrast, women represent 7.5% in the Palestinian National Council (among secular and leftist forces) and 6% in the first legislative council, in which the Islamists had not yet participated (p. 154). Additionally, an annual conference is held for one day, attended by both men and women, to discuss pressing gender issues raised by feminists from national secular forces. Typically, the senior leadership of Hamas are keen to attend these conferences and events organized by the women of the party and movement to demonstrate their support as men for what women are doing (p. 158).

The gender ideology of Islamists has been overlooked in studies conducted by male researchers, and the examination of the content of gender ideology and its impact within Hamas has been limited to a few female researchers. Even in these studies, Islamic women have been neglected as actively engaged activists and not considered a part of the Palestinian women’s movement (p. 162).

The “Islamization of gender” was a central factor in the Islamization of national identity by the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine, where for the first time, the issue of the hijab was explicitly recruited as a national issue. This campaign demonstrated Hamas’s ability to influence national identity formation in Palestine through its social doctrine (p. 169).

The author argues that the fundamentalist tendency displayed by Hamas during the first Intifada cannot be explained merely as a distortion

of the prevailing culture at that time; rather, it was a reaction to the Israeli occupation's terrorism against women. Moreover, the restriction of women's freedoms during that period, and even the killing of some women on charges of moral corruption, were not primarily perpetrated by the Islamic movement, but by official Fatah groups first, followed by groups affiliated with Fatah and then by groups from the Popular Front (Marxist left) (pp. 171-176).

Islamic women have been a decisive force in expanding Hamas's base within the student movement. However, once they leave university, there is no place for female students within the organizational structure of the movement, especially in the West Bank. As a result, their refuge has been charitable associations affiliated with the movement. These associations have proven their effectiveness and are considered strong competitors to both old and new women's associations linked to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). In Gaza, women have found their place first in the Salvation Party and then in the women's Islamic movement, which was established in 2003 (pp. 179-180).

As for the Islamic women's perspective on gender, although they adopt a clear discourse opposing the agendas presented by secular feminist movements, they often echo the phrase "the text does not prohibit" to expand the ideological boundaries of the movement regarding gender and women's rights in the public sphere. By tracking the opinions of Islamic women, especially in their conferences, the author noticed a shift in their viewpoint from a complete rejection of feminism to adopting some positions and statements made by feminists, and integrating them into Islamic perspectives, culminating in a request to establish research centers focusing on women's issues. These conferences addressed a sensitive topic: how to understand the integration between the public and private spheres, between statehood and the family, while discussing the concepts of *shura* (consultation) and *qawamah* (guardianship) as the main pillars in both realms. The conclusions drawn from these conferences and the research papers presented highlighted two main points: the urgency to correct the status of women; otherwise, "others" will take on this

task, and the necessity to emphasize that the responsibility for women's liberation primarily lies with the women themselves (pp. 183-190).

The author added the fourth chapter to her study more than eight years after the publication of her original thesis, which was published originally just before the Hamas movement came to power following the legislative elections in 2006. During this phase, the role of the Palestinian national movement diminished, and all forms of organization affiliated with it, or its parties weakened. Additionally, the funding mechanisms of the Palestinian Authority led to the dominance of the discourse of "development" and "state-building," while the discourse of resistance and liberation diminished. In this context, a national mechanism for gender integration was adopted in the West Bank, after the split, while the women's discourse in Gaza emphasized the importance of mobilizing and empowering women to continue resistance and defend the Palestinian existence (pp. 207-208). The period preceding the split was a difficult phase for feminist work, as there was a prior rejection of the election results by the national women's elite, in addition to a derogatory view of Islamic women as "unaware of feminism." On the other hand, there was a lack of a clear vision from Hamas and its women regarding how to address the demands of the feminist movement (p. 211).

The strategy of the national feminist movement in the West Bank continued after the split to focus on issues of equality, violence, and legal reform, in addition to combating violence against women, especially domestic violence. However, priorities shifted after 2012, and there was a renewed focus on issues related to the national liberation cause, with an emphasis on the situation of Jerusalemite women. This strategy also included supporting female prisoners as a group that should receive political, psychological, and material support (p. 213). Despite all these efforts to develop the agenda, women's ability to exert political pressure to mend the political rift between the West Bank and Gaza was non-existent. Women remained loyal to the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and refrained from any form of engagement with the Ministry of Women in Gaza. They also adhered to the conditions set by the Quartet and various funding sources that refused to engage with the Gaza Authority

(p. 215). In Gaza, however, the priorities of the Ministry of Women were entirely different, focusing on mobilizing and organizing women, as well as on the executive aspect of providing projects and services for women. Additionally, there was an effort to separate the Palestinian economy from the Israeli economy, enhance the self-sufficiency of the economy, achieve food security, create job opportunities for youth, and improve the legal and legislative framework for women (p. 216).

Women in the Ministry of Women in the West Bank relied on the Women's Rights Document as a governmental reference for all relevant parties to shape policies or make amendments. This approach led to significant achievements, such as introducing a quota for women in the electoral law, raising the legal marriage age to 18 years, adopting a gender-sensitive budget, and issuing a decision from the Prime Minister's office to establish women's units in various ministries, in addition to urging the authority to adopt the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (p. 220).

In Gaza, however, the Ministry of Women adopted the document with reservations and made amendments and changes to it. Nevertheless, it implemented what it believed in from the document in practice. Islamic women were interested in the document, held conferences to discuss it, and insisted on the importance of legal amendments, expressing their dissatisfaction with the current laws. The views of Islamic women regarding this document aligned with those of the Global Islamic Network for Women and Children. The discourse surrounding the adoption of the document and the amendments made to it reflects some contradictions between the openly declared rejection of the principle of full equality and the achievements that Islamic women have realized on the ground (p. 224-226).

Finally, we arrive at the stage of the Arab Spring, during which new forms of political participation emerged, with girls playing a prominent role. One of the most notable slogans adopted by Palestinian youth, mirroring the slogans of the Arab Spring, was "The people want to end the division." The activities of girls on social media introduced new forms of organization

and political expression, ranging from organizing demonstrations and sit-ins to hunger strike tents, as well as using music as an expression of resistance, and cleaning the protest sites after their conclusion. These activities faced repression in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip (p. 229).³

In summative conclusion, the author opines that women have achieved a more prominent presence in the public sphere and in official and governmental institutions, whether through elections or appointments. Women have reached decision-making positions that were previously reserved for men, whether in the legislative, executive, or judicial branches, and also in the media. Despite the clear data regarding the Palestinian situation, the author believes that the focus on the agenda of state-building and empowering women in decision-making positions, relying on international treaties, has NOT contributed to building the democratic foundations sought by this approach (the Palestinian National Authority) nor to the continuity of the struggle for national liberation.

On the other side of the homeland (Hamas), the government has adopted policies to increase self-reliance and reduce dependence on the Israeli economy, which women have effectively contributed to achieving. They have also sought to support the segments affected by the policies and aggression of the occupation alongside supporting the line of resistance. However, the alignment with the policies of global Islamic organizations, particularly those close to the Muslim Brotherhood, has prevented the concentration of efforts on mending the internal rift and finding common ground for cooperation with the Palestinian secular stream. Thus, women on both sides have not made efforts to mend the rift, nor have they worked towards it at all; instead, they contribute to and reinforce it (p. 239).

³ During this period, political tensions were high across the region, particularly in Palestine. The governing authorities in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip perceived these limited movements as primarily orchestrated by opposing forces to create the impression that the wave of uprisings in the Arab world aimed at toppling regimes could also shift the political balance in Palestine. However, politicians believed that the dynamics of the Arab uprisings did not fully apply to the Palestinian context. Moreover, these movements lacked the necessary seriousness and sufficient popular support to shield them from the suppression imposed by the security apparatus.

Acknowledgements: Not Applicable.

Ethical approval: Since sources obtained from humans or animals were not used in this study, ethics committee approval was not obtained.

Competing interests: The author declare no competing interests.

Consent for publication: Not applicable.

Financial Support: The authors declare that this study received no financial support.

References

Jad, I. (2018). *Palastinian Women's Activisim Nationalism, Secularism, Islamism*. Syracuse University Press.