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A: Reviews: The Modern Middle East

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violence. Palestinians are always referred to as terrorists, whereas the Irgun is described as a ‘dissident group that focused on anti-British actions’ (p. 45) and the Lechi is labelled only as a ‘militant group’. When the peace activist Shulamit Aloni is described equally as a ‘militant’ activist (p. 50) one wonders about the meaning of ‘militant’. The author also accepts uncritically some of the Zionist myth (such as defence) despite the large body of available literature that provides a counter narrative. The war in 1967, for example, is described as a ‘united Arab surprise attack’ (p. 93), a statement that does not do justice to historical reality.

Finally, one factual error could have easily been avoided, namely the date of the proclamation of the State of Israel which occurred on May 14 and not May 15 (p. 46).

Claudia Prestel © 2008
University of Leicester

Resistance, Repression, and Gender Politics in Occupied Palestine and Jordan
Frances S. Hasso
(Gender, Culture and Politics in the Middle East), Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2005, 213 pp.

This book documents the major wing of the Palestinian resistance movement after 1967, embodied in the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was established in 1964, following the Palestinians’ disillusionment with the Arab Nationalists Movement’s promise to liberate Palestine, a frustration exacerbated by the Arab defeat of 1967. Shortly after that war the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine was established, and two years later it split; the DFLP, which was to be the dominant faction of the PLO, emerged. The DFLP was Marxist, secular and modernistic, and believed in self-liberation of the Palestinians through armed struggle. Laying out the detailed practical meanings of this particular ideological articulation, through dozens of interviews with activists from the top of the movement down, this book presents a complex and nuanced picture of the vision, the contradictions, and the internal challenges to the dominant wing of the Palestinian resistance movement during a critical era of its operation.

Hasso looks at two main arenas, Jordan and the Occupied Territories, and does a very methodical job in dedicating roughly similar space to each of them in every chapter. The book proceeds chronologically, with part one covering the period 1967–1987 under the title ‘From Revolution to Pragmatism’, and part two, ‘From Intifada to Fragmentation’, continuing from 1988 to the 2000s. Her main focus is gender, or rather women. She examines the impact on gender transformation of the endemic tensions between patriarchal culture, authoritative organizational culture, and militaristic ideology on the one hand, and a legacy of modernity, secularism, and socialism on the other. The main strength of this book lies in the careful bottom-up recording of how these ideological strands evolved through practice. For example, the different nature of the Jordanian and the Israeli states, and of the
relationships of each with the respective Palestinian population under its rule, prompted radical leftist-modernistic orientations in the West Bank and Gaza and traditionalist-tribal orientations in Jordan. In the first case, the blocked possibilities for local capitalist development that catalyzed an out-migration of the urban elite facilitated the emergence of a new educated stratum among the fellahin, and encouraged the mass mobilization into the resistance movement of the lower classes and of women. Conversely, in Jordan, where Palestinians occupied the ambivalent position of potential citizens and a potential fifth column, the state maintained tight control of the movement’s institutions, which hindered popular activism of the kind that spread in the occupied territories that included day-care centers, voluntary work committees, or income-generating projects. The Jordanian wing in its early days focused on developing a military apparatus that would use Jordanian territory to launch attacks against Israel. This rising semi-autonomous military organization was met with a violent response by the monarchical regime culminating in a civil war in 1970–1971. Then again, the Jordanian wing of the DFLP invested not only in resistance to the Israeli occupation but also in acting with local opposition for the democratization of the Jordanian state.

According to Hasso, the situation in the occupied territories, particularly during 1967–1987, was conducive to a significant transformation in gender relations. The Israeli stranglehold on Palestinian military organizing and arming, the large number of absent men due to extended jailing or migration, the dire economic conditions, and the depleted local capitalist class shaped a type of involved, localized activism. For the West Bank and Gaza wing of the Marxist DFLP, the masses, as Hasso puts it, were women, and indeed women’s leadership was fostered at all levels, uneducated and marginalized refugees included. A concomitant dominant force that fueled gender transformation was a deep-seated modernistic conviction that women’s advancement was a crucial civilizing step toward amending the Palestinians’ initial inferiority in the battle with the Zionists. Against these orientations, the popularity of militarism, and later the patriarchal character of the Palestinian Authority, had opposing effects. After the signing of the Oslo accords women activists shifted from working with the masses for what they had believed was a gender-inclusive national cause to struggling against their exclusion from the nascent state institutions, for example, through forming a shadow parliament.

A glaring lacuna in this otherwise highly proficient book is its consistent ignoring of political Islam. This would not be a problem under a less inclusive title. But in a book on ‘resistance, repression, and gender politics in Occupied Palestine and Jordan’, the sole focus on the secular-leftist wing of the PLO is problematic. Of course, a history of this element of the Palestinian resistance movement is of utmost importance because as the dominant faction it has had a formative effect on the Palestinian polity to date, but also because it sets out well-founded documentation of one local variety of an important chapter in international politics. Hasso’s personal attachment ‘as an Arab American feminist of mixed Jordanian and Palestinian heritage’ (p. xxiv) to that side of national politics apparently worked as a double-edged sword. It was a significant advantage in terms of her ability to conduct the interviews in Arabic and immerse in local activism, as well as to articulate with great compassion the nuanced complexities of Palestinian resistance. At the same time, it seems to have stopped her noticing
the demise of the secular-leftist-modernistic option. Beyond the author’s impaired vision, such blindness to the deep roots of religion among the people seems to be a corollary of the period and the circles of which she writes. This shortcoming notwithstanding, this solid scholarly book is valuable for what it does contain. It makes an important contribution to the growing comparative study of feminisms in national and post-colonial settings, particularly where armed struggle produces a hyper-militarism that infiltrates all social institutions.

Amalia Sa’ar © 2008
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