

Hamas and the Women's Movement: Islamism and Feminism Under Occupation

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Hamas and the Women's Movement in Palestine: Islamism and Feminism[1] Under Occupation

It was in 2006 that Hamas[2] first entered the institutions of the Palestinian Authority (PA), as a democratically elected party. On June 14th 2007, after a series of attacks launched by Israel, Hamas established a *de facto* government in the Gaza Strip. Although Islamists have always played an important role in the Palestinian struggle, Hamas' takeover of Gaza marked a shift in the complex process of preparation for national sovereignty (Hovdenak ed., 2010). For the first time, the Occupied Palestinian Territories became politically and administratively parted by the existence of two competing bodies: a Fatah-led government in the West Bank, under President Mahmoud Abbas, and Hamas' government in the Gaza Strip, under the premiership of Ismail Haniyeh.

However drastic a change, "no grand redesign of governmental institutions in accordance with Islamic principles has been detected," a 2010 report from the Peace Research Institute of Oslo (PRIO) on the study of public services under Hamas in Gaza concluded (Hovdenak ed., 2010: 5). Except for the creation of its own judicial apparatus, Hamas has mostly maintained the structures it took over, choosing to rule through the institutions of the Palestinian Authority, which granted it a certain degree of constitutional continuity. Still, the imposition of more conservative cultural and moral codes, such as veiling, gender division of labor or female restrictions in public life, has become the most visible aspect of Hamas' government (Hovdenak ed., 2010).

Western media and academia have alerted for a progressive "talibanization" of Gaza (Schanzer, 2009; Toameh, 2013) with the corresponding violation of individual rights and freedoms, especially women's. Yet, the fact that around 20 per cent of public servants working for Hamas are women (Ass. Press, 2013) and that two Ministers of Women's Affairs have been elected through the Party since 2006, as well as the recent appointment of Isra Al-Modallal, a 23 year-old UK-educated journalist, as the organization's first spokeswoman, have drawn attention to gender politics in the region and the possibilities for social change.[3] The attempts by Gaza's conservative rulers to present a friendlier discourse and outlook (considered by many to be just "window dressing") are now under serious scrutiny.

On a rather negative note, the image of Palestinian fighters in the West, long linked to suicide attacks towards Israeli civilians (both by Islamic and secular factions of the Palestinian resistance), has been reinforced with the victory of Hamas. And as a significant number of women demand more responsibilities in the struggle against the occupation, challenging traditional grassroots roles, many have begun to take up military training and embrace violence.[4] Whether instrumental or empowering, the development of a female culture of active martyrdom is yet another reason why Hamas cannot escape the accusations of fostering terrorism.[5]

This paper aims to discuss the case of Islamist women of Hamas within the women's movement in Palestine. We will address the more general debate on religious fundamentalism through the framework of feminist theory and bring them together to analyse the impact of such an Islamist political turn on the status of Palestinian women, particularly since 2006. The guiding research questions for this paper were thus structured as follows:

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1. Overarching question: In what way, if any, can religion/non secularism contribute to post-patriarchy?

1. Sub-question: Is the version of social and political Islam formulated in the ideology of Hamas, more accurately understood as providing space for the exercise of female agency or as maintaining male dominance?

Politics of God and Men

The "Revival" of Islam

Addressing the case of the Palestinian women of Hamas inevitably takes us to a broader discussion on religious fundamentalism and its potential threats, in the context of what has often been perceived as a "revival" of Islam (Huntington, 1996; Berger, 1999). This re-surge in religious participation and values, which agitated several Muslim countries since the 1970s, is not well understood. The environment brought about by the 9/11 events was one of general suspicion for faith and radical believers. Almost 15 years later, controversy over the meaning of jihad remains, and so does the tendency to understand Islam as a monolithic bloc and to oversimplify identities and political contexts. The essence of being a Muslim has been analysed time and again. Still, Western difficulty in grasping the phenomenon of fundamentalism denotes a bias, or at least a failure, to see that the world today is "as furiously religious as it ever was" (Berger, 1999: 3).

The existing "Western consensus on modernity" (Gelvin, 2011: 69), rooted in the values of the European Enlightenment, led to recommendations of a universal adoption of the Western development model and often defined other kinds of non-Western experience as imitations or travesties (Abu-Lughod, 1999). In viewing secularism as a core element of modernity, different models and approaches to social and political reality end up being excluded as anti-modern, or taken for distorted versions[6] of *the truth* (Sharabi, 1988; Euben, 1997). Therefore, religious upturns, particularly those related to the Islamic Movement, are often treated as "withdrawals from, rather than encounters with, social change" (Hannigan *apud* Sofos, 2013).

However, according to many authors both in the Middle East and the West, the Islamic Movement(s) should rather be perceived as selectively and sometimes instrumentally traditional, in the sense that they are reactions to Western modernity, to which they try to pose an alternative, but by no means suggesting its absolute refusal (Euben, 1997; Podeh, 2011). Not recognizing this power of critique as equally valid tends to obscure their capacity for transformation, compromise and strategic adaptation. This is particularly true in the case of Hamas which, despite its military extremism, is a good example not only of the inherent contradictions within the Palestinian Islamic Movement but also, more importantly, of its pragmatism, ever since it became an undeniable part of the political landscape and, arguably, of any future peace arrangement (Jad, 2010; Roy, 2003).

Understanding Hamas: Between Islamism and Nationalism

In the midst of the first *Intifada*, the first great Palestinian uprising against Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, in 1987, a group of Islamist leaders founded Hamas as an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, which had been active in the Gaza Strip roughly since the 1960s. A quote by the founder of the Brotherhood, Imam Hasan Al-Bana, opens the Charter of Hamas (1988: 1): "Israel will be established and will stay established until Islam nullifies it as it nullified what was before it," indicating a religious foundation for a political nationalist project.

With the signing of the Oslo Accords by Yasser Arafat, in 1993, Hamas initiated a period of violence. Paradoxically perhaps, the Oslo period was both: motivated by the challenge of Hamas—whose impressive welfare network allowed it to "compete with Fatah for the minds and hearts of the Palestinians"—and challenging to the organization's future (Kristianasen, 1999: 20). The attempt of accommodation with Israel by the Oslo Accords, to which Hamas firmly opposed, would turn out to be its great chance to garner and maintain popular support, given the little accomplishments of the peace process so far.

In 1995, as its internal divisions deepened, Hamas announced the establishment of the Islamic National Salvation

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Party (Khalas) – a political organization separate from its military wing, the Al-Qassam Brigades.[7] Sharing Hamas' broad ideology but rejecting the use of violence, Khalas opened the way for a credible involvement of the Islamists in the political processes brought about by the Oslo Accords and the arrival of the PA (Jad, 2010). Such an engagement in the political game had immediate repercussions for women. As an article for *The New York Times* noted at the time: "Two of the leaders, in a marked departure from usual Islamic practice, were women" (Schmemmann in NYT, 1996: 1). Though Khalas was short-lived, it marked the beginning of Hamas' transformation process from resistance group to potential ruling party, without which its later electoral upheaval would have not been possible. Up until then, "Hamas was known for its suicide bombers, not its bureaucrats" (Gerges, n.d.: 11).

The outburst of the second Intifada in 2000, coupled by the effects of 9/11, meant a return to violence, at unprecedented levels. As the spirit of Oslo faded, the continuous occupation and assaults against Palestinians increased the embrace of the military option. Amongst the factors enabling political Islam's rise, culminating in the 2006 elections, are what most authors suggest were the abnegation of any command by the PA during the uprising (even though all Palestinian factions were visibly engaged in the fight. Hamas' attacks inside Israel were perceived by large segments of the population as somehow bolder); the accusations of corruption, nepotism and mismanagement that were gradually de-legitimizing the government of Ramallah; and the increasing lack of law and order in a state of near chaos (Roy, 2003; Susser, 2010).

After Arafat's death in 2004, the idea that Hamas was a good fit to fulfill the leadership vacuum became more obvious. Fatah would eventually lose the monopoly of Palestinian politics with Hamas' victory within the Palestinian Legislative Council and its effective control over the Gaza Strip from 2007. Though it may seem incoherent that Hamas would run for elected office in institutions it never considered legitimate, it may be precisely in its incoherency that the organization's strategic vision, always couched in religious discourse, resides. For the truth is that "Islam provides a strong rhetorical tool for furthering national projects and has always been a major cornerstone of Arab nationalism" (Jad, 2010: 4). So, to many people in Gaza and the West Bank, after the failure of Arab nationalism and then, of Palestinian secular nationalism, Islam has come to signify "force of ethnic identity, attachment to the land, and cultural purity of the Palestinians" (Sahliyah *apud* Abusada, 2010: 2). Moreover, the social core of the Islamic Movement (namely education and health) had become an important part of the welfare system in the Occupied Territories, given the PA's diminishing capacity to deliver even the most basic services (Roy, 2003).

The return to Islam by the Palestinian society, and its unquestionable triumph in Gaza, seems thus to have its roots in deprivation and despair – forced upon the majority of the population in the Occupied Territories by Israel's policies—more than blood thirst or the simple rejection of modern values. It is not surprising, given the ever more evident failure of the secular nationalist movement headed by Fatah, that some started to foresee political Islam as the only way left to achieve national liberation, state building, and welfare.

Radical Islam emerged not because people were opposed to political and economic change but because they were continuously denied it. Palestinians are a secular people seeking their political rights and national liberation, but this could change if their misery deepens and their possibilities end (Roy, 2003: 20).

Although the Charter of Hamas is very dogmatic and anti-Semitic, like many of the organization's first communiqués, later documentation particularly since the mid-1990s is less doctrinaire, depicting the armed struggle as a form of resistance to Israel's occupation and even leaning towards the possibility of a peaceful agreement (Roy, 2003; Gerges, n.d.). Also, the movement has continuously demonstrated its dynamic character and willingness to address the challenges posed by modernity as well as the specific political and social conditions in the Occupied Territories (Roy, 2003; Waymire, 2009).

In the end, the question the PRIO report tries to answer about the rule of Hamas in Gaza is whether it is "Islamic Revolution or Crisis Management" seems to lead us away from the first option, specially if we confront it, for instance, with the full establishment of an Islamic society in Iran, following 1979. However, despite the great complexity caused by the occupation and the progressive popular discredit in the secular sectors of the resistance, this process is more than temporary crisis management. Rather, we can see here a display of power politics aimed at maintaining a level of control that will enable Hamas to remain in power for a long time, if it wishes to do so (Hovdenak, 2010).

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A Gendered Struggle

Islamic and Secular Feminism in the Middle East

“Conflict over the construction of gender and the ideal woman is neither a neutral nor is a primarily religious concern” (Jad, 2010: 2). It is not very different from, say, nationalist formulations of gender. Still, the debate around (de)secularization strongly influences knowledge production on feminism and women's issues. A recent survey on third-wave feminists in the UK (Aune, 2007) concluded that feminists tend to be much less religious than the general population. This might be an unsurprising find, if we consider how the historical interaction between religion and feminism in Europe has been a hard one. However, for a great number of activists throughout the world, religion is an essential arena for social transformations, agency exercise, and even feminist longings. Post-colonial and black feminists, for one, have never been overtly secular and, in fact, religion and spirituality have been central to their worldviews, in stark contrast with mainstream feminist discourse (Salem, 2013).

The transference of secularism theory to feminism meant, first and foremost, that a significant part of the female population felt underrepresented by classic (Western) feminism. To post-colonial theorists such as Chandra Mohanty (1991) or Lila Abu-Lughod (2002; 2013), classic feminist scholarship discursively depicts third world women as backwards or in need of rescue – namely from their own religion. The Western debate around women's issues reveals, many argue not only a colonial heritage but also, perhaps more subtly, a liberal ontology (Salem, 2010). The focus on women's rights and agency—understood as the free exercise of behavior, self-determination, and rational choice—reflects an individualistic premise, which is at the core of the secularist narrative and, ultimately, of Westerner-style modernity. The notion of God, not to mention powerful organized religion, is in itself a “transgression of the secular and liberal worldview” (Salem, 2010: 3). If, like in the case of modernity, our concept of feminism defines non-Western experiences as distorted then it is no less condescending and oppressive to women than patriarchy.

Keeping in mind the above caveats, it seems more appropriate to talk about “feminisms” in plural, analyzing their various forms as products (and not distortions) of the modernity project, in a kaleidoscope of stories that are worth telling (Abu-Lughod, 1999). The idea that modernity and tradition, spirituality and agency, are not necessarily opposing poles (Abu-Lughod, 1999; Bracke, 2008) is central to understanding and discussing the status of women in the Middle East, including what has been called an Islamic feminist critique. Islamic feminism, which developed in the late 20th century, could be defined as:

[...] a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm. Islamic feminism, which derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence. Islamic feminism is both highly contested and firmly embraced (Badran, 2002: 1).

Rereading of the Islamic texts and influencing jurisprudence is a central project for Islamic feminism. Whether through feminist journals in Tehran, from inside the mosques of Cairo or sitting in university classrooms both in the Middle East and overseas, Islamic activists have come to insist that gender discrimination has a social basis, rather than a natural or divine one. The argument that “the text does not prohibit” and the increasing search for complementary sources—such as the Hadiths (the deeds of the Prophet)—have opened the door to new possibilities for gender equality within the framework of Islam and its values. This approach stems, in a way, from the referred feeling of underrepresentation and from the realization that most secular feminist groups in the Middle East remain restricted to an elite class, failing to help women in the lower and more traditional segments of society (Jad, 2010; Moghadam, 2002; Amayreh, 2010; Malik, 2010).

Where many see potential conquests for women, others accuse Islamic feminism of being a contradiction, for either creating a false consciousness of agency or promoting what Kandyoti (1988) has called a phenomenon of “bargaining with patriarchy” (that is, strategically negotiating one's condition within a patriarchal society but not really striving to dismantle it). In this line of thought, female activism within Hamas has long been perceived in mainstream media as inimical to women in the Occupied Territories (especially Gaza) and retrograde in comparison to the traditionally secular agenda of the Palestinian women's movement.

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The Women's Movement in Palestine Until 2007

The Palestinian struggle makes for the analogy between male dominance and sovereignty over land, in the sense that for the most part it presented a chance for men—"the lover"—to reunite with land—"the bride"—excluding women from the process, much like what the Zionist narrative did, for that matter (Katz, 2003: 82-83; 87). And still, Palestinian women's activism began as a result of the national struggle. Though they had been politically active since beginning of the process of creation of Israel, it was after the founding of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964, in particular, that a great number of organizations[8] flourished (James, 2013). Palestinian women were extremely active during the First Intifada, to the extent that many were imprisoned and harassed.

After the signature of the Oslo Accords, however, the role of the women almost disappeared and many of the successful women's grassroots organizations were transformed into NGOs, mostly connected to Western donors and pursuing liberal-oriented agendas. This "NGOisation of the women's movement" (Jan, 2004) has been considered detrimental to Palestinian women and their desires of social change and development. Within these NGOs, staff members and target groups virtually did not participate in decision or policy-making nor did they have the capacity to mobilize the masses (Jad, 2004: 50).

Having been predominantly secular until the emergence of Hamas as a convincing political opponent to Fatah, the women's movement suffered from the absence of women in the political leadership. Thus, when the Second Intifada started in 2000, most women were not able to contribute much. In 2004, in an effort to grant women more decision-making power in the PA, the Ministry of Women's Affairs was established (Daho, 2008). But by then the secular side of the political spectrum was already losing ground to Islamic movements, something women were not aloof from.

With the beginning of the Second Intifada and in the years that followed, hundreds of Palestinian women were held in captivity in Israeli facilities (most of them with connections to a resistance group). The majority were affiliated to Islamic organizations such as Hamas and the Islamic Jihad, demonstrating the capacity of Islamic movements to incorporate women in the armed struggle (Daho, 2008). Slowly, a re-Islamization of several sectors of the Palestinian society started to appear more evident. Even in Palestinian universities, not only those traditionally closer to Islam but in former secular strongholds such as Birzeit, support for the Islamic Bloc grew, and female students became especially active.

The Daughters of Gaza: Challenges and Opportunities of Hamas' Gender Ideology

As Islah Jad (2010) notes, Islamist women are presented with two paradoxical expectations: to live as good mothers and obedient wives or become model political activists—a challenge that most secular women face. When it comes to the women living under Hamas, mainstream media have tended to emphasize the first aspect, along with a gender division of labor, segregation in schools and public places, and the daily restrictions that have gradually been imposed on them since 2006.[9] And, in fact, Hamas' Charter clearly defines the woman as "the factory of men" (1988: Art. 17) and ascribes her the role of family caretaker (Art. 18).

However, departing significantly from the organization's initial considerations on gender roles, some of Hamas' members have demonstrated support for women's participation in public affairs and, if necessary, in the armed struggle. For instance, spiritual leader Sheik Ahmed Yassine is said to have personally overseen the creation of the women's organization within Hamas: "He allocated funds and encouraged the growth and development of the Women's Department" (Naim *apud* Amayreh, 2010:13). This adaptability of Hamas has been demonstrated in various forms, namely in the recognition of women's importance as a mobilizing force, which enabled Hamas' electoral victory in 2006, and the encouragement of education and career building, contributing to Palestinian women being among the most qualified in the Middle East.

Even the *hijab*, a recurring sensitive topic within gender politics, has acquired new meanings (Jad *apud* Waymire, 2009). Despite the authoritarian campaign to "veil-up" women and protect them from the temptation of Western customs carried out from the beginning of First Intifada (Hammami, 1990), some authors (Jad, 2010) have stressed its empowering character, at least from a personal standpoint. Working and politically active women wearing the

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hijab have gained access to new spaces and are now more able to engage directly in debates with men and to move around the streets of Gaza protected from judgmental gazes, rather than women not wearing it.

This idea that an increasingly wider space is being carved out by Islamist women, albeit in ways not always understandable from a Western perspective, is shared by Jamila Shanti, former head of Hamas' Women's Department.[10] When asked to describe the status of women within Hamas, Shanti remarked:

Irrespective of Western stereotypes, I can say that Hamas—a movement I know very well—is a moderate Islamic movement that adopts a comprehensive approach to society. [...] Hamas' philosophy stems from Islam, which gives women their rights and dignity. So, it is only natural that the status of women within Hamas is very advanced as women are considered a fundamental component of the movement. In fact, I can say for sure that women are more representative in Hamas than they are within any other Palestinian political movement (Shanti *apud* Amayreh, 2010: 8).

Conclusion

Palestinian women live their lives in between male dominated power structures, Israeli occupation, and an internal political crisis, which have all lasted for too long now. Hamas' gender ideology, largely ignored by scholarly literature, has received renewed attention thanks to the organization's recent moves towards a more open and cosmopolitan image. Yet, the general discussion on gender within Islam, and particularly its intersection with nationalism and social movements, remains sketchy.

In response to our first research question, it seems more or less evident that neither religion nor secularism *per se*, can alter patriarchy. Nevertheless, spirituality can and often does constitute an important site of agency providing opportunities to defy calcified social structures. The reviewed literature for the elaboration of this paper suggests that women of Hamas—traditionally in grassroots roles but increasingly acquiring more leadership responsibilities have found spaces to exercise their agency in the social and political spheres, often even more so than secular women of Fatah.

We have aimed here at deconstructing some of the Western liberal formulations of agency, so that light could be shed on not so conventional possibilities for female empowerment. If feminism has always been a contested concept and if feminist politics is shaped by specific historical, political, and cultural contexts, then it makes sense to define it more by its practice than by any kind of monolithic ideology (Moghadam, 2002). However, agreeing on “the need for a more inclusive and cross-cultural understanding of feminism” (Moghadam, 2002: 1136) is not to say that a locally produced feminist consciousness would immediately solve the challenges posed to women by male dominance, namely in Muslim societies.

Although it might be hard to acknowledge, especially in light the most recent intervention in the Gaza Strip, in the summer of 2014, the version of social and political Islam formulated in the ideology of Hamas has evolved over the years towards the adoption of a less extreme and more pragmatic posture, namely towards women. In fact, an important (if not the most important) obstacle to female emancipation in both Gaza and the West Bank today continues to be the occupation by Israel, not religion. Nevertheless, and despite creating some opportunities for women's empowerment and participation in the social collective, Hamas has not yet proven itself capable of providing a truly progressive environment for all Palestinian women, regardless of their piety, in case a sustainable peace process is achieved. The current status of women living in Hamas-ruled Gaza, though more advanced in comparison to other women in the Middle East, reveals the difficult but necessary task of reconciling agency and social change, individual empowerment, and structural transformation.

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Footnotes

[1] Here, I refer to *Islamism* as the attempt to incorporate Islam in various aspects of social, political and cultural life by the sectors and organizations within the Islamic Movement, in opposition to secularism. I use *feminism* as a theoretical concept as it is not intended to categorize any particular segment of the women's movement in Palestine as "feminists", nor is it in the scope of this paper to discuss whether the term applies to this specific context.

[2] Hamas is the acronym of *al Harakat al Muqawwama al Islamiyyia*, meaning the Islamic Resistance Movement. Hamas is also the Arabic word for zeal.

[3] See *The Independent* (2013) "A move in the right direction?" <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/a-move-in-the-right-direction-after-years-of-restricting-womens-rights-hamas-hires-isra-almodallal-as-its-first-female-spokesperson-8935065.html>>; *Al Jazeera* (2013) "Hamas appoints first spokeswoman" <<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/11/hamas-appoints-first-female-%20spokesperson-2013111013586831738.html>>; *Time Magazine* (2013) "Hamas' first female spokesperson: A vehicle for unintended change" <<http://ideas.time.com/2013/11/12/hamas-first-female-spokesperson-a-figurehead-who-might-actually-bring-change/>>.

[4] See *Haaretz* (2002) "The Palestinians see a 'Joan of Arc'", <<http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/the-palestinians-see-a-joan-of-arc-1.53335>>; *BBC News* (2004) "Hamas women bomber kills Israelis", <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3395973.stm>; *CNN* (2011) "Women fighters willing to die for Gaza" <<http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/01/03/gaza.women.fighters/index.html?npt=NP1>>; The *Ezzedeen Al Qassam Brigades* webpage (2013) "Female Martyrs", <http://www.qassam.ps/female_martyrs.html>.

[5] The United States of America and the European Union have listed Hamas as a terrorist organization in 1997 and 2003, respectively (US Department of State, 1997; Council of the EU, 2003), a designation both maintain.

[6] Hisham Sharabi developed the concept of *neopatriarchy* in his 1988 book on the process of distorted change in Arab society. *Neopatriarchy* derives from the encounter of a universal form of traditional society (patriarchy) with modernity, resulting in a hybrid type of society seen as a malaise. Two major forces are described as capable of dismantling that society: secularism and fundamentalism – both having manifested in the Arab world. The first, would dismantle *neopatriarchy* by converting it in an "authentic" (Western) modernity; the second, would do so by bringing it back to the past and closer to its roots. Sharabi believes the Arab society will most likely take a fundamentalist turn, mirrored in projects like that of the Muslim Brotherhood or post-revolutionary Iran.

[7] According to its official webpage, the *Ezzedeen Al-Qassam Brigades* (Ezzedeen Al-Qassam is the name of a pioneer fighter who was martyred in 1935 near Jenin) are the armed branch of the Islamic Resistance Movement or Hamas. The organization, established during the first Intifada, states as main goals: to evoke the spirit of *jihad* amongst Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims; to defend Palestinians and their land against the Zionist occupation and its aggression; and to liberate Palestinians and the land usurped by the Zionist occupation forces and settlers.

[8] The General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW) and the Palestinian Women's Association (PWA), in 1965; and later the Union of the Palestinian Women's Committees (UPWC), pillar of the modern Palestinian women's movement.

[9] See *The Guardian* (2012) "Women in Gaza: how life has changed", <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jul/30/women-gaza-life-changed>>; *BBC News* (2010) "Women in Gaza: Life under Hamas", <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8557251.stm>>.

[10] "The Women's Department in Hamas played a critical role in political mobilization of women in the period leading

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up to the 2006 elections. These efforts, says Jamila Shanti, maximized women's turnout to the extent that it exceeded that of men, especially in the Gaza Strip" (Amayreh, 2010: 23).

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