

Feminist Intifada

Palestinian Women through a Century of Organizing

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In examining various stages of one hundred years of Palestinian women's and feminist organizing, it becomes apparent that Palestinian feminism is not a new phenomenon. Though the most recognized formations that have adopted feminist language in collective mobilizing have emerged in the twenty-first century, a Palestinian anticolonial feminist politics has been brewing since modern, Western forms of colonialism were imposed on the lands and peoples of Palestine. While the development of such a feminism has changed shape and been undermined by shifting colonial and imperialist policies meant to repress the Palestinian liberation struggle, Palestinian feminist political praxis has been mobilized throughout. Each phase of mobilizing has shaped a practice of feminism grounded in how women have inserted themselves into the anticolonial struggle against both British and Zionist colonial forces, and through this practice a feminist politics of liberation and care has emerged. While the term *feminism* remains contentious in Palestinian spaces, Palestinian feminist praxis has been built through every moment of *intifada* in the Palestinian liberation struggle. *Intifada* is an Arabic term that translates to "uprising" and is largely specific to moments of Palestinian insurgency. As I think through different historical moments of Palestinian *intifada*, I note the various roles women have played and how those mobilizations create a nonlinear yet necessary trajectory of Palestinian anticolonial feminism. I argue that this trajectory, while not widely accepted due to multidirectional challenges to the concept and language of

Radical History Review

Issue 148 (January 2024) DOI 10.1215/01636545-10846907

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feminism, is in fact compatible with, and even necessary for, the struggle to actualize Palestinian liberation and freedom.

Palestinian Feminist Formations

On September 26, 2019, *tal'at* emerged across Palestine, through calls for mobilization in response to the intercommunal, gendered murder of the Palestinian woman Israa Gharib.¹ Palestinian feminists situate this murder within a global rise in femicide that results from patriarchal hierarchies that deem women's bodies property and connect family honor to control over women's bodies.² The Zionist state further perpetuates the familial anxieties around honor and poses a threat to women's physical safety through infiltration practices for the purposes of blackmail.³ As my comrade and colleague Shadia⁴ narrated to me, the idea of *tal'at* began to form earlier in 2019 and, following some smaller, localized protests, *tal'at* ("We're going out," in the feminine)⁵ was used as a slogan to call for nationwide protest in response to growing cases of gendered violence in Palestine. The original intent of this mobilization was a singular day of aligned protest; however, through the immense force, power, and energy of this moment, organizers realized the necessity of continuing to organize this feminist front in a fascinating display of the power of both spontaneity and organization.⁶ *Tal'at* mobilized not just women but Palestinians of all genders,⁷ and the profound impact rippled across Palestine, the region, and the Palestinian *shatat* (translated most often as "diaspora" but more literally meaning "dispersal" to connote the transnational community of Palestinians outside their homelands). It also evoked a power that women came to assume in organizing spaces that are typically overpowered by male leadership.

The emergence of *tal'at* challenged the social and political culture that perpetuates gender-based violence in Palestinian infrastructures while also calling into question the lack of effective prevention, intervention, and accountability processes for engaging such gendered questions. In turn, this moment reflects a twofold challenge to the patriarchal order. First, it contests Zionist colonial, ideological underpinnings of violence based on gender that have insurmountable effects on Palestinians and serves as a tool for emasculating Palestinian men. There are many instances in which Zionist colonialism genders its colonized subjects. Some examples include the use of sexual violence as a torture practice on Palestinian political prisoners and unequal access to health care that has resulted in mothers birthing their babies at checkpoints because they are not allowed to pass—often resulting in birth complications, including death of the mother, the baby, or both. Second, this moment challenges Palestinian society and political culture to take seriously the egregious consequences of gender inequity and particularly femicide as structurally enabled through Palestinian governing bodies and social status quos. Within Palestinian social and legal structures, there are no clearly defined repercussions for instances of femicide or other forms of gender-based violence, yet solicitations like

catcalling in the streets have been monitored by morality police, thus furthering the cultural view that protecting women is an issue of honor and violence against them is a family matter. These pressures are further exacerbated by the technologies of Zionism that prohibit a life of dignity for Palestinians, often prohibiting Palestinian men from their aim of providing economic stability to their families, threatening their sense of masculinity and thus producing an expression of masculinity in the family through regulations of honor, gender, and violence.

This moment of uprising in 2019 left many Palestinians across the *shatat* wondering why there had been such a void in contemporary Palestinian feminist mobilizing. As *tal'at's* efforts continued to resonate, some organizers in the United States, including me, remained in contact with the organizers in Palestine whom we had encountered in other Palestinian organizing spaces. This relationship was crucial for thinking through the shared need for an explicitly feminist platform in the diaspora. After almost a year of foundational work and process, the Palestinian Feminist Collective (PFC) publicly launched on March 15, 2021, pledging that “Palestine is a feminist issue.”⁸

This pledge immediately gained public traction; signatories stepped forward in the hundreds to thousands and are still trickling in nearly three years later. As Palestinian and Arab women and feminists committed to liberation in its multilayered forms, we came together around an idea and a void that we felt. The pledge came out just before the emergence of the unity intifada in 2021, which signified a renewed resurgence of Palestinian resistance to defend land and lives across Palestine’s entire geography, from Jerusalem to Gaza and from Nablus to Haifa, as well as retaliatory escalations of violence by the Zionist regime. In this moment the PFC decided to write “A Love Letter to Our People in Palestine.”⁹ This public letter was in part a response to a letter we learned of from *tal'at* to the women of Jerusalem defending their homes from demolition and lands from confiscation. These initiatives and this moment of heightened resistance led to the mobilization of a letter from gender studies departments in support of the PFC.¹⁰ This unexpected and welcome initiative was released alongside an influx of university departments issuing public statements in support of Palestine. At this moment it became clear, at least in my view, just how critical the need was for a Palestinian feminist formation, both for the Palestinian community and for US-based radical feminist allies, and how deeply felt the PFC message was as it aimed to fill that void.

Historicizing Palestinian Feminism

In tracing historical iterations of Palestinian feminism, we must examine women’s organizing spaces, which housed this work almost exclusively until the early 2000s. The queer organizing spaces that emerged in Palestine articulated their organizational trajectories as overtly feminist. Palestinian women’s organizing dates back

over a century and therefore is far from a new phenomenon. To take the question of Palestinian feminism seriously, we must honor this continuity and the different formations that house this trajectory. Highlighted in the PFC's Feminist Futures 2023 calendar project is this century-long legacy Palestinian women and feminists have created. The work of this project is featured in the physical calendar, in corresponding social media posts, and through programmatic events accompanying the physical calendar.¹¹ The first iterations of Palestinian and Arab feminisms predated the British Mandate, as we see with women's resistance against the construction of a settlement in Afula as early as 1893 and through to the establishment of women's societies including, most notably, the Arab Women's Association in Jerusalem and localized Arab and Palestinian women's unions across Palestine in the early 1920s.¹² In the early years of resistance under both British and Zionist rule, to the foundations of the Palestinian student movements and emergence of the parties, to the establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the anticolonial national liberation movement, women have persisted in their organizing; they have inserted themselves in spaces not relegated to them and paved the way for the participation of more women, signifying an anticolonial, feminist practice of visibilizing and strengthening demands and participation from a broader social base. During the British Mandate, Palestinian women were committed to Palestine as an autonomous and contiguous land-based formation and were unequivocally consistent in their criticisms of colonial migration, militarism, and rule, both British and Zionist, as a foundational part of their principles in organizing.¹³ This legacy of Palestinian and Arab women's organizing persisted in multiple forms across the past century.

During the peak of the liberation movement, known as the *thawra*, or revolution, from the 1960s to the 1980s, Palestinian women largely mobilized through the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW) as well as the various political parties and PLO unions. At this time, the Palestinian liberation movement was consolidated under the PLO, one united infrastructure that housed political parties, popular resistance unions, guerrilla organizations, and executive infrastructures that moved forward a united project and strategy of liberation. In this period, in particular, the aims of women's movements were in line with those of the national liberation struggle, and women inserted themselves within male-dominated spaces to pave the way for more broad-based women's participation in revolutionary activities. These activities centered the creation of a Palestinian national infrastructure in exile to contest the Zionist state's violence and its colonial existence altogether through political party organizing, popular refugee mobilization, and cross-border armed resistance. The national movement at the time, including many revolutionary women active in the movement's organizations, subscribed to the framework that Palestine must be liberated before women can be liberated. While you can read this work through a feminist lens both as a sort of feminist nationalism and as shortsighted in feminist imagination for its relegation of women's issues to a postliberation

chronology, the language of feminism was not used as such in either regard. However, women were central to conceiving of a feminist cultural practice from within the movement, putting forth a politics of care and sustaining the revolutionary current through their gendered labor.

Women were central to the organized resistance against colonial, military, and state rule inside Palestine as far back as the 1936 Great Revolt (and preceding it), which lasted three years. In all waves of Palestinian resistance, especially in what has been communally labeled the first intifada in the late 1980s, coordinated popular resistance from within Palestine strongly contested Zionist state violence and militarism. Both the 1936–39 Great Revolt and the first intifada are important moments, in a century of ongoing anticolonial intifadas, for the organized formations that emerged in these two moments as grassroots defenders of Palestinian life, land, and dignity. During the late 1980s Palestinian Islamic movements emerged and women found their way into organizing in these spaces as well, resisting in direct confrontation with Zionist state militarism. Following the early 1990s peace processes, which ultimately resulted in the Oslo Accords¹⁴ and the formation of the Palestinian Authority (PA), a process of both political collapse and an influx of money from foreign nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), particularly from the West, shifted the landscape of women's organizing. This occurred not only in Palestine under the PA but also across the region where Palestinians were displaced, especially in the refugee camps.

This transition reflects the move from a radical nationalist women's organizing modality, whereby women's labor fueled revolution and intergenerational survival, to a more politically restrictive phase, whereby the collapse in the organizing institutions, coupled with liberal funding with strings attached, created a "women's empowerment" boom across the newly established NGO sector.¹⁵ Many women who were leading the GUPW and the women's movements found themselves moving into NGO positions with narrowly defined women's empowerment foci.¹⁶ As *Islah Jad* explains, NGOization enables a new, growing form of dependency on the West and is a tool to expand Western hegemony. She argues that a process of decentralizing and fragmenting sociopolitical issues from one another ensues and mobilizes state-building frameworks, localizing women's struggles and decoupling them from the broader liberation struggle.¹⁷ The frameworks brought forth by the funding networks of United Nations and international development organizations revert women's empowerment "back [to] the old dichotomies of West versus East" and inscribe the Westernized notion of women as the model of empowerment to follow.¹⁸ This NGOization move, in combination with the conditions set through the Oslo Accords for Palestinian political elites and wealthy exiles to return to the PA territories, produced a new elite class in Palestine that ushered in a new wave of economic instability through the facade of growing capitalism under occupation. The influx of NGO and PA funding forged a deeper wealth gap as well as reliance

on these types of employment opportunities, creating a dependence on colonial and imperialist funding circuits and governing structures to ensure economic stability and survival. Following the counterrevolutionary engagement of the peace process, in which we see the national bourgeoisie become figureheads for a governing body that maintains the colonial regime instead of offering an alternative, and the fracturing of a unified liberation project, a void was deeply felt in terms of Palestinian mobilizing, which, I argue, is still felt today. Of course, this dissolution of organized liberation struggles impacted women as it impacted all of Palestinian society. It created a vacuum of revolutionary infrastructure, leadership, and vision, all of which have continued to devolve incrementally into further fragmentation from the 1990s to today.

Palestinian Feminism Today

While women have continuously been part of Palestinian political life, whether in the PLO, the PA, the secular parties that make up the PLO, or the Islamic parties that emerged in the 1980s, the first Palestinian queer organizations—Aswat and Al-Qaws—emerged in the 2000s, at a time when women’s organizing through NGOs was in full force.¹⁹ However, these organizations did not immediately become public, and their work was met with heavy social and political backlash that continues today. While queer organizing situates its work within the conditions of settler colonialism and through feminist visions, it, like feminism, is still not fully integrated into the larger social and political landscape in Palestine or the shatat.

Tal’at and the PFC also face backlash in Palestinian community spaces. Feminism is a challenging concept for Palestinian communities, because the most common iteration of feminism is Western, imperialist feminism. Therefore, using the language of feminism connotes for some an alignment with imperialist aims. This association is as much linked to the anti-imperialist politics of the Palestinian *thawra* as it is to the current phase of NGOization and strings-attached funding streams for women’s (and other) organizing. As has been reflected in countless comments on the social media platforms of the PFC as well as *tal’at* and other formations, there are multidirectional challenges to the concept of feminism as a vehicle for anticolonial resistance.

However, the Palestinian feminism that both *tal’at* and the PFC offer stands in stark contrast to imperialist and white feminisms, though in our communities the concept of feminism is often seen as imperialist and Western. In fact, if one engaged in the concepts and politics the PFC is putting forth, one would find that the commitment to Palestinian resistance in all forms, to anticolonial struggle, and to decolonization is central to its feminism. In turn, PFC’s feminism is compatible with, and arguably offers necessary frameworks for, the struggle for Palestinian liberation and freedom. What *tal’at* and the PFC offer organizationally, as far as liberation is concerned, is to conjoin political and social struggles and aims as inextricably tied

and coconstitutive in the fight for liberation. This is exemplified through *tal'at*'s popularized slogan “no free homeland without free women.”²⁰ These two collectives account for very real material conditions being felt by women and queer Palestinians as multiply and intersectionally oppressed through the duality of being a subject of both colonialism and patriarchy and the entanglement of the two. The feminism put forth by the PFC and *tal'at* are not new among intergenerational Palestinian conversations. However, they articulate a Palestinian feminism of twenty-first-century relevance, building on over a century of Palestinian women's mobilizations and accounting for the material conditions and social struggles central to the Palestinian gendered experience as we mobilize toward actualizing decolonized liberation through sustained Palestinian feminist intifada.

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Notes

1. Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung—Palestine, “Discussion about the New Palestinian Feminist Initiative”; Hawari, “Israa Gharib's Murder Has Nothing to Do with Honour”; Marshood and Alsanah, “Tal'at.”
2. Abueish, “Israa Ghareeb.”
3. Ben David and Ben David, “I'd Rather Die in the West Bank”; Mahmoud, “Film about Israel Collaborators”; O'Connor, “Gay Palestinians Are Being Blackmailed”; Council on American-Islamic Relations, “Israeli Guards Rape Palestinian Women”; Rapoport, “The Disturbing Story from Within”; Mohsen, “Decolonization of Palestine.”
4. *Shadia* is used as a pseudonym for someone still actively engaged in the community that *tal'at* created and is part of the leadership community of *tal'at*.
5. Since Arabic is a gendered language, the gendering of the term is an important part of its significance.
6. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*.
7. Giovannetti, “Palestinians Demand Legal Protection.”
8. Palestinian Feminist Collective, “Pledge That Palestine Is a Feminist Issue.”
9. Palestinian Feminist Collective, “Love Letter.”
10. Gender Studies Departments in Solidarity with Palestinian Feminist Collective, “Gender Studies Departments in Solidarity.”
11. Palestinian Feminist Collective, “Calendar.”
12. Palestinian Feminist Collective, “Calendar.”
13. Mogannam, *Arab Woman and the Palestine Problem*.
14. The Oslo Accords were a Western-facilitated attempt at diplomatic resolution between Palestinians and the Zionist state. However, the agreements disregard the refugee question and the question of Jerusalem and have upheld colonial military rule through elaborate mobility-control infrastructures like checkpoints, sniper towers, and the annexation wall and through the rapid expansion of settlements, which continue to confiscate lands and bantustanize West Bank Palestinian territories. See Palestine Remix, “The Price of Oslo.”

15. Jad, "The 'NGOization' of the Arab Women's Movements." The concept of intergenerational survivance has been elaborated by Indigenous feminists on whom I draw strongly, including Linda Tuhiwai Smith. See Vizenor, *Survivance*.
16. Hindi, "Narratives of National Struggle."
17. Jad, "'NGOization' of the Arab Women's Movements."
18. Jad, "'NGOization' of the Arab Women's Movements," 46.
19. ASWAT, "Palestinian Feminist Center for Gender and Sexual Freedoms"; Al Qaws, "AlQaws for Sexual and Gender Diversity in Palestinian Society."
20. Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung—Palestine, "Discussion about the New Palestinian Feminist Initiative."

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