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Pious-modern subjectivities in the Palestinian West Bank

Identity formations and contours between the individual and the familial, the local and the global

Ferial Khalifa

Introduction: subjectivity and the new pious-modernity

I cannot continue to live like other women do, without a mission in life ... I want to be a person with impact ... to reform society.

Subjectivity is a state of mind (Allen 2002), affect, desire (Ortner 2006) and inner life (Biehl et al. 2007). It also refers to the culturally constituted meanings and ways of perception that animate the acting subject (Ortner 2006, pp. 107, 110). Subjectivity qualifies the subjects to ‘think through their circumstances and to feel through their contradiction’ (Biehl et al. 2007, p. 14). It assumes the subject’s intentionality (Allen 2002), reflexivity and agency (Ortner 2006), while remaining attentive to issues of social determination and processes of domination and resistance (Biehl et al. 2007, p. 9).

The focus on subjectivity since the 1980s in the human and social sciences is part of a paradigm shift from ‘evolutionary reasoning and methodological positivism to agency and ... context-bound interpretation of modernity and self’ (Göle 1996, p. 6). With respect to the study of Muslim women and societies, this has meant moving away from ‘universalistic master-narrative of modernization’ towards more particular ‘articulations between modernity and the local fabric’ (Göle 1996, p. 7). In her seminal study of the Islamist veiling movement of female university students in Turkey in the 1980s and 1990s (the ‘Turban Movement’), Göle does not so much explore how secularism replaces religion, following a universal model of modernization/secularization, but rather decodes Turkish constructs of modernity (ibid.). Göle observes that by veiling themselves, lower- and middle-class young Islamist women on Turkish university campuses were distinguishing themselves both from ‘traditional uneducated women’ and their mothers, whose traditional religiosity
was seen as lacking in ‘knowledge and praxis’ (1996, pp. 4–5). It lacked, in other words, intentionality and reflexivity. Göle concludes that in their adoption of the turban instead of the scarf, these women were not reproducing tradition as much as they were actively ‘shift[ing] from traditional to modern realms of life’ (1996, p. 4). In short, these women were constructing their own brand of pious and modern subjectivities.

Likewise, in her ethnographic study of Lebanese Shiʿi women’s everyday practice of Islam, Lara Deeb ‘clothes’ terms like ‘Islamization’ and ‘Islamism’ by seizing them in their local contexts (2005, p. 5), unravelling how women’s everyday practices are ways of debating and conciliating between modern and pious definitions of the private and public self (2005, p. 6). Deeb argues that these everyday practices construct an ‘ideal womanhood’ that is both modern and pious, producing a new meaning of what it is to be modern in which modernity and secularity, as well as materiality and spirituality, are enmeshed rather than opposed.

This chapter explores some of the contours of this new form of female subjectivity whose pillars are to be both pious and modern in the context of the Palestinian West Bank. It does so through the example of the life story of a particular ʿdaʿiyya (a Muslim woman preacher) known as ʾDaʿiyya Nur who voluntarily practices ʿdaʿwa (calling). Women’s Islamic activism in the Palestinian West Bank dates to the late 1960s, yet proliferated during the 1990s. These developments occurred at the same time as a global human rights discourse replaced Palestinian national politics as a major discursive trope, following the Oslo Accords. This chapter argues that these transformations are to be read as being closely linked to the new geopolitical conditions created by the collapse of communism and the rise of neoliberalism and the massification of ‘post-Cold War consumerism’ across the Muslim Middle East (Haenni 2005, p. 11). It was also linked to the decline of political Islam in favor of ‘The New Islamism of the Middle’ and what Patrick Haenni calls ‘Market Islam.’

Ethnographic fieldwork for this chapter was conducted in the Palestinian West Bank during the summers of 2010 and 2011. During my fieldwork, I participated in two women’s weekly piety groups, which met in mosques, and conducted 20 in-depth interviews with ʿdaʿiyyat (women preachers). This chapter is based on my interview with senior ʾDaʿiyya Nur. I decided to interview ʾDaʿiyya Nur because she was renowned for her well-attended weekly public piety meetings, which were especially popular in the late 1990s.

Senior ʾDaʿiyya Nur’s socio-cultural repertoire of piety and the contours of the new Islamic modernity

Senior ʾDaʿiyya Nur was born in the early 1950s to an urban middle-class family in the Palestinian West Bank, where her father owned a handcraft workshop. In the early 1970s, she earned a diploma from a West Bank teacher training college. She then accepted a teaching position, which she enjoyed tremendously, confessing in retrospect having ‘given to her students from her very blood.’ After marrying a West Bank businessman who was sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood, her husband asked her to give up her teaching job to take care of their children, because in his family ‘women were not to take a job [outside the home].’ After her youngest daughter turned six, ʾDaʿiyya Nur resisted her husband’s directive and insisted on studying Islamic law (ṣarīʿa). She argued that she ‘could not live like a lost person (ṣakhḥš ḏāʾ ī), without a mission in life, like other women did,’ and that she ‘wanted to have an impact, to reform society.’ ʾDaʿiyya Nur enrolled in a distance learning program in Islamic law, completed a degree in Islamic jurisprudence and started preaching in private homes to women in her area.
In the 1990s, a businessman offered his locale for free to accommodate the growing attendance at her home piety sessions, enabling her to reach a wider audience. *Daʿiyya* Nur was proud that more than 100 women from all social classes and professional categories, including retired teachers, physicians, lawyers and stay-at-home mothers, would come to hear her. In addition to Quranic readings, a typical weekly meeting discussed community health concerns, such as water shortages, nutrition, food safety and storage, as well as personal status laws on divorce and child custody. *Daʿiyya* Nur’s long years of preaching to women in private homes and later in a public hall made her a senior *daʿiyya*, yet also drew her attention to the numerous social problems in the Palestinian West Bank. She listed some of these problems:

Fathers hindering the marriage of their working daughters in order to benefit from their paid salaries; parents making their clever boys leave school and send them instead to work in order to earn some more money; divorcees with child custody and inheritance problems.

*Daʿiyya* Nur frames those problems in (Islamic) human rights terms, describing them as ‘issues of rights and duties (ḥuqūq wa-wājibāt).’ According to her, the moral categories which define the licit and the illicit (al-ḥalāl wa-l-ḥarām) are meant to safeguard those rights, but because of the public’s ignorance of these categories, the rights of many people, especially those of women and children, are violated. She affirms being ‘so concerned that people understand those issues of rights and duties, [especially that] many women are ignorant of their rights.’ Her answer to such challenges is pro-active and empowering: ‘if you [a woman] have a right, go for it.’

In interview, *Daʿiyya* Nur insists that her religiosity was unlike her father’s, ‘who worshipped in private and had no [social] impact,’ as well as different from her husband’s, who was sympathetic to the gender stance of the Palestinian Brotherhood, and whose religiosity was ‘propelled by his fear for *ird* (honour).’ *Ird* (honour) in Middle Eastern society is a cultural code that defines women in terms of their sexuality and considers them a threat to social order unless under the supervision of a male subject who controls their conduct. Honour therefore reflects the male desire to control the female body and sexuality to ensure female modesty (see Abu Lughod 1999, pp. 85–110). But rather than submitting to this code of honour which limits her role to the private sphere, *Daʿiyya* Nur envisions herself as a social entrepreneur with a public aim and mission to reform society. Against the traditional masculine authority of her husband and the Islamic Brotherhood, *Daʿiyya* Nur draws on her identity as a Muslim woman entrepreneur and neoliberalism-inspired Islamic ethics (see Atia 2012) to carve out for herself a public space through *daʿwa*. Examples of such ethics are entrepreneurship, personal progress, self-development, hard work and commitment, having preached for years for free.

*Daʿiyya* Nur’s framing of the social and moral status of women in the Palestinian West Bank in Islamic human rights terms parallels the rise of global human rights discourses that started to prevail there in the mid-1990s. *Daʿiyya* Nur’s redefinition of a Muslim religiosity also resonates with the 1990s shift in the Middle East from the political Islam of the 1970s towards what Patrick Haenni calls ‘Market Islam’ and its insistence on individual piety rather than state-centered large-scale social change as a result of global economic and political changes from nation-state ideologies towards neoliberalism and consumerism shaped realities. *Daʿiyya* Nur’s mode of religiosity indicates a non-political, bottom-up moral reform approach to social change. With her modern education in Islamic law, she holds an intermediate position between an older and more traditional generation of women preachers from the
Palestinian West Bank who were active in local urban piety groups as early as the 1950s, and the younger generation of the politically active (Islamist) women of Hamas. Finally, Daiya Nur’s insistence on her right to work and public visibility through da’wah echoes central gender problematics which many Islamic reform movements have addressed since the late nineteenth century. In the next section, I will discuss these Islamic reform movements, focusing on the Muslim Brotherhood and The New Islamism of the Middle. The section will highlight these movements’ approaches to social reform and gender, stressing how these contributed to the formation of women’s pious-modern subjectivities in the Palestinian West Bank, through its local Brotherhood.

**Modern top-down and bottom-up state-oriented Islamic reform movements and their gender stances**

Modern Islamic gender ideology dates back to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Islamic scholars and reformers who, in response to increased Westernization, called for the modernization of the Muslim world and for a reform in Muslim women’s conditions without abandoning Islam. Mohammad ‘Abdu (1849–1905) articulated the rationale for this call, arguing that Islam granted women their rights before the West but had been ‘at fault in the education ... of women’ and for not sufficiently acquainting them ‘with their rights’ (Ahmed 1992, pp. 139–140). Al-Tahtawi (1801–1873), Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1839–1897) and Mohammad ‘Abdu stressed the value of education for both sexes. Al-Tahtawi recommended that girls be granted ‘the same education as boys,’ because ‘this was the practice in the strongest nations’ (Ahmed 1992, p. 133). When, following their 1882 occupation of Egypt, the British restricted government education, Mohammad ‘Abdu established charities and ‘private committees’ to attend to the education of ‘both sexes’ (Ahmed 1992, p. 138). Mohammad ‘Abdu also stressed the need for a reform in ‘marriage practices’ that kept women back (Ahmed 1992, p. 139), and al-Tahtawi associated such ‘reforms’ against the social norms that ‘oppressed’ women with ‘national renewal’ (Ahmed 1992, p. 134).

The reform agenda of these late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Islamic scholars remained at the heart of the ‘modernization project’ of their twentieth-century successors, the Muslim Brotherhood (Abu Lughod 1998, p. 243). Founded in Egypt in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna, the Brotherhood was soon to become a regional Islamic movement with strong popular appeal. However, from its beginnings as a moral reform movement intended to spread the ‘correct understanding of Islam’ (Soage 2008, p. 22), the Brotherhood quickly became a main source of political opposition to the Egyptian state. Violent attacks on public places were attributed to the Brotherhood, and in 1948, the Brotherhood was accused of the murder of Prime Minister Mahmoud al-Nokrashy Pasha (1888–1948). The Brotherhood’s founder and political leader Hassan al-Banna was assassinated shortly thereafter, and it was believed that the Egyptian state’s security apparatus was responsible. In 1966, the Brotherhood’s political leader and ideologue Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) was executed, following the attempted assassination of President Jamal ‘Abd al-Nasser. The high cost of the state-oriented, top-down approach to social change promoted by both Hasan al-Banna and later Sayyid Qutub turned the Brotherhood into a dangerous contestor of the state and thus led to its ban and the expulsion of its leaders from Egypt.

Among those expelled from Egypt in the 1960s was Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who developed the tenets of The New Islamism of the Middle. This current emerged in the 1980s and 1990s in response to militant Islamism and was shaped by both the ‘successes and
failures’ (Baker 2003, p. 3) of the Islamic Brotherhood. The aim of The New Islamism of the Middle was to design an Islam-based authentic brand of modernity which stood at arm’s length of both Western-style state-centric secularism and revolutionary political Islamism. For al-Qaradawi, the spirit of Islam does not favor extreme positions as much as a middle stance between the strict and literal application of Islamic law (Shari’a) and its abandonment (see Stowasser 2009, p. 181).

After Qutb’s death, his legacy on the Arab East’s Brotherhood (Egypt, Syria and Jordan) distinguished it from its counterpart in North Africa (Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria). The Brotherhood in the Arab East regarded Islamic doctrine and political party as inseparable. In contrast, the Brotherhood in North Africa regarded Islamic creed and an Islamic political party as distinct entities. Islamic creed represents Islamic faith and community; an Islamic political party, however, represents numerous ethnic and religious groups assembled within a single entity (Muhram 2016). Politically, the Brotherhood in North Africa was pragmatic, relaxing its stance on the implementation of Shari’a in exchange for a place in the political representation of power. Unlike state-oriented Islamic movements such as the Iranian Islamic Revolution, Islamic movements in Tunisia and Morocco in power after the 2011 elections did not announce the establishment of an Islamic state nor ‘seriously attempt at reviewing the existing legislation… on religious [Shari’a] grounds’ (Abdel Ghafar and Hess 2018, p. 2).

These political differences between bottom-up and top-down Islamic movements mirrored different gender stances. When in the late 1970s Iranian women’s political participation in the Iranian revolution gained momentum, Ayatollah Khomeini (1902–1989), the political and spiritual leader of the Iranian Islamic Revolution, endorsed Iranian women’s participation in the Iranian revolution as Islamic ‘religious duty’ (Kian 2014, p. 188). However, once in power, Khomeini endorsed a paradoxical stance on gender in which ‘true Muslim women’ were to be active in the public sphere but ‘docile’ and ‘dependent on their husbands at home’ (Kian 2014, pp. 192, 189). Furthermore, after the establishment of the new Islamic republic, inequality between Iranian men and women was institutionalized, as Islamic law (Shari’a) became the republic’s primary source of legislation (Kian 2014, p. 190). A sequence of codes subsequently curtailed women’s rights in both the public and private spheres (ibid.). Salient among these codes was the Islamic dress code, which made the veil compulsory for ‘the entire female population of Iran’ (ibid.).

The gender stance of the traditional Brotherhood was more conservative than that of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Islamic scholars. Perhaps the best explanation of this difference is Ayubi’s observation that the latter scholars ‘were striving to modernise Islam,’ while the former ‘were striving to Islamicise modernity’ (1991, p. 231). As the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hassan al-Banna was an advocate of women’s participation in the communal base of the Brotherhood, but he recommended that a woman only be educated ‘with that which she requires to fulfil the mission and duty that God created her for: to take care of her home and her children’ (Al-Banna 1988, p. 11). In contrast, al-Tahtawi considered equal education for both sexes necessary for ‘harmonious marriages’ and acceptable for women to enter men’s professions when necessary (Ahmed 1992, p. 136). He also considered ‘women’s intelligence [as]… in no way limited to matters of the heart but… extending to the most abstract ideas’ (ibid.).

Based on the rationale that Islam forbids the mingling of sexes, al-Banna insisted that women be prohibited from work and political participation (1988, pp. 19, 18), and even preferred that they pray at home (ibid.). Despite drawing inspiration from al-Banna’s adherence to an Islamic form of modernity, The New Islamism of the Middle disagreed with al-Banna on those grounds. For example, al-Qaradawi allowed women’s education,
work and political participation, on the basis of a non-textual and pragmatic interpretation of Islamic Law. In arguing for women’s political participation, al-Qaradawi proposed that the Islamic principle of guardianship (al-qiwa), which dictates that men are responsible for the women in their lives, applies only to the husband’s role in the domestic sphere, not to the public or political spheres (Stowasser 2009, p. 203).

Islamists in North Africa had similar gender positions. Al-Ghannoushi, for example, has denounced the restriction of Muslim women’s education to basic reading and writing because of the corruption of the ‘education milieu’ (2012, p. 74). He also opposes the view that women should not participate in public life and work outside of the home on the grounds that the outside world is corrupt. Instead, al-Ghannoushi argues that women should be empowered to navigate the corrupt world within an Islamic framework (2012, p. 80). Likewise, al-Turabi wants women to participate in public life and even believes in a woman’s right to assume the political leadership of her country. Al-Turabi similarly holds that Muslim women can even lead men in prayer, can marry ‘People of the Book’ (Christians and Jews) and that the Islamic veil was not meant to cover the head—all views which al-Qaradwi firmly rejected.

How did the traditional Brotherhood and The New Islamism of the Middle shape pious-modern subjectivity? To come back to Dā’iyya Nur, her rejection of the Brotherhood’s conservative views of women, which her husband endorsed, led her to embrace the more progressive views of The New Islamism of the Middle. In order to better understand how these views were shaped, the following section further describes the composition of the Palestinian West Bank’s Brotherhood and how their traditional ideas about gender came to be.

**Palestinian West Bank’s traditional Brotherhood and their gender stance**

The Brotherhood’s presence in Palestine dates to the mid-1940s, when branches of the Egyptian organization were established in several Palestinian cities, including Haifa, Jaffa, Hebron and Nablus (Uwaysi 1998, pp. 153–168). However, after the annexation of the Palestinian West Bank to Jordan after the 1948 Arab–Israeli war, the Palestinian West Bank’s Brotherhood became part of the main Brotherhood party organization in Jordan. The Palestinian West Bank Brotherhood’s ideas on gender, therefore, were influenced by those of its counterpart in Jordan. According to Abu Hanieh, unlike Egypt’s Brotherhood, which has integrated women activists into its organization since the early 1930s, in Jordan, variations in the social structure (e.g., tribalism) and Jordanian Brotherhood’s conservative interpretation of Shari’a did not allow for a similar model of women’s participation to emerge (2008, p. 89). In fact, the Brotherhood in Jordan argued that women’s integration into the Islamic movement went against acceptable Islamic norms, and Jordanian women were not accepted into the Brotherhood until the early 1990s as a consequence (Abu-Hanieh 2008, p. 92).

Robinson observes that Gaza Strip Islamists were political activists and that those in the Palestinian West Bank were more philanthropic (2003, pp. 120–122). The Gaza Strip’s Islamists, who came from poor families, were younger. They developed their political activism on university campuses and directed their activism against the Israeli occupation. Palestinian West Bank’s Islamists, however, were older. They came from urban and upper-middle-class merchant backgrounds and advocated a bottom-up approach to social change through charity work and Islamic preaching in Palestinian West Bank’s mosques and Quran teaching centers. Their financial relations with affluent Arab countries like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait helped them sustain their moral reform mission and welfare programs. The
traditional Islamists of the Palestinian West Bank and their support of women’s Da’wa activism nurtured Da’i’ya Nur’s approach to moral reform. Few Palestinian West Bank women engaged in militant actions against the Israeli occupation during the second Palestinian uprising (2000–2005) on behalf of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) and other Islamist groups, limiting female militant activism in time and scope. Political and militant Islam in the Palestinian West Bank quickly subsided as the Palestinian second uprising gave way to the penetration of consumerism and neoliberalism deep within the fabric of society.

The global context and its regional and local processes: neoliberalism, consumerism and the rise of market Islam

According to Gauthier, the last half of the twentieth century has seen consumerism and neoliberalism progressively transform societies and culture worldwide, including religion (2018, p. 382). As a ‘set of business and managerial ideologies,’ practices and policies, neoliberalism emerged as a dominant force within world politics at the tail end of the 1970s (Harvey 2005). This is before translating into Structural Adjustment Programs led by the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) meant to ensure an efficient transition of previously state-owned services into the market economy over the course of the 1980s and 1990s. Politically, the neoliberal revolution has acted as a shift from a ‘government’ type of governmentality, that is of a vertical, top-down, bureaucratized and nation-driven and state-enforced kind of regulation, to a ‘governance’ type of governmentality, that is a civil society-centered, bottom-up, horizontal and supposedly non-coercive, partnership and punctual type of regulation ‘involving non-state actors and organizations’ as well as the state (Gauthier 2018, p. 398). In order to react and adapt to these changes, Gauthier notes how religious institutions (e.g., churches, but also bureaucratized religious movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood) started reforming their ‘structure and functions’ according to neoliberal business management principles (2018, p. 399) and began to perceive and present themselves as ‘entrepreneurs’ (2018, p. 390).

These processes are observable in the Palestinian West Bank, becoming particularly prominent over the course of the 1990s and the turn of the millennium, considerably changing the social, cultural, economic and political environment within which Islam in particular, and religion in general, have evolved. In this same period, the Palestinian West Bank transformed to become a consumer society, with consumption as a prevalent and desirable ethos. The expansion of consumption as a practice that entails identity, community and meaning (Gauthier 2018, p. 387; Douglas and Baron 1978) started changing the modern notion of the autonomous self from the ‘rationalist’ to the ‘reflexive’ (Lury 2011, p. 29), even well outside of the confines of the Western world, driving individuals to express themselves through life patterns and consumption choices. Although individualistic and individualizing, Gauthier insists on the ways in which the emerging consumer culture of global society is ‘paradoxically intensely social’ because an expressive brand of individualism is in ‘continuous need for a community . . . actual or virtual, to recognize and validate these ever-constructing identities’ (2018, p. 401). This characteristic is important, as it has allowed the changes brought about by the penetration of consumerism to develop in non-Western societies and cultures where social bonds are still profoundly enmeshed in more traditional and honor-based forms of extended familial bonds. This is why the processes which Gauthier calls marketization have changed religion into ‘lifestyles, [experience-based] practices, and voluntary [forms of] adhesion’ (Gauthier 2018, p. 389) also in regions such as the Palestinian West Bank.
It is against such a backdrop of the joint rise of neoliberalism and consumerism that one can understand Patrick Haenni’s (2005) claim that the Middle East has seen the rise of Market Islam. Based on Haenni’s analysis, Gauthier (2018, p. 405) notes how Market Islam moves attention ‘away from collective, politically oriented projects towards individualistic, practical concern . . . linked to economic performance [and] introduces [within Islam a novel brand of] prosperity theology in which material affluence and individual success are interpreted as signs of *baraka* (grace).’ Gauthier moreover observes that the rise of Market Islam has made it imperative for Muslim women to ‘express their religious identities publicly . . . through clothing . . . i.e. through consumption’ (2018, p. 404). Rather than signifying the perdurance or return of political, mediaeval or traditional Islam, these new Muslim women’s Islamic life-style choices point towards ‘a new synthesis of Islam and modernity’ (Haenni 2005) in ‘post-Cold War consumer capitalism’ (ibid.).

The evolution of Islamism in several Middle East societies illustrates this shift from political Islam to Market Islam. In Egypt, Bayat observes that by 1997, the ‘complex’ Islamist phenomenon, of which the Muslim Brotherhood, with its grassroots organizations and groups, and militant Islamism, which was particularly strong in the southern part of the country during the early 1990s (2007, p. 136), had subsided because of state crackdowns and the spread of personal piety movements. Islamic media, including fashion and leisure magazines, publicized an Islamic lifestyle that was especially appealing to upper-middle-class women such as the ‘New Rich’: a class which was the product of the economic opening (*isfāḥ*) policy of Egypt as of the late 1970s. For this category of Egyptians, personal piety and Islamic lifestyles eased the anxieties caused by their new affluence, the fluidity of the global world and the multiplicity of life options by providing access to signs of piety and conformity with Muslim morality, without sacrificing their desire to partake in the flows of modernity in its global-capitalist form.

As another example, Turkey’s economic liberalization program (1980–1993) created new ‘opportunity spaces’ for Islamic groups to advance their ‘Islamic ideas and practices’ (Yavuz 2004, p. 270). Kiliçbay and Mutlu (2002) note that Turkish entrepreneurs have identified the market of women’s Islamic fashion as a high growth potential and opportunity-rich segment in which economic interests and social status could be harmonized with the Islamic faith (2002, p. 503). A Turkish Islamic fashion industry flourished as a result, leading to both the incorporation of global brands into mainstream women’s consumption and the Islamization of the consumer culture. Kiliçbay and Mutlu show how the emergence of such a specifically Islamic type of consumerism shifted the meaning of Turkish women’s veiling. This practice henceforth developed along three complementary forms: ‘hybrid’ veiling, first, which expresses Turkish women’s Islamic identity, social status and aspirations, as well as their taste for modern fashion (2002, p. 507); more traditional veiling (*Tassatur*), secondly, consisting of a scarf covering the head in a way that reproduces inherited ways of expressing the Islamic code; and political veiling, thirdly, which covers the head and shoulders and asserts the public presence of political Islam (2002, p. 503).

In the Palestinian West Bank, neoliberalism and consumerism gained momentum after the Oslo Accords. Political and militant Islam in the Palestinian West Bank waned as the second uprising ended and was replaced by a striking transformation in West Bankers’ modes of consumption and lifestyles. The construction of new Palestinian towns (e.g., Rawabi and al-Rihan), the extension of most Palestinian West Bank’s cities and towns, facilitated by flexible lending policies driving a thriving construction sector, and the growing number of banks, shopping malls, hotels, coffee shops, restaurants and brand-fashion stores, all attest to this sudden and profound transformation.
These developments were accompanied by a boom in Islamic dress, food, medicine, investment banks, private schools, leisure activities, sociability practices and life rituals (e.g., weddings). Islamic dress stores such as Hijabbi (‘my veil’), Jilbabi (‘my Islamic ‘dress) and al-Ziyy-al Islami (‘Islamic dress pattern’) proliferated. They reflect the preferences of middle-class women who want to express their Islamic identity not necessarily through their mothers’ traditional scarf, which partly covers the head, nor through political veiling, a long dress with a long white veil that covers the head and shoulders, but through a ‘hybrid’ form of Islamic dress, designed by international, Turkish and local brands. In 2013, a branch of the London-based Islamic Design House was established in Ramallah, the centre of the Palestinian Authority, thus turning Ramallah into a major brand city among those of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Jordan. These transformations were accompanied by a shift from Palestinian national politics to a global human right discourse, discussed in the section that follows.

From national politics to a global human right discourse in the Palestinian West Bank

The failure of neoliberalism’s Structural Adjustment Programs in the 1980s and 1990s modified the neoliberal development agenda from sole market enablement to include the issue of human rights, which did not naturally flow from the latter as planned. This readjustment moved the focus towards measures meant to invigorate civil society and promote good governance, corruption limitation, poverty reduction and participation (Merz 2012, p. 52).

In the Palestinian West Bank, a global human rights discourse emerged with the conclusion of the first Palestinian uprising in the early 1990s. Through international aid, this discourse contributed to shape the local development agenda and national politics, and had an effect on the constitution of Palestinian subjectivities. A growing Palestinian dependence on international aid after the Oslo Accords intensified this process. For example, external financial aid to West Bank and Gaza was ‘until the end of the 1980s, a regional matter’ (Challand 2009, p. 80), provided by financial sources from the PLO, the Jordanian-Palestinian Joint Committee, the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, and the Islamic Development Bank (Da’na 2014, p. 130). However, after the Oslo Accords, according to the Palestine Economic Policy Institute, Western external foreign aid to the West Bank and Gaza increased by over 600 percent between 1999 and 2008, while NGO funding increased by over 500 percent over the same period (Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute 2007). The expansion of the NGO sector was so pronounced that by 2001, over a third of all existing NGOs had been established after the Oslo Accords (Challand 2009, p. 80). Most significantly, the highest external aid to NGOs (30%) went to those involved in ‘rights-based’ undertakings (Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute 2007).

Growing reliance on international aid altered Palestinian NGOs’ local development agenda from rural development to rights-related agendas, such as gender, environment and civil society (Da’na 2014, p. 132). International aid, with its peace-related development agenda, ‘narrowed [the] Palestinian political space’ (Da’na 2014, pp. 129–130) as a consequence, and shaped subjectivities (Merz 2012, pp. 50, 52). Therefore, while ‘positive neoliberalism’ started molding ‘societies and subjectivities’ in the mold of ‘enterprise and individualism’ (ibid.) globally, in the Palestinian West Bank, it caused a weakening of the Palestinian ‘collective national resistance movement by replacing political mobilization with civic engagements’ (Hanafi and Tabar 2005, p. 30). Thus, training workshops and advocacy campaigns addressing the rights of Palestinian women, children, the poor, the disabled and
other vulnerable groups increased as of the late 1990s. The election of the first Palestinian Legislative Counsel (PLC) in 1996 and the anticipation of a Palestinian state at the end of the five-year transitional period, as projected by the Oslo Accords, intensified NGOs’ right-based advocacy. Women’s NGOs believed that it was their chance to introduce legal reforms regarding Palestinian women’s conditions, based on the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

It was in this euphoric climate of human rights activism that the Palestinian Women’s Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC) established the two-year project entitled ‘Palestinian Model Parliament: Women and Legislation.’ It identified ‘provisions discriminatory to women’s rights’ in Palestinian law and proposed they be amended by the PLC (Welchman 2003, p. 42). In 1998, the project proposed to amend the Personal Status law as concerns the minimum marriage age as well as the conditions of divorce, guardianship, polygamy and child custody. The project argued that the proposed amendments were in line with the international human rights law and the CEDAW (Welchman 2003, p. 47), both ratified by the Palestinian Authority.

Although it brought unprecedented attention to Palestinian Personal Status law, the project was met with heated opposition. Shari’a court judges and seventy Shari’a-college instructors, university deans and imams signed a memorandum urging the PLC to reject the draft law (Welchman 2003, p. 49). The memorandum argued that ‘most of [the suggested] provisions [were] in explicit violation of God’s Book and the Prophet’s Sunna and the consensus (ijma’) of the Muslims’ (Welchman 2003, pp. 52–53). When a sub-committee of women was appointed to advise a general committee on drafting a unified personal status law for both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, the Deputy Chief of Justice argued that it be limited to women with expertise in and a commitment to fiqh (Islamic law) (Welchman 2003, p. 47). Women believing in ‘sources of authority’ outside the fiqh, such as the women of the Model Parliament, were therefore cast as not qualified for inclusion (ibid.).

With the outbreak of the second Palestinian uprising in 2000, the Palestinian Model Parliament project was suspended. Yet this public debate among Palestinian secular and Islamic groups about the amendment of the Palestinian personal status law, as well as its resonance in the Palestinian West Bank community enabled Dāʿiya Nur to articulate her pious-modern-ness in terms of (Islamic) human rights. As an example, she framed the problems of women and children in the Palestinian West Bank as violations of their human rights, but she also grounds these rights in the Islamic legal tradition.

The following illustrates how these rights are understood as being Islamic based on Dāʿiya Nur’s pious-and-modern viewpoint. In his comparison of Islamic and modern human rights conceptions of the term ‘right,’ Mossa notes that Islam stresses three kinds of rights: God’s (ṣuṣūṭ Allah), individuals’ (ṣuṣūṭ al’ibād) and those which are a mix of both (hybrid) (2000). The first stress a Muslim’s religious duties to God, the second to others (i.e., secular, civil rights), while the third emphasizes a combination of secular and religious rights. Mossa suggests that in Islam, ‘devotional and civil rights have the same moral status’ (ibid.).

Based on Tuck’s (1979) distinction between active and passive rights, Asad (2003, p. 30) concludes that modern human rights are based on active rights: rights of the individual as such. Passive rights stress rights as reciprocal and interpersonal obligations (ṣaqq and wajib). Given this distinction between ‘global modern’ and Islamic notions of rights, it is interesting to note that Dāʿiya Nur defines Islamic rights as both reciprocal (i.e., passive) and hybrid. That is, she defines Islamic rights as a mixture of one’s religious duties to God and one’s civil and reciprocal obligations to others. She thus conveys a notion of rights as a moral obligation not only in terms of ‘ibādāt (worship) but also in terms of muʿāmalāt (worldly, pragmatic affairs). In casting Islamic rights as hybrid, Dāʿiya Nur creates a pious-modern-ness
that transcends (and challenges) the secular/religious dichotomy at the basis of the liberal conception of modern polity. In advancing that one’s civil rights (e.g., the rights to education, health, work and safety) are not separated from God’s rights, she stresses the enmeshment of the religious and the secular, an essential theme for her pious-modern subjectivity.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the formation and contours of pious–modern subjectivities among Muslim women activists in the urban Palestinian West Bank. Through the analysis of the life story of senior Dāʾiyya Nur, whose long years of preaching to women in private homes during the 1980s and in a public hall during the 1990s, made her a senior dāʾiyya proud that more than 100 women from all ages, social classes and professional categories, including retired teachers, physicians, lawyers and stay-at-home mothers, would come to hear her. A typical weekly meeting which she used to head consisted of a Quran reading session and a discussion of community health concerns, such as water shortages, nutrition, food safety and storage, as well as personal status laws on divorce and child custody. In her preaching, she also drew her attention to the numerous social problems in the urban Palestinian West Bank.

The chapter has also highlighted the gender dynamic in Dāʾiyya Nur’s familial and marital settings that shaped these contours. The contributions of the global and regional contexts are clear: the global shift from nation-state regimes to neoliberalism and consumerism; the shift in the Middle East from political Islam to personal piety and Market Islam; and the rise of a global human rights discourse. These regional and global shifts and processes have been taking place in the Palestinian West Bank since the late 1990s. In addition, international foreign aid was a catalyst in shifting Palestinian national politics from political mobilization to civic and human-rights based activism, while neoliberalism, consumerism and Market Islam transformed the Palestinian lifestyle from below.

References


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