Re-Thinking Islam and Islamism: Hamas Women between Religion, Secularism and Neo-Liberalism

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Re-Thinking Islam and Islamism: Hamas Women between Religion, Secularism and Neo-Liberalism

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ABSTRACT: In the 2016 Bir Zeit University elections Hamas’ women launched two videos in which unveiled, western-dressed young girls urged viewers to vote for Hamas. The videos sparked a passionate debate: Religious forces accused the girls of being ‘westernized’ and abandoning the norm of Islamic modesty; while secular forces accused them of promoting a form of women’s empowerment linked to their success in accommodating religious values to secular ones. The debate mirrors scholarly works on Islamist women’s subjectivity that tend to adhere to the dominant liberal analytical frames and lack a clear problematization of the relationship between Islam, gender, and new forms of liberal and secular sensitivity, as Islamic practices, secularization, and neo-liberal projects are seen as opposed. Most of the literature that analyzes women within Islamist movements overlooks the historical and economic trajectories that have operated to shift the relation between gender, sexuality and religion. In 2017, I conducted extensive field research in the Occupied Palestinian Territories among Hamas women with the objective to unwrap the relationship between Islamism and the secular/neo-liberal and nationalist project instituted in the West Bank. By taking distance from the assumption that religion and secularism are opposing poles of a binary, this article provides an understanding of Hamas women’s shifting subjectivities in the encounter with new forms of secular modernity, an encounter that signifies a shifting understanding of the categories of secular and religious, and which I analyze through a new understanding of women’s bodies and sexuality.

KEY WORDS: Gender and religion; Gender and secularism; Hamas women; Islamism; Neoliberalism; Palestine; West Bank

Two Hamas videos that appeared during the 2016 Birzeit University elections in Palestine depicted young, unveiled girls dressed in western style clothes, and who urged people to vote for the party. The video sparked a passionate debate: Religious forces accused Hamas of being ‘westernised’ and abandoning the Islamic norm of modesty, while secular forces criticised the party for promoting a form of women’s empowerment linked to their success in accommodating religious norms with secular values. The debate mirrors scholarly works on Islamist women...
which rely on the liberal normative assumption that religion and secularism are opposing poles of a binary system: Secularism is seen as synonymous with modernisation, while the entry of religion into the public sphere is understood as a lack of modernisation. Through this framework, Islamist women often are seen as religious subjects who promote denial of the modern secular values of freedom and rationality or as women whose empowerment is linked to their success in accommodating religious values to secular ones through a reinterpretation of Islamic texts. Islamist women, often are analysed within a western liberal framework, which lacks a clear problematization of the relationship between Islam and new forms of liberal and secular sensitivity.

Debates over young Hamas women in the West Bank provide an ideal setting to study the imbrications of Islamism, modernity, secularism, coloniality and neoliberalism, and such debates offer an understanding of recent changes in Islamist movements in the area since the Arab Spring because the West Bank has experienced particular developments: Introduction of a neoliberal system; the transformation of Ramallah into an imaginary capital of an imaginary state; the political and social changes in the Middle East after the Arab Spring; and the internal struggle between Hamas and Fatah within the framework of the lengthy Israeli occupation.

In order to study the development of Islamist movements in the encounter with particular forms of modernity, in 2017 I conducted field research in the main universities of the West Bank, interviewing 35 young Hamas women activists (aged 18-30), focusing on qualitative methods and using semi-structured interviews in order to grasp their emotions and lived experiences. Given the actual social and political context and the complexity of Islamic and secularist discourse in Palestinian history, I approached the subject as being affectively and discursively produced through power relations, and situated in a particular heterogenic context, where desire comes to be shaped by a concomitance of temporal dynamics such as modernization, secularization and nation-building. Hamas women’s struggle, assertiveness and desires are contingent and dependent on specific ever-changing political, cultural, and social circumstances.

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3 While Islamism is not a monolithic concept, I understand Islam as religion, and Islamism as “a broad project of the political mobilization of Islam.” See further Badran, ‘Understanding Islam’, p. 48.
6 I have chosen young university activists for two reasons: Firstly, they are the backbone of the party, which increasingly relies on the young, given that most older Hamas members have been imprisoned by the Palestinian Authority (PA) or Israel; and secondly, because young women are the promoters of a new form of hybridised subjectivity that is emerging in the university context. See Human Rights Watch (2018) Two Authorities, One Way, Zero Dissent | Arbitrary Arrest and Torture Under the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, Human Rights Watch. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/10/23/two-authorities-one-way-zero-dissent/arbitrary-arrest-and-torture-under, accessed August 14, 2019.
Hence, their subjectivity is not shaped by a singular and monolithic discursive tradition, but rather it is fashioned by the interconnection of the multiple non-homogeneous discourses\(^{10}\) that young Hamas women embody in their daily practices. This reality makes it necessary to problematize binary western oppositions (secular v. religious, liberal v. illiberal, etc.) and to understand the subject as multi-layered and imbricated in heterogenic discourses, where the construction of secular and religious notions is contingent on the redefinition of the lines between public and private, rendering those categories unstable.\(^{11}\)

In my analysis of the secular and the religious spheres, I draw upon various scholars\(^{12}\) who understand the secular and the religious as intertwined and constitutive of each other. I define political secularism as the ‘state’s relationship to, and regulation of, religion’\(^{13}\) and secularism/secularity as ‘a concept that articulates a constellation of institutions, ideas, and affective orientations that constitute an important dimension of what we call modernity and its defining forms of knowledge and practice—both religious and nonreligious.’\(^{14}\) Hence, more than the mere political division between the private and the public, secularism is a concept that ‘brings together certain behaviors, knowledge, and sensibilities in modern life.’\(^{15}\) This, in turn, discloses how secularism articulates and defines specific religious and nonreligious practices. Secular practices, for Talal Asad,\(^{16}\) are defined as practices that have been recognised as part of the discourse of secularism (as distinct from secular political doctrine); hence, a practice is secular not because it relates to the political doctrine of secularism, but because it follows a specific secular pattern, a dynamic, of binary oppositions (such as secular/religious, rationality/beliefs, sacred/profane, etc.). Bruno Latour\(^{17}\) points out that the crafting of specific body orientations, dispositions and modes of being, enables an understanding of how hybridization can generate new modes of experiencing religion. He explains that the crafting of new body orientations is the result of a reflexive hybridization, which draws on multiple discourses and generates new understandings of religion, as well as ways of being. Hence, religious traditions shape and are shaped by the internal and reflexive discourse of individuals in their management of particular dispositions. In this case, Hamas women are shaped by particular religious dispositions and secular/neoliberal orientations, which institute a religious *habitus* that crafts a mode of being through which women embody and negotiate different religious and non-religious dispositions.

I employ Saba Mahmood’s study\(^{18}\) of the piety movement in Egypt, comparing and juxtaposing different ways of embodying religious, secular and traditional values. This model allows us to understand he link between knowledge and embodied practices of

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\(^{13}\) Mahmood, ‘Politics of Piety, p. 3.

\(^{14}\) Asad, ‘Formation, p. 25.

\(^{15}\) Ibid.

\(^{16}\) Ibid.


\(^{18}\) Mahmood, ‘Politics.’
young Hamas women, favoring a comprehension of their practices beyond western/liberal/secular dichotomous categories. Mahmood\textsuperscript{19} defines \textit{habitus} as a repeated act able to discipline and to shape the internal feelings and emotions of the individual, and to link the subject’s moral virtues to the discipline and performativity of the body. She sees in the bodily practices of Egyptian pious women, such as veiling, the search for the construction of a moral/religious subject, disclosing a specific (affective) relationship between subject and object, faith and rituals. In contrast, the Hamas women whom I interviewed disclose a novel way of inhabiting different and seemingly opposing values, blending and melting different forms of knowledge, behavior and ideas at the intersection of apparently opposing values and normative systems. While women of the piety movement understand veiling as an \textit{habitus}, a means through which to acquire a specific ethical self, Hamas women’s understanding of veiling emerges as a dogma, showing a more privatised understanding of religion located in the internal conscience of the individual. This understanding is the manifestation of a new Islamic modernity, which discloses the emergence of a new pious Islamic/Islamist female subject, and as the symbol of Islam, which emphasizes a nationalist/identitarian and secular understanding of women’s body as the national body. This pluralist understanding of the practice of veiling, which forms a specific modern/Islamic/secular pious self, is mediated by a neoliberal understanding of the body that maintains, while reinterpreting, Islamic precepts.

Through the embodiment of different religious/secular and neoliberal/colonial discourses, young Hamas women not only have disclosed the cultivation of a more individualist pious subject, but also they have transformed their religious bodily practices into a new form of Islamic modernity linking autonomy, choice, freedom and veiling. Veiling and modest behavior embed a liberal notion of individual autonomy and gender equality while maintaining religious/cultural meaning. By incorporating different values, young Hamas women resist, engage in, inhabit and blend forms of knowledge, values and beliefs at the intersection of religion, secularism, neoliberalism and colonization, fashioning a new form of hybridized Islamic/secular subjectivity, the understanding of which is mediated by neoliberal and secular/nationalist notions of women’s bodies. While young Hamas women disclose the inherent contradiction of both religious and secular discourses, they also manage to blend opposing norms and values, shaping a subject that goes beyond liberal/secular oppositional categories. As a matter of fact, none of the young activists with whom I spoke see any contradiction or incoherence in their embodiment of different values. Rather, they fashion a new, hybridized and fluctuating subjectivity that eludes and problematizes liberal/western oppositional categories in the studies of Islamist women.

\textbf{Setting the Scene}

Emerging in 1987, during the first \textit{Intifada} (Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation), as a military branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas soon became the main Islamist party in Palestine.\textsuperscript{20} In its 1988 Charter, which represents a synthesis between

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.

Islamism and nationalism, Hamas declared that the liberation of Palestine was a duty binding all Muslims and called for the establishment of a Palestinian state under Islamic law. While Hamas, from its inception, adopted Islamist/nationalist ideals, and religious identity was the key element in its political goal of national unity, the complex national and international political context, along with the religious heterogeneity of the Palestinian population, has pushed the party to adopt a more moderate form of Islamism, mixed with post-colonial nationalist ideas based on notions of self-determination and resistance to occupation.

From its inception, Hamas’s gender ideology has been shaped by both Islamist ideology and the colonial use of gender, which has posed Hamas women in contrast with other nationalist or imperialist ideals of womanhood. In fact, while Islamists employ women’s bodies to establish a specific notion of society and (strict) Islamic morality, relegating women’s role to the domestic sphere, Hamas also calls on women to be active in the liberation struggle and to engage in the public sphere. For this reason, historically, Hamas always has given an important role to women within the party as well as in religious charitable institutions. Since 1998, Hamas has organized yearly conferences to reflect on women’s rights and their position within the party. Notably, while initially Hamas established a fundamental distinction between the western and Islamic understandings of women’s empowerment, in recent conferences the party has adopted more liberal/western notions of women’s rights. In other words, Hamas’ search for an alternative to secular feminism inevitably has forced the party to deal with (and at times, appropriate) some secular/liberal concepts such as pluralism, autonomy, self-determination and individual rights. This, in turn, has favored a change of gender roles through a continuous reinterpretation of Islamic principles, rendering Hamas gender ideology contradictory and fluctuating.

The popularity of Hamas increased after its rejection of the Oslo Agreements (1993-95), which fragmented the Palestinian territories and established the PA (Palestinian Authority) as allied to western powers and increasingly dependent on western donors. The 2004 death of Arafat, the leader of the secular Fatah and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), signalled the beginning of a new era for Palestine. In 2006, the first Parliamentary and Presidential elections gave Hamas an incontestable victory. Immediately afterward, western countries stopped all aid to the PA, Israel ceased transferring tax revenues, and the banks of most western and non-western

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24 Jad, ‘Islamist Women.’
25 Ibid.
countries refused to process the movement of funds to the PA, leaving millions of Palestinian people without salaries for almost a year. Political stagnation and the difficult economic situation caused the eruption of internal fighting between Hamas and Fatah in which hundreds died in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The inability of Fatah and Hamas to solve the internal conflict, along with the refusal of Israel and the international community to recognize Hamas’s victory, led to a geographical and political separation between the West Bank, governed by the un-elected Fatah, and the Gaza Strip, governed by Hamas. This separation resulted in different political, social and economic development in the two territories.

In the West Bank, the PA established military cooperation with Israel to contain internal opponents (especially Hamas members) and implemented neo-liberal economic policies that western donors strongly suggested were a condition for continued aid. This has determined the proliferation of de-radicalization (anti-Islamist) projects that focus on the link between Human Rights and Islam which, in turn, reflects an international agenda of refusal to support Islamic or Islamist organisations. Ultimately, the PA in the West Bank has achieved a state which functions as an Israeli contractor and is dependent on international donors, but has been unable—or unwilling—to build democratic institutions, as demonstrated by the absence of the Palestinian Legislative Council and fair national elections since 2006. In addition, the PA carries out human rights abuses against its opponents and effectively has created an authoritarian and a neoliberal regime in the West Bank under Israeli occupation.

Gaza experienced a different form of development. Given the absence of donors’ support, Hamas has focused on the use of public resources, taxation, and the re-organization of production, creating an alternative to the neoliberal system established in the West Bank. On a political level, Hamas adopted a moderate form of Islamism, mixed with post-colonial nationalist ideas based on notions of self-determination and resistance to occupation. While Hamas implemented some Islamization policies, it has maintained the religious/secular system that was in place before. In fact, the party never has tried to establish an Islamic state, focusing more on security and on the arrest of

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29 Ibid.
35 Haddad ‘Neoliberalism and Palestinian Development.’
37 Pestana ‘Hamas and the Women’s Movement.’
(radical) Islamist groups and members of Fatah.\textsuperscript{38} Clearly, Hamas’s approach to gender differs in Gaza and in the West Bank. In the West Bank, the party seems to have adopted a more secular/liberal approach, showing its flexibility in adapting to new and ever-changing contexts: This, in turn, has reformulated Islamist understanding of gender roles, as the video launched at Birzeit University suggests. For example, in Gaza, Hamas on the one hand, has imposed a conservative moral code expressed in veiling, gender segregation\textsuperscript{39} and a gender division of labor,\textsuperscript{40} while on the other hand, Hamas women increasingly have become more visible in governmental and non-governmental institutions.\textsuperscript{41} Jad\textsuperscript{42} highlights that Hamas women face two paradoxical expectations: Being an obedient wife and a good mother; and living as a political activist. This gender ideology is associated, on one hand with a nationalist understanding of women as reproducing the national values, while, on the other hand, it is associated with the necessity to construct the image of a ‘new Islamic woman.’\textsuperscript{43} This contradiction also is visible in a comparison of the 1988 and 2017 Hamas Charters. The former states:

‘[T]he Moslem woman has a role no less important than that of the Moslem man in the battle of liberation. She is the maker of men. Her role in guiding and educating the new generations is great.’\textsuperscript{44}

Differently, in the party’s recent charter, Hamas declares that ‘[T]he role of Palestinian women is fundamental in the process of building the present and the future … It is a pivotal role in the project of resistance, liberation and building the political system.’\textsuperscript{45} Hamas’s contradictory gender agendas are linked to the peculiar political context as well as to the symbolism of women’s body in the national liberation struggle, which has taken different forms in Gaza and the West Bank. In Gaza, Hamas is leading a process of state building where a contradictory notion of the ‘new Islamic woman’ is at play. In the West Bank, Hamas has appropriated secular/neo-liberal notions and the gender dimension becomes a key element of their politics. All in all, women’s body remains the main objective of ideological projects shaping a society’s social values, whereas ‘women’s bodies, dress and practices are key to the construction of each space as secular, modern, or religious.’\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{38} Wendy Brown (2003) Neo-Liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy, Theory & Event, 7(1).
\textsuperscript{39} An example was women’s prohibition to compete in the Gaza Marathon in 2013; see Fares Akram (2013) Gaza Marathon Cancelled After Women Are Barred From Participating, The New York Times, March 5. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/06/world/middleeast/gaza-marathon-canceled-after-women-are-barred-from-participating.html, accessed November 24, 2021.
\textsuperscript{40} Pestana ‘Hamas and the Women’s Movement.’
\textsuperscript{42} Jad, ‘Islamist Women.’
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, p. 180
\textsuperscript{44} Hamas Covenant 1988 (1988), Art 17, Available at: https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp, accessed November 21, 2021.
A Secularised Islamic Modernity

The process of secularisation in the Middle East has produced different outcomes than in the west. Mohammed Hermassi\(^{47}\) observes that while the west has established a *de jure* division between church and state, in the Arab world, Islam has been recognised as the main religion, while *de facto* ‘demobilis[ing] its political use.’\(^{48}\) In the Palestinian context, both Islamist and secular parties always have adopted a religious language and they have given importance to religion to the point that both Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in the Gaza Strip have maintained the draft of the Basic Law which provides that ‘the principles of Islamic *shari'a* are a principal source of legislation’ (Art. 4/2) and that ‘matters of personal status are to be dealt with by *sharia* and religious courts’ (Art. 92/1). While both parties have used and abused religious language for political aims, the complex political situation has led the ‘secular’ Fatah and the ‘religious’ Hamas to adopt nationalist/secular ideologies typical of Arab nationalism, which at times have obfuscated and radically reinterpreted Islamist and Islamic ideology. Trapped between Islamization and secularization projects introduced by the un-elected Fatah-led government in the West Bank, Hamas women, far from being a homogeneous unified whole, embody desires and practices mediated by both Islamic and secular/liberal principles. This is mirrored in the conceptualisation of their religious bodily practices, such as veiling, which discloses a more secularised and privatised notion of religion as well as a novel link between modernity, veiling, change, autonomy, and development.

While the definition of religion is not a simple matter, as it varies, western secularism tends to understand religion as a belief located in the conscience of the individual.\(^{49}\) The individual therefore is conceived as one who is able to separate beliefs from rationality, the soul from the body: A self-governed autonomous and rational individual ‘whose affective-gestural repertoires express a negative relation to forms of embodiment historically associated with (but not limited to) theistic religion.’\(^{50}\) In western/liberal/secular thought, religion is defined as a personal belief located in the conscience of the individual, embodied religious practices are understood as acts of devotion, ‘as protestantized duties of conscience,’\(^{51}\) and not as linked to the construction of a specific moral/religious subject, as in Mahmood’s work.\(^{52}\) This understanding of religion as individualised and privatised has an important implication, namely the encouragement of fundamentalist religious dogma to be strictly followed.\(^{53}\)

All the Hamas women whom I interviewed adopt a western/secular/private and dogmatic notion of religion. They define religion as a personal relationship with God, and

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\(^{48}\) Ibid, pp. 41–46.


\(^{52}\) Mahmood, ‘Politics of Piety.’

\(^{53}\) Laborde, ‘Protecting Freedom of Religion.’
the veil as the symbol of submission to God’s commandment. Ahia, a young Hamas activist at An-Najah University in Nablus, explained: ‘In our religion, the Qu’ran says that you have to wear the hijab. We wear the veil because it’s Allah’s order.’ Bissam added, ‘there are women who believe that they don’t need to wear the veil. But this is a wrong interpretation of the Qur’an … we don’t want to force people to wear the veil, but we think that it is the right thing to do for a woman in our society.’

Thus veiling, a non-compulsory practice in Islam, emerges as a dogma and a duty of every female believer. Religious practices then are understood as part of a set of normative duties of conscience, rather than as a lived religious experience, as different anthropological studies on Muslim religiosity affirm. Those studies highlight that Muslims adopt a performative/affective understanding of bodily practices. Laborde points out that for many, religious practices are understood as ‘habiting the virtues of the good believer, living in community with others, and shaping one’s daily life in accordance with the rituals of the faith. Those rituals are meaning-giving and are connected to believers’ sense of their moral integrity … yet, there are not duty of conscience though they often are redescribed as such.’ At stake here are two different understandings of religion: One (western/secular/liberal) locates religion in the private sphere and inevitably defines it as a matter of personal conscience, while the other links religion to morality which, in turn, depends upon a particular discursive formation. In Mahmood’s analysis of the piety movement in Egypt, the ethical self-cultivation of pious Muslim women is attained not through the learning and application of a specific set of rules, but through specific emotional dispositions employed in the context of large communities. In contrast, Hamas women adopt a more logocentric, privatized, and secularized notion of religion as located in the consciousness and expressed through their body. At first, then, it seems that young women shift their understanding of religion and religious practices to a more western/liberal/secular understanding.

However, they also highlight the importance of modesty and morality as essential Islamic values. For Ahia, ‘every Muslim woman should wear the veil, not only because it is a religious commandment, but also because if a woman is modest and pious, she should wear the hijab.’ In view of this belief Hamas women like Ahia forge a gendered pious subject that expresses religion publicly, given, as I shall argue, that the wearing of the veil emerges in relation to specific religious gender ideology as well as a community’s external visibility that highlight how public piety required by

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54 Author Interview with Ahia, Nablus, West Bank, July, 2017.
55 Author Interview with Bissam, Nablus, 3 July 2017.
57 Asad, ‘Formation of the Secular’; and Mahmood ‘Politics of Piety.’
60 Hirschkind, ‘The Ethical Soundscape.’
61 Mahmood, ‘Politics of Piety.’
62 Author interview with Ahia, Nablus, 15 July 2017.
Islamist/nationalist movements is most visible on women, assigning to them a specific gendered role whereas the control of their sexuality is linked to the moral control of the community. However, while Hamas women appropriate specific gender notions, they also modify them based on their lived experiences within an ever-changing context. According to Bissam, ‘you cannot force someone to do what you believe is right. Of course, we are pleased when a woman wears the veil, but we would not force anyone, and we accept anyone who supports our ideas.’

Hence, they construct a pious, modest female subject, but they do it through the liberal rhetoric of autonomous choice and relegating religion to the private sphere. The understanding of bodily practice as a non-constrained personal choice mirrors the introduction of more neo-liberal principles within the young generation of Hamas women. Hence, on the one hand they construct their religious agency in non-secular terms, which is highlighted by their insistence on modesty, while on the other, they disclose a liberal secular understanding of their religious practice as privatised beliefs located in consciousness, linking veiling, free choice and modesty.

While liberals see in the secular/religious divide the essential condition of modernity, Hamas women see in their religious practices, specifically veiling, a symbol of their modernity, reinterpreting the liberal/western notion through the incorporation of secular and religious values and normative understandings. They define modernity as ‘the capacity to change, to adapt to social development,’ and they relate it to the idea of flexibility and malleability. While this idea has been strengthened by the capacity of the party to adapt to different socio-political situations, what is of particular interest is the link Hamas women draw between their bodily practices and the concepts of change, flexibility and adaptability. In the past, peasant women wore the typical Palestinian head cover to indicate geographical provenance, while other women wore modest clothes. Women belonging to Hamas and Islamic Jihad have changed this tradition by starting to wear the typical Islamic veil, usually white with a long black loose dress. Laila, a young activist, observed: ‘Today we still use the veil but with fashion. We use many colours and many shapes. We have accommodated tradition with modernity by maintaining important Islamic values.’

Asma, a friend who quickly jumped into the conversation, explained, ‘We are fashionable in a good way, in an Islamic way.’ When I asked them why in the past they had worn white hijab, they answered that it was a tradition, rather than a religious requirement. Asma noted that unlike in the past, Hamas women today ‘talk with foreign people whom they don’t know, without breaking Islamic norms… This is modernity from the Islamic point of view… Women’s position in Palestine was not determined by Islam, but by social traditions and norms. Once society changed its understanding of women, also our role in the society changed.’

Modernity, then, is associated with changing tradition, ‘but not always. There are things that should be changed to make our society a better place and things that are not even under discussion because they are part of who we are… Modernity is not

64 Author Interview with Bissam, Ramallah, West Bank, 3 July 2017.
65 Keane, ‘What is Religious Freedom.’
66 Author Interview with Ikram, Nablus, 7 July 2017.
67 Author Interview with Laila, Nablus, 31 July 2017.
68 Author Interview with Asma, Nablus, 5 August 2017.
69 Ibid.
only to wear a miniskirt.\textsuperscript{70} For Samira, ‘exactly because the body is yours, you should respect and protect it. …. I am not saying that a woman should not wear what she wants, but I think that she should know where and when to wear a specific article of clothing … I am quite sure that western women who do not respect and protect their body end up regretting it.’\textsuperscript{71} Bissam continued:

\begin{quote}
In the west, a woman can wear whatever she wants, and people do not care about it. But here is different… if a woman goes out with a miniskirt and someone rapes her, it is a mistake for both of them. In this society, if you wear a miniskirt, you have to be conscious that it would not be accepted. Clearly, raping a girl is wrong and it is not justifiable. But as a girl I also believe that if I know how my society thinks, then I should wear the right clothes in the right place in order to protect myself. In girls’ parties we dress as we want, and we also [use] make-up, but only between girls.\textsuperscript{72}
\end{quote}

Hence, for Bissam, modernity is associated with changing and maintaining traditions, as well as specific gendered power relations and women’s sexuality. In essence, modernity is linked to both the veiled body, now re-fashioned, and to women’s sexuality and gender relations, now placed at the point of fracture between the east and the west. Hamas women pose their body and sexuality in contrast to an imagined ‘western woman’ who has been constructed by both the Islamist/nationalist and the secular/nationalist through the imposition of a specific type of womanhood. Edward Said\textsuperscript{73} considered how hegemonic western discourses constructed the image of a backward Arab other in need of modernisation. Nationalism, as well as colonization, appropriates images, metaphors and symbols in the public sphere to create a specific paradigmatic and binary opposition between the self, citizen of the territorial ‘nation-state’, and the ‘other’, the ‘outsider’.\textsuperscript{74} In the same way, Hamas’ nationalist ideology has constructed the western woman as an imaginary and monolithic other by highlighting civilizational differences typical in every form of nationalism. Hence, the visibility of women’s body is the key element that links modernity, piety, and nationalism, whereas eastern and western women’s body and sexuality is essentialised within the framework of imagined civilizational differences. For Bissam, ‘Western women have male friends, but we don’t because we think that it would create confusion…. there are boundaries in our relationship with men. We believe that we cannot be friends with men.’\textsuperscript{75} Pointing out a strict and monolithic interpretation of Islam, Samira added, ‘This is what our religion says. If you are friends with a man you don’t really know what he thinks. Maybe he does not see you as a friend. So, in order to prevent ‘bad things’ happening, we prefer not to have male friends. Of course, we interact with men for work or political issues, but we establish boundaries, not like western women.’\textsuperscript{76} In these views, the western woman emerges as an imagined, essentialised entity, while

\textsuperscript{70} Author Interview with Samira, Ramallah, 7 August 2017.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{72} Author Interview with Bissam, Ramallah, 3 July 2017.
\textsuperscript{75} Author Interview with Bassam, Ramallah, 3 July 2017.
\textsuperscript{76} Author Interview with Samira, Ramallah, 7 August 2017.
women’s modesty appears as a relational virtue aimed at protecting not only their bodies, but also the society at large. Veiling is linked to social order and the importance of women’s body in maintaining it.

While for many western/liberal feminists the Muslim headscarf is the symbol of women’s seclusion, Hamas women have found in the veil a useful tool to advance their social position. Ikram, a young journalist active in the party, pointed out: ‘50 years ago, in the Arab and Muslim world, women did not use the veil as much as today. However, their role was relegated to the domestic sphere. Today, more women wear the veil, but we are freer. We can have an education and work outside the domestic sphere. Sometimes we also can travel. It is unclear why people think that 50 years ago we were freer given that few women had a university degree, for instance.’

In fact, the veil has facilitated their mobility by allowing them to overcome certain Islamic norms and social taboos. For example, it is possible for unmarried women to move around late in the day, or to be in contact with men at work and for political reasons. It is exactly the inviolability of their bodies—symbolised in the practice of veiling—that has helped them to negotiate their presence in the public sphere. Male Hamas members have allowed and welcomed mixing because it has given the party an image of modernity while leaving gendered power relationships unchanged. Unlike liberals who understand the notion of modesty as oppressive for women, young Hamas women see modesty as linked to autonomy: It has helped to empower them by giving them the possibility of agency that a more ‘sexualised’ encounter with the other sex would not have done.

While feeling empowered by the gendered separation that the veil has allowed, most young Hamas women with whom I have spoken do not reflect on existing unbalanced gender relations: Rather, they disavow gender inequalities, disclosing the embodiment of neo-liberal and traditional values. According to Bissam, ‘If you want to participate in political activities, you should balance it with your domestic life. Even men should. Everybody should balance between the responsibility outside the house (including politics) and the one inside the house.’ Catherine Rottenberg argues that, unlike liberal feminists who posed an active critique of liberalism and its unbalanced gender relations, neo-liberal feminists, while acknowledging inequalities between men and women, nevertheless disavow the social, political and economic factors that have created these inequalities. According to Wendy Brown, this idea is based on a neo-liberal concept of the subject which ‘interpellat[es] individuals as entrepreneurial actors in

78 Author interview with Ikram, Nabuls, 7 July 2017.
79 In her work on young Muslim females, Sara Ababneh argues that the gender division of space operated by Islamic movements have empowered especially women from less privileged socio-cultural backgrounds, and hence, “there is nothing inherently patriarchal about the idea of separate spaces. So long as the space of men is in any way more privileged than that of women, the concept as such is not patriarchal.” Sara Ababneh (2014) The Palestinian Women’s Movement versus Hamas: Attempting to Understand Women’s Empowerment Outside a Feminist Framework, Journal of International Women’s Studies, 35, pp. 39–40.
80 Jad, ‘Islamist Women of Hamas’.
82 Author Interview with Bassam, Ramallah, 3 July 2017.
every sphere of life. It figures individuals as rational, calculating creatures whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for “self-care”—the ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions. Happiness, in this context, emerges from the perfect balance between work and family life.

Traditional values, then, go hand in hand with a new secular and neo-liberal sensitivity. While Hamas women advance a liberal and individualist understanding of the body, they also maintain the Islamic understanding of the body as located within a community and oscillating between public and private. Fadwa El Guindi notes that the Arabic concept of privacy differs from that of the west as it “is based on a specific cultural construction of space and time central to the functioning of Islamic society in general [. . .]. Space in this construction is relational, active, charged and fluid.” It is related to social life whereas ‘behaviours and space are mutually dependent.’ In other words, while in the west space often is conceived as divided between public and private, where the ‘private’ is understood as ‘personal’, or ‘individual space, in the Muslim world, privacy is ‘communitarian’, including the ‘two core [social] spheres—women and the family’. Hamas women, in this sense, adopt a concept of the body that oscillates between western and eastern notions of public and private, liberal and illiberal, secular and religious.

Veiling, a practice in between the public and the private, embodies different political, religious, secular, and neo-liberal understandings of the body. Hamas women’s insistence on the importance of modesty discloses a religious-moral understanding of veiling. Yet, their dogmatic and private understanding of religion reveals the emergence of secular values that are mediated by a neo-liberal understanding of the body: This is mirrored in their emphasis on fashion, personal choice and self-making. However, veiling also has been a strategic tool that has strengthened women’s activism in the public sphere, while at the same time, women’s body increasingly has become the means of signification of contrasting political ideologies. Young Hamas women’s understanding of apparently contrasting values is played over an understanding of their religious practices, which disclose the cultivation of a more individualist/neo-liberal pious subject: A modern Islamist colonial female subject who structures her religious agency alongside neo-liberal notions of modesty, a term that often has been employed to construct a self-governed religious/secular female subject. Veiling, then, emerges as a practice that links modernity, choice and autonomy with moral/religious values within a neo-liberal and colonial framework that has constructed women’s body as the representational element of nationalist ideals, further shifting their understanding of their own religious/secular bodily practices.

Representing the Body: Islamism, Nationalism and Secularism

Most young Hamas activists I interviewed see in the veil the intrinsic symbol of Islam and their body as a representational tool. Souad, a young activist at Birzeit University

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84 Brown, ‘Neo-Liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy, p. 201.
87 El Guindi, ‘Veil: Modesty, Privacy, and Resistance, p. 82.
in Ramallah, explained how ‘the veil is not only a simple piece of cloth that covers your head; it is a moral Islamic symbol.’

According to her friend Nima, ‘the veil is the Islamic symbol of Islamic women. We represent our self in front of people with the veil.’

Likewise, Samira pointed out that the veil is ‘like an identity of Islam. It’s something apparent, visible. It’s more than a piece of cloth … I wear the veil to tell the world that I am Muslim, and people should take it into account and respect it.’ Bissam added: ‘Hamas represents Islam. It is a part of it. The hijab is the representation of Islam and of Hamas. From the appearance of the person you can understand that someone is Muslim. I wear the veil because it is the representation of Islam and because I am from Hamas, which bases its norms on Islamic values.’

This understanding of the body clearly is strengthened by the long-lasting Israeli occupation and strong western influence that have reinforced post-colonial nationalist ideals. In nationalism, women’s body is seen as the signifier of community identity and the biological reproducer of ethical/national/cultural group boundaries. As George Mosse argues, ‘nationalism and respectability assigned everyone his place in life, […] woman […] was at the same time idealised as the guardian of morality and of public and private order. […] Woman as a national symbol was the guardian of the continuity and immutability of the nation, the embodiment of its respectability.’ This is mirrored in the rhetoric at work in discourses about women’s veiling since the beginning of the Palestinian liberation struggle. From the first Intifada (1987) and the rise of nationalist ideologies, the meaning of veiling started to assume nationalist/identitarian connotations. On the one hand, religious/nationalist parties, such as Hamas, started to call for strict female ‘Muslim attire’ by linking Islamic faith with the struggle for national liberation, while on the other hand, secular/nationalist parties, such as Fatah, ‘ab-used’ the character of the (veiled) peasant as a ‘sign of’ a past untouched by colonial powers. In both cases, however, women’s body became the symbol of Palestinian national, cultural and traditional values.

Far from being a religious topic, the veil, in the Palestinians’ history, often has been related to the representation of their identity in binary contraposition to the occupying forces, where gender roles and women’s sexuality have been defined (also) by nationalist discourse.

The understanding of veiling as a ‘sign of’ reveals the link between nationalism and a secular understanding of religious symbols. For example, Webb Keane’s study of how western semiotics show the secular distinction between signifier and signified, object and subject, form and essence, mirrors Calvinist and Protestant concerns to institute a separation between the transcendent world and the reality of this world. Western missionaries imposed this distinction on other cultures, and it has become embedded in the secular idea of what it means to be modern and how images work in

89 Author Interview with Souad, Bir Zeit University, Ramallah, 10 July 2017.
90 Author Interview with Nima.
91 Author Interview with Samira, ibid.
92 Author Interview with Bissam, ibid.
the liberal/secular world. As, in western semiotic ideology, clothes are conceived as images, they are intended as a vehicle for meanings: they signify structures behind what is represented, irrespective of the modality of the subject/object relation. This secular understanding of images clashes with a more affective understanding of religious symbols. Mahmood’s study of pious Muslim women in Egypt shows that many Muslims have a non-representational understanding of bodily practices. She explains that the ‘Muslim’s relationship to Mohammad is predicated not so much upon a communicative or representational model as an assimilative one.’ The Aristotelian term schesis, which is defined as the way in which something relates to something else, can capture the sense of pluralistic embodiment and inhabitation (or intimacy), that Muslims experience through body practices such as veiling. According to Mahmood, ‘such an inhabitation of the model (as the term schesis suggests) is the result of a labor of love in which one is bound to the authorial figure through a sense of intimacy and desire.’

In other words, the formation of a moral subject is dependent on a signify symbology, but it is not related to a distinctive semiotic phenomenon because the symbology attached to a specific medium is the product of various interconnected discourses. In this view, veiling emerges as a technique of the self, which has the power to generate specific values in the subject. Unlike women of the piety movement, for Hamas women veiling does not change the subject’s interiority; rather, it emerges as a tool to invest the body with meanings and (strategic) identitarian political and religious representations, which are linked to the specific political context.

Referring to Rasha, the unveiled girl in the Hamas electoral video at Birzeit University, most girls I interviewed, while accepting the presence of unveiled activist women within the party, contended that the ‘face’ of Hamas could not be that of an unveiled woman. According to Mariam, ‘it is fine to represent Hamas unveiled at a university level, but not at a national one.’ Yussra added, ‘If you represent a thought you have to believe in every single part of this thought. Many girls in this university [Birzeit] are simply supporters because they do not believe completely in our values. That is why so many people voted for us even if they are not from Hamas. Many of our supporters do not wear the veil because they are afraid of the consequences, or because they do not believe completely in our values.’ Ikram and other girls repeatedly have pointed out their difficulties in finding a job: ‘Many companies and organizations do not employ veiled women because they are afraid that they might be from Hamas and they might have problems with the Palestinian Authority or with Israel.’ However, by identifying veiling as the symbol of their Islamic identity and by linking it to Hamas, veiling becomes public and therefore political. As a matter of fact, all the young women whom I interviewed stated they believe that ‘a woman

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100 Ibid, p. 848.
102 See further Mahmood, Politics of Piety.
103 Author Interview with Mariam, Ramallah, 20 July 2017.
104 Author Interview with Yussra, Ramallah, 21 July 2017.
105 Author Interview with Ikram, Nablus, July 2017.
belonging to Hamas should wear the veil because otherwise people will be confused about the image and the values of the party. Rasha only can be a friend, a supporter, but she clearly does not support all our values. Religious identity, then, acquires importance in the social and (partly) political realms. Most of the girls with whom I spoke see in this video a political strategy that Hamas adopted in the West Bank to show its flexibility and malleability to adapt to ever-changing political and social contexts. According to Ikram,

‘Hamas wanted Rasha to be ‘the face’ of Birzeit in that precise political moment. Hamas wants to show it is inclusive of different sensitivities in order to reach a wider electoral pool. Basically, Hamas wanted to give a precise message which is ‘Hamas will propagate Islamic ideals, but people will still be free to choose whether they want to wear the veil or not, or whether they want Islamic law or not’.  

Samar noted that ‘when Hamas won the University election at Birzeit in 2016, everybody thought that we would ask every girl to wear the veil in the university and we would create different cafes for girls and boys. However, we didn’t change anything.’

Hamas women seem at times to accept this representational role, seen as a form of patriotism and therefore of political/cultural resistance, and at times to reject the creation of their body as ‘national body’. Magida, a long time Hamas activist, clearly pointed out that the conformity to Islamic values required of women is different from that required of men within the party: ‘We can see political members who can drink while the same is not allowed for their wives. Hamas practices Islam on the representation of women who should wear the veil and modest clothes, cover their body, etc. …. most of the 2005-2006 election campaign events were led by women because women reflected the image of Islam and traditional values.’ Hence, while men are seen as the ones who resist the occupation, the role in the resistance attached to women is framed in their public activities and the visibility of their body as signifier of cultural resistance.

National/colonial/secular ideologies construct women’s bodies as the symbolic carrier of a community’s identity and as a signifier of a monolithic subjectivity. The introduction of nationalist and secularist ideals and understandings of women’s body have changed Hamas women’s embodiment of religious symbols and practices as well as Islamic values. By understanding their bodies as carriers of a specific religious/political truth, they distance themselves from a more pious/affective religious experience aimed at changing the interiority of the subject. The understanding of their bodies as a ‘sign of’ indicates the incorporation of a more secularised notion of embodied religious practices, which has reinterpreted Islamic understandings of embodied values. Hence, rather than being a tool for the creation of a moral/religious subject, women’s body

106 Author Interview with Ikram, Nablus, 7 July 2017.
107 Ibid.
108 Author Interview with Samar, Ramallah, 2 July 2017.
109 Author Interview with Magida, Nablus, 15 July 2017.
emerges as a means of representation of internal religious and political truth: This has resulted in the detachment of the subject from the object and extra-worldly experiences in name of a more logocentric and rational understanding of religion.

Conclusion

The Hamas women whom I interviewed are located at the intersection of different and apparently contrasting values. This positioning makes it difficult to understand their selfhood as being shaped by a particular religious or cultural understanding. Nevertheless, Hamas women embody Islamic and secular values and norms that are framed and mediated by a secular/neo-liberal mode of self-governance. This is made clear by their understanding of the practice of veiling, which discloses the imbrication of colonial/nationalist, secular, religious and neo-liberal discourses; this, in turn, configures a specific understanding of their body and bodily practices, as well as their choices and their ethical and political practices. Through their bodies, Hamas women engage creatively with the wider heterogenic context, where veiling emerges as an ever-changing *habitus* which cannot be associated with a singular monolithic tradition or understanding of the secular and the religious sphere. The relation between the subject and the broader complex Palestinian social and political context shows that women’s religious practices and *habitus* are not reproduced outside of external dynamics: rather, young Hamas women’s bodily practices are constitutive of and constituted by those dynamics. These include Islamic as well as neo-liberal/secular forms of self-governance, through which they construct their heterogenic identities. Their embodiment of different values, however, goes beyond western/liberal dichotomies (such as religious and secular, women’s freedom and unfreedom, etc.) and should be understood as strategic, contradictory and complex. The capacity of Hamas women to see their body as object and subject does not entail a separation between different spheres of action but invites us to think beyond those categories. As a matter of fact, western modernisation and secularisation theories seem to be inadequate to understand the way in which Islamist women’s subjectivity is changing. It is therefore necessary to challenge liberal categories and notions concerning secularism and religion in order to understand the emergence of a new female subject: one who embodies and incorporates seemingly contrasting values simultaneously. It is exactly through Hamas women’s understanding of veiling that it is possible to comprehend how seemingly opposite categories and values are revealed as being, in a particular way, constitutive of each other.

Young Hamas women express a novel understanding of (Islamic) modernity, blending the secular and the religious, and disclosing a foundational element of secularism, namely, its indeterminacy. In his study of secularism in Egypt, Hussein Ali Agrama shows how secularism and religion depend on a certain instability. He observes that the main characteristic of secularism is that it continuously blurs and merges the religious and the secular, relying on the ‘precariousness of the category it establishes,’ and rendering secular normative categories indeterminate and unstable. Hamas women

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112 Agrama, Secularism, Sovereignty, Indeterminacy, p. 500.
continually move and re-draw the line between secularism and religion: two spheres that at times melt into each other and at times are constitutive and generative of each other. Their understanding of secular and religious is mediated by the introduction of neo-liberal notions, revealed in the emphasis Hamas women place on autonomy, discipline, self-determination, and free choice, whereby they emerge as ‘modern subject[s] of colonial occupation … increasingly individualised, hybridised and hard to represent within the dominant discourses of the Palestinians’ struggle.’ Rottenberg describes the new female neo-liberal subject as a highly individualised subject who uses:

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\text{key liberal terms, such as equality, opportunity, and free choice, while displacing and replacing their content, … [a subject] who is not only individualised but entrepreneurial in the sense that she is oriented towards optimizing her resources…. while calibrating a felicitous work–family balance becomes her main task. Inequality between men and women is thus paradoxically acknowledged only to be disavowed, and the question of social justice is recast in personal, individualized terms.}^{114}
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Hamas women whom I interviewed emerge as subjects responsible for their own wellbeing and who follow a morality regime that links integrity, self-reliance and autonomous will. For Rottenberg,\(^{115}\) this is the node of the neo-liberal female subject, based on self-monitoring, able to balance perfectly work/politics and family life. The image of a successful woman who juggles the challenges posed by modernity and balances perfectly her domestic/traditional duties with her political activism, along with an insistence on fashion, reveals the incorporation of neo-liberal values by the young generation. However, while embodying neo-liberal notions, Hamas women also disclose a specific way to blend neo-liberal ideas with traditional, communitarian and religious values, by linking their bodies to modesty and the wider community. On the one hand, Hamas women emerge as self-governing pious subjects in search of a society based on Islamic values where modesty is a matter of moral/personal choice, while on the other hand, their understanding of their bodies is mediated by identitarian and nationalist ideologies that often obfuscate power and gender relations, changing their way of understanding their religious bodily practice: their (veiled and/or unveiled) body and (free and/or un-free) sexuality become the point of fracture between the west and the east, the secular and the religious.

However, while in western liberal terms, freedom and religion are considered two different spheres whereby the first is led by choice, individual autonomy and reason, while the latter is governed by self-submission, faith and irrational beliefs that constrain the individual,\(^{116}\) Hamas women do not see those categories as being in

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115 Ibid.

contradiction with each other; rather, young Hamas women have reformulated opposing western categories by linking reason and faith and free choice: ‘Reason as a certain proclamation of faith, as working on and reflecting on faith.’ In fact, my research demonstrates that what liberals see as the symbol of bodily constraint (the veil) in this case is a tool for young Hamas women to be active in the public sphere, to negotiate a new modernity, to represent their inner truth, and to fashion their bodies. What emerges is a new Islamic modernity still trapped in identitarian/nationalist ideologies that often oppress women due to the role given to their body as a monolithic symbol of an ‘imagined community’ but through which they represent, ensure and transform their identities, changing their ways of embodying Islamic, secular and neo-liberal values. Hamas women reformulate embodied orientations through a reflexive engagement with their selves and different discourses, showing a great capacity to blend religion and secularism/nationalism, tradition and modernity, liberal and illiberal norms. Their bodily orientations enable them to understand how particular reflexive modes of hybridisation could generate a new religious subjectivity where religious traditions and embodied practices shape and are shaped by both the subject and multiple discourses and traditions: by blending apparently contrasting values, Hamas women craft their thought, feeling, and action at the intersection of specific worldly realities.

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119 Latour, Reflections on Etienne Sourau.


