KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY MDC The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies

Bayan بيان ביאן
The Arabs in Israel הערבים בישראל

Editor: Arik Rudnitzky

Issue no. 32, March 2025

# Table of Contents

# From the Editor's Desk

The current issue of **Bayan** contains one article, written by **Dr. Salwa Alinat-Abed**, which examines the two main arenas of activity of women in the Islamic Movement in Israel that are related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: interfaith dialogue whose goal is to promote a solution to the conflict, and political activism on behalf of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, which is based on challenging Israeli authority.

The article is an edited version of a lecture delivered by Dr. Salwa Alinat-Abed at a conference held by the Konrad Adenauer Program for Jewish-Arab Cooperation on December 12, 2024, at Tel Aviv University, which was entitled "Islamic Approaches to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict."

***Bayan*** is a quarterly review of Arab society in Israel, published by the Konrad Adenauer Program for Jewish-Arab Cooperation at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle East and African Studies at Tel Aviv University.

The opinions expressed in MDC publications are the authors' alone.

We invite our readers to contact us, through the following channels:

- The Konrad Adenauer Program for Jewish-Arab Cooperation:

  Dr. Arik Rudnitzky (Project Manager)
  Tel. 03-6406046

- Moshe Dayan Center website: dayan.org



The Konrad Adenauer Program for Jewish-Arab Cooperation (KAP) was established in 2004 by the German Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and Tel Aviv University as part of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies. KAP is an expansion of the Program on Arab Politics in Israel established by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and Tel Aviv University in 1995. The purpose of KAP is to deepen the knowledge and understanding of Jewish-Arab relations in Israel through conferences, public lectures and workshops, as well as research studies, publications and documentation.

***Bayan*** is published in Hebrew and English.

We thank Mr. David Simmer for translating and editing the English edition.

# Salwa Alinat-Abed * / The Politics of Faith: Discourse and Practice among Women in the Islamic Movement in Israel

**The impact of the 1996 split in the Islamic Movement is evident in the activities of women in each faction: the activities of women in the northern faction are more organized but subject to male authority, while the activities of women in the southern faction are more independent but less organized.**

**Religious women, both Muslim and Jewish, believe that interfaith encounters may help to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and offer a better future for the younger generation, since it is women who are the mothers and educators of the next generation in both peoples.**

**The participation of religious women in interfaith dialogue constitutes a feminist statement that emphasizes the status of women in their communities, as well as a political statement since religion and politics cannot be separated.**

**Muslim women use a sacred site like the Al-Aqsa Mosque to express political protest. In this way, they challenge male authority, both Israeli and Palestinian-Muslim.**

**Muslim religious scholars have not required women to be present in arenas of confrontation with outsiders, which sometimes turns into physical clashes. Nevertheless, Muslim women have interpreted their religious role according to their own discretion, without relying on religious rulings, and have not been deterred by male criticism of their actions.**

Women were active in the establishment of the Islamic Movement in Israel in the 1970s, and since then they have continued to fulfill various roles within it. They also contributed to shaping the opinions of individuals and the public on the Arab-Israeli conflict, even though they have not played a key role in shaping the official positions of either of the movement's factions regarding the conflict. This article is based on information that I have collected and processed over the past two decades on the activities of Muslim women in Israel.

## *The evolution of women's activity in the Islamic Movement*

One can distinguish five stages in the development of women's activity within the Islamic Movement. The first is referred to by the women themselves as "the golden period," during which they were committed to *da'wah* (religious preaching), and their activity was directed toward that end. This stage lasted from the early 1980s until the movement's split in 1996, during which chapters were established in various regions of the country. Although the connection between the women

* **Dr. Salwa Alinat-Abed** is a historian and lecturer at the Open University of Israel. Her research fields include political Islam, religious literacy, religious activism, and gender and citizenship among Muslim and Jewish women in Israel, as well as Arab and Palestinian children's literature.

activists was not formally organized or particularly close, there was no competition among them.

The second stage began with the division of the movement into two factions, with each of them seeking to establish itself as a separate entity. The split led to a lack of trust in the movement among the Arab population in Israel and did not facilitate the activity of the women. The faction to which women belonged was determined either by the men in their surroundings or by the leaders with which the women identified. There were women activists—though not many—who withdrew from the movement in protest against the split, which they viewed as unnecessary. This stage lasted until the 2000s, during which each faction's leaders campaigned in their communities to rally supporters. Some opposed the split and attempted to reunify the movement, although women activities did not play a part in their efforts. It is worth noting that in the mid-1990s, the *Al-Risala* movement was established at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, which gave expression to the younger generation's opposition to the split. The students, who were active in the Islamic Movement and identified with its values, wished their movement to be independent in its decision-making, and free from the influences and dictates of the Islamic Movement's leaders, especially after the split when each faction sought to attract young activists and students.

The division of the movement was a formative event for its women activists and reflects the movement's difficulty in handling internal disagreements. Furthermore, the split continues to influence the movement's activities on the ground and continues to produce tension even today. The women activists in each faction adopted the ideological framework of the split, and there is no evidence of any activist who fundamentally opposed the stance of the faction she belongs to. Moreover, the women activists have stated that they did not participate in attempts to reunify the movement. These attempts have yet to bear fruit, with each faction blaming the other for the lack of progress. While women's activity in the northern faction continues to deepen, the level of activity in the southern faction is gradually declining.

The third stage of women's activity in the Islamic Movement began in the 2000s, during which both factions became more formally organized. This was reflected in, among other things, the establishment of non-profit organizations led by veteran women activists. At this stage, differences emerged between the two factions, with the northern faction gaining more power on the ground than the southern faction. The distinction between the factions was also evident in the patterns of women leadership: the northern faction's female leadership accepted the authority of the male leadership within the movement, whereas the southern faction's female leadership created an independent space, separate from the faction's decision-making centers. These leading activists, who identified as independent but affiliated with the southern faction, did not take orders from above and acted according to their own judgment. However, they encountered obstacles, and their activities were less organized than those of the northern faction.

At this stage, competition emerged between the two factions of the movement over the recruitment of women, which was also reflected in their activities on the ground. The women of the southern faction noticed that the women of the northern faction were dominant in activities in the field and believed that competition was undesirable. The women of the northern faction expressed aspirations to expand

their activities within Arab society. This competition indicates that the legacy of the split had trickled down to even the lowest levels of the organizational hierarchy, suggesting that the possibility of uniting the two factions is unrealistic.

The fourth stage began in 2008 and was marked by the academization process of activists in both factions of the movement. This process attracted female students and graduates of academic institutions in Israel to both factions, as they sought a safe framework within the Israeli academic space. They also aspired to express their Islamic identity, which they were able to do in non-profit organizations affiliated with each faction of the Islamic Movement.

Women's activity in the northern faction of the movement became increasingly organized and spread to additional regions starting in the 2000s. Meanwhile, in the southern faction, activism has yet to consolidate within regional institutions. The pace of activity varies from region to region: in the central region, there has been a resurgence of activism, thanks to women's organizations in Kafr Qasim and Jaffa. In contrast, in the northern region, veteran women members of the movement report a decline in *da'wah*, stemming from a lack of sufficient commitment among women activists. It appears that in the southern faction, it is difficult to establish non-profit organizations or recruit female managers for women's *da'wah* activities. Most non-profit managers declare that they hold views associated with the southern faction; nonetheless, they do not wish to be part of a central organization in order to preserve their autonomy.

The fifth stage in women's activity within the Islamic Movement began after the northern faction was outlawed in 2015. This stage is critical in the development of the movement, reinforcing the division between the two factions in the context of the Knesset elections, as well as with respect to positions on the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Women have been active in two parallel arenas—both inside and outside the Islamic Movement—in order to express their positions and attitudes toward the ongoing conflict between the Palestinians and Israel: interfaith dialogue and resistance to Israel's authority over the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.

## ***The first arena of activism: The dialogue for peace***

The conflict between Jews and Palestinians over the Holy Land has yet to reach a resolution. The dispute between the two peoples has experienced ups and downs and can be characterized as deep, long-standing, and ongoing. According to the prevailing view among researchers, politicians, and the media on both sides, religion is the primary factor perpetuating the conflict. In recent decades, new actors have entered the political and social arena in Israel, including religious figures such as members of the Islamic Movement and Jewish rabbis who have sought to foster interfaith dialogue. This arena has witnessed a process of religionization among both the Jewish and Arab-Palestinian public.

In a study I conducted between 2017 and 2020 together with Dr. Laila Abed Rabbo from the Truman Institute at the Hebrew University, participants voiced objections to the political position that attributes a central role to religion in fueling the

conflict.[1] The Jewish and Muslim interviewees emphasized that there is no contradiction between being a religious woman and an aspiration for peace between the two peoples. In the interviews, they stated that their religious duty motivated them to participate in interfaith meetings with other women, whom they previously perceived as adversaries. The interviewees emphasized the moral foundations inherent in every religion and stressed that their role as women is to educate the younger generation according to religious values, namely tolerance and mutual respect. Each interviewee had her own story — sometimes a story of loss, sometimes a story of fear. Nevertheless, they participated in these meetings in order to ease their personal pain and even the collective pain, whether Muslim or Jewish. Through their participation in interfaith meetings, they gained the ability to influence the other side while simultaneously demanding legitimacy for their religious identity within the Israeli public space.

It is possible to identify several characteristics of the interfaith discourse conducted among religious women in Israel. This discourse is feasible in areas where conflicts exist between nations or religions. Such discourse is primarily based on religious values and a shared religious foundation among the participants, whereby religion is considered a legitimate and positive factor rather than an obstacle to peace between nations. Despite the diverse religious streams within Judaism and Islam and despite differing lifestyles, a shared religious foundation paves the way for a respectful discussion.

Moreover, religious women play a significant role in promoting interfaith encounters, believing that these meetings have the potential to offer a better future for the younger generation. The religious participants perceived themselves as mothers and educators of the younger generation, and based on this commitment, they take part in interfaith meetings. Their participation reflects religious activism that conveys both a feminist and political message. The feminist message is expressed in the women's pursuit of religious education and status within their communities, while the political message asserts that religion and politics cannot be separated in Israel. These two messages are inherently intertwined.

## ***The second arena of activism: The politics of provocation***

The term "politics of provocation" describes a social, historical, and gender-related phenomenon in which religious women challenge existing gender norms through acts of provocation. This act expresses women's stance regarding the deep and ongoing conflict between the Arab world and the State of Israel.

Shouting slogans such as "*Allahu Akbar*" at the Al-Aqsa Mosque when tourists, Jews, or Israeli police officers enter the sacred compound serve as an act of provocation. According to the women, this provocation is meant to push both Israeli police officers and worshippers out of their comfort zones, creating confrontations between the women and the police and thereby generating tension. This tension

[1] Salwa Alinat-Abed and Laila Abed Rabho, "Connected but Cautious: Religious Muslim and Jewish Women Promoting Interfaith Dialogue in Israel." *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 38 (2023), pp. 86-106.

sometimes escalates into physical confrontation, arrests, the expulsion of women from the mosque, and legal proceedings.

The women are prepared for these steps and the consequences that follow. They receive support and public solidarity through local and Arab media outlets, where they are portrayed as heroines, with some even stating that one such woman is worth a thousand men. However, criticism of this phenomenon has also been voiced on social media.

The roots of this provocation date back to the early days of the Second Intifada in 2000. The phenomenon gained extensive media attention starting in 2015, following the outlawing of the northern faction of the Islamic Movement, and it continues to this day. Some of the women have faced punitive measures, including expulsion from the mosque.

This provocation is a unique phenomenon in which religious women utilize a sacred space to express political protest. They challenge male authority, both Israeli and Palestinian-Muslim. Their challenge to Israeli male authority—which they perceive as colonial—is direct, explicit, and carried out with a sense of pride. In contrast, their challenge to Palestinian male authority is more implicit and unspoken; they do not openly state that they are opposing religious figures or political leaders in the Arab and Muslim world. This behavior is not surprising given historical precedent. Studies show that struggles for national independence often focus on battling an external opponent rather than advocating for change in gender relations. This pattern is observed not only among Palestinians but also in other movements, such as the struggle for independence in Egypt and elsewhere. Examples of this can be found in the research of Ellen Fleischmann, Islah Jad, and others.[2]

Religious Muslim women use the sacred space of Al-Aqsa Mosque to express a message of political protest. To do so, they invoke the religious concept of *ribat*, which means the duty of presence and vigilance in a mosque or any site of conflict requiring protection. Religious scholars have not traditionally required women to be present in conflict zones involving confrontation with outsiders, since the natural space for women was considered to be the domestic sphere. For example, the Islamic jurist Yusuf al-Qaradawi did not address whether women should be present in a mosque during times of conflict or crisis. The responsibility to protect sacred sites and women has traditionally fallen upon men.

Women known as *murabitat* have interpreted *ribat* according to their own understanding, without relying on religious rulings that support or reject their interpretation. They identified a vacuum in the mosque due to Israeli policies and stepped in to fill it. According to them, if there are no men capable or willing to defend the mosque, then they must take on the responsibility themselves. They are

[2] Islah Jad, "The forgotten history: Who remembers the role of women in politics?", in Umayma Abu Baker, Samia Ramadan, and Huda al-Sada (eds.), *The Time of Women and Alternative Memory*. Cairo, Egypt: The Woman and Memory Group, 1998, pp. 315-329 [in Arabic]; Islah Jad, *Women at a Crossroads: The Palestinian Women's Movement – Between Territorial Nationalism and Secularism and Islamic Identity***.** Ramallah: Muwatin, The Palestinian Association for the Study of Democracy, 2008 [in Arabic]; Ellen Fleischmann, "The Other 'Awakening': The Emergence of Women's Movements in the Modern Middle East, 1900-1940", in Margaret L. Meriwether & Judith E. Tucker (eds.), *A Social History of Women and Gender in the Modern Middle East*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 1999, pp. 89-134.

fully aware that their actions constitute *ghayth* (provocation) against Israelis and Jews, and they have declared their readiness to bear the consequences, including arrest, interrogation by the Shin Bet (Israeli Security Agency), and other punitive measures. Their goal is to convey the message that the mosque belongs exclusively to Muslims.[3]

These women have attributed a political meaning to *ribat* rather than limiting it to its religious significance. In other words, they have not confined themselves to prayer at the mosque, which is the traditional expectation of women. They have gone further, viewing themselves as responsible for leading the protest at the mosque as long as men are unable to do so. *Murabitat* of the *al-khassa* type (those who take active roles) have not waited for a clear religious interpretation from scholars. They have neither sought support nor been deterred by criticism of their actions. It is no coincidence that there is not a single explicit religious ruling addressing this issue.

Religious scholars who support the actions of these women must find justification in Islamic sources in order to permit their actions. Those scholars who oppose their actions hope that this phenomenon will eventually disappear on its own. This situation presents a paradox: on the one hand, it is difficult to issue a religious ruling preventing women from defending the sacred mosque. On the other hand, they pay a heavy price: they confront foreign men, are physically shoved by men, are subject to interrogation and verbal and physical violence, and find themselves in situations that religious scholars view as fundamentally prohibited.

Acts of provocation as a means of conveying messages against political, religious, and social authority are not new and have been recognized in other periods and in other locations. For instance, stone-throwing at Israeli soldiers during the First Intifada was an act of provocation aimed at expressing political rejection or resistance. The strategy of provocation as a form of resistance has persisted from the Intifada to the present day, manifesting in various arenas, including protests, journalism, books, media interviews, street demonstrations, and even in the Knesset.

What is unique about women's provocation in this case is the setting they have chosen, namely the mosque. The body of research on mosques is extensive and diverse, but it has not addressed the use of provocation within that domain. Mosques and sacred spaces have traditionally been places of safety, particularly during times of war. There is also a vast body of literature on women's activities in mosques, such as Saba Mahmood's study of women's activities in mosques in Egypt during the 1990s.[4] Mahmood analyzed these activities, which were largely focused on *da'wah*, in order to critique Western liberal feminist discourse.

---

[3] *Ghayth* means to provoke. The term has roots in the Koran – Surat Tuba (120):

مَا كَانَ لِأَهْلِ الْمَدِينَةِ وَمَنْ حَوْلَهُم مِّنَ الْأَعْرَابِ أَن يَتَخَلَّفُوا عَن رَّسُولِ اللَّهِ وَلَا يَرْغَبُوا بِأَنفُسِهِمْ عَن نَّفْسِهِ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ لَا يُصِيبُهُمْ ظَمَأٌ وَلَا نَصَبٌ وَلَا مَخْمَصَةٌ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ وَلَا يَطَئُونَ مَوْطِئًا يَغِيظُ الْكُفَّارَ وَلَا يَنَالُونَ مِنْ عَدُوٍّ نَّيْلًا إِلَّا كُتِبَ لَهُم بِهِ عَمَلٌ صَالِحٌ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُضِيعُ أَجْرَ الْمُحْسِنِينَ.

In other words, to be in a place that encourages *ghayth* of infidels and their anger is considered to be a good deed that is rewarded.

[4] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004.

Afnan Masarwa's research in Israel on women in the mosque of a Palestinian village near Jerusalem described their activities in the mosque's basement and their religious classes as a challenge to male authority.[5] Masarwa adopted Saba Mahmood's concept of *agency* and examined the transformations in women's bodies and social positions as a result of the religious classes they attend in the mosque.

A similar finding emerged from interviews I conducted with women in the Islamic Movement in Israel. The mosque was revealed to be a space from which Islamic female leadership emerged in both factions of the movement from the 1980s until 2000 and beyond.

## ***Conclusion***

Over the years, women have played a role in the Islamic Movement, which has been expressed in their ideas and perspectives on the Arab-Israeli conflict. They reflected the spirit of the times: they participated in meetings with religious Jewish women aimed at fostering interfaith dialogue on issues that concerned them both personally and collectively. They also ascended to the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem to stage political protests against Israeli sovereignty over the site and the ongoing conflict. Although they did not take part together with men in shaping the different perspectives on the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians or between Israel and Muslims—whether the conflict was perceived as national or religious—their activism has shaped their personal experiences, those of their children, and those within their close circles. They have expressed a rejection of Israeli occupation, which they view as the root cause of the ongoing conflict, while also seeking opportunities to engage in dialogue with Israel through its representatives or simply religious Jewish citizens living here. Their goal is to find common ground between the two peoples and to engage in advocacy and the mobilization of public opinion.[6]

[5] Afnan Masarwa-Sarur, *Women of the Mosque: Subversion Learning of Religious Knowledge*, Tel Aviv: Resling, 2017. [in Hebrew]

[6] For further details, see Salwa Alinat-Abed, "The politics of provocation: Islamic Ribat in the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem." In: Lior Chen, Omer Hacker, and Nurit Stadler (eds.), *Sacred Places in the Holy Land: An Ethnographic Perspective* (Ranana: The Open University of Israel, 2021), pp. 200-230. [in Hebrew]