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Tradition amid Social Upheaval

The Palestinian Muslim Family

Bruce A. Chadwick, Camille Fronk, Ray Huntington,
Tim B. Heaton, and Brian K. Barber

In 1994 and 1995, a research team from Brigham Young University conducted a survey of residents of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Motivated in part by our strong interest as Latter-day Saints in understanding and strengthening family life, we wished to study several aspects of the Palestinian family including prominence of marriage, family size, gender roles, education of women, marriage between relatives, and location of residence after marriage. By comparing our data with that of earlier surveys, we can ascertain changes occurring in the Muslim world.

Generalization from a single study of the Arab-Muslim family is difficult, given the differences among urban, village, and rural residents in the Arab world. Sufficient similarities exist, however, within Arab Islamic countries to make possible some degree of generalization from Palestinian families to Muslim families in general.¹ We surveyed several thousand Palestinian families in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, 99 percent of whom identified themselves as Muslim. Results from our study provide contemporary images of Muslim families in much of the Middle East.

A Brief Historical Overview

In 1967, Israel's military forces clashed with the armies of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan in what is referred to by some as the Six Day War. At the conclusion of fighting, Israel occupied all land on the west side of the Jordan River, previously controlled by the country of Jordan. This area, including all of eastern Jerusalem, became known as the West Bank. In addition to the West Bank, Israel occupied the Gaza Strip, previously controlled by Egypt. With the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, Israel assumed military governance of several million Palestinians whose families had been living on these lands for hundreds of years. After two decades of Israeli occupation of historic Palestine, Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip began a grass-roots protest movement referred to as the *intifada*. Loosely translated, the Arabic word *intifada* means to "shudder" or "shrug off" and refers to Palestinian efforts to force Israel's withdrawal from the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

During the intifada years of 1987 to 1994, Palestinians participated in public marches, demonstrations, strikes, and violent confrontations with Israeli soldiers. Even women, whose domain had only been the privacy of their homes, were publicly involved in these activities. As a result of these events and of such Westernizing influences as modernization, the Palestinian family has been exposed to powerful forces of social change. Thus one of the purposes for our study was to describe the contemporary Palestinian family and assess whether, as a result of these social forces, Palestinians have departed from traditional family life as prescribed by Islamic teachings.

Islam and the Family

For Muslim Palestinians, family and religion are intertwined. As Strum notes, "If the Koran is the soul of Islam, then perhaps the institution of the Muslim family might be described as its body."² Likewise, sociologist John Williams points out that religion in the Arab world "is not part of the social structure, it *is* the structure."³ The teachings of Islam permeate Palestinian family life. Indeed, patriarchy; kinship ties; cultural standards for inheritance laws, marriage, and divorce; and gender roles are perceived as manifestations of Allah's will.⁴

Roles of husbands and wives are defined through dogmas and teachings in the Qur'an; the hadith, or sayings, of Muhammad; and Islamic jurisprudence. For example, the Qur'an states the following: "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given [men] more (strength) than [women]. . . . Righteous women are devoutly obedient" (4:34). "[Women are to] stay quietly in [their] houses" (33:33). "[Women] should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons" (24:31).

Islamic teachings influence not only family functioning but also the legal and social status of women. As Molyneux explains:

The impact of religious orthodoxy on the juridical realm, in particular on the Family Laws . . . is a factor of the utmost significance: it is precisely within these religious codes that the position of women is defined as legally and socially subordinate to that of men. The religious influence and derivation of the codes has allowed the subordinate status of women to be legitimized in terms of divine inspiration and doctrinal orthodoxy.⁵

Islam's influence in Palestinian society, including the family, has been strengthened during the past two decades by a revival of Islamic fundamentalist groups. These organizations, such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the Muslim Brotherhood Society, have heightened the impact of Islamic thought within the Palestinian family. For example, supporters of these groups have encouraged women to cover their heads with the traditional

Women and Worship

Women without husbands or young children sleep together in a separate section of the home. When I stayed in Gaza, I slept in that part of the house where the aged, widowed mother and a single sister resided. The men of the family had already indicated that they did not follow Muslim worship practices very often. I was surprised then to hear the single sister arise from her bed with the Muslim call to prayer in the early morning hour. She quietly washed, dressed entirely in white, and performed all the positions of prayer in concert with the official call. Her worship was conducted in the privacy of her bedroom, without any thought that I might be awake and observing. Afterward she told me that she does prayers that same way every morning, despite the fact that she must be at the hospital by 6:00 A.M. She explained that men generally pray in groups at the mosque whereas women pray alone in the solitude of their homes.

—Camille Fronk

hijab while in public, discouraged women from working outside the home, and criticized wedding ceremonies that were not conducted according to Islamic law.

This paper has three objectives. The first is to describe the formation and functioning of the contemporary Palestinian family. The second objective is to examine the role of women, especially wives, in Palestinian families, given the influence of modernization and the impact of the intifada. The third objective is to examine the attitudes of Palestinian adolescents toward female autonomy, as those attitudes suggest what role women might fulfill in the future.

Sources of Information

We obtained data from a self-report survey of 7,000 Palestinian families living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip during 1994 and 1995. Two questionnaires, one for students and one for parents, were developed in English and then translated into Arabic by a Palestinian translation and printing business in the West Bank. Several bilingual Palestinians reviewed the Arabic versions and recommended minor changes. Finally, the revised surveys were pilot tested with a sample of Palestinian youths and adults living in East Jerusalem.

In November 1994, the research team visited all sixty-four of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) secondary schools in

the West Bank and trained the head teachers (principals) to administer the survey. Students in the ninth grade, the highest grade offered in UNRWA schools, were asked to complete the questionnaire in class and then to take one home for each of their parents. Students returned their parents' questionnaires the following day. The same procedure was replicated in Gaza, where a sampling of schools was done in spring 1995. There both UNRWA and Palestinian Ministry of Education schools in Gaza were surveyed. Unfortunately, we were unable to access nonrefugee students living in the West Bank.

Five types of Palestinian communities are represented in our sample: West Bank cities, West Bank villages, West Bank refugee camps, Gaza cities, and Gaza refugee camps. Parents in the study ranged in age from 27 years to their early 60s; fathers averaged 47 years of age, and mothers, 48.

Completed surveys were returned by 92 to 97 percent of the enrolled students ($n=6,923$), by 85 to 94 percent of the fathers ($n=6,253$), and by 84 to 90 percent of their mothers ($n=6,024$). These high response rates were obtained without any follow-up or offer of incentives. Both students and parents seemed excited by the opportunity to share their feelings and experiences.

The Contemporary Palestinian Family

Of the many facets of the contemporary Palestinian family that can be studied, we hypothesized eight could be significant indicators of whether social change had occurred in the family. They are marriage rates, age at marriage, age difference between spouses, rate of marriage between relatives, location of residence after marriage, family size, marital satisfaction rates, and women's roles.

Prominence of Marriage. Since family is a dominant institution in Muslim Palestinian society, marriage is almost universal.⁶ Jordanian Personal Status Law, a remnant of the Jordanian occupation era (1948–67), regulates marriage and family practices in the West Bank and Gaza.⁷ This law is based on Islamic beliefs, operates within the religious sphere, and is administered by local Islamic leaders. Israel has made no effort during the past thirty years of occupation to substitute Israel's marriage laws for Jordanian law. In fact, none of the emerging political powers in contemporary Palestine, such as the Palestinian National Authority, has suggested an alteration of the Jordanian laws governing the Palestinian family.

Over 98 percent of fathers in the sample were currently married as were 95 percent of the mothers. Our sample is obviously biased toward married couples as only parents of ninth-grade students were selected. Most of the nonmarried respondents were widows or widowers. Less than one percent of the mothers and fathers were separated or divorced. One

explanation for low divorce statistics is the Muslims' obedience to a teaching attributed to the Prophet Muhammad that divorce is "the most hateful to God of all permitted things."⁸ The exceptionally low number of divorces underscores the family's importance in Palestinian society.

Age at Marriage. Traditionally, Palestinian couples sign a marriage contract in a ceremony viewed as legally binding. Even though they are considered married upon signing the contract, Palestinian couples do not necessarily begin living together as husband and wife immediately after the contract signing. Palestinian women are generally married at a fairly early age to protect their sexual purity. Notwithstanding tradition, Jordanian Personal Status Law requires women to be at least 18 years to marry and men to be 19 years of age.

Judith E. Tucker studied Islamic court records in Nablus, a prominent West Bank city, for the periods of 1722 to 1729 and 1798 to 1856. She found that about 18 percent of the recorded marriages involved a prepubescent girl. She concluded that women often married around the age of fourteen.⁹ In contrast, in a 1960 study of Artas, a small village near Bethlehem, Prothro and Diab discovered that the average¹⁰ age for marriage among women was 16.9 years of age and 24.4 years for men.¹¹ The average age at marriage in 1982 for a sample of the West Bank population, according to Ata, was close to 20 years for women and nearly 24 years for men.¹² These studies suggest that Palestinians, especially women, have gradually extended their childhood years.

Contrary to their law, over half the wives in our study signed a marriage contract before they were 18, with over one-fourth of these women signing before their sixteenth birthday (see table 1). During interviews with Palestinians, the authors were told that marriage laws are often ignored by officials or circumvented by families. For example, young brides claim to be older or invite an older sister to represent them in the signing ceremony.

The average age at which wives in all three groups in our sample signed their marriage contract clustered around 19 years of age, with about one percent marrying after age 28. The men averaged a little over 23 years, with nearly 5 percent being over 30 when they contracted marriage.

We also examined when couples began living together as husband and wife and found that nearly 90 percent started living together the same year they signed the contract. Most commenced living together immediately after the signing or shortly thereafter. Seven percent waited at least a year, and another 4 percent delayed living together for more than two years. It appears from our data that little time expired between signing the marriage contract and living together as a married couple among this sample of Palestinian families, suggesting that the tradition of waiting several months may be eroding; increased unemployment rates made it difficult for men to wait and save for an apartment, a large dowry, or other traditional goals.

TABLE 1
Age When Marriage Contract Was Signed

Age	West Bank		Gaza Refugee		Gaza Nonrefugee	
	Men (N=2842)	Women (N=2732)	Men (N=1875)	Women (N=1846)	Men (N=1294)	Women (N=1341)
12–15	0	33%	0	25%	0	26%
16–18	13%	28	13%	28	12%	28
19–20	21	19	22	24	20	23
21–22	17	8	17	9	15	9
23–24	15	4	16	6	15	7
25–26	17	5	16	5	19	5
27–28	9	11	7	2	8	1
29–30	4	0	5	1	8	1
31–50	5	0	4	1	4	0
Average Age	23.3	19.0	23.2	19.2	23.4	19.5

Question: How old were you when you first entered the marriage contract?

TABLE 2
Difference in Husbands' and Wives' Ages

Age Difference	West Bank (N=2680)	Gaza Refugee (N=1819)	Gaza Nonrefugee (N=1265)
Wife Older	8.6%	10.4%	8.8%
Both Same Age	9.4	13.3	11.4
Husband Older			
1 year	7.1	8.5	7.0
2 years	9.0	10.4	9.8
3 years	7.8	8.9	7.9
4 years	10.3	9.0	8.5
5 years	8.9	8.5	9.8
6 years	7.6	6.1	6.6
7 years	5.6	5.4	6.3
8 years	5.4	4.4	4.7
9 years	5.1	2.5	4.1
10 years	4.9	4.2	4.7
>10 years	10.7	8.4	10.5
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Average Difference (years)	4.3	4.1	4.1

Question: How old are you?

Age Difference between Husbands and Wives. Traditionally, Palestinian husbands have been considerably older than their wives. Prothro and Diab found in 1960 that husbands in Artas were, on average, nine years older than their wives.¹³ Ata discovered a four-year age gap between the average marrying ages of men and women in the West Bank in the early 1980s.¹⁴ Table 2 presents the age differences between husbands and wives in our sample.

In our sample, less than 10 percent of the wives were older than their husbands, while another 10 percent were the same age. Approximately 45 percent of the husbands were one to five years older than their wives. About 25 percent of the husbands were six to ten years older and approximately another 15 percent were more than ten years senior to their wives. Our findings agree with Ata's that husbands were overall about four years older than their wives.

Marriage between Relatives. Among Palestinians is a strong tradition of marriage between a man and his "father's brother's daughter"¹⁵ (a form of endogamous, or "blood," marriage). This tradition includes a "cousin-right," which gives a man the right to demand marriage to his cousin. If he is unsure whether he wants to marry a particular cousin, he supposedly has the right to block her marriage to another until he makes up his mind.

Marriage between Cousins

During our study, I was invited into the home of a Palestinian man in order to interview him and several of his friends. During the course of the interview, the man's wife came into the room to serve us fresh juice and slices of fruit. As the woman served the food, I noticed a strong resemblance between her and her husband. After the woman left, I related this observation to my host. He seemed amused with my statement and then told me that it was natural that she resembled him, since they were first cousins. I knew that endogamous marriage (marriage within the close family clan) was not uncommon among Palestinians, but I had not as yet met anyone who had married his cousin. The Palestinian man told me that marriages between blood relatives were very positive and successful within their culture. "I have known and loved my cousin all of my life," he said. "Our parents arranged our marriage when we were younger, and I thank God they did, because I have been truly happy. What better choice for a wife than someone you have known since your birth."

—Ray Huntington

Blood marriage is justified on the presumption that cousins adjust to each other better than nonrelatives and thus have a stronger marriage. Also, cousin marriage retains farmland, flocks, commercial and residential property, and other resources within the patriarchal family. Support for this practice is evident in Ata's observation that a young man's family obtains a cousin bride for a significantly lower price than nonrelatives would have to pay.¹⁶

Although previous researchers observed that approximately 42 percent of married Palestinians espoused a relative,¹⁷ we anticipated finding a decline in endogamous marriages in our study. On the contrary, we found that about half of the wives and husbands in our sample married a relative. A stronger evidence to refute a decline in endogamous marriages is that our respondents reported a higher percentage of blood marriage among themselves than they reported for their parents.

Residence Following Marriage. Palestinian families have traditionally been patrilocal, encouraging newly married couples to reside with, or adjacent to, the husband's parents. Prothro and Diab discovered that 48 percent of the wives in Artas in the 1960s lived their entire married life with their husband's family.¹⁸ Five percent stated that they started married life with the husband's family and later established their own household. According to Adado-Zubi, favorable wage earning associated with modernization has allowed more newly married couples to establish their own household.¹⁹ As shown in table 3, there is considerable support in our data for the tradition of living with the husband's family.

TABLE 3

Residence of Newly Married Couples

Residence	West Bank		Gaza Refugee		Gaza Nonrefugee	
	Men (N=2935)	Women (N=2854)	Men (N=1924)	Women (N=1827)	Men (N=1346)	Women (N=1346)
With, or very close to, groom's family	62%	42%	71%	43%	65%	42%
With, or very close to, bride's family	9	23	7	27	9	23
Other relatives	4	6	4	9	4	8
By selves	25	29	18	22	23	28
	100%	100%	100%	101%	101%	101%

Question: After your marriage, who did you live with?

Living with the Husband's Parents

While driving through a rural village in the West Bank, I noticed that many of the Palestinian homes were two and sometimes three stories high. Many one- and two-storied homes had rebar protruding from their roofs. Their appearance gave me the impression that they were still under construction. When I asked the Palestinian men accompanying me why many of the homes appeared to be unfinished, they responded with a question: "When you were married, where did you first live?" I told them that I lived in an apartment close to the university my wife and I were attending. "Did you live close to your parents?" they asked. I told them that when I married I moved out of my parents' home. "In Palestinian culture," they said, "when a man marries, his parents will often add a new floor onto the existing home for their son and his bride to live in."

With that explanation, I began to understand the Palestinian tradition of men continuing to live with their family when they marry, creating what is referred to as the *hamula*, or the extended family.

—Ray Huntington

According to husbands in our study, over 60 percent of the couples had established their first home with, or very near to, the husband's parents. Interestingly, fewer wives reported living with their husband's family. It may be that wives viewed their home as a separate residence even when it was in close proximity to their in-laws' home. An alternative explanation is that some wives may have defined their husband's family as their own family when they married. However the living arrangement was interpreted, approximately half of the couples initially lived with the groom's extended family. About 25 percent established a home independent of either family, settling in a different village, town, or city to secure employment. About 10 percent of the couples in our sample initially lived with the bride's family following marriage.

Family Size. Children, especially sons, are highly esteemed in Palestinian families.²⁰ Numerous children are seen as security during old age, ensuring care for elderly parents.²¹ Also, many women believe that as they bear children, particularly sons, their prestige and power in the extended family increases. While Islam does not forbid contraception, birth control is rarely practiced. When we informally asked married men how many children they anticipated, they almost always answered, "As many as God gives me." The number of children reported by mothers is presented in

TABLE 4
Number of Children Reported by Wife

No. of Children	West Bank (N=2683)	Gaza Refugee (N=1758)	Gaza Nonrefugee (N=1322)
1	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
2	0.3	0.4	0.5
3	1.2	1.2	1.0
4	3.1	2.9	2.8
5	6.8	5.9	7.0
6	12.4	8.8	10.7
7	14.8	15.3	14.8
8	15.1	16.8	15.8
9	14.9	16.1	15.1
10	11.0	12.4	13.1
11	8.8	8.6	8.2
12	5.5	5.1	5.8
13	2.4	3.4	2.7
14	1.5	1.3	0.9
15	0.6	0.8	0.6
≥16	1.5	1.0	1.0
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Average	8.43	8.61	8.43

Question: How many living children do you have?

table 4. Since husbands' and wives' reports agreed as to numbers of children, we present only the wives' data.

Our data are biased in that childless couples were never surveyed. On the other hand, a bias in the opposite direction was introduced by our asking only about living children. Furthermore, many of the wives in our sample are still in childbearing years, suggesting the possibility of additional children. Fertility reported by these women is high: 20 percent indicated that they have ten or more living children. The average number of children per family is between eight and nine. This number is confirmed by the students' report of the number of siblings in their families.

We estimated the total fertility of a Palestinian wife by determining the number of children born to women in the sample who had completed their childbearing. Women over the age of forty-four reported having over nine living children. These findings are consistent with previous research and refute claims that fertility has declined among Palestinian couples. Our findings also show support for religion's influence on the family, since Islam encourages women to marry and bear children.

Marital Satisfaction. Ninety percent of both husbands and wives in our study were either “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their marriage. Less than 6 percent were “dissatisfied.” The level of marital satisfaction reported by our sample is similar to what is reported in studies of Americans, who are likely to leave marriages if they are dissatisfied. The low level of dissatisfaction in Palestinian marriages is remarkable given the infrequency of divorce.

Palestinian couples do not often contemplate the degree of satisfaction or happiness in marriage. After viewing the very high levels of marital satisfaction reported in table 5, we asked a number of Palestinian husbands and wives how they felt about this type of question. Most felt marital happiness is irrelevant: honorably carrying out family responsibilities is the important issue.

TABLE 5

Marital Satisfaction of Palestinian Couples

	West Bank Men Women (N=2806) (N=2669)		Gaza Refugee Men Women (N=1864) (N=1815)		Gaza Nonrefugee Men Women (N=1214) (N=1255)	
Marriage						
Very Satisfied	61%	58%	63%	60%	61%	59%
Satisfied	29	31	27	29	28	29
Mixed Feelings	4	4	4	5	4	5
Dissatisfied	2	2	2	2	2	2
Very Dissatisfied	5	5	4	4	5	5
	101%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Spouse						
Very Satisfied	60%	58%	63%	60%	60%	58%
Satisfied	30	31	29	30	30	31
Mixed Feelings	6	6	5	5	5	5
Dissatisfied	2	2	2	2	2	3
Very Dissatisfied	3	3	2	3	3	3
	100%	100%	101%	100%	100%	100%
Relationship with Spouse						
Very Satisfied	61%	58%	63%	61%	61%	59%
Satisfied	29	3	27	28	28	28
Mixed Feelings	5	6	5	5	7	6
Dissatisfied	2	2	2	2	2	3
Very Dissatisfied	4	4	2	3	3	4
	101%	101%	99%	99%	101%	100%

Questions: How satisfied are you with your marriage? Your husband/wife as a spouse?
Your relationship with your husband/wife?

Palestinian Women's Family Roles

The second objective of this article is to examine the degree to which contemporary Palestinian women assume family roles consistent with those of the traditional Islamic family. In the world of Islam, the traditional family is characterized by a patrilineal and patriarchal extended household, called the *hamula*.²² The leader of the *hamula*, normally the eldest man, is the primary decision maker in family issues, such as selecting marriage partners for the children.²³ The *hamula* residence is patrilocal, “with new member-wives and children . . . being added to the traditional Arab home.”²⁴ The role of women within the *hamula* has been “defined by centuries of cultural patterns and social restrictions and justified by religious sanctions.”²⁵ Within the *hamula*, the wife is considered to be under the care of her husband or her husband’s father. Consequently, power and authority in the extended family typically rest with men, especially older men. Further, men are responsible to economically support the family and protect the honor of individual family members—most notably women.²⁶

Women are expected to obey their husbands and perform domestic responsibilities, such as cooking family meals, cleaning the house, and caring for children. Expected to marry and rear children, these women are traditionally limited to the private domestic sphere of the home. Moreover, women experience considerable constraints on public participation, such as working outside of the home or attending a college or university after graduation from secondary school. In brief, there appear to be two worlds within Palestinian society: the world of women, where traditional roles within the home are emphasized, and the world of men, where tradition mandates the public roles of generating the family income and maintaining the family’s honor and prestige within the community.

A Palestinian Woman’s Duty

I spent a night with an extended Palestinian family in Gaza presided over by an unmarried man who had several younger brothers and sisters. His brothers’ families each lived in a wing or floor of the multilevel family home, and his married sister lived close by in a separate dwelling. Since the eldest brother had no wife to cook for him, he required his unmarried sister (who had worked as a head nurse in Saudi Arabia) to return to Gaza to work at a nearby hospital and to cook meals for him. Even though her preference was to remain in an environment that allowed greater female autonomy, she did not hesitate in returning to Gaza. She felt her first duty was to her family.

—Camille Fronk

To ascertain changes in obligation for family roles, we collected information regarding who was primarily responsible to clean the house, care for children, discipline children, visit relatives and friends, and provide income for the family.

Housekeeping. Not surprisingly, the results of our survey found that 93 percent of married women were responsible for cleaning the home, cooking and cleaning up after meals, washing clothes, making beds, and doing general housekeeping chores. Five percent of the women indicated that housekeeping duties were shared equally with their husbands. Only 2 percent of the women surveyed indicated that their husbands were primarily responsible to care for the home. We theorized that those 2 percent were ill or in some way incapacitated, necessitating that the husband assume responsibility for housekeeping.

We tried to determine whether traditional family roles remained constant or had changed over time. We compared our results to Ata's study, which found that 89 percent of the women surveyed reported that they were solely responsible for keeping house and 5 percent reported that they were mostly responsible. Three percent reported that housekeeping duties were shared with their husbands, and only 1 percent reported that the duties were shared equally.²⁷ Our findings are almost identical to Ata's, confirming that modernization and political upheaval have not released women from the daily household chores that tradition has dictated they should perform. Nor have men entered this aspect of the private domain in order to assist their wives. Moreover, there is no evidence in our study that would indicate a shift in this role for either men or women.

Caring for Children. We anticipated that the responsibility to care for children rests primarily with wives in Palestinian families. However, we were surprised to find that 65 percent of the wives indicated that they and their husbands shared this family task equally. In other words, husbands were almost as involved in caring for their children as were their wives. Only 32 percent of wives said that they were responsible for caring for the children without their husbands' help. Three percent indicated that their husbands were solely responsible for child care. Our findings appear to contradict the traditional stereotype prescribing that women be the primary family caregivers.

Further, within the past two generations, a significant change has taken place with respect to this family role. For example, data from Ata's 1982 study reveal that 80 percent of the women he surveyed were solely responsible for child care within the family and 5 percent were mostly responsible.²⁸ Only 13 percent of the women indicated that this duty was shared with their husbands. The fact that men are significantly more involved in caring for their children in the current study than they were in Ata's study indicates a

shift from traditional expectations to a slightly more egalitarian approach between Palestinian husbands and wives.

Disciplining Children. Traditionally, Palestinian women have assumed responsibility for supervising and disciplining their children since they are at home for longer periods of time than their husbands. Consequently, we assumed that women would report primary responsibility for children's discipline. Again, we were surprised with the findings of our study. Only 16 percent of the women reported that they were solely responsible for disciplining their children. An unexpected 70 percent of women indicated that discipline of children was shared equally with their husbands. These findings suggest a shift in this family role. In comparison, Ata's 1982 study found that 38 percent of the wives were solely responsible for disciplining their children, and 12 percent were mostly responsible. Forty-five percent shared this duty in some measure with their husbands.²⁹

We suggest three possible explanations to account for the increased participation of husbands in caring for and disciplining children. First, an extremely high rate of unemployment existed among Palestinian men in the West Bank and Gaza Strip during the time we conducted this study. Consequently, men were probably spending more time in the home than they had in the past. Second, as Palestinian youths challenged Israeli occupation of their land during the intifada, they may have experienced a growing independence from traditional family authority. Sensing this loss of parental authority, some fathers may have compensated by becoming more involved in disciplining their children. Third, driven by forces of modernity and Westernization, men and women across the Muslim world may have become more egalitarian with respect to family roles involving their children.

Visiting Relatives and Friends. Palestinians place a great deal of emphasis upon sociability, particularly hosting in their home and visiting family members and friends. Given the patriarchal structure of the Palestinian family, men are presumably responsible for planning the visits to the homes of other family members and friends. However, our study revealed that 69 percent of women shared this activity with their husbands. Seventeen percent said their husbands were responsible to arrange visits as compared to 14 percent of the women who indicated they were primarily responsible to organize social activities with family and friends.

Since we were not able to find any previous research describing the roles of husbands and wives in this particular area, it is difficult to determine if changes have occurred in this family role. Given the sharp distinction between the husband's role in the public sphere versus the woman's role within the private domain of the home, it is possible that a shift in the role of women has taken place. However, the involvement of Palestinian women in the public sphere appears to be limited to social activities with family and close friends.

Providing the Family Income. We anticipated a clear separation between husband and wife concerning who is responsible to earn income for the family. Our study revealed that this family role conformed to traditional Islamic expectations, which mandates that men are expected to provide the family income. For example, 84 percent of wives reported that their husbands were solely responsible to provide family income, while only 4 percent indicated that they alone generated their family's livelihood. Twelve percent of the women said that they shared with their husbands the responsibility of earning money. Low percentages of women who provide family income or who share the task equally with their husbands are to be expected, since 92 percent of the women in our sample were housewives. Only 5 percent worked outside of the home, and another 3 percent indicated that they were looking for work. This percentage of employed women is somewhat lower than the 13.5 percent reported by Ata in 1982.³⁰

The large gap between the percentage of those indicating they were housewives and the smaller percentage of women who reported they worked may be explained by the fact that all of the women in our sample were married and responsible for several children in the home. Thus, large family size would certainly deter women from working outside of the home or bringing outside work to do within the home.

Acquiring an Education. Traditionally, women's education has been limited in comparison to that of men. Most women in our study, 73 percent, received some type of primary, secondary, or trade-school education. We found that 21 percent of the women surveyed received no formal education, 22 percent reported at least some primary education, and 25 percent completed part or all of secondary education. Additionally, 26 percent of the women said that they received some type of trade-school experience. Only 6 percent indicated they attended or graduated from a college or university. Thus, while higher education may be available to women in the West Bank and Gaza, most have not received advanced education.

Ata found that 29 percent of women in his 1982 study had no formal education, while 30 percent received some form of primary education and 33 percent completed part or all of their secondary education.³¹ Only 3 percent attended trade school, while 6 percent attending college or university. Thus, over time educational attainment for Palestinian women has remained consistent.

An Unexpected Finding. In summary, a surprising finding that emerged from this study was the degree to which family power and responsibilities were shared. With the exception of men working outside the home and women cleaning the home, family roles appear to be shared between husbands and wives to a remarkable degree. We expected to find that men exercised much more control over the family than was actually reported.

Given the findings of this study, we may have to reformulate our notions about Arab-Muslim wives, particularly Palestinian wives. The stereotypical image of the powerless, marginalized, and oppressed Muslim wife is clearly not accurate. The wives in this study appear to function with a greater degree of power within the family than was previously assumed. However, these women have not as yet made the same strides in participating in the public domain.

Women's Autonomy as Impacted by Social Changes

Some scholars of the Middle East foresee an erosion of Palestinian Muslim family tradition as a result of societal disruptions, including political occupation and modernization. Mar'i suggests that Palestinians may be more susceptible to modernization forces than other Arab nationalities because "their dispersion and forced fragmentation" have fostered exposure to international influences such as women's emancipation.³² Likewise, Warnock states that industrialization and education are eroding the Palestinian family's authority because schooling and working for wages take youths (boys and girls) away from the family farm or business.³³

Conversely, other studies warn against making hasty conclusions that modernity has fostered major changes in women's liberation in Palestine. Consider a few examples. While an increasing number of young women with postsecondary training have reported marrying men of their own choosing, most young women are required "to justify their choices in rational rather than emotional terms and to obtain a family consensus."³⁴ Palestinian fatalities incurred in the struggle for national autonomy argue

The Role of Women's Education

I met a premed Palestinian student at Brigham Young University soon after we collected our data. Desiring to put real stories behind the numbers, I asked her about education in Ramallah, where she was reared. In contrast to the rigors of comprehensive final exams in the West Bank, she said BYU was easy, with the exception of learning the English vocabulary for physics. She plans to finish medical training, return to Palestine, marry, have a family, and then practice medicine only after her children are grown. She concluded, "I don't want anyone else to rear my children; being a mother is most important to me."

—Camille Fronk

for a need of larger families although the already depleted economy continues to lose ground.³⁵ Palestinian women still need a man's signature to receive a passport.³⁶ While more Palestinian women are seen working outside the home, they are typically widows, young single women, or divorced without children. Educating young women is seen as an "indulgent gamble."³⁷

Attitudes of Palestinian Adolescents toward Women's Autonomy

We asked Palestinian adolescents in our sample about their attitudes toward female autonomy or liberation. Youths responded to nine parallel statements, indicating their personal view of women's role in family and society, such as "If a woman disagrees with her husband, she should keep quiet" or "A woman should be able to express her opinion if she disagrees with her husband." The first statement represents a more restrictive role for women while greater autonomy is reflected in the second.

Questions that focus on primary responsibility for various family obligations made up a second measurement of attitudes toward female autonomy in our study. Those questions ascertained the adolescents' views of their future marriage, specifically who would have the primary responsibility of earning money for the family, disciplining the children, arranging visits to family and friends, supervising their children's education, and making decisions about their children's marriages.

Palestinian girls in the study viewed the future differently from Palestinian boys. Not surprisingly, Palestinian girls expressed more liberal views pertaining to women's roles and position in society than their male peers. Both boys and girls expect an egalitarian division of authority in the home when they become parents, but a greater percentage of girls than boys expect an egalitarian sharing in every responsibility, including earning family income. Boy's educational expectations correlate with this view of women's liberation. The higher a boy's educational aspirations, the more restrictive were his views on female autonomy. In other words, education may engender a degree of intolerance on the part of young men toward women's independence and choice of less-traditional lifestyles.

Most young women in our study will eventually marry from among the group of young men whom we surveyed. If these young women maintain their hope for greater equality and independence, greater discordance in future marriages would seem likely. However, we have no reason to anticipate such incongruence between the expectations of future Palestinian husbands and wives. The findings suggest that these young women, socialized by their mothers and other women who surround them, will view their expectations for female autonomy and their future maternal role as not in opposition but as a means to build greater equality within families and the entire community. Islamic feminists have been distinguished

from Western feminists by their insistence on including religion in any solution and by their commitment to “strive to create equality, not for the woman as individual but for the woman as part of the family, a social institution . . . central to the . . . maintenance of any society.”³⁸

The tendency of girls to favor greater female autonomy in society even when choosing more traditional family roles evidences the cultural influence of well-defined religion and corresponds with other research. Both Kaufman and Rosaldo conclude that women who live in a culture with a strong patriarchal religious base and who claim rights of female autonomy are likely to elect traditional family roles.³⁹ Rapoport et al. reported strikingly similar findings from their study of gender role attitudes among Palestinian adolescents living in the state of Israel.⁴⁰

Modernization Theory

Our results do not support social theorists' claims that modernization's influence is virtually unstoppable and thereby makes every society eventually like all others—that rarely does one find a resistant culture. We discovered that this Muslim culture has largely succeeded in resisting Western philosophies affecting the family. Indeed, the results of our study do not support research conducted by other researchers, such as Rapoport et al., who suggest that liberal Western norms have influenced gender conduct, family role relations, and delayed age of marriage among Palestinians.⁴¹

Modernization theory asserts that education of youths will promote even greater modernity. Every youth in our study was a current student. Teachers and principals met these youths every school day, influencing them as adult role models. Girls in particular saw women working outside the home as educators and administrators, yet one third of these girls reported that a woman's place is in the home. Boys, not girls, appear to be influenced more by education's shaping of less-traditional roles. While this study included only a couple of measures of modernity, these indicators substantiate a significant resistance to modernization influences. Although these families own televisions and radios, the refugee population in our study is either only marginally exposed to liberal Western norms and value systems or is determined to reject such norms. The latter is more likely. From a Palestinian's perspective, Westernization and modernization, as reported by the media, have repeatedly failed to produce peace and equality in other parts of the world, making Islamic culture all the more attractive.

Enduring Family Traditions

Finally, findings from this study suggest that neither youths' participation in the intifada nor their immersion in a society of political unrest have

disturbed family traditions or family authority. Fears expressed to us by concerned Palestinian fathers that their sons and daughters are becoming independent of family traditions are unfounded. This finding corresponds with Hudson's suggestion that youths' involvement in intifada activities reinforces traditional gender roles rather than alters gender ideology.⁴²

Youths who participated in the intifada do not necessarily desire departure from traditional family practices. While these youths expect to be more egalitarian in their family roles than traditionally observed, they anticipate that women will likely remain at home, as Palestinian women have done in the past. The data show overwhelmingly that these youths expect to manage their future homes in much the same way they have observed their parents do. Thus no major evidence indicates that future Palestinian families will differ significantly from current families in managing and maintaining the home and family.

We hypothesized that modernization, the intifada, and a society in upheaval would encourage trends leading to a departure from the traditions observed in the parents' home—especially in young women's expectations. Adolescents, however, anticipate family roles very similar to current family roles described by their mothers. We did not expect trends to be dramatic, considering the enduring traditions that family role divisions have enjoyed for generations; in spite of ubiquitous change, we did find that stability continues within Palestinian families.

Summary

To say that the family permeates Islamic society is an understatement. Muslim men and women seek marriage, with strong guidance from family members. Children are desired, and few couples use any form of family planning. Consequently, Islamic families tend to be large. The husband-father and his family exercise greater power and influence than does the wife-mother and her family. But our examination of family roles revealed that within the home the wife has considerable influence on family life.

Westerners often have difficulty fathoming the depth to which Islamic thought permeates Palestinian society and the Arab world in general. In America an emphasis on separation between church and state, between religion and politics, greatly reduces any one religion's influence on society. In Palestine essentially one religion—Islam—influences all roles in life, especially traditional family roles. Even the Jordan Personal Status Laws that govern the family are based on Islamic principles.

The Islamic family remains a strong institution in a world where erosion of the family is attributed to a variety of powerful outside forces. Outside social and political upheaval in the West Bank and Gaza Strip have not appeared to undermine Palestinian commitment to family solidarity.



FIG. 1. The Faqawi family, Khan Yunis refugee camp outside Gaza City, 1997. Fuad Faqawi, the father, stands in the rear of the group, behind his wife and six of their eight children. He teaches English at a United Nations Relief and Works Agency school for girls. Brian Barber, on the right, is one of the authors of this study.

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Courtesy William S. Dant

Aliya building a mosque out of blocks, January 2002, in the school library at Iqra' Academy, an Islamic school in Salt Lake City.