

All in the Family



By Penny Johnson
and Islah Jad

In a poignant essay, poet and scholar Sharif Elmusa describes taking his two children, American born and raised, to the now abandoned Al-Nuwayma Refugee Camp near Jericho, where Sharif grew up after his own family was forced to flee from their coastal village in 1948. Sharif is apprehensive, but as the children wander through the boarded-up school building, they discover a breach in the concrete wall and are thrilled to enter and scribble their names on a blackboard. Sharif's young son Layth particularly enjoys entering the classroom through a hole: "Dad, did you do this every day?"

Palestinian families, whether in Palestine or the diaspora, are woven from memories as well as present experiences. There is no one "Palestinian family," but there are common contexts. And as with families everywhere, they are both a source of love and support and of burden and conflict. But there is a special feature: the Palestinian family may be *the* institution that has preserved and reproduced Palestinian society and history under the highly adverse conditions faced by Palestinians over the last century. The two Palestinian voices that lead our reflections are telling: A father, refugee, and breadwinner struggles against all odds to build "a decent home for his family"; a mother sacrifices to invest in her children's education because "the children are our house." As Palestinian families in various locations support and preserve their members, Palestine is remade.

We will briefly explore the various lenses that have been deployed to understand (and sometimes to stereotype) Palestinian families, from travelers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to incoming Zionist settlers in the twentieth century to contemporary statistics on demographic changes from our Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics.

By far the most common features in Western imaginings of Palestine in the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries was Palestine as the Holy Land. Travel guides recommended the Bible as the best source of information, and the inhabitants as well as the archaeology were viewed through this lens. In these fixed images of Palestinian women, men, and children, traces of modernity were erased and the inhabitants portrayed as still living the life of Biblical times or representing a romanticized Orientalist dream. What sociologist Salim Tamari has termed the "Ottoman modernity" of this period was entirely absent. The popular *A Handbook for Travellers in Syria and Palestine*, published in 1858, opened the chapter entitled "Inhabitants" with this sweeping statement: "The inhabitants of Syria and Palestine form a most interesting study. Their dress, their manners and customs and their language, are all primitive." (The writer does go on to opine that the inhabitants are "excessively polite.") There were exceptions: anthropologist Hilma Granqvist, living in the Bethlehem village of Artas in the 1920s and 1930s, distanced

"We invested in the children. The children are our house."

A Palestinian mother

herself from these Biblical models and provided a careful analysis of key and sometimes changing features of family life, such as wedding arrangements and dowry and marriage patterns. She criticized earlier writers who "quite inconsistently with the great differences in country and people" put forward generalizations about customs and habits which are "unconcernedly given out as Palestinian in general."

Such an understanding of difference largely went out the window when waves of European settlers inspired by the Zionist movement arrived in Palestine. Colonization of Palestine was accompanied by a war of information and images where Palestinian

A drawing by a child from Gaza for a project entitled "Inclusion for All" run by Tamer for Community Education.



women were portrayed as trapped in oppressive families, in contrast to the gender equality enshrined in the settler movement, expressed visually by new Jewish immigrant women wearing shorts and working alongside men, while one of the most persistent symbols of Palestinian women's subordination was the carrying of materials on their heads or walking while carrying a heavy load behind a man riding a donkey

Palestinian families in the cauldron of the *Nakba* and its aftermath suffered diverse circumstances but had one overriding goal: to educate their children as a form of "portable capital" in the face of loss and instability. And major political upheavals such as the Palestinian Intifadas changed family dynamics and the roles of Palestinian women and their families in resistance to occupation. In particular, mass civil resistance during the first Intifada empowered young women and men in the family as youth came to the forefront of the struggle. Women built barricades and broke barriers, also raising hitherto neglected internal family issues: in 1989, Ramallah hosted the first conference on domestic violence in the occupied territories, with research findings presented by the late Dr. Hala Atallah and Dr. Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian.

In the post-Oslo period, issues within the family, such as domestic violence (or gender-based violence), came under further scrutiny: families have largely been examined in light of human rights and women's rights universal conventions, reflecting the policy orientation of the last quarter of a century. At the same time, the new Oslo economic and political climate has had multiple effects on family life: from the rising cost of marriage and wedding celebrations (leading at times to mass marriages) to new insecurities and declining livelihoods in the 61 percent of the West Bank designated Area C and in besieged Gaza.



Photo by Issam Al-Rimawi.

The founding of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) has allowed us a new and important lens through which to view the significant changes in Palestinian families. We can only summarize several key trends here from the rich data offered by the PCBS, from its earliest studies to the preliminary results of the 2017 census. One key change is a significant drop in fertility rates: in 1999, the Total Fertility Rate (defined as the average number of live births projected for a woman during her reproductive life at current fertility rates) was 5.9, whereas from 2011–2013, the rate had dropped to 4.1 and a lower 3.8 in the West Bank. Although the rate is higher in Gaza at 4.5, it is a very significant drop as Gaza in the 1980s had one of the highest fertility rates in the world. These rates nonetheless are higher than neighboring Arab countries.

Both Palestinian women and men still prefer fairly large families, with children being a source of both comfort and security in an insecure world.

A rise in marriage age is probably one of the factors driving lowered fertility. The median age at first marriage for females in 1998 was eighteen; in PCBS's review of court records in 2017, the median age was 20.5. The median age for males in 1998 was 23 years; in 2017, according to court records, it was 24.9. We hasten to add that early marriage is still a concern: on the eve of Women's Day 2018, PCBS announced that 20.5 percent of females and 1 percent of males had married before the age of eighteen. Although this figure includes women of several generations, young girls from poor, large families seem still to be the most vulnerable to early marriage. Poll after poll shows that a majority of Palestinian women and

men support raising the legal age of marriage from fifteen to eighteen for females, but the prospects for a new family law or laws rest on the resumption of the Palestinian parliament. The proportion of families who live in nuclear households has also increased to about 84 percent, from 74 percent in 1997. However, these families may well be embedded in networks of kin, whether living in the same building or nearby – "living close" with relatives is still a common practice, as is marrying close, with about a quarter of marriages occurring between cousins. Imprisonment or killing of young husbands at the hands of the Israeli occupation forces has also enforced the "living close" in Palestinian families. The divorce rate is relatively low, but there are almost three times as many divorced women as men since males more easily remarry.

Divorced women, as well as a relatively high proportion of widows and single women, contribute to the number of female-headed households, at 12 percent in the West Bank and 9 percent in Gaza. Palestine has long had an unusually high proportion of single women in contrast to other Arab countries; in the late 1990s, one in ten Palestinian women over 40 had never married as opposed to 1.5 percent of the same age group in Egypt. This is probably due to the multiple dislocations that Palestinians have experienced.

Patterns of Palestinian marriage are also threatened by increased Israeli restrictions on mobility across “borders,” both through physical closures and new legal restrictions on family reunion which constitute the “other wall,” banning marriages between Palestinians from the Occupied Palestinian Territory and from inside the Green Line.

PCBS statistics are a rich source – although we should note that they largely exclude Arab Jerusalem due to Israeli restrictions – but statistics are mute without our attention and analysis. Although PCBS has brought to the fore such issues as gender-based violence through several studies, there are aspects of intimate Palestinian family life that cannot be measured and are best evoked if we return, as we did at the beginning, to writers of fiction and memoirs. In his account of living with his family through the 2014 war against Gaza, Atef Abu Saif writes, “Watching my kids sleep used to be one of my greatest pleasures.” Atef often spent hours watching his nineteen-month-old daughter Jaffa sleeping, “drifting among the clouds of her dreams.” But in wartime Gaza, this pleasure is no longer possible. “I can’t bear them being so quiet,” he writes; instead

“I don’t know if I’ll be allowed to stay here. If they move me to heaven or hell, I’ll take my wheelbarrow and my tools, and I’ll build a decent home for my family.”

A Palestinian father

“their noise, the fuss they make shouting and running around the flat” makes life just a bit easier, a testimony that his children are alive. He ruefully recounts the paternal lies he tells: to one studious son, that school will soon be open; to another, that the drones might stop hovering overhead in a few days, making it possible to go to the new ice cream parlor.

A sleeping child and a visit to the ice cream parlor: Palestinian families seek normal lives and future opportunities for their children. Let us listen to them.

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