

# Women in Arab-Palestinian Associations in Chile:

## Long Distance Nationalism and Gender Mixing

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### Introduction

This article examines a nearly century-long women's involvement in the associations of the Palestinian community in Chile (1920-2010). By reconstituting the long course of action followed by women in these institutions we intend to analyze the transformation that gender roles have undergone, especially with respect to women's increasing politicization in support of the Palestinian cause. Did "long-distance nationalism" (Anderson, 1998), so far a male-exclusive domain, allow the women of the diaspora to renegotiate their roles within the community's associations?

After going through the historical background of Arab-Palestinian female immigration to Chile, we show how the involvement of these women has shifted from a commitment manifesting itself in gender-segregated associational work to a militancy claiming leadership positions within gender-mixed associations. We also highlight the successes of this struggle for equality as well as its limitations. In the last section of this paper, we examine the reasons that led many women, particularly those belonging to the young generations, to prefer leaving the associational milieu rather than engage in confrontations with their male counterparts.

This article is based on a Ph.D thesis for which data was collected from community associations as well as from the very dynamic Arab-Palestinian ethnic press in Chile.<sup>1</sup> The content analysis of these documents has proved to be an extraordinary indicator of gender representation within the Arab community. As for the most recent period (1980-2010), many semi-structured interviews were conducted, and were backed by various participant-observation sessions during the associations' meetings.<sup>2</sup>

### Women in Arab-Palestinian immigration to Chile

In Chile, as well as in the rest of Latin America, the most important wave of immigrants of Levantine origin stretches from the 1880s to the early 1930s. According to the "Guide of the Arab Colony in Chile" published in 1941, nearly 77 percent of these migrants were male (Olguin and Peña, 1990, p. 77). In order to be able to understand the course of action followed by the women of this first generation of immigrants, one should go back to the reasons behind this transatlantic migration.

Levantine emigration to the Americas that started in the early 19th century was in the beginning a spontaneous movement. Neither did it have the political connotation

1. This Political Science Ph.D thesis is entitled: "The Palestinians of Latin America and the Palestinian Cause (Chile, Brazil, Honduras, 1920-2010), and was defended in December 2010 at Science Po Paris.

2. 26 interviews were considered, of which about a third were with women. Six of those women were students and were between 18 and 27 years old. The other 3 were professionals (all university graduates) and were between 40 and 55 years old.

of the European migrations destined to colonize large under-populated spaces of the continent, nor was it the result of forced migration as was the particular case of the Palestinian refugees in 1948. The Levantine emigrants who arrived in Chile in the 1880s were small merchants who voluntarily left their home country in order to find new markets.

Strangely enough, the majority of the immigrants came from Palestine: they constituted nearly 50 percent of the Arab immigration to Chile, whereas Syrians constituted nearly 29 percent, and the Lebanese constituted 18 percent (Olguin & Peña, 1990, p. 74). Almost all Palestinians came from the Christian townships of Bethlehem, Beit Sahour, and Beit Jala. In the Palestinian hinterland as well as in the rest of the Ottoman Near East, success stories spread quickly after the merchants of the region met European emigrants who were on their way to the “New World” via Genoa and Marseille. In the villages, young men started dreaming about the American El Dorado. According to Adnan Musallam, the first Palestinian to arrive in Chile in 1880 was a merchant from Bethlehem called *Jubra’il D’eiq*, to be followed soon by Yusef Jacir and Yussef Geries Salah. Later on, the three men became partners. All three started as peddlers with a trunk on their backs travelling through the country, selling commodities to households.

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This first generation of merchants was almost exclusively composed of very young men. According to the data processed by Patricia Peña and Myriam Olguin, 40.16 percent of the total number of immigrants who arrived in Chile up until 1940 left their home country when they were between 10 and 20 years old, whereas 27.7 percent of them were between the ages of 20 and 30. This first wave of Arab-Palestinian migration was of an exploratory type and excluded women to a large extent, for whom the mere thought of “adventure” was inconceivable. This type of migration increased in the 1910s due to the political situation prevailing in the Ottoman Empire. In 1909

the nationalist Young Turks’ government decided to amend the terms of conscription by making it mandatory for all citizens, regardless of religion. In order to avoid having their sons enlist in the army, families decided to send their sons to join their uncles, fathers, or brothers who had preceded them to the Americas. Thus, the peak of Arab-Palestinian migration to Chile took place between 1905 and 1914 (Olguin & Peña, 1990, p. 75).

In this context, women’s migration became completely dependent on that of men’s. Women travelled either as daughters with their parents (especially their father), or as wives accompanying their husbands. In the case of women emigrating due to marriage, there were three possible scenarios. In the first situation – and the least common one – husband and wife emigrated together. In his autobiography, Raúl Tarud (2002), a businessman, described his parents’ arrival in Chile: “By the end of February 1906, Giries Tarud el-Masri, who was born in Bethlehem on August 21, 1889, left his home country at 17, with his 13 year old wife, Rahme Suadi Dawid. My grandmother used to say: ‘They are almost fledglings’” (p. 13). In the second situation, the wife followed her husband after having given him some time to settle

abroad. In the meantime, she assumed alone all the household responsibilities, and this situation may have lasted for a long period of time. Salah As'ad al-Ta'mari, a Fatah leader in Bethlehem, talks about his "generation" (born in the 1940s) as a generation of children "raised by [their] mothers", while their fathers and uncles were émigrés abroad (Chesnot & Lama, 1998, p. 34). The last situation is when the emigrant came back to the village on a temporary basis to look for a wife.

In any case, marriage played a major role in the migration process, and was the first motive behind women's migration. In fact, marriages of the early generations of immigrants were still largely endogamous.

A first situation would be the traditional marriage, also called the "Arab" marriage, which required that the woman marry her paternal cousin (*ibn 'amm*) (Granqvist, 1931).<sup>3</sup> However, one should not exaggerate the binding side of this type of marriage connected with the *hamula* (patrilineal extended family) structure.

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Hilma Granqvist notes that in the 1920s, in the village of Artas (near Bethlehem), only 13.3 percent of men married their paternal cousin (Granqvist, 1931). In fact, this practice was not only a custom, it also had a socio-economic dimension. According to Nahla Abdo, this binding aspect was more felt "among landlords and rich peasants, rather than among poor peasants and the have-nots" (Abdo, 1994, p. 153). This is explained by the fact that marriages based on parenthood were associated with safeguarding and generating wealth, as well as with the political position of the *hamula*. In addition to class, endogamous marriages might have had another meaning for the expatriates: "traditional" marriage was "a way to preserve their identity" (Hammami, 1993, p. 286), as a response to the acculturation process expatriates were facing in Chile.

Another way of studying endogamy associated with emigration consists of using ethnicity as a unit of analysis rather than *hamula*. Seen from a wider angle, endogamy becomes particularly interesting when it is connected to the evolution of the matrimonial strategies prevailing in Palestine under the mandate. According to Abner Cohen, these strategies were more likely to follow social criteria rather than family related ones (Cohen, 1970, p. 196, 203 cited by Gonzalez, 1992, p. 114). Thus, emigration and social status were interconnected. In Palestine, expatriates were associated with wealth and modernity. In her autobiography, Victoria Kattan relates that her father, who was a "fanatic Catholic," refused to give her hand in marriage to Nicolas Hirmas, an expatriate who was based in Chile, because he belonged to an Orthodox family. However, he ended up accepting the proposal when he found out that the young Nicolas, who was born in Chile, studied at Barros de Arana College where he did his first communion. What was of prime importance to the father was that the migrant belonged to a "good family" and hailed from the same village. Victoria Kattan thus got married in 1924 at the age of 16 and settled in Chile.

This first pattern of women's emigration remained relatively unchanged for decades. In fact, Palestinian emigration to Chile has never completely stopped, although at no other period did it reach the peak attained in the early 20th century. It fluctuated

3. The research project conducted by Finnish anthropologist and folklorist Hilma Granqvist between 1925 and 1927 about marriage in Palestine is still considered to be a key reference in the field.

according to the pace of wars and economic crises in Palestine. New waves of migrants arrived during the years that followed the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, then after the Six Day War of 1967 and the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza strip, and more recently after the deterioration of the social situation and the beginning of the second *Intifada* in the early 2000s. Emigration through marriage, whether arranged or not, still constitutes the major mode of emigration for Palestinian expatriate women to Latin America. However, post-1967 female migrants differ from previous generations of women in that the latter had limited influence in their marriage selection whereas for the former group marriage became an opportunity to fulfill their personal and professional ambitions which were inhibited in Palestine. Palestinian women from the Bethlehem area, hailing from the middle or upper classes of society, were educated and some held university degrees. These women found in emigration to Chile a safe – although affectively costly – way to “live better”. Although this factor did count when the time came to make a decision, these marriages cannot be reduced to a simple social calculation. Now more than ever, it is women with some social connections (parents or acquaintances) who are emigrating to Chile. Women’s emigration to Chile and the birth of baby girls to families of Palestinian origin have progressively brought back equilibrium to the sex ratio of the community.

### Women’s Ethnic Organizations: Community Cohesion and “Gender Complementarity”

#### The Emergence of a Women’s Associational Movement

What role did women play in Arab-Palestinian associations? In order to answer this question, a study of the historical evolution of their participation is necessary.

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While in the 1910s “clubs” and “societies” flourished in homeland societies, associations in Latin America also developed, thanks to the efforts of Levantine immigrants. In Chile, between 1904 and 1941, nearly fifty associations were created having as a main objective the organization of intra-community mutual aid.

The great majority of these institutions were headed by men; however, women were not completely absent from this development. From the mid-1920s, as they were increasing in number, women started organizing themselves in single-sex institutions. Six women’s associations were thus created in Chile between 1924 and 1935:

the Society of the Syrian-Palestinian Ladies, the Welfare Society of Arab Ladies, the Society of the Orthodox Ladies Hamilat Al-Tib, the Society of Syrian Feminine Youth, the Society of the Women of Homs in Valparaiso, and the Society of Lebanese Ladies in Antofagasta. Similar to men’s associations, women’s associations assembled immigrants on a pan-Arab, religious, local (village of origin), and more and more on a nationalist basis (*wataniyya*), which indicated the increasing influence of Near Eastern nationalisms.

Women who took part in this first associational movement belonged to the bourgeoisie of the Arab community. All of the participating immigrants were educated and came from the most well-known families. An example of standing

and educational background was Cleo Haddad, president of the “Society of Syrian Feminine Youth”, who was also very much involved as vice-president in the “Pro-Foundation Arab College Committee” created in 1934 (Ruiz Moreno & Sáiz Muñoz, 2006, p. 363). The presence of a woman in such an important position in a mixed-sex institution was something very rare at the time. In addition to her social and cultural standing, Cleo Haddad benefited from the fact that the committee dealt with education and childhood, matters usually considered of concern to women.

The creation of female, single-sex institutions should not be considered the best available solution to women relegated to inferior positions in essentially male-dominated associations. Single-sex associations have their advantages too. First of all, they are the ideal place for women to socialize, carry conversations with each other, and share their experiences, whether ethnic or gender-related, as Arabs in Chilean society: as mothers, wives, or young daughters. What should a “señorita” (young lady) of Levantine origin living in Chile expect from marriage during the decade of the 1920s? How do they remain faithful to their own Arab origins at a time when the behavior of the indigenous women was often considered too “liberal” by the members of the community? All these questions find in this homosocial space a context for discussion in a more relaxed atmosphere than the family circle.

Women’s involvement in associations can also be considered an act of self-fulfillment. The “Society of Syrian Feminine Youth” offered courses in artistic embroidery (cited in Ruiz Moreno & Sáiz Muñoz, 2006, p. 368). Some institutions even offered the possibility of professional training for women in the textile industry – a domain in which the community’s men had excelled since the mid-1930s. Emilia Yazigi J. offered a course entitled “Fashion, Cut, and Tailoring” at the Women’s Technical School of Santiago (cited in Ruiz Moreno & Sáiz Muñoz, 2006, p. 368). These schools that have been opening throughout Chile since 1887 for the professional training of young women specialized in this industrial sector. However, working women of Arab origin were still considered exceptions in Chile,<sup>4</sup> especially among the wealthier classes, because unlike women belonging to the small merchant class, wealthy women did not join the family-run shop.

This low rate of women’s activity within the Arab community should be examined in the structural context of both Chilean and Levantine society: in 1930 women represented 20.2 percent of the working population in Chile<sup>5</sup> whereas women represented only 9.4 percent of the working population<sup>6</sup> of Palestine in 1931. The first women immigrants to Chile were not allowed to practice street trading, unlike in the United States where Alixa Naff noted the existence of a great deal of women peddlers (Naff, 1985, p. 177).<sup>7</sup> Borrowing Oswaldo Truzzi’s hypothesis concerning Levantine women immigrants to Brazil (Truzzi, 2001, p. 115), one can say that the strong patriarchal and less pragmatic culture prevailing in Latin America prevented women from negotiating their independence. In the ethnic press such as *La Reforma* and *Mundo Árabe*, some articles regularly described women’s incorporation into the job market as a way of “corrupting the family, destabilizing and destroying the traditional structures,” in addition to making women “masculine” (cited in Ruiz Moreno & Sáiz Muñoz, 2006, p. 348).

4. However, exceptions are to be mentioned, such as Mary Jury, M.D. The ads for her cabinet of “surgery and women’s diseases” appear regularly in the community press (Ruiz Moreno & Sáiz Muñoz, 2006, p. 348). Again, because she practiced in a domain that used to be considered “compatible” with women’s attributes (i.e. caring for people) Mary Jury was able to practice “honorably”.

5. According to the census data (Hutchinson, 2000).

6. According to the census data (Fleischmann, 2003, p. 52).

7. According to Naff, it was these women who introduced new commodities such as linen and lingerie.

As most women of Levantine origin were not part of the work force, they nevertheless found in their associations a way to join the public sphere by performing activities such as voluntary and charity work. Fundraisings organized by distinguished figures of the community such as Salha Hirmas de Chehade, for instance (*Mundo Árabe*, 28-11-1935, p. 4), were exclusively destined to assist the Arab community, particularly the most deprived families or the recently-settled ones. Later on, these associations widened the scope of their activities to reach the entire Chilean society (Ruiz Moreno & Sáiz Muñoz, 2006, pp. 352-354). Thanks to the donations received, the “Society of the Syrian-Palestinian Ladies” was able to distribute food and clothing. It was even able to donate the sum of three thousand US Dollars to those who lost their jobs as a result of the economic crisis of 1930 (*La Reforma*, July 26, 1931, p. 3). This generous donation received an unprecedented echo in the Chilean press: an *El Mercurio* commentary noted that “[t]he Arab community has wished to contribute to alleviating the difficult situation that affects the whole country through various acts of solidarity in order to help the most deprived in these times of hardship, [times] that demand great sacrifices from the entire society [...] It is a nice example of solidarity these women are showing at a moment when solidarity is needed more than ever” (August 19, 1931, p.1).

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There is some similarity between the women’s organizations in Chile and those of the Near Eastern, urban, educated, middle class women’s associations at the beginning of the 20th century (Fleishmann, 2003, pp. 95-96). Their contemporaneity, the similarity of their members’ sociological profile, even the resemblance among the names of these associations are striking. According to Ellen Fleischmann, the first organization created in Palestine is most probably the Society of the Orthodox Ladies, founded in Jaffa in 1910, to be followed soon by the Association of Arab Women and the Club of the Arab Ladies, both located in Jerusalem and respectively founded in 1919 and 1921 (Fleischmann, 1995). Whether in the host country or in the “homeland,” the essence of these associations was that charity is inherent to both religion and Arab culture, and that this task is particularly associated with women’s roles. But charity is not only a mere cultural duty. In Chile, women’s associations were filling the gap left by the host state in the social field. The poor educational and public health infrastructure were the motives that made Arab immigrants seek assistance from their own community.

However, there is a substantial difference between the evolution of women’s institutions in the country of origin and that of the institutions created in the country of emigration. In Palestine, the women associational movement became highly politicized. Its leaders modified the notion of charity to put it in the service of the “nation” and openly criticized the Zionist movement. Their members organized conferences, participated in street demonstrations, sent memoranda to the authorities, and visited prisoners. In other words, these middle and upper class women constituted an integral part of the Palestinian nationalist movement. By contrast, Arab women associations in Chile did not take part in the expansion of early Palestinian nationalism. However, this nationalism had a great impact on

Arab immigrants' milieus and was reported extensively by the community press. The Great Arab Rebellion in Palestine (1936-1939) gave rise to an unprecedented movement of long distance solidarity. In 1938 a Central Committee pro-Victims of the Arab Revolution in Palestine was created in order to raise funds from all the Arab associations in Chile. Significantly enough, these fundraisings and activities did not include any women charity association, keeping them away from any activity that had a political connotation.

### From Charity to Culture: Women Associations as Factor of Cohesion

The apolitical attitude of the Arab women associations vis-à-vis Near Eastern issues persisted until the 1960s. By centralizing the previously created associations, the United Committee of Arab Ladies carried on with its social mission of charity that was praised by the community press as an expression of "noble solidarity" of "Arab women".<sup>8</sup> In 1960, the Committee was mobilized in order to assist the victims of the terrible Valdivia earthquake that caused more than 2000 casualties.

In general, women stayed away from the ideological debates that were pulling apart the circles of immigrants who were of Arab descent. Neither did they argue about the importance of "anti-imperialism" to the Arab cause, nor did they take a stand concerning which kind of political regime is most suitable for the Middle East. However, this does not mean that their associations were not affected by the nationalisms exported from the homeland. Indeed, in 1958 the United Committee of Arab Ladies was created as a result of the merging of the associations of Levantine women in the name of "Arab unity", a slogan that was clearly influenced by the then fashionable pan-Arabism.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, this identification did not make women more involved in debates or more thoroughly committed to nationalist actions.

The first signs of a more in-depth involvement of women of Levantine origin appeared as early as 1935 in traditionally male-dominated political milieus.<sup>10</sup> In 1965, Juana Dip Muhana and Margarita Paluz Rivas were the first two MPs of Arab descent to be elected to the Chilean Parliament. Their election was all the more noteworthy knowing that, at the time, only 8.2 percent of the MPs were women. Both of them were members of the Christian Democratic Party. Juana Dip's political achievements are quite telling as to the way these women re-invested their gender identity into politics. A non-working mother of two, her political career started at the age of forty after having dedicated herself for a long period of time to basic social organizations (juntas de vecinos, i.e., neighborhood meetings, nurseries, and farmers' organizations aiming to achieve land reform).<sup>11</sup> Dip, an MP of Lebanese origin, was one of the rare persons to talk openly about the political situation prevailing in the Middle East. At the beginning of her mandate, she paid a vibrant tribute to Nasser during a parliamentary session in July 1965. Juana Dip praised the role played by Egyptian women as to the implementation of 'Arab socialism': "This young democracy has granted women a privileged space; they are participating at all levels of the hierarchy and collaborating efficiently in various activities, leaving their indisputable seal on them".<sup>12</sup> Later on, in December 1968, she vigorously denounced the Israeli military operation perpetrated against the Beirut International Airport, in retaliation for the operation led by the Popular Front for the Liberation of

8. *Palestina Patria Mártir, Palestine, a Martyr Country* (Santiago), June 1965.

9. See Lumi de Zalaquett and Idette Falaha, *Comité Unido de Damas Árabes: 50 años de vida y pasión 1958-2008*, United Committee of Arab Ladies: 50 years of life and passion 1958-2008, Ed. Copygraph, Santiago de Chile, 2009, p. 168.

10. Since 1935 in municipal elections.

11. She was re-elected in 1973 for a second term that was interrupted only after a few months by the military coup against President Salvador Allende. [http://biografias.bcn.cl/wiki/Juana\\_Dip\\_Muhana](http://biografias.bcn.cl/wiki/Juana_Dip_Muhana)

12. 21st parliamentary session, Wednesday July 21, 1965, p. 2616-2617.



The United Committee of Arab Ladies' meeting with the First Lady of Chile, María Ruiz Tagle de Frei, 1965. Source: *Palestina Patria Mártir* (Santiago), June 1966

Palestine. However, this was far from being a feminist discourse questioning “gender complementarity.” Members of the United Committee of Arab Ladies as well as MPs of Levantine origin shared the same idea according to which women have to assume a specific social role, a “characteristic seal,” as it pleased Juana Dip to point out.

It is in the name of this specificity that Arab women’s associations took hold of the promotion of their original culture. For Julia Hasbun de Tanus, secretary of the United Committee of Arab Ladies, the aim of the organization was to concretize “the sentiment of compassion that any woman feels towards vulnerable persons” as well as to “make the Arab countries, their language, their culture, and their achievement known as proof of the huge affection [these ladies] have for [their] fathers’ homeland”.<sup>13</sup> At a time when Arab cultural distinguishing features (language, marriage traditions, the Orthodox religion) in Chile were fading away rapidly, women embarked on a revitalization process whose most important feature was to secure the support of anti-imperialist industrialists and intellectuals of Arab origin. Hence women were able to play a mediating role within the community that conferred on them a new status. In this atmosphere of intra-communitarian tensions and divisions, women’s associations perceived themselves as a unifying factor. So in Chile, like elsewhere in other countries of immigration (Gabbaccia, 1972), the role of these women’s organizations was more to reinforce the cohesion of the immigrant community than to promote women’s autonomy.

13. “Colocación de la Primera Piedra del Pabellón des Estudios Árabes” (Laying of the First Stone of the Pavilion of Arabic Studies), *Palestina Patria Mártir* (Santiago), September-October 1965.

In 1965, the United Committee of Arab Ladies was able to collect enough funds in order to acquire a pavilion at the University of Chile with the aim of creating a Center for Arabic Studies (CAS). The first university institution of its kind in Latin America, the CAS became an exceptional center for the diffusion of Arab culture.



As a consequence of this donation Wagiha María Numan de Labán, president of the Committee, was decorated in October 1965 by the Ambassador of the United Arab Republic on behalf of Nasser's government.

## Women's Participation in Long Distance Nationalist Organizations: Between Promises and Frustrations

### Women's Involvement in the Palestinian Cause

From the 1970s onward, the role of women in community associations started to

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change. Some of them started to question the traditional gender segregation of the organizations' work. On September 21, 1970, the FRELIPA (Palestinian Liberation Front), a leftist Chilean organization founded by Mahfud Massis and Fuad Habash, accomplished the first public action in Latin America in support of the Palestinian Liberation Organization: 25 persons – four of whom were women – occupied the Jordanian Embassy in Santiago for eight hours in protest against the crimes perpetrated by the Hashemite government during "Black September".<sup>14</sup> Women's participation in this occupation was the cause behind the irruption of new women activists in the National Palestinian Movement, such as Leïla Khaled,

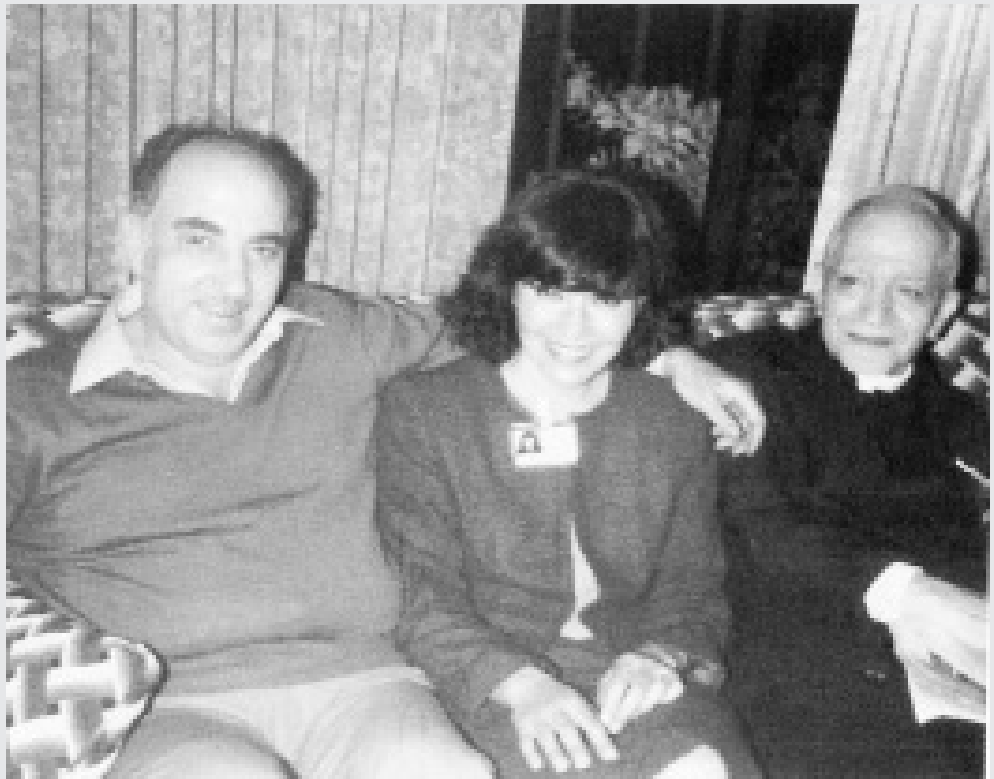
the first woman to participate in a plane hijacking. The global impact of Leïla Khaled's action radically changed the conception of young Levantine women with regard to traditional gender roles in the Arab world. Consequently, the questioning of gender segregation became more widespread and disrupted traditional customs, even those prevailing in progressive organizations such as the FRELIPA, which had set aside a "women's section".<sup>15</sup>

For the young women of the diaspora, demands for the mixing of gender went hand in hand with their political debut. For the younger generations, it was not possible any more to support the Palestinian cause in women's organizations whose actions were labeled "a-political". Nancy Lolas Silva was one of the first women of Palestinian origin to have played a political role in promoting long distance nationalism – refusing to confine herself to educational issues and charity work. In 1978, she opened the Palestinian Information Bureau inside the Palestinian Club with Michel Marzuca, Fuad Dawabe, and Nicola Hadwa (Lolas, 2001, p. 56). The young woman militated in favor of the Palestinian Club becoming more openly committed to the Palestinian cause and getting closer to the PLO.

14. "Toma sede de embajada jordana" (The occupation of the Jordanian Embassy), *El Mercurio* (Santiago), September, 22 1970.

15. Cf "Saludos al departamento femenino del Frente de Liberación de Palestina con motivo de elección", (Greetings to the women's section of the Palestinian Liberation Front, on the occasion of its election), *Palestina Patria Mártir* (Santiago), September 1964.

In July 1984, the first conference on Palestinian Entities in Latin America and the Caribbean (COPLAC) convened in São Paulo in Brazil (Lolas, 2001, pp. 232-233). The event was jointly organized by the Federation of Arab-Palestinian Entities of Brazil and the Palestinian Club of Chile. It is Nancy Lolas' will of iron that convinced Carlos Abumohor Touma, then president of the Palestinian Club, to accept this task: "This was the first time Nancy Lolas and Carlos Abumohor clashed. Earlier, he used to argue that this was a club of social and sports activities and that its taking part in this conference was a highly political act. Although Nancy Lolas admitted that this was true, she nevertheless considered that it was absolutely essential to do something for the Palestinian cause" (Abumohor, 2005, p. 129). Not only did Nancy



Nancy Lolos between Salah Khalaf (Abu Iyad) and father Ibrahim Ayad / Amman, Jordan, 1985, Source : Lolos, 2001, p. 85.

Lolas achieve her objectives; she also managed to obtain recognition from the PLO. She was one of the eleven Latin American representatives to have been appointed by the PLO at the National Palestinian Council (NPC). Five of these representatives came from Chile alone, and two of them were women (Nancy Lolos and Rita Hazboun). Nancy Lolos was the only one who was not born in Palestine. This status within the PLO conferred on her a new legitimacy. In 1987, she was elected president of both the Palestinian Federation in Chile (a new entity deriving from the São Paulo Conference) and the Palestinian Club. She replaced Carlos Abumohor Touma, who reigned over the club for twenty five years. This was no slight achievement because she had to convince the members to let a woman run as a candidate, which at the time caused a real “scandal” (Abumohor, 2005, p. 131).

But Nancy Lolos was not the only person to effect change within the institutions of the community. Other young women from Santiago, Viña del Mar, and from other regions managed to improve their status as well. Nancy Lolos’ achievement remains, however, an exceptional one, as she was elected to the head of the most important Palestinian organization in Chile. Nevertheless, her consecration had a lot to do with Yasser Arafat’s personal co-optation as well as that of the PLO leadership since 1984. However, gender desegregation does not necessarily mean equality, and the majority of the Palestinian institutions remained male-dominated. In addition to the gender-

bias already prevalent in Chilean society, there is also the widespread belief in patriarchy in Arab culture that all top positions should be held by men, and a good number of women of Arab origin continue to be involved in women's associations. Although somehow in decline since the 1980s, these associations remain active in charity work (donations to schools, nurseries, hospitals, the Red Cross, etc.), promoting "Arab culture," and perpetuating traditional bourgeois customs such as organizing "tea fashion shows" or "tea-bingo" parties.<sup>16</sup>

#### Between Women's Leadership and Exit Strategies

The revival of Arab-Palestinian organizations in Chile since the early 2000s that came as a result of the second Intifada has allowed a new generation of women to emerge in the community associations, and particularly in student associations focused on the Palestinian cause. In a few years, about ten organizations were either created or reactivated. In Santiago we saw the emergence of the Association of Youths for Palestine (AYFP), and the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS), whereas in the small towns of the provinces such as Concepción, Viña del Mar, Iquique, Valdivia, Chillán, or Temuco, "Arab Youths" or "Palestinian Youths" organizations were created.

The members of these associations are usually between 16 and 25 years of age, and girls are very much in the foreground. Many of them have held leadership positions for long periods of times: Elisa Abedrapo at the GUPS-Santiago (2002-2004) and Camila Mattar Hazbun (2009-present) at the Arab Youth for Palestine in Valdivia were two activists elected thanks to their charisma, family background (their parents were active within the community associations), and achievements within other political organizations such as student unions or youth sections within party organizations. They were the ones interviewed by the press, hence becoming the emblematic figures of their organizations.

Taking up the leadership of these highly politicized organizations was no ordinary task for these young women, the majority of whom claimed to be feminists. A frequently mentioned term by these women – as well as by some men – is *caudillismo* (i.e., the ideology of rule by the strong man), used in order to describe the historical form of leadership prevailing in these institutions. The term is borrowed from Latin-American historiography and evokes for its users the idea of personal power and that of an "authoritarian" government.

As a response to the transformations experienced by Arab Chilean men with regards to their masculinity, some young women of Arab-Palestinian origin became more committed to their political engagement within the associations – sometimes being more extremist and uncompromising, politically speaking, than their male counterparts. These attitudes show a quest for legitimacy and identity manifesting itself in the desire to embody the sublimated figure of "authentic" Palestinian militancy. This quest for identity is all stronger because women have to assume the biggest share of responsibility in passing on cultural traditions. Not only are they expected to accomplish duties that are traditionally perceived as being "theirs" in

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16. "Tea-bingo of the Society of Arab Women", *El Mercurio de Valparaíso* (Valparaíso), 19 May 2009, "Fashion show of the Committee of Arab Women", *El Mercurio* (Santiago), 4 September 2004.



Elisa Abedrapo,  
interview in  
Montevideo,  
Uruguay, 2006.  
Source : [http://www.  
radio36.com.uy](http://www.radio36.com.uy)

the domestic sphere (such as cooking and educating children), but also to choose carefully a future spouse on whom the transmission of the family name will depend. Thus, the patronymic is a determining factor for the Arab-Palestinian diaspora's identification in Chile; whereas for other groups religion and phenotype constitute differentiating criteria, this is not the case for Arab-Palestinians.

This quest for identity is quite clear in the choice that these women have made when they decided to go alone to visit the Palestinian Occupied Territories. This step is noteworthy as it is rare and comes out of individual choice. Unlike many Palestinian families in Brazil – who are more recently settled and who regularly send their children to Palestine or to Jordan to get acquainted with features of Arab culture such as language and marital customs – families of Palestinian descent in Chile do not organize trips for their children to visit their home country (Jardim, 2007 and 2009). The travel projects of these young women reflect a personal decision, even an act of protest vis-à-vis their parents, and are an event in need of much preparation such as taking on “small jobs” to self-finance the long trip. For these young women, the trips constitute their first contact with the Near East as well as a major step with respect to their Palestinian identity, as Nadia Hassan's testimony reveals:

We are very proud to be the children and grand-children of Palestinians in Chile. We proudly reveal our origins whenever it is possible. However, and without being aware of it, we are much farther of what many of us consider as

their homeland, Palestine [...] I spent these last months in Palestine. I was able to recognize in the faces of the people I met, those who warmly welcomed this Chilean woman, my origins; I recognized my own face [...]. Palestine is a land of stories and not a mythical land where olive trees blossom [...].<sup>17</sup>

For someone of Arab-Palestinian origin, there is a great deal of discovery that starts upon arrival to Palestine during these trips: an immersion in the language and the discovery of the landscape and that of the people of course, but also and particularly the brutality of the occupation forces. Three of these young women were deported – this is the term that was stamped on their passport – by the Israeli authorities after denying them entry into the Occupied Territories: Elisa Abedrapo in December 2003; Nadia Hasan twice, in September 2005 and in May 2007; and Nadia Silhi in December 2009.<sup>18</sup> The experience is both humiliating and makes the person feel guilty. Nadia Silhi said that the Israeli soldiers treated her as a child and made her feel as a punished “little girl” Nadia Hasan said that she cried as a “little girl” during her questioning. For these leftist young women, the experience recalls the bad memories of the violation of human rights under the military dictatorship (1973-1990). Upon their return, all of them publicly denounced the way they were treated.<sup>19</sup>

17. Nadia Hasan, “Palestinos fuera de Palestina, algo más que un sentimiento,” [“Palestinians far from Palestine, something more than just a feeling”], <http://www.rebelion.org/noticia.php?id=24560>

18. See in particular, Concerning the case of Elisa Abedrapo Iglesias *El Mercurio* (Santiago), 20 December 2003; *La Cuarta* (Santiago), 30 December 2003; and *El Morrocotudo* (Arica), 28 March 2007. Concerning the case of Nadia Hasan Abdo see *La Estrella Palestina* (Buenos Aires), 7 May 2007. Concerning the case of Nadia Silhi Chahin, see Comisión Nacional de Comunicaciones / Federación Palestina de Chile, 15 December 2009, [http://www.oicpalestina.org/ver\\_noticias.php?id=5613](http://www.oicpalestina.org/ver_noticias.php?id=5613)

19. For more information see *El Mercurio* (Santiago), 7 January 2004; and *Radio cooperativa* (Santiago), 13 April 2007.

20. See for instance: <http://memoriasdeunajovenformal.blogspot.com/>

Despite their will and determination, the young activists are often disillusioned as to their experience with the Palestinian associations in Chile: they are judged based upon their physical aspect, overwhelmed by the egos and ambitions of their comrades, and overexploited when it comes to executing tasks in the associations. Indeed many are the grievances of these young women vis-à-vis the prevailing structures of the community. When it comes to facing all these difficulties, many of them prefer to retreat, using what Albert Hirschman calls “defection” rather than “speech” (Hirschman, 1995). Many of the interviewed activists abandoned the Palestinian associations due to their disillusion with the working conditions and a lack of receptivity toward their political stances. Significantly enough, there is no single example of a woman having made use of the community associations’ milieu as a “stepping stone” to achieve a political career, whereas since the 1950s scores of political men of Arab-Palestinian origin have earned their spurs in the community institutions.

However, leaving the community associations does not mean being deprived of the right to a voice in the political domain. Many of the young women who left the associations or chose to remain far from them carry on with their activism through writing. In fact, journalism and blogging constitute for these activists a more personal way of contributing to the public debate.<sup>20</sup>

This tension between the cultural or political nature of women’s organizations is still strong among the Palestinian-Chilean community. May al-Kaila, appointed in 2005 Head of the Delegation of Palestine in Chile, is particularly aware of this problem. A gynecologist and former Secretary General of the office of Women’s Movement in Fatah (1999-2005), May el-Kaila was the first woman appointed as a Palestinian ambassador in Latin America. The role of women within the Palestinian national movement is particularly important for her and she nourishes the project

to settle the Chilean chapter of the General Union of Palestinian Women (UGFP), a historical organization of the PLO. While working closely with Nelly Marzouka, a clinical psychologist from the Palestinian-Chilean community, to establish the new organization during the year 2012, May al-Kaila has encountered some reluctance regarding the establishment of a UGFP-Chile. Many women from the diaspora still refuse any kind of politicization of their organizations and want to limit them to charity.

### Conclusion

Women of the Arab-Palestinian diaspora in Chile have been heavily involved in the life of community associations since the 1920s. Until the early 1980s their contribution consisted exclusively of a commitment within women's institutions directed toward the promotion of Arab culture and the community's reputation through charity works addressing Chilean society in its entirety. Their contribution was significant and has had an overall positive impact. Unlike their counterparts in Palestine, these associations were not politically engaged, and were barely involved in supporting Palestinian nationalism.

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In the 1980s, a new generation of women seriously challenged this type of middle-class female engagement that consisted of filling the empty positions left by men. By mobilizing themselves for the Palestinian cause, these new activists challenged traditional gender segregation in the associations' work and claimed their place within the gender-mixed community institutions. Some of them even managed to reach leadership positions, something that used to be unthinkable earlier, and their successors today occupy top positions in students' associations. However, Palestinian organizations remain in their majority dominated by the men of the community, and this is all the more true given that women usually choose defection whenever an internal crisis arises. Although it has made some change as far as gender roles and representations are concerned, the choice of mixed gender has led to a relative decline in women's associations in the country, thus depriving young women of Arab descent of a space of their own that is still waiting to be recreated.

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