

REVIEW

Women's Political Activism in Palestine: Peacebuilding, Resistance, and Survival

Sophie Richter-Devroe

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Reviewed by SOPHIA GOODFRIEND

Women's Political Activism in Palestine is a timely intervention. In 2021 a new generation of Palestinian activists came into the global spotlight. Young influencers turned away from more established political avenues, using social media to broadcast the damaging effects of Israel's military rule on everyday life in Palestine. Their narratives drew global attention to the injustices of Israel's occupation, framing the Palestinian struggle alongside growing movements against racism and dispossession worldwide. As 2021 demonstrated, and as Sophie Richter-Devroe writes in her introduction, "the need to refocus and rethink what 'doing politics' really means in Palestine seems even more urgent today" (2). Her analysis of Palestinian women's activism since the second intifada provides valuable historical and theoretical context to the shifting landscape of grassroots struggle across Palestine.

Richter-Devroe joins many scholars who have retheorized Palestinian politics since the failure of the Oslo Accords, the intensification of Israel's military rule, and the disintegration of Palestinian national leadership (Hammami 2006; Hasso 2005; Kanaaneh 2009; Peteet 2018; Shalhoub-Kevorkia 2015). By focusing on Palestinian women in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, Richter-Devroe clarifies how women continue the struggle for Palestinian liberation in ways that exceed the frameworks of secular nationalism or Islamism. Drawing on postcolonial and feminist critiques (Abu-Lughod 2000; Fraser 1992) of classic political theory (Habermas 1984, 1989), Richter-Devroe demonstrates how women engage in an "informal politics" enacted in quotidian contexts and through improvised, often private, practices (2): from anti-wall protests or commuting past checkpoints to sharing food with neighbors as settlers encroach on one's land. In this way, Richter-Devroe's method is ethnographic. Her data, based on fieldwork in the West Bank and East Jerusalem between 2007 and 2009, derive from scores of interviews, focus groups, and participant observations of political events with women from diverse crosscuts of Palestinian society.

The ethnographic details woven into the three main chapters allow readers to latch on to protagonists, women who became Richter-Devroe's key interlocutors (all pseudonymized) throughout her fieldwork. It is their life stories that clarify the stakes of her theoretical interventions. In chapter 1, for example, Richter-Devroe critiques peace-building initiatives between Palestinian and Israeli women, such as women-to-women dialogue groups often celebrated in international media. We hear from Najla, a woman who as a child witnessed her sister's death at the hands of Israeli occupation forces. For Najla, her sister's death disturbs efforts to dialogue with Jewish Israeli women about the conflict. Her testimony demonstrates how such initiatives often depoliticize women's experiences by positioning Israeli and Palestinian women as equals, thus sidelining justice-oriented and rights-based frameworks. Richter-Devroe therefore argues that the liberal political theories undergirding such peace-building initiatives — theories of political neutrality, dialogue, and consensus — cannot account for the power asymmetries and injustices of a settler-colonial context.

As more liberal forms of political practice fall short, chapter 2 turns to the popular, nonviolent, and collective forms of resistance Palestinian women engage in. Here Richter-Devroe provides a compelling history of popular resistance in Palestine since the first intifada, underscoring Israel's increasingly violent response to popular struggle. Richter-Devroe demonstrates how women engage in embodied, symbolic acts of resistance in the face of such constraints. This includes protesting in front of the separation wall, lying down in bulldozers' paths, or refusing to vacate their homes. These acts allow women to forge a political subjectivity beyond the frames imposed by international media, traditional forms of nationalism, and Islamism, which often confine women to a depoliticized, nurturing role of mother, wife, or sister. Putting their bodies on the line to protect their land, homes, and families allows women to dramatize how they experience the violence of Israel's military rule.

In chapter 3 Richter-Devroe homes in on the private political acts that unfold alongside these public acts of resistance. In so doing, she joins a number of anthropologists and sociologists who have, since the 1980s, outlined the importance of *sumud*, often translated as "steadfastness," to Palestinian political struggle (Allan 2014; Sayigh 2007; Shehadeh 1982). Importantly, Richter-Devroe does not frame *sumud* as the romanticized ideal of political action often invoked in scholarship on Palestine. Instead, Richter-Devroe describes it as an everyday practice that materializes in the contradictory ways women get by the "tragicomedy" of life under occupation. Amal visits Jewish Israeli settlements adjacent to her East Jerusalem neighborhood to unwind with a book. Karima assents to another peace-building dialogue group so she can relax at the beach in Haifa afterward. Women narrate such practices with ironic humor yet affirm that these everyday tactics of survival defy the egregious restrictions on Palestinian movement and fragmentation of their space, as well as internal patriarchal structures embedded in their communities. These small acts allow women to navigate external and internal forms of domination on

their terms. One of the book's most important contributions is Richter-Devroe's insistence that such actions constitute an essential form of political agency.

Richter-Devroe's book will be valuable for readers interested in the genesis of contemporary activism in Palestine and the gendered contours of political action writ large. At times her interlocuters' compelling stories are eclipsed by a persistent engagement with liberal political theory. Recent ethnographic studies of Palestine, especially those focusing on colonialism and gender, would allow Richter-Devroe to make more effective theoretical interventions. Nonetheless, this volume presents critical-historical context and theoretical frameworks to apprehend political struggle in Palestine. Richter-Devroe's insights are not only essential for scholars and students of Israel/Palestine and politics in the Middle East but pertinent to those eager to put contemporary events in context to understand how Palestinian women activists have engaged and continue to engage in political struggle.

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