The Gender Gap in Palestinian Political Support: Why do women prefer Hamas?
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Polling data shows that a persistent gender gap exists in political support in the Palestinian Territories: women are more inclined to support Hamas, and men are more inclined to support Fatah. The different levels of support may even account for Hamas’ startling electoral victory, over a decade ago, in 2006. Here I will explore why more women than men support Hamas, and why more men than women might support Fatah. My research is based on statistical analysis of 56 opinion polls carried out in the Palestinian Territories between 2000 and 2015, and interviews with eighty individuals, expert and non-expert, from across the West Bank and Gaza.

First I would like to emphasize the main factors influencing an individual’s political support in the Palestinian territories regardless of gender. These include the influence of family and friends, a preference for the policy positions of one party over another in relation to tactics of resistance or negotiations with Israel, a preference for the ideological stance of one party over another, admiration for a leader, perceived economic benefit of supporting one party over another and perceptions of corruption within different parties. These factors play a primary role in determining political support of individuals, however certain factors impact men and women differently creating the gender gap in political support.

Religiosity is an important explanatory factor for the gender gap in political support. Women as a result of societal pressures, socio-economic restrictions and the nature of the nationalist rhetoric that dominates the political scene, tend to be more religiously devout than men. Their increased religiosity correlates with, and explains, to a certain extent, their greater level of support for Hamas.

Women’s rights play an interesting role in determining political support. While women’s rights are rarely seen as a priority by men or women in the Palestinian territories, as long as the greater injustice of the Israeli occupation is not addressed, they do play a role in determining political support. Leftist parties advertise their commitment to gender equality, while Hamas shows a strong commitment to women’s involvement in the movement, though while adhering to an Islamic framework that emphasizes a separation of the sexes.

Gender differences in socio-economic status also partially explains the gender difference in political support. Men are more involved in the world of work than women. Employment rates attest to this. Women, as in most countries around the world, have a lower socio-economic status than men. This means that men are more likely than women to benefit more directly from any employment opportunities granted to them by those in authority. While on the other hand, women, as those who usually hold primary caring responsibilities, are more likely to benefit from other structures which provide support at a local level through charitable, educational or other organizations, which in Islamic societies may often
be provided through Islamic charitable networks. The organizations which bestow either welfare and services or else employment are likely able to influence the recipient in their political interests. The gender difference in needs and roles therefore translates into a gender difference in political support.

In my conclusion I want to tie my research to the current political situation in the Palestinian Territories. While elections continue to be delayed in the territories, an understanding of where political support lies is important for numerous parties. My research should be able to help Palestinian politicians address better the needs of their people. It should also help the international community understand that frustration with the status quo is the greatest political motivator in the Palestinian Territories, and this, more than anything else, has led to support for Hamas. It should also show that to a certain extent improving socio-economic status can correlate to support for those in authority.