MUSLIM NGOs, ISLAM AND GENDER
BETWEEN LOCAL TRADITIONS AND THE WEST:
THE CASE OF JORDAN

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Abstract

The issue of gender is of a contentious nature among Jordanian Muslim NGOs. It evokes their criticism of certain western influences as well as of certain local traditions in the name of Islam. Al Afaf Society is the Jordanian Muslim NGO that is most specialized in marriage and gender issues. Its discourse and its practices in this regard are ambiguous and display conservative as well as anti-traditionalist features. Other Muslim NGOs, in particular certain women’s associations, are more outspokenly in favor of women’s rights in the wider society and in the public realm.

1. Introduction

This presentation is largely based upon research I carried out for my PhD-thesis on Muslim NGOs in Jordan. I defended this thesis on 13 June 2007 in Utrecht in the Netherlands. The guiding theme of my dissertation, that was published at the beginning of 2008, was the question whether Muslim voluntary welfare associations in Jordan try to foster the empowerment and self-reliance of their target groups, such as the poor, the orphans, divorced mothers, children of risk and the handicapped, or rather patronize them and reinforce their state of dependency, and how this relates to their position within Jordanian civil society. I was asked by the organizers of this workshop to focus my presentation at one of the associations that distinguishes itself by its focus on marriage- and family-issues. This association attracts a relatively great amount of media-attention in Jordan by the mass-weddings it organizes for young Jordanian couples. This brought me to the idea to focus this paper on the way Jordanian Muslim NGOs deal with gender issues, and how their discourses and

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practices in this regard are affected by Islamic ideologies, local traditions as well as western influences.

The American anthropologist Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad has distinguished two different Islamic approaches toward gender issues that have been prominent in the Muslim world during the last three decades or so: on the one hand the conservative approaches of various traditionalist ‘ulama seeing the role of the woman as limited to the family sphere and as subjugated to her husband, and on the other hand more progressive Islamist approaches that tend to see the woman as an autonomous and equal being with a rightful space for herself and an independent role to play in private as well as in public spaces. The conservative view seems to affect Islamists when they perceive socio-cultural threats toward Muslim society emanating from the west.

According to Haddad, “for the Islamists, women are maintainers of tradition and are relegated to the task of being the last bastion against foreign penetration”. She continues: “Given the perception of the collapse of western society, it is clear that traditional family values in the Arab world will be propagated strongly (by the Islamists) for fear of loss of social cohesion” (Haddad in Haddad and Esposito 1998, pp. 12 – 21). On the other hand, I would say that Islamist discourse becomes more progressive in tone when it criticizes the unislamic character of indigenous habits and customs that are oppressive toward women and deny them their opportunities in society.

For this reason, I have chosen the concepts of “the West” and of “local traditions” to assess the religious discourses and the social practices of Jordanian Muslim NGOs toward gender issues. I will start to describe the discourses and practices of Al-Afaf Welfare Society. Afterward, I will compare the approach of this Society with that of some other Jordanian Muslim NGOs. At the end, I will make some concluding remarks concerning the role gender is playing in the Islamic discourses and the social practices of Jordanian Muslim NGOs, and the impact of western influences and local traditions in this regard.

2. The Mass Weddings held by Al-Afaf Society

On 25 July 2003, I attended the collective wedding party of that year organized by Al-Afaf Society in Amman. Fifty-two couples celebrated their marriage in a mass party attended by thousands of visitors. The party took place in and around the Islamic Dar ul-Argam school in an affluent Amman neighborhood. The street leading to the
school building was packed with cars, buses and invited families. Banners welcomed
the visitors. Upon entering the school area, men and women visitors were separated
from one another, as men and women celebrate in separate parts of the complex.
There was excitement in the air. Men in green uniforms from the Jerusalem Scouting
Association walked around to maintain order. An Al Afaf Association spokesman
welcomed the visitors, thanked Allah for enabling all those present to attend the party,
declared it a joyful occasion and presented the program. Qur’anic verses regarding
marriage and family life were recited. Next, the spokesman rose to the platform again,
and spoke of the values of marriage, sharing, solidarity and love. He expressed the
wish that “the fatherland … be a land of love and welfare for everyone”. Several
Islamist male singing groups performed throughout the feast. They sang of Allah the
Almighty and the merits of marriage, and of bride and bridegroom. Mostly no musical
instruments were used, except for occasional drums. Nonetheless, the performances
were rhythmic in character. Many men in the audience started to clap, and some
danced. Finally, the fifty-two bridegrooms were led to the schoolyard by a group of
men in white kefiya’s and traditional robes. Once in the schoolyard, white foam was
poured over the bridegrooms and a circle was created within which they danced.
Towards the end of the party, dabkeh-dancers bared their fists and sang of liberating
Palestine from the “Zionist enemy”.

Al Afaf is one of the many associations in Jordan founded and run by people
belonging to the mainstream Jordanian Islamist movement, which is dominated by
the Muslim Brotherhood. The association’s founders were alarmed by the lack of
access to marriage for many young Jordanians due to the high financial and material
demands of the wedding parties, along with the costs and demands involved in
starting a family. In their view, these high demands and the inability of young people
to meet them result into prolonged bachelor- and spinsterhood and could easily lead
to the spread of sexual immorality as well as to the disintegration of Muslim society.
Out of an anti-materialist and anti-consumerist conviction, they condemn the habits of
young Jordanians to wait until they have obtained a well-paying job, a spacious home
and a beautiful car before they decide to marry. In the words of its director: “material
expectations should be lowered, and a higher priority should be put to the importance,
the warmth and the love of marriage”. Islamic ideals of solidarity or takaful between
the rich and poor are part of their motivation as well. In the words of its president,
Abdul Latif Arabiyat, who is also a prominent Islamist politician in Jordan: “we see
two extremes in our society now. On the one hand, there are many people in Jordan who are so poor that they do not have the means to have a simple wedding party, and on the other hand, there are rich people who spend tens of thousands of dinars on wedding parties, and celebrate them with a lot of glamour and with the aim to show off. According to him, it would be better if the rich spent part of their money on helping the poor to marry. The collective weddings, to which wealthy donors and companies contribute financially as well as in-kind, are an expression of this conviction. They are meant to create an atmosphere of shared joy and togetherness, regardless of the social ranking of the participants, and to symbolize a “better Islamic society”, characterized by a spirit of modesty, cooperation and compassion; a society in which rich people spent part of their wealth on the welfare of the less privileged, rather than on their own social prestige (Harmsen in ISIM-newsletter no. 13, 30).

In this vein, Al Afaf-society’s mass-weddings constitute a living criticism of certain aspects of Jordanian and Arab traditional culture. This is illustrated by the views of a married couple I interviewed that had participated in one of the Society’s collective weddings. Their motivation for participation seems not to have been informed by financial want. In particular the family of the wife was well-to-do and could have financed a regular wedding party without any problem. The couple stated their motive in terms of their aversion against the extravagant and luxurious nature of “customary weddings”, with their display of expensive jewelry and clothing. Older sisters of the wife had wed in such a style. The couple was of the opinion that such customary weddings are about profane and idle things, like outer appearance and the display of wealth and prestige, rather than about the true values of marriage, like mutual love, harmony and cooperation. In the words of the husband: “we do not care about this world (dunyah). We want to live for God” (fi sabil li-llah), whereby “this world” stands for materialism and worldly prestige and living fi sabil li-llah stands, amongst other things, for mutual affection, attention and care. The couple decided to register with the Society for the mass wedding, even before they notified their own families.

3. Prolonged Bachelor- and Spinsterhood

Apart from the organization of mass weddings, the activities of Al Afaf Association consist of the provision of bridal gifts and contributions and of interest-
free loans to the newlyweds. Moreover, the association organizes lectures and workshops related to marriage and family issues and publishes books on these topics. One of those topics is the harmful psychological, medical and socioeconomic consequences of prolonged bachelor- and spinsterhood, such as the spread of sexual immorality, loneliness, lack of self-confidence and the adverse economic consequences of this perceived moral and social malaise. On the one hand, the blame for the phenomenon of prolonged bachelor- and spinsterhood is attributed to the West. Western capitalist and individualist culture is accused of encouraging this phenomenon. Therefore, the Society’s president ‘Arabiyyat laments the absence in Jordanian society of “authentic values which govern individual and collective social conduct and customs … in a framework of projects for Westernization which are backed by wealth, experience and deadly means.” This absence, he stresses, leads to “social illnesses and an epidemic of customs, ways of behaving and values that threaten our edifice from its foundations” (Wiktorowicz and Taji Farouki, 692). On the other hand, certain local traditional habits responsible for prolonged bachelor- and spinsterhood, that can obviously not be attributed to Western influences, are mentioned as well. Examples are the habit of marrying only with spouses from one’s own environment, such as the extended family or village, or the tendency among males to choose females who are younger than them and less in education and socio-economic status, and for the opposite tendency among females. Such customs limit the range of possible marriage partners (Badran and Sarhan 2001, 117 – 120).

In this regard, it is interesting to note that of the two families of the couple that participated in one of Al-Afāf Society’s mass weddings I just mentioned, that of the bride was clearly the better of. Moreover, her own economic position as a university teacher was better than that of her husband, who was a high school teacher. They did not belong to the same extended family and they were even ethnically different: the husband was Palestinian in origin, and the wife Transjordanian. This illustrates that the social base of Al Afaf Society is largely of an urbanized, upwardly mobile and well-educated middle class background. These people do not want to turn the clock back to pre-modern times. They try to locate (social, economic, psychological and cultural) stability in a modern society in accordance with their reading of the Islamic revelation. On the one hand, speakers at Al-Afāf Society’s workshops and seminars express the need to fight or even punish, “in accordance with the shariah”, phenomena often attributed to the influence of western-dominated globalizing culture, like non-marital sex, homosexuality, “unnecessary” mixture between the sexes as well as
films, TV-shows and pictures enticing their viewers to sexual immorality. On the other hand, they are of the opinion that marriage should be based upon the free will of both partners. They do not view traditional Arab customs of enforced pre-arranged marriages (in which the two partners may not even know one another beforehand) favorably either (Badran and Sarhan 2001, 71 – 85).

4. Sexual Honor and Honor Crimes

A similar pattern of criticism of western influences and simultaneously of certain aspects of traditional Arab culture in the name of Islam can be found in Al Afaf Society’s position toward sexual honor and honor crimes. The legal expert Lama Abu-Odeh has described the traditional Arab conception of sexual honor as the need for men to maintain the chastity and virginity of their female family members by monitoring their behavior and their movements in outer space, so as to prevent them from any activity that may put their chastity and virginity at risk. In traditional Arab communities, a man’s masculine status and reputation depends on his ability to control the female members of his family and to preserve their chastity and virginity. If a woman compromises or destroys this reputation by any kind of behavior that is interpreted in the community as immoral or as suspect in this regard, the only way for the man to restore his masculine reputation might be to kill her (Abu Odeh in Mai Yamani 1996, 151 – 153). On the position of Islamists in this regard, she observes: “the fundamentalist agenda itself is not devoid of its own ambiguities. An important question for the Arab world today is: what is the meaning of gender when the traditional, nationalist and fundamentalist texts intersect?” (Abu Odeh in Mai Yamami, 180).

In many ways, Islamism looks like a religious version of an anti-western (Arab) nationalism. That is to say, Islamists try to construct an “Islamized”, and therefore “authentic” version of modern Arab life that must be defended against the assault of westernization and global consumer culture. In regard with criticism of honor crimes at home as well as abroad, Al Afaf Society’s reaction consists on the one hand of downplaying the phenomenon and accusing the West of using the honor crime issue in an aggressive campaign against Islam and Arab society. On the other hand, its representatives portray the struggle undertaken by local liberal and feminist circles for women’s rights and against honor crimes as a cover for promoting sexual immorality, an aim they attribute to imperialist powers and the “Zionists” (Taleb 2001, 98 – 99).
That does not mean, however, that Al Afaf Society is entirely in favor of traditional cultural notions of sexual honor. What the Society’s representatives condemn as well in their publications, lectures and workshops is the traditional notion in which the mere suspicion of dishonorable sexual activity by a woman may prove sufficient reason for male relatives to kill her in order to save their masculine reputation. Honor killings based upon unproven allegations and rumors are disapproved of (Badran and Sarhan eds., *Qaddiyah Al-Sharf*, 2003, 89 – 90 and 104 – 106). Islam forbids resorting to self-justice and gossiping. Instead, the shariah should be applied, including moral education and practicing gender segregation where needed, as well as the *hudud* punishments (lashing andstoning) for persons convicted in court of engaging in illicit sex. Al Afaf Society’s stress on the cultivation of a moral conscience strong enough to prevent believers from engaging into illicit sexual practices implies in my view a move away from the traditional culture of “shame” toward a more modern culture of individual responsibility and guilt.

In theory, the representatives of the Society endorse the Islamic principle of “equality in punishment for equal crimes”, regardless of gender. At the same time, however, it hardly tackles the aspect of gender discrimination, or the fact that it is always women who are the victim of honor killings and that men usually get away with perceived violations of sexual honor. Moreover, it continues to stick to – traditional but religiously justified- patriarchal notions of the “rationally superior male” as the guardian of family honor (Taleb, 85 – 86). This is reflected in what the Society’s director told me, that he saw the monitoring of a girl’s movement outdoors by her family as something positive, since the purpose was “to protect her, and not to oppress her”. Indeed, traditional, nationalist and fundamentalist texts intersect in Al Afaf Society’s discourse.

5. The Marital Relationship

The ambiguity of Al Afaf Society’s Islamic discourse on gender is also apparent in regard with its view on the marital relationship itself. To illustrate this, I would like to quote the answer of a voluntary woman worker of Al Afaf Society to my question of how the principle of obedience of the wife toward her husband relates to the principle of an equal relationship between both. She said: “Obedience in the shariah does not mean that the husband can simply give orders to his wife, lock her up and prevent her from going out of the house and so on. No, the wife has her own
life, is free to do what she wants and to have contacts and activities outside of the home. I studied Shariah science at the Jordan University, so I know what I am talking about. The duty of obedience relates to very fundamental issues that are basic to the well being of the family as a whole. Issues in which the woman cannot act against her husband’s will. For example, once I raised with my husband the question of working outside of the house. He said: “if you are going to work outdoors fulltime, what about the household tasks and the care of the children?”. I had to consent to his objection, but decided to work as a volunteer for Al-Afaf Society. My husband understands very well that I need to do something outside of the home. He even supports me, and tells me: don’t sit all the time at home, you will get sick of boredom⋅⋅⋅ my parents grew up with much more traditional ideas. My mother always had to follow my father’s orders; there was not much room for her own desires and demands. Really, I wouldn’t be able to live like that!”

This example shows that in the Islamized educated middle class atmosphere to which this woman belongs, women do not simply follow their husbands slavishly. Rather, there is room for mutual consultation, reasoning and the exchange of ideas in arriving at decisions and for negotiated compromise between husband and wife, even though it is still the husband who has the last say, at least in theory. His educated wife certainly has means at her disposal to influence and persuade him in his decision making, though. The Society’s criticism of traditional conceptions of gender roles is also reflected in views that the husband must assist his wife in her household tasks in order to relieve her of part of her burden. The worker I just quoted referred in this regard to a hadith stating that the Prophet Mohammed too was involved in cleaning his own house.

This doesn’t alter the fact that Al ‘Afaf Society’s discourse on the marital relationship still starts from a complementary role division between husband and wife as the basis of a harmonious and happy family life. A discourse in which the husband performs the role of income provider who has the right to exercise control and guidance over his family, and the woman the role of obedient mother and housewife. Underlying this discourse is a view on family and community that emphasizes the duty and responsibility of each person to satisfy, in accordance, the rights of others; the husband has the duty to satisfy his wife’s and children’s rights to material wellbeing, educational opportunities and daily attention; the wife has the duty to satisfy his husband’s right to well-cooked food, a pleasant home environment, moral support and obedience. Such views are expressed in the public events and the publications of the
Society.

In one of these publications, Western society is accused of degrading the woman by pressuring her to work in jobs in which she has to show her physical beauty. This causes her to lose her humanity for the sake of financial gain, according to the author. Paid work, the author stresses, should be regarded as a means to her own well being and, especially, that of her family, and not as an end in itself. The best situation for a woman, he stresses, is that she can make herself free to take care of her home and her family (Muhammad Abu Hisan 1993, 115 – 116). In this regard, the Society’s president Arabiyat considers the introduction of “certain western values” as part of a grand plan to invade the Arab and Muslim worlds and to reinforce “Western-Zionist” hegemony over them (Badran and Sarhan eds., Al-Sakinah wa al-Muwaddah wa al-Rahmah baina al-Zawjain 2001, 11 – 12). And, like American anthropologist Haddad observes on Islamist discourse, the Muslim woman must be educated to serve as a bulkwark against these threats.

On the other hand, more egalitarian values regarding the marital relationship are expressed as well in public events organized by Al Afaf Society. A great emphasis is put on mutual care, consideration and democratic consultation between husband and wife. When asked to mention valuable lessons from the workshop on marital life they had to attend as participants in Al-Afaf Society’s mass wedding, the husband of the couple referred to above answered: I learned that abusing and (harshly) beating your wife is prohibited by Islam. In popular culture, it is acceptable, but Islam teaches you to treat your wife with kindness, respect and dignity. You may not treat her like an animal”. His own mother, he told me, had been abused by his father in the past, and had suffered medical repercussions from this treatment.

Similar criticisms of traditional Arab culture can be detected in de Society’s position on the privacy of the nuclear family. Women workers of the Society I spoke to regard interference by the husband’s relatives in the life of the couple, and in particular their tendency to dominate and control the wife and demand from all kinds of services in the sphere of household tasks, as a traditional habit that hinders a modern Islamic family life. They insist on the wife’s need to have her privacy and her own space in her own house. In addition to this, the practice of marriage partners to discuss their mutual problems with their own families instead of with each other is criticized. This, one woman worker said, only worsens their problems “because their families will interfere, which create a very complicated and escalating situation. Both partners must learn to solve their problems amongst themselves and should
listen to each other, without the interference of others”. Again, we speak here about people from an urban, educated and middle class environment that is increasingly emancipating itself from old tribal and rural patterns but looks at the same time for a renewed sense of social cohesion and stability in modern society on the basis of religion.

And again, this search can also give rise to more conservative positions. The Society’s insistence on the status of the father and husband as disciplining head of the family, for instance, makes it an opponent of a relatively new Jordanian law that allows the wife to divorce her husband without his permission. According to the Society’s director, “women are in general more emotional, impulsive and capricious in the decisions they make. Therefore, putting the final say in divorce matters in her hands alone would not be responsible”.

6. Other associations

It could be stated that when the emphasis is put on the oppressive and unislamic character of indigenous habits and customs, Islamist discourse becomes significantly more progressive in tone. Instead of focusing on the defense of traditional values and relationships in the face of perceived external threats, the emphasis is put on what needs to be changed internally in order to improve one’s own society. In Al Afaf Society, I found women workers more outspoken and explicit than male workers in their condemnation of customs and traditions that were seen as detrimental to the woman’s status. Other Muslim NGOs, and especially the women’s associations among them, are more outspoken on this line and explicitly advocate the rights of women in the wider society, including the public domain. Their argument centers on women’s need to use their skills and education to contribute to Jordanian and Muslim society at large, and not just her own home and family.

One example is the Al Aqsa Association led by Nawal al-Fauri. She is an Islamist activist for women’s and children’s rights who left the Muslim Brotherhood during the 1990’s out of frustration with the conservative and patriarchal attitudes among the organization’s leadership. With the support of several Western embassies, her association has implemented micro-credit projects enabling needy women to set up agricultural and stockbreeding farms. Moreover, it carries out awareness raising activities for underprivileged women on social, cultural and political issues, including gender. In the name of Islam, Al-Fauri stresses that women have a right to participate
in economic, social and political life that is equal to that of men, and that a husband has to assist his wife in household tasks and the upbringing of children. Women, she states, should follow the will of God as it is revealed in the Islamic sources, and not arbitrary and self-interested traditional habits invented by men.

Another example is an Islamic women’s association in a poor suburb in the industrial city of Zarqa’ working for the empowerment of school-dropout girls and their mothers from broken and socially weak families. Some of these mothers are even working as prostitutes in order to survive. Methods used by this association are literacy courses, a creative handicraft project, confidential discussions of personal and social affairs and recreational outings. It is led by a woman who is also working as a religious teacher and social worker in a mosque. She wears orthodox Islamic dress, including a niqab or full face veil. She was, at the same time, trained by a British development organization supporting projects for “children at risk”. In the name of the Islamic concept of karama or dignity, this association endeavors to enhance the self-esteem of the girls and their mothers, and to counter traditional habits that discriminate against females regarding their social and educational opportunities.

The Danish researcher Marie-Juul Petersen, who is currently working on her PhD-thesis, has visited this association at the time when I was about to finish my own dissertation. The association’s head told her that people often asked her why she did not just focus her efforts on getting the girls married, but no, she said “I want these women to be able to take care of themselves”. One of the beneficiaries told Petersen that the association made her aware of her rights and capabilities, and helped her to stand up for herself. Petersen also mentions projects for empowering women in a center for orphans and poor belonging to the largest Muslim NGO in Jordan, the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Islamic Center Charity Society. One of these projects is called “The Woman Can”. It teaches women that they can express themselves and can do what the man can do. One of the center’s women teachers told Petersen: “A woman should choose a career, she should not be dependant, she can earn money for the family”. Petersen states that while traditional conceptions of gender roles among many Muslim voluntary welfare associations still limit endeavors of empowerment of women seriously, even the most conservative among them encourage girls to pursue their education and criticize views denying women their educational rights (Petersen 2007, 39 – 41).
7. Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that the question whether Muslim NGOs in Jordan advocate a conservative view that limits women to the sphere of home and family and keeps them in a subservient position or, on the contrary, work on their empowerment, independence and participation in the wider society cannot be answered unequivocally. The Islamic discourse of an association like Al-Araf Society still starts from the traditional patriarchal family structure, which ties the woman first and foremost to her home as mother and housewife. Underlying this structure is the assumption that males are superior to females in terms of rational decision making abilities and rights to control the family’s affairs in the name of guarding the family’s integrity, unity, honor and wellbeing. The view expressed by especially the male leadership of Al-Araf Society emphasizing external threats to the Muslim family, such as those emanating from western-dominated globalization and imperialism, seem to serve as a justification of such a conservative gender-agenda. An agenda that justifies gender inequality in terms of “natural differences” between the sexes and of the need of the weaker sex to be protected by the stronger. We have seen that this defense of patriarchy comes strongly to the fore when legal-social issues, such as honor crimes and divorce, are discussed.

There seems to be a trend among the Jordanian Muslim associations, however, in the direction of a more progressive view on gender relations. In Al-Araf Society, this trend can be detected in a redefinition of patriarchy in terms of the democratic or consultative leadership that the husband should exercise. Within the framework of moral sanction and acceptability that religious discourse provides, women involved in Al Araf Society and likeminded Islamist organizations try to get across their own needs and desires, such as those for the respect and attention from their husbands, for the opportunity to work outdoors, in a paid or in an unpaid fashion, and for the husband’s assistance in household duties and the upbringing of children. Religious discourse seems to serve as a framework for the negotiation and balancing of, on the one hand, traditional and patriarchal values and, on the other, the influences of modernization and globalization. Modern education and an enhanced participation of women in the labor market and public life have induced several Muslim associations to criticize certain traditional forms of patriarchy and to advocate greater equality into the marital relationship. In particular, certain Muslim women’s associations now insist that the role of the woman is wider than only the family sphere. They try to enhance
women's rights in the wider society and the public domain.

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