

## **The Politics of Group Weddings in Palestine:**

### **Political and Gender Tensions**

An Arab Families Working Group Policy Brief

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The Palestinian group wedding (*'urusjam'i*) or Islamic wedding (*'urusislami*) is a mixture of new secular “traditions” and newly invented “religious” rituals, along with borrowings of globalized customs.

Palestinian group weddings are also sites of subtle and sometimes visible political tensions between two major political movements, Hamas and

Fateh, as they compete over which rituals should be dominant: new Islamic

or fading nationalist symbols. Furthermore, these group weddings reflect the creative ways in which Palestinians resist Israeli policies of siege and closure designed to break the political will of the people in general and the Islamists in particular.

In this paper, The Arab Families Working Group (AFWG) will explore the political and social dynamics surrounding both mainstream and Islamic group weddings. This paper will argue that women are also active agents in these group weddings, accepting some of the new/old rituals, altering them, or categorically rejecting them. Conversely, women can also be victimized when group marriage encourages polygyny.

AFWG asserts that the practices of group weddings are not derived from a fixed meaning found in scripture, but that they are constantly evolving. Group weddings serve an important purpose, however: Hamas in particular uses group weddings to promote its political and social ideology, increase its constituencies, and root itself among the people in general and youth in particular. Group and/or Islamic weddings are a potentially important instrument the Islamic movement employs to Islamize Palestinian society and culture.

In this paper, AFWG also distinguishes between Islamic and ordinary ('adi) group weddings, as the characteristics of each are important in denoting women's agency. If economic factors can obviously be seen in the organization of a group wedding, gender is a crucial factor in determining whether a wedding is "Islamic" or an "ordinary" wedding.

This paper is based on interviews with those involved in organizing group weddings and with those who have benefitted from them. It covers Ramallah, Nablus, and Gaza.

### **Origins of Group Weddings**

Group weddings are not specifically a Palestinian phenomenon; they occur in many places throughout the world – from China and Korea to Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Most often, the purpose behind group weddings is to encourage youth to marry by making it easier for them to do so. In the Palestinian context, the idea was born among the Islamist activists of Hamas. According to Sheikh Hamed al-Bitawi, a member of the Palestinian Parliament and founder of the Chastity Committee of the Solidarity Society in Nablus, in 1995, a group of unmarried women ("spinsters," as he called them) approached Hamas and asked for help in solving the "problem" of unmarried women within the confines of religious values and

morals. Their request led to the creation of chastity committees where unmarried women and men could apply for assistance in being introduced to suitable spouses.

The project foundered when some 70 unmarried women registered, but only four men. Instead, the group began to focus on encouraging men to get married by reducing the costs of marriage and providing some incentives. Reducing the overall costs of a wedding via group weddings emerged as a solution.

In Gaza, the Al-Falah Society was founded in 1999 to provide assistance to the poor and marginalized. It offers medical services, food distribution, vocational training, and runs an orphanage. Through their work in the orphanage, the staff at Falah were in close contact with the mothers of orphans (a fatherless child is defined as an “orphan”) and decided to address their needs.

### **Polygyny as the Solution: Justification and Protest**

In an effort to “solve” the social problems of unmarried women, the Falah Society encourages polygyny. According to ‘Amer Sultan, this is the only socially acceptable way to solve the “problem” of unmarried women: “We cannot solve the problem the way they do in the West. (The point) is not to encourage polygyny, however, until society accepts men marrying older women, and young men stop regarding a woman of 27 as an unwanted spinster, we have to encourage married men to marry again.” To reach this goal, the Falah Society provides many incentives for married men to take another spouse, including a new bedroom suite, paying for the court costs of marriage, a new suit for the groom, the cost of the group wedding party, and a sum equivalent to \$1,000 in cash. These incentives have led some already married men to come to Falah and commit themselves to remarry in order to solve the problem of unmarried women.

Married women, some of whom faced the unwelcome prospect of their husbands taking another bride, have come to the Falah Society in protest, only to be rebuffed by the administration. In 2007, ‘Amer Sultan, a spokesman for Falah, stated that, although wives may protest, eventually they would accept polygyny, as “they have no other choice.” Sultan is correct; current family law in Palestine neither prohibits nor limits polygyny. It does not even require notification of the first wife. Thus, one of the consequences of group marriage is to increase women’s legal vulnerability.

### **Competing Flags: Rivalries Over Group Weddings**

The success and popularity of Hamas-sponsored group weddings led to the rival Fateh political party to emulate the celebrations. Competing flags mark Islamic and Fateh-sponsored group weddings with the two different political stamps. In the Islamic version, the Hamas green flag is prominent, whether tied around the groom’s necks or suspended on the walls. In the nationalist-secular (Fateh) group wedding, the Palestinian flag is used extensively, likewise around the grooms’ necks or on the walls, and the Palestinian checkered scarf is a dominant symbol. The nationalist wedding starts with the Palestinian national anthem, while the Islamic version begins with verses from the Qur’an, religious songs, and sayings of the Prophet. Perhaps most important, respect for “traditions,” “customs,” and “conservative culture” is reiterated in both forms of the group wedding.

### **Conclusions**

Palestinian group weddings are highly successful and well-attended events. There are several reasons for their popularity. One is related to the economic opportunities they create. In a stagnant political and economic situation with a high level of unemployment, group weddings

engage many small businesses in the region. Taxi drivers, hairdressers, photographers, hall proprietors, food suppliers, cooks, dress shops, and furniture shops all profit from group weddings. Another major incentive that is frequently and fervently noted is that a group wedding reduces the cost of marriage for poor young men and their families, without which they could not afford to marry at all.

Another reason for the success of the group wedding is the cycle of collective joy and festivity it creates amid a grim political situation, full of long days of mourning, sadness, and humiliation. These events draw large gatherings of people who come to celebrate, dance, and eat. Group weddings give important moral support and empowerment to poor young men and their families through the care and attention they receive from well-known and distinguished leaders in the Islamic movement.

While group weddings can be a cultural, economic, and political success for their organizers, they have serious implications for gender roles and gender relations in that it enforces certain conservative social beliefs and practices, such as the segregation of men and women. Group weddings also reinforce conservative social perceptions about women's bodies, dancing, and music. They prevent women from sharing and participating in men's gatherings and vice versa. Thus, group weddings merely strengthen moral underpinnings that discourage gender equality. Sex-segregation has become the norm at group weddings and individual weddings; it is the norm at both Islamic and nationalist weddings. While women have protested and shown resistance to the polygyny promoted by the organizers of group weddings, the generally unstable and highly insecure political context in which both Islamic and nationalist group weddings occur clearly does not favor women.