

Weddings and War:
Marriage Arrangements and Celebrations
In Two Palestinian Intifadas

An Arab Families Working Group Brief

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In 2009, the Arab Families Working Group (AFWG) studied marriage arrangements and wedding celebrations in Palestine. Our study consisted of a comparative analysis of weddings and marital arrangements that took place between the first and second intifadas. Specifically, we focused on “political marriages” – that is, marriages in which the political activism and affiliation of the marital partners are of considerable importance. We asked why such

marriages featured in the first intifada, but diminished, or were even denigrated, in the second.

Our research concluded that, during the first intifada, political engagement became a major consideration in choice of marriage in some settings, and conventional boundaries of religion and class were transgressed. Simultaneously, marriage celebrations were transformed, whereby a widespread culture of austerity and mourning made weddings far more simple and inexpensive, as well as signaling solidarity and resistance. In the second intifada, marriage

arrangements and wedding celebrations were very different. The changed political climate, with the hope and popular participation of the first intifada, turned into the despair and exclusions of the second, transformed political engagement from a positive into a largely negative qualification. The material side of marriage has again become more important, public displays of consumption have become acceptable, and celebrations have become more expensive. These shifts are shaped by the effects of the post-Oslo transition, as well as by the warlike conditions on the ground. Although these conditions, from Israeli army intrusions to physical barriers to marriage, are more insecure and dangerous than in the earlier intifada, they function largely as external threats to the shaping of wedding arrangements and ceremonies, rather than generating internal transformations.

Among Palestinians, as generally in the Arab world and also beyond, marriages are crucial moments in the (re)production of families across the nation. In two cases of “Palestinian weddings” examined for this study, we noted significant differences between the ways in which they were arranged and celebrated.

The first wedding we looked at took place in 1989, at the height of the first Palestinian intifada. Suheir, age 30, a Bizreit University engineering graduate with a master’s degree from the United States, married Riyadh, age 33, a fellow engineer and political activist in a leftist political movement. Riyadh met Suheir’s qualifications for a desirable wedding partner: most important, he was a man “whose nationalist activities were high” and second, a similarly educated, “conscious and socially acceptable” man. Being “conscious” (wa’i) is a qualification often used by Palestinian women to describe men who are aware of women’s rights and social issues, while for Suheir, “socially acceptable” did not mean conforming to social norms but simply being well-mannered – she thought her male political comrades were rough and pushy.

Most notable about Suheir's and Riyad's wedding was the degree to which the festivities were subdued. The couple chose a wedding day when Riyad was already in Ramallah for a "long political meeting." After teaching a class at one of Birzeit University's underground locations (the university had been closed by military order), Suheir was persuaded by her mother to go to a nearby hairdresser, but she didn't want an elaborate hair style. "I was married in braids," she says. Riyad was late and, when he arrived, there was only enough time for the couple to exchange the briefest of vows and then his family had to return north.

The next day was an intifada strike day, so the couple wrote the marriage contract in the sheik's house. The dower was registered as one Jordanian dinar; marriage expenses were insignificant. Then, the couple retired to an apartment usually reserved for clandestine political meetings – essentially a safe house – when the groom announced, "Now I have to go to a meeting." The bride spent a lonely night asking herself, "Where are our minds?" She offered as an explanation, "You know, it was the first intifada and the resistance took all our minds."

Almost two decades and another more violent and insecure intifada later, in 2006, Ahmed, age 29, from Amari refugee camp near Ramallah and also an engineering graduate from Birzeit University, married Leila, age 22, a graduate of UNRWA women's training institute. Ahmed is the youngest brother of from a nationalist family of mainstream Fateh activists: one brother was martyred during the first intifada, another deported, and two imprisoned. Ahmed had very specific criteria for a bride: post-secondary education as "something like a teacher," an age gap of at least six years, and his prospective wife should not have worked for a long time. Despite his own community activism, he said that it was not important whether his bride was politically active.

Ahmed not only saved for his own marriage expenses, but built a still-unfinished floor on top of his family home. He was quite exact about wedding expenses, giving his bride 1,000 JD (Jordanian dinars) and telling her to buy what she liked. Additionally, he accompanied his bride and her parents and sister and spent 3,600 JD to have gold at the wedding.

The wedding party was held at a wedding hall built during the Oslo years in the nearby lower-middle-class neighborhood of Um Shariet, the price of which Ahmed had managed to bargain down to IS 6,500 (Israeli shekels.) A well-known and well-liked figure in the camp, he is proud that he had 1,500 guests, whereas “most people have only 500.” Ahmed hired a DJ for the women’s party on the third floor, although he was the only man to enjoy it, entering to dance with the bride and hear the women’s celebrations and admire their wedding finery. The men went in and out of the second floor, drinking coffee and talking politics.

These two cases raise a host of questions. How can we make sense of the disregard of the material aspects of marriage arrangements in the first and the careful attention in the second? What is the meaning of the dismissal of the social and symbolic aspects of celebrations in the first and pride and distinction in the second? Why the importance of nationalist activity in marriage partnership in the first and its diminution in the second? How do we understand the different ways of celebrating marriage during two brief periods of sustained warlike conditions in Palestine?

It is important to recognize that these two cases are not only different because of the historical moment: class, gender, location, and political affiliation also need to be taken into consideration, as well as the point of view from which they are narrated. While both intifadas

were marked by deteriorating economic conditions – more severe in the case of the second intifada – the responses are strikingly different.