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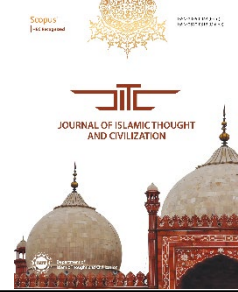
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Socio-Political Representation of Muslim Women: The Case of Palestinian *Murabitat* at Al-Aqsa Mosque

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Abstract

The current study aims to explore Palestinian *Murabitat*'s roles in protecting the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Thus, this research highlights several activities organised by Palestinian women at Al-Aqsa, focusing particularly on two prominent *Murabitat* figures in Al-Aqsa: Hanadi Halawani and Fatimah Khedr. The study also highlighted how *Murabitat* contributed to Muslim women's empowerment in Palestine. Secondary sources, including newspaper articles and journal publications, provided the data for this study. The researchers analyzed the data using qualitative methods. The study revealed that the notion of old *Ribat* extended to include various forms and activities that achieve the main purpose of *Ribat*, which is to maintain a standing guard to defend the country. These activities include educational initiatives, prayers in Al-Aqsa Mosque, coordinating visits to all martyrs' mothers, visiting the owners of demolished homes to assist and console them, taking part in solidarity protests with detainees and martyrs' families, participating in demonstrations against illegal attacks on Al-Aqsa Mosque, protesting through cuisine, and preserving heritage to depict Palestinian resistance. The researchers contended that Palestinian women exemplify the resilience of Muslim women through their liberation from occupation and their courage to face threats and abuses. Hence, this research reinterprets the notion of the traditional *Ribat* from a contemporary perspective, while also contributing to the present literature on Muslim women's socio-cultural contributions to their cultures. This Muslim women representation contradicts the prevalent Western stereotype and negative portrayal of Muslim women around the world.

Keywords: Al-Aqsa Mosque, empowerment, *Murabitat*, Palestinian resistance, *Ribat*

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Introduction

Numerous scholars have revealed that Western media and various anti-Islamic movements have frequently portrayed Muslim women in a range of negative ways, often through their misrepresentation and marginalisation.¹ Western media has generally portrayed Muslim women as oppressed, backward, less respected, undervalued, uneducated, and subject to male dominance. This wrong depiction often creates misrepresentation regarding the Islamic teachings concerning the veil, *hijab* (head covering), or *burqa* (facial covering), as well as Islamic principles related to women's rights, such as inheritance, and their role as witnesses in the Shariah (Islamic) court. Therefore, the researchers prime duty is to explore the crucial contribution of Muslim women in developing societies and nation-building, particularly emphasizing the Palestinian women's role in defending the Al-Aqsa Mosque.

When Islam was established in the Arabian Peninsula in the 7th century, it paved the way for Muslim women's liberation, and Allah elevated their status in society. Allah revealed to Prophet Muhammad to protect the rights of women, honour them, and raise their status in society. During that century, Muslim women enjoyed the right to equal justice and the right to access education. Historically, Muslim women were granted the right to financial independence and security, including the right to trade, engage in business, own property, enter into legal contracts, and manage their assets and financial affairs. Women had the right to inherit property, spend their wealth, and invest it.² There are several ongoing debates on the status of Muslim women in leadership and their roles in society. These debates are wide-ranging and remain unresolved on whether they could serve society politically, socially, culturally, and spiritually at large or not. Currently, the fundamentalists and Orthodox perspectives are of the viewpoint that Muslim women should abstain from active participation in Muslim affairs and Islamic leadership. On a broader scale, socially, the genuine and tangible contributions of Muslim women to society have to be revisited, re-evaluated, and revived. According to Hadji Abdul Racman, the social, ethical, educational, economic, political, and material progress of Muslim societies will never materialise without the active engagement of Muslim women. Therefore, Muslim societies must fully recognize womens contributions to nation -building, public administration, Islamic scholarship, and Muslim affairs across the economic, socio-cultural, political, and spiritual spectrum. Historically, in the nascent stage of Islam, the female companions of the Prophet (PBUH) prayed in the Prophet's Mosque, traded in their local and regional markets, taught the Qur'an and the prophetic traditions, gave charity, and even fought in the battle alongside the Prophet. During this time, the Muslim women already held positions of power and leadership. They cooperated with men in civil life and defensive warfare. They also excelled in various fields, including Hadith studies, *fiqh* (jurisprudence), public administration, warfare, etc.³

Since then, there have been numerous Muslim women who have led leadership since the 9th century to date. Queen Zubayda, the wife of the 9th century Caliph Harun Ar-Rasheed, built several water resources and guest houses for pilgrims along major routes leading to Makkah. She was an intellectual woman who expressed her political views publicly and supported the poets, writers, scholars, and the needy regardless of their religion. Arwa al-Sulayhi ruled Yemen for seventy-one years in the 11th century. In 1500 C.E., Hurrem Sultan, the wife of King Suleyman, founded numerous institutions and mosque complexes in Istanbul, including an Islamic school, public kitchen, bathhouse, and women's hospital. She also contributed to the establishment of four schools in

¹Yvonne Haddad, et al., *Muslim Women in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²Sohayle M. Hadji Abdul Racman, "Is there a Sexism in Islamic Leadership? The Case of the Sultanahs in Lanao Sultanate, Philippines," *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 12, no. 2 (2020): 88-102, <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.122.07>

³Ibid.

Makkah and a mosque in Jerusalem.⁴ Siti Wan Kembang, who ruled in the early 17th century used to control the social, political, economic, and religious affairs of Kelantan, Malaysia. This demonstrates that Muslim Malay women played a crucial role in the Islamization of the Malays.⁵ Similarly, one of the founders of twenty-eight subordinate sultanates of Lanao Sultanate in 1616 was a woman named Bai-sa Lumbak.⁶ In the recent century, Pakistan had Benazir Bhutto, who served as Prime Minister from 1988 to 1990 and again from 1993 to 1996.⁷ Likewise, Halima Jacob was elected as the first Singapore Muslim women president.⁸ Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-populated nation, had been led by Dyah Permata Megawati Setiawati Sukarnoputri as its 5th president from 2001 to 2004.⁹ Khaleda Zia served as Prime Minister of Bangladesh from 1991 to 1996 and again from 2001 to 2006. Moreover, countries like—Turkey, Senegal, Kyrgyzstan, Kosovo, Mali, Northern Cyprus, Mauritius, and Tunisia—have had Muslim women as prime ministers or presidents highlighting the significant role of women in charge.¹⁰

The researchers agreed that there is an existing humongous knowledge gap in the status and roles of Muslim women in societies, particularly across the socio-political, cultural, and economic sectors of the Islamic world. This knowledge gap causes misinterpretations and distasteful opinions on the status of Muslim women in Islamic leadership and, more broadly, on their roles in societies. Consequently, this paper explores the narratives on the roles Palestinian women play in defending their occupied land, with a particular emphasis on the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Historically, Palestinian women have been able to employ various types of resistance under their own spiritual, psychological, and physical capacities after realising the significance and efficacy of the national struggle for the liberation of Palestine. Throughout Palestinian history, women have played a significant role in the national struggle; they have been mothers, civilian activists, prisoners, politicians, and fighters¹¹ Leila Khaled, the hijacker, is arguably one of the most iconic Palestinian women. In 1969, she participated in the hijacking of a TWA plane, which she flew to Damascus before exploding. She underwent cosmetic surgery to change her appearance and the following year attempted to hijack another plane as part of a series of hijackings planned by the left-wing Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.¹² As part of the Palestinian fight to overthrow the Israeli occupation, younger generations of Palestinian women are now actively participating in civilian resistance.¹³ Therefore,

⁴Zaynab Aliyah, "Great Women in Islamic History: A Forgotten Legacy," *Fundacion de Cultura Islamica*, 16.7.2016. <https://funci.org/great-women-in-islamic-history-a-forgotten-legacy/?lang=en>.

⁵Khairudin Aljunied, *Islam in Malaysia: An Entwined History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 85–104.

⁶Sohayle M. Hadji Abdul Racman, "The Islamicity of the Lanao Sultanate Practices on Land Grant with Special Reference to the Political Thought of al-Māwardī on Land Grant," *Firdaus Journal* 1, no.1 (2021): 79–92.

⁷"Benazir Bhutto," in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Updated: December 23, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Benazir-Bhutto>

⁸"Halima Jacob," in *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halimah_Yacob.

⁹Arif Rohman, "Women and Leadership in Islam: A Case study in Indonesia," *The International Journal of Social Sciences* 16, no. 1 (2013): 46–51.

¹⁰Dalia G. "Meet the Nine Muslim Women Who Have Ruled Nations." 2015. <https://egyptianstreets.com/2015/06/09/meet-the-nine-muslim-women-who-have-ruled-nations/>.

¹¹Bassam Yousef Ibrahim Banat, "Palestinian Women and Resistance," *Anglisticum Journal (IJLLIS)* 7, no. 3 (2018): 44–55. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1211743>

¹²Georgina Nieves, "Gender Inequality, the Desire for Political Self-determination, and a Longing for Revenge: Three Main Causes of Female Suicide Bombers," *Hist.* 496, no.1, (2006), http://www.mountsaintvincent.edu/SupportFiles/Files/Female_Suicide_Bombers.pdf

¹³Jawad Dayyeh, and Mohammed Y. I. Banat, "Palestinian Youth And Civilian Resistance," *International Humanities Studies* 4, no. 3 (2017): 15–26.

this research is significant as it expands the body of knowledge about Muslim women's empowerment worldwide. It also draws attention to a significant contemporary instance of *Ribat* that extends the term's previous religious meaning. Furthermore, it provides awareness of the obstacles and hardships Palestinian women endure, asserting that their steadfastness and determination to remain on their land are significant.

2. Research Questions

This study looks at Muslim women's participation in socio-political spheres of life. It looks at the roles that Palestinian women in *Murabitat* play in defending their occupied land, with a particular emphasis on the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Thus, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are *Ribat* and *Murabitat*?
2. What kinds of events are organised in Al-Aqsa by the the Palestinian women in *Murabitat* regarding two of the most highly prominent *Murabitat* in Al-Aqsa?
3. How do these activities enhance the empowerment of Muslim women?

Before delving into the analysis, it is vital to provide information on the Al-Aqsa Mosque, as it highlights the importance of the mosque for Muslims and Palestinian women in particular.

2.1 Al-Aqsa Mosque and its Religious Significance for Muslims

According to Abdul Hadi, Al-Aqsa has two meanings in Arabic: (i) the highest in terms of status; and (ii) the farthest in terms of distance. Thus, the Al-Aqsa Mosque could mean the mosque with the highest status or could refer to the mosque that was the furthest from Mecca while Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) received the holy Qur'ān.¹⁴ Located in the southeast corner of Jerusalem's Old City, Al-Aqsa Mosque occupies one-sixth of the city's total area. Al-Aqsa Mosque, also known as *Al-Haram Al-Sharif* (the Noble Sanctuary), has more than 200 historical monuments dating from different Islamic eras and occupies the entire 144,000 square meter area inside the compound walls, including all the open courtyards, platforms, buildings, prayer rooms, and mosques that are either above or below the grounds. Since Islamic belief and jurisprudence consider the holy grounds of Al-Aqsa sacred, they also consider all the courtyards and buildings constructed there as equally sacred. This sacredness extends beyond the actual places designated for worship, such as Al-Qibly Mosque (the mosque with the enormous silver dome) or the Dome of the Rock, as well as the structures located inside the grounds of Al-Aqsa. Al-Aqsa Mosque is larger than merely the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Qibly Mosque. It is the entire region highlighted in yellow, as shown in Figure 1 below. People sometimes referred to it as "Bayt al-Muqaddas" or "Bayt al-Maqdis," which means the House of the Holiness.¹⁵

¹⁴Mahdi Abdul Hadi, *Al-Aqsa Mosque: Al-Haram Ash-Sharif* (Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs, Jerusalem), 2013.

¹⁵Ibid.



Figure 1. Al-Aqsa Mosque. Source: Abu Huzaifa (2019, 6)

For Muslims, Al-Aqsa Mosque is very important spiritually for several reasons, the most significant of which are presented as follows: (1) It is the location of one miracle witnessed by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), known as the Night Journey (*Al-Isra' wa Al-Mi'raj*), as cited in the holy Qur'an in Surat Al-Isra': "Exalted is He who took His Servant by night from al-Masjid al-Haram to al-Masjid al-Aqsa, whose surroundings We have blessed, to show him of Our signs. Indeed, He is the Hearing, the Seeing."¹⁶ (2) The Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad state that Al-Aqsa Mosque is one of the three sacred places that Muslims are advised to travel to on pilgrimage, as stated in *Sahih-Bukhari*:¹⁷ "Do not get ready for a journey other than to the three mosques, namely *Al-Masjid Al-Harām*, the Mosque of Aqsa (Jerusalem), and my mosque." (3) For 13 years, Muslims turned towards Al-Aqsa Mosque for their daily prayers before being instructed to turn towards Al-Ka'aba in Mecca. The Al-Aqsa Mosque was the world's second popular and significant mosque after the Ka'aba in Mecca. According to Sahih Bukhari Narrated by Abu Dahr: I said, "O Allah's Apostle! Which mosque was first built on the surface of the earth?" He said, "*Al-Masjidul- Harām* (in Mecca)." I said, "Which was built next?" He replied, "The mosque of Al-Aqsa (in Jerusalem)." I said, "What was the period of construction between the two?" He said, "Forty years." He added, "Wherever (you may be, and) the prayer time becomes due, perform the prayer there, for the best thing is to do so (i.e., to offer the prayers in time)."¹⁸ (4) A religious importance is associated with the Rock of Bayt al-Maqdis and Angel Israfil, as cited in the holy Qur'an in Surat Qaf, "Hearken on the Day when the caller will call from a place nearby, the Day when they shall hear the Blast in truth. That will be the Day (for the dead) to come forth."¹⁹ The 'place nearby' in the aforementioned verses is the sacred Rock of Bayt al-Maqdis, where Angel Israfil will summon humanity to come together on the Day of Judgement, which is when people will rise from the dead, as believed in Islamic belief. Ikrim Sabri says; that the Imam of Al-Aqsa Mosque and convener of the Islamic Supreme

¹⁶Al-Qur'an, Bani Israeil 17:01.

¹⁷Muhammad b Ismail Bukhari, *Sahih Bukhari*, "Virtues of Prayer at Masjid Makkah and Madinah," Chapter: The superiority of offering As-Salat in the Mosque of Makkah and Al-Madina," Hadith 1189, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:1189>

¹⁸*Sahih Bukhari*, Hadith 3366, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:3366>

¹⁹Qaaf 50:41-42.

Committee argued that four principal ties bond of Muslims to Bayt al-Maqdis, which are belief, culture and civilisation, worship, and history.²⁰

Al-Aqsa Mosque is currently under Israeli occupation, and Palestinians continue to defend their holy site, no matter how severe the situation is. After the 1967 “Six-Day War,” Israeli forces took control of the entire city of Jerusalem. They declared their ownership of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, while the Islamic *waqf* (trust) is in charge of its custodianship. Nonetheless, Israeli troops are allowed to patrol and conduct searches within the mosque.²¹ After occupying East Jerusalem and taking control of Al-Haram Al-Shareef in 1967 following their victory over the Arab armies in the war of June 5, the Israeli forces started excavating beneath the Al-Aqsa Mosque. This demonstrates the Zionists’ fervent desire and determination to conduct excavations beneath the Al-Aqsa Mosque. These excavations continued to the present time.²² According to Kailani, the walls of the Al-Aqsa Mosque are in danger of being penetrated by more than 20 excavations and tunnels. Some tunnels have been transformed into synagogues and given titles derived from the Talmud that suggest that they are a component of the claimed Jewish temple. Through more than 114 excavation sites, where the interconnected and long tunnels were excavated and built beneath and surrounding the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the settler groups and the Israel Antiquities Authority conducted their secret operation to erode the Al-Aqsa Mosque.²³ According to Ijaz et al., Israeli authorities have gone beyond the boundaries of natural law and international human rights by designating numerous houses of worship as “closed zones” accessible only with certain permits. However, these permits are extremely difficult to obtain, and are consistently denied to Arab residents. In a similar vein, some buildings have bricked-up doors and windows, and some have barriers and fences surrounding them.²⁴

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach that is involved in “analysing the subjective meaning or the social production of issues, events, or practices by collecting non-standardised data and analysing texts and images rather than numbers and statistics.”²⁵ Qualitative research methods focus on exploring and understating different perspectives and thoughts, meaning, or reality.²⁶ The primary goal of qualitative research approaches is to investigate and understand various viewpoints, ideas, meanings, or realities.²⁷ The current study is a case-based study, which was carried out to investigate the study’s objectives. The study of a single case’s complexity and particularity through

²⁰Sabri S. Ikrima, “The Status and Significance of Bayt al-Maqdis in Islam,” *Insight Turkey* 22, no.1 (2020): 11–19.

²¹Abu Huzaifa, “Jerusalem Ziyarah Guide: Facts and Information on Places of Historical Importance in Jerusalem (al-Quds),” *Islamic Landmarks*, 2019, <https://www.readkong.com/page/ziyarah-guide-facts-and-information-on-places-of-historical-9529205>

²²Doaa El Shereef, “Judaization of the Lower Aqueduct of Jerusalem Digging Holes and Tunnels Beneath Al-Aqsa Mosque,” *Palestine in Month Magazine*, August 2015.

²³Wasfi Kailani, *Why Should Muslims Visit Al-Masjed Al-Aqsa?* (Jordan: The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2012), https://rissc.jo/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Visiting_Aqsa-EN-Wasfi_Kailani.pdf

²⁴Sabir Ijaz et al., “Violation of Holy Sites in Jerusalem,” *The Islamic Culture* 42, (2019): 35–50.

²⁵Uwe Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (London: Sage Publications, 2014).

²⁶J. F. Hiatt, Spirituality, “Medicine, and Healing,” *Southern Medical Journal* 79 (1986): 736–743.

²⁷Ibid.

understanding its action within crucial circumstances is known as case study research.²⁸ A case study, according to Yin, investigates a current phenomenon in-depth and within its actual context, particularly when it is difficult to distinguish between the issues of context and phenomenon.²⁹ Merriam and Tisdell noted that a case study is a type of research that emphasises the search for understanding in the setting of qualitative research, with the researcher serving as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis and producing highly descriptive findings.³⁰ The data for this study was obtained from secondary sources, such as newspaper stories and journal publications. Regarding the data's inter-coder reliability, the researchers initially analysed it individually. The coding technique was then modified and accepted by all researchers. According to Tinsley and Weiss, inter-rater (or inter-coder) agreement is significant since it assesses 'the extent to which the different judges tend to assign the same rating to each object. This fact served to reinforce the view that the coders' had regarding the consensus-based conclusion and its validity.³¹

4. Finding

4.1. *Ribat* and *Murabitat*

Şimşek (2024), defined the Arabic word *Ribat* as “keeping watch (stand guard) along the border to prevent enemy attacks.”³² Throughout the history of Islamic architecture, the name is usually applied to the buildings where soldiers stood guard along the borders and tied their horses. In the Holy Qur’ān, the term is stated with Jihad in the verses Al-Imran (3:200) and Al-Anfāl (8:60). For instance, in the Al-Imran verse, Allah says, “O believers! Patiently endure, persevere, stand on guard, and be mindful of Allah, so you may be successful.” The Hadīths (sayings of the prophet Muhammad) also emphasise the significance of *Ribat*, as cited in Al-Bukhari: “A day’s vigil (*Ribat*) at the border in the way of Allah is better than the world and all that is on it,” and “A night’s vigil (*Ribat*) in the way of Allah is better than spending a month in fasting and worship.”³³ The spiritual aspect and the military role were integrated from the start of the *Ribats*. Therefore, it was crucial to give equal attention to the spiritual and military aspects of the *Murabituun* (volunteer soldiers) training. The volunteer soldiers’ consideration for this matter is demonstrated because they read the Qur’ān, engaged in prayer, and performed *dhikr* (an Islamic prayer that involves reciting prayers aloud several times to remember God) during their free time. In this regard, the *masjids* (mosques) of the *Ribats* are quite significant.³⁴

The word *Ribat* is derived from the Arabic verb (*Rabata*), which means to fasten, tie, or be attached. The definition of the verb is “to be lined up, posted stationed (troops); to line up, take up positions; to be moored (ship); to move into fighting positions,” as provided by Hans Wehr in his

²⁸Robert E. Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995).

²⁹Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2009).

³⁰Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2016).

³¹Howard EA Tinsley, and Weiss David J., “Interrater Reliability and Agreement.” In H. E. A. Tinsley and S. D. Brown (Eds.), *Handbook of Applied Multivariate Statistics and Mathematical Modeling*, 95-124 (Academic Press, 2000), <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-012691360-6/50005-7>

³²Onur Şimşek, “Analysis of the Masjids of the Great Seljukid Caravanserais: Case Study of Ribati Sherif,” *Bāb Journal of Architecture and Design* 5, no. 2 (2024): 201–25.

³³Ismail Yiğit, “Ribat,” in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. 35 (Istanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Foundation Publishing House, 2008), 76-79.

³⁴Şimşek, “Analysis of the Masjids of the Great Seljukid Caravanserais,” 2024.

popular Arabic-English dictionary.³⁵ In the Islamic discursive tradition, *Ribat* has been utilised in a variety of contexts throughout history. It was ascribed to cities under danger from Byzantine forces attacks, including Aleppo, Tarsus, Beirut, and Antakya, during the Umayyad era. Later, the Almoravid dynasty adopted the word to refer to the area from where they launched attacks on the Western frontier of the Islamic empire. Additionally, the word came to be connected with many Sufi organisations, who referred to their hospices and guesthouses as “Ribats.”³⁶

According to Schmitt (2017), in the Islamic tradition of *Ribat*, the terms “*Murabitun*” (for men) and “*Murabitin*” (for women) refer to the protectors of one's faith.³⁷ Schmitt argued that *Murabitin* sees their work as a kind of worship. *Ribat*, according to them, is for God alone; it is not for community, nation, or country. It is closely related to one's sense of faith and piety, which the *murabitin* contends are influenced by the political environment but not directly controlled by it. In this study, the researchers use the term “*Murabitat*,” which is the feminine plural derived from the root (*rabata*). This term refers to people who defend what is being attacked; with *Murabitat* in this study, this means defending al-Aqsa Mosque against Jewish radicals who want to destroy the holy Islamic site and change its status quo.³⁸ The *Murabitat* is a group that was founded in 2012 and had grown to about 1,000 members until they were banned from visiting al-Aqsa in 2015 because of allegations that they were associated with the Islamic Movement of Israel. Even though Israel has legal restrictions on *Murabitat*'s entry, they have continued to return to Al-Aqsa, confirming their presence and refusing to give up the resistance.³⁹ *Murabitat*, who are not only from Jerusalem but also frequently come from other Palestinian towns including Jaffa, Haifa, Akko, Umm Al-Fahm, and Nazareth, have been resilient despite arrests, the seizure of ID cards, the police abuse that includes physical and verbal attacks, and prohibitions on visiting the sacred place.⁴⁰ Shitrit asserted that the initial objective of *Murabitat* was to raise Muslim awareness of the significance of Al-Aqsa among Muslims in Palestine and the rest of the globe.⁴¹ Moreover, Schmitt argued that there was a noticeable lack of men because of the imprisonment, arrests, and bans on men entering the mosque, which prompted the women to take up the front lines of mosque protection.⁴²

4.2. Palestinian Women *Murabitat* in Al-Aqsa and their Activities

In her study, Shitrit explored the principal activities of *Murabitat* at the site of Al-Aqsa. She found that the major initiatives of *Murabitat* were to encourage women to visit or go on pilgrimages to Al-Aqsa (which is called *shad al-rihāl* in Arabic). In addition, to raise *Ribat* in the mosque to confirm that the site belongs to Muslims only, despite what they perceived to be pressure from the Israeli establishment for a temporary separation of Muslims and Jews at the site. They also arranged

³⁵Hans Wehr, “Rabata,” *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*. Ithaca, NY: Spoken Language Services, Inc.) 1994.

³⁶Feryal Salem, *The Emergence of Early Sufi Piety and Sunni Scholasticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); David Cook, *Understanding Jihad* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005).

³⁷Kenny Schmitt, “Ribat in Palestine: The Growth of a Religious Discourse alongside Politicized Religious Practice,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 72, (2017): 26–36.

³⁸Kenny Schmitt, “Murabitat al-Aqsa: the New Virgins of Palestinian Resistance,” *Contemporary Islam- Dordrecht* 14, Iss. 3, (Nov 2020): 289-308, DOI:10.1007/s11562-020-0045

³⁹Kenny Schmitt, “Ribat in Palestine: The Growth of a Religious Discourse alongside Politicized Religious Practice,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 72, (2017): 26–36.

⁴⁰Passia, *Al-Aqsa Mosque Compound Targeted: Lurking Dangers Between Politics and Prophecies* (Jerusalem: Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs, 2015).

⁴¹Lihi Ben Shitrit, “Al-Aqsa will not be Divided! Murabitat Traveling to, Studying in, and Fighting for al-Aqsa,” *Women and the Holy City: The Struggle over Jerusalem's Sacred Space* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 122–175.

⁴²Schmitt, “Murabitat al-Aqsa: The New Virgins of Palestinian Resistance,” 2020.

monthly shuttles around the country to fetch women to Al-Aqsa regularly. The Return Project was also another significant initiative, whereby *Murabitat* organised day trips for women to visit Palestinian villages that had been devastated in 1948 in remembrance of their right to return, memory, and history. In addition, *Murabitat* hosted charity bazaars, wherein women would contribute goods to be sold at an annual event that drew people from nearby cities and villages. Furthermore, they make Al-Aqsa a home for their communities and plan activities for youth, children, and women at the location. They also volunteer to clean the place and assist with *iftar* preparations for guests who are fasting during Ramadan. Other activities include educating religious lessons, being authorised guides there, serving as professional employees of the Islamic Waqf, and even facing the Israeli authorities and proving their resistance credentials.⁴³ In his study, Schmitt asserted that *Murabitat* created new avenues for women to participate in Palestine's political fight by integrating the *Ribat* language's symbolic resonance with Islam's discursive tradition, employing domestic metaphors to express their connection to the sacred place, and chanting the phrase “Allahu Akbar” as protest. She also pointed out that phrases such as “Jerusalem Resists Alone” were frequently used by *Murabitat* in protests. Their major fear is related to the Judaisation of Jerusalem (*tawhid Al-Quds* in Arabic). Thus, they discussed the mosque's potential division, both temporally and spatially, believing that the Al-Aqsa Mosque would be lost if they did not keep watch over it.⁴⁴ Daoud stated that many *Murabitat* proudly declared that their brave activities had established gender equality in their communities, believing that they had paved an alternative route for their communities where bias against women had disappeared.⁴⁵ The following section illustrates the kinds of activities organised in Al-Aqsa by the female members of the Palestinian *Murabitat* concerning two of the most highly prominent *Murabitat* in Al-Aqsa.

4.2.1. Hanadi Halawani

Halawani is one of the *Murabitat* whose objective is to defend Al-Aqsa Mosque from Jewish right-wing assaults. She is at the top of the list of Palestinians prohibited from entering Al-Aqsa and has been referred to by the Israeli media as one of the most dangerous Palestinians in Jerusalem. Israeli authorities over 60 times in a series of incidents have arrested and expelled her. Throughout her captivity and detention, Halawani was subject to multiple violations. She reports that she and other *Murabitat* experienced humiliation and abuse in detention, including being forced to take off their headscarves and traditional Islamic attire while being filmed. In addition, they were forbidden from using sanitary towels when they were menstruating. To safeguard both the *Murabitat* and Al-Aqsa Mosque, Halawani has chosen to go a different way via education. She studied international law and human rights at Birzeit University, intending to fight for the protection of the sacred place.⁴⁶

Halawani is a well-known figure who is frequently interviewed by the media for her religious and political beliefs supporting Palestine and Al-Aqsa. She always identifies herself as “*I am a daughter of Jerusalem*” to express her strong attachment and affiliation with her homeland. In her article, Halawani stated, “I am a daughter of Jerusalem—and yet I cannot enter Al-Aqsa Mosque.”⁴⁷ This statement highlights the injustice that she has experienced because of her arrests and bans on

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Suheir Abu Oksa Daoud, “Women and Islamism in Israel,” *A Journal of Women Studies* 37, no. 3 (2016): 21–46.

⁴⁶Mariam Elsayeh Ibrahim, “Who are the Murabitat? The Palestinian Women Guarding Al-Aqsa Mosque,” *The New Arab*, 2021. <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/who-are-murabitat-women-guarding-al-aqsa-mosque>

⁴⁷Hanadi Halawani, “I am a daughter of Jerusalem - and yet I cannot enter Al-Aqsa Mosque,” *Middle East Eye*, 2023. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/aqsa-mosque-how-israel-punishes-me-devotion>

entering Al-Aqsa. She believes that her status as a native of the city granted her the right to visit Al-Aqsa and be in the vicinity of the sacred site, which validates her resistance to the occupation.

Her *Ribat* activities include teaching the Qur'ān. She holds a Qur'ān teaching certificate, which qualifies her to visit Al-Aqsa daily. She has also been involved in an initiative since 2011 that aims to teach believers, ages 12 to 80, the Qur'ān. She is the director of the entire program of the Qur'ān teaching. When she joined with other teachers at Al-Aqsa, they worked collaboratively, with each teacher or volunteer assigned to a specific subject and area of expertise. Her responsibility would involve moving from one circle to the next, leading, consoling, encouraging, and directing. She is known as the butterfly of Al-Aqsa.⁴⁸ Despite the Israeli authorities' restrictions and harassment of Halawani and the other *Murabitat*, she never abandoned her devotion to the educational program; she reports, "Whenever the soldiers tried to make life difficult for us, we would find ways around these restrictions; when they tried to scare us, we remained fearless and steadfast. When they tried to threaten us, we wouldn't move an inch. Nothing they have done has changed our commitment to the educational program."⁴⁹

Furthermore, Halawani boldly stated that she constantly collaborates and contemplates with her group of *Murabitat* to challenge and overcome the occupation's unjust decision to banish them from Al-Aqsa. One activity they agreed on was to pray at the Al-Mujahideen Road, which is the nearest location to Al-Aqsa that they could reach. Halawani added that they have been doing this for several years, and they welcomed anyone expelled from Al-Aqsa to join them. Another activity of *Ribat* to challenge the occupation is during the holy month of Ramadan. Halawani and other *Murabitat* were not content to pray at that location. Below, Figure 2 shows Halawani and other *Murabitat* performing prayers at the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound.⁵⁰



Figure 2. Halawani performed *itikaf* prayers at the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound with other *Murabitat* to prevent the Zionist regime's occupation of the area. Source:

<https://www.ummahtoday.com/my/>

⁴⁸"We Are the Murabitat': Who is Hanadi Halawani, Just Released from Israeli Prison," *The Palestine Chronicle*, 30 November, 2023. <https://www.palestinechronicle.com/we-are-the-murabitat-who-is-hanadi-halawani-just-released-from-israeli-prison/>

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Halawani, "I am a daughter of Jerusalem," 2023.

They also hosted communal *iftār* (breaking of the fasting) to attract attention and educate others about why they were dining in the street, aiming to inform as many people as possible about Al-Aqsa's cause.⁵¹ The most common cuisine made by the *Murabitat* is *Maqluba*, a popular traditional Palestinian dish made with rice, meat, and vegetables. When the occupation decided to stop Halawani from entering Al-Aqsa, she chose to station at its doors with the other *Murabitat* stationed there in her way through *Maqluba*, which marked the beginning of the resistance through the *Maqluba* at the Chain Gate, the gate of Al-Aqsa.⁵² The *Murabitat* chose to prepare this dish because there are local stories that claim that after Jerusalem was freed by the commander Salahuddin Al-Ayyubi in 1187; the city celebrated its victory by serving this dish to al-Ayyubi and his soldiers. *Maqluba* was called *Bazenjaniyah* but was renamed by Al-Ayyubi as *maqluba*, which means "upside now" in Arabic, considering that it is flipped on the serving trays after preparation.⁵³ In December 2017, Jerusalem residents protested against Trump's decision to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital. They brought enormous pots of *Maqluba* and ate them in front of the Israeli police, and they flipped the pots while chanting, "Allahu Akbar." This became a ritual, and both Palestinians and Israelis began to refer to this meal as the "dish of spite." Accordingly, this dish has become a symbol of Palestinian community and solidarity and a tradition of the protest supporting Palestine. Halawani states that, "During the sit-in against Trump's decision at the Damascus Gate, I made sure to serve *Maqluba*... to the young protesters as a way to underline that Jerusalem is the capital of Palestine, with all its people, food, and culture. People are now keen to have *Maqluba* every week with their families in Al-Aqsa's squares as a kind of tradition and custom to guard the mosque."⁵⁴

Below, Figure 3 shows Halawani and another *Murabita* serving *Maqluba* during Ramadan Iftar at Al-Aqsa Mosque.



Figure 3. Halawani and another *Murabita* serving *Maqluba* during Ramadan Iftar at Al-Aqsa Mosque. Source: <https://www.ummahtoday.com.my/>

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Rima Zenaida, "Women Stationed at Al-Aqsa: Heroines Challenge the Occupier," *Al-Mujtama*, 4 June 2023. <https://en.mughtama.com/index.php/palestine/al-quds/item/41927-women-stationed-at-al-aqsa-heroines-challenge-the-occupier>

⁵³Ahmad Melhem, "Palestinian National Dish Fuels Al-Aqsa Protests," *Al-Monitor*, 11 January, 2018. <https://holylandjustice.org/2018/01/12/palestinian-national-dish-fuels-al-aqsa-protests/>

⁵⁴Ibid.

Moreover, in media interviews, Halawani consistently highlights the contribution of Palestinian women to the struggle for liberation. In an interview with the Al-Awda Palestinian Foundation (2015), she states, "A Palestinian woman has played a significant role in struggle, jihad, and steadfastness. She is a fighter, a detainee, a fighter's mother, wife, and sister. She gave birth to and raised the fighters. She is a detainee, a detainee's mother, sister, wife, and daughter. The Palestinian woman has endured more than any other woman in the world. She is a symbol of steadfastness and resilience."

Halawani views her *Ribat* not only as a responsibility to defend Al-Aqsa Mosque but also as defending the honour of the entire Islamic nation, believing that *Murabitat* stood alone in defending the sacred site and challenging the occupation's strength, injustice, and oppression, despite the brutal attacks they have experienced. Therefore, *Murabitat* thrived on portraying the situation and suffering witnessed by Al-Aqsa citizens and worshippers, as justified by the brutal abuse they have experienced from the occupation authorities. Halawani states, "Attacks against *Murabitat* have escalated recently, as the occupation recognised women's significant role in obstructing, thwarting, and revealing its plans by their presence, defence, strength, and steadfastness." Halawani asserted that *Murabitat*'s reaction has educated the people throughout the world about the situation of Al-Aqsa. She adds that "the reaction to the *Murabitat* movement was not just restricted to Palestine; we saw reactions at the community level, including demonstrations and marches in support of the uprising and the defenders, both male and female."⁵⁵

4.2.2. Fatimah Khedr

Khedr is another prominent *Murabita* in Jerusalem. Khedr's attachment and love for Jerusalem were the inevitable result of a series of tragedies that made her appreciate the value of her homeland. She was born 10 years after the Nakba, but she learnt about displacement from her mother and grandmother, who were forced to leave the village of Bir Ma'in in the Ramla area in 1948. Her family settled in the Al-Sharaf neighbourhood, next to Al-Aqsa Mosque.⁵⁶ Accordingly, Khedr is one of the most empowered women in Palestine. Her voice resonates in the courtyards of Al-Aqsa Mosque, chanting in support of the mosque and criticising Arab rulers for not defending Al-Aqsa. On the steps of Bab al-Amoud (Damascus Gate), she does not hesitate to engage in any solidarity demonstrations with detainees and martyrs' families, as well as against all arbitrary decisions against Jerusalem and its citizens, in addition to her participation on Palestine's national occasions. Khedr, along with other Jerusalemites, is actively involved with organising visits to all the mothers of martyrs not just in Jerusalem but also in other governorates in the West Bank, as well as visiting the owners of demolished homes to comfort them.⁵⁷

Khedr became an icon of Jerusalemite women's resilience. She has always been accompanied by the Palestinian flag, which she has never replaced with the flags of other Palestinian factions. Furthermore, she became a target for the Israeli occupation and its settlers, who circulated her photo in one of the campaigns calling for mass raids on the Al-Aqsa Mosque, in a clear provocation to attack her.⁵⁸ During her participation in protests and rallies to defend Al-Aqsa, she was subjected to

⁵⁵ Al-Awda Palestinian Foundation, "The Activist Halawani: Jerusalem Women are at the Forefront in Defending Al-Aqsa," 2015. <https://alawda-pal.com/news/7042>

⁵⁶ Asil Jundi, "Fatima Khader: A Fighter who is Concerned about Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa," *Aljazeera*, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2018/2/25/%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B7%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%AE%D8%B6%D8%B1-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B6%D9%84%D8%A9-%D9%8A%D8%B4%D8%BA%D9%84%D9%87%D8%A7-%D9%87%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%AF%D8%B3>

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

hundreds of injuries by the Israeli soldiers and police who used sound bombs, tear gas, rubber bullets, electric shocks, and severe beatings with batons.⁵⁹ However, in one of her interviews with Aljazeera, she boldly asserts, “I am not lying when I say that I am not afraid of that at all, because I believe that I am standing on solid ground that recognises that I am the landowner and that they are the intruders.”⁶⁰ She also revealed that during one of her investigations with Israeli officials, she informed the investigators, “Do whatever you want. I am the daughter of this country, the owner of a right and a cause, and I will fight against your injustice until my last breath.”⁶¹ Here, her statement, “I am the daughter of this country,” is similar to Halawani’s, as previously discussed, and emphasizes her deep affinity and attachment to her homeland, as well as her willingness to resist the illegitimate occupation.

In another activity of *Ribat*, Khedr celebrates the blessed Eid al-Adha in the courtyards of Al-Aqsa Mosque by preparing more than 70 kg of Arabic *Maamoul* (a traditional Palestinian dessert) scented with the scent of dates, which she makes to distribute after the Eid prayer. Khedr celebrates in her unique way, wishing she could live a normal life in this holy place. She also bravely stands in the middle of the courtyards and calls out every year the greeting “*Al-Aqsa is fine*,” which she exchanges with other Palestinians visiting Al-Aqsa.⁶² The greeting Muslims use for Eid in Arabic means “For each year, I hope you and yours are fine,” yet Khedr used the statement “Al-Aqsa is fine” to emphasise the significance of defending Al-Aqsa.

Moreover, another practice that represents Khedr empowerment is embroidery. She states, “In my free time, I either protest in the square or embroider at home. At the age of nine, I learnt embroidery from my mother and grandmother, and I discovered that each stitch tells a story. One tells of spring, another of a wedding, and a third of ears of grain.”⁶³

She welcomes her guests on the street wearing traditional Palestinian attire, with a *keffiyeh* (Palestinian traditional scarf) hanging over her shoulders. She believes that preserving the heritage is a resistance that she should maintain. She explains, “Heritage is my identity. I go with it to exhibitions both inside and outside of Jerusalem, and I only leave my house dressed in traditional Palestinian attire. Should I abandon our roots? I am a refugee in my country, and I adhere to my heritage because I feel it is one of the means that will return us to our villages from where we were forcibly displaced.”⁶⁴

The occupation had already raided her house, wreaking destruction before stealing all of her embroidery, as well as images of Al-Aqsa, Jerusalem, and Palestine in particular.⁶⁵ Below, Figure 4 shows Khedr embroidering a new heritage item at her home, and Figure 5 shows her embroidery and small antiques collection on display at the Heritage Bazaar (exhibition) in Amman.

⁵⁹The Palestinian Information Center, “The Occupation Bans the Worshiper Khader from Al-Aqsa for 6 Months,” 6 February 2021. <https://palinfo.com/news/2021/02/06/173685/>

⁶⁰Asil Jundi, “Fatima Khader: A Fighter who is Concerned about Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa.”

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²“The Morabata Fatima Khader Carries Heritage Handicrafts Mixed with Jerusalemite Heroics,” *Alghad News*, 2019. <https://alghad.com/>

⁶³Asil Jundi, “Fatima Khader: A Fighter who is Concerned about Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa.”

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵The Palestinian Information Center, 2021.



Figure 4. Fatima Khedr is Embroidering a New Heritage Item at Her Home (Source: Al Jazeera)



Figure 5. Fatima Khedr's Embroidery and Small Antiques Collection is on Display at the Heritage Bazaar (exhibition) in Amman. Source (Alghad News)

Khedr is also an example of a role model mother who supports and inspires her children. She continues to visit and defend Al-Aqsa, accompanied by her four daughters and three sons, who have begun to follow in their mother's footsteps of belonging and defence. Khedr supports her children in their initiatives in "Arabism of Jerusalem," as she is, for example, a major supporter of her daughter "Alaa," who converts her camera photos of Al-Aqsa's daily life into paintings and artworks that she markets in Palestine and beyond.⁶⁶

4. Conclusion

The findings demonstrated that *Ribat* activities can take various forms to achieve the purpose of *Ribat*, which is to maintain a standing guard to defend the country and deter enemy attacks. The activities shown and analyzed in this study include but are not limited to, educational initiatives, such as the *Murabitat*' self-education by pursuing education at universities, teaching Qur'ān and Islamic

⁶⁶"The Morabata Fatima Khader Carries Heritage Handicrafts Mixed with Jerusalemite Heroics," *Alghad News*, 2019. <https://alghad.com/>

teaching for those visiting Al-Aqsa to reinforcing Muslim remembrance of their holy mosques, and educating Al-Aqsa history for the young ones to raise awareness about injustice and occupation. Other activities include prayers in the Al-Aqsa Mosque, if possible, or at the closest place to Al-Aqsa that they may reach in light of the occupation's prohibition on Al-Aqsa entry. In addition, initiatives include coordinating visits to all martyr mothers, not only those in Jerusalem, as well as visiting the owners of demolished homes to assist and console them. *Murabitat* additionally takes part in solidarity protests with detainees and martyrs' families, as well as demonstrations opposing the illegal attacks on the Al-Aqsa Mosque.

The study also highlighted the creativity of Palestinian women in revealing solidarity with their own culture by protesting particularly through their traditional cuisine. This paper shows how Palestinian women serve traditional food such as *Maqluba* and *Maamoul* in the courtyards of Al-Aqsa Mosque as a way to challenge the occupation. Another creative initiative is the preservation of heritage as a form of resistance, as exemplified by wearing traditional clothes and producing Palestinian traditional embroidery. These acts of resistance not only highlight the expression of defiance and resilience but also showcase the face of occupation and the preservation of cultural heritage.

The illustrations devoted to the two of the most highly prominent *Murabitat* in Al-Aqsa emphasise the empowerment of Muslim women and their role in participating in the socio-political aspects of their societies. Hence, this paper offers a fresh narrative on the status of Muslim women in leadership, more particularly the role of Muslim Palestinian women in community resilience and resistance to occupying powers that pose a threat to the very existence of the Palestinians. The findings contradict the negative portrayal of Muslim women in Western media and anti-Islamic activities since the study demonstrates that Palestinian women are portrayed as educated, powerful, fearless, respected, and appreciated. Hence, one could argue that Palestinian women are strong women battling for their liberation against occupation oppression, being courageous in the face of occupation threats and abuses, and serving as icon of Muslim women's resilience. Accordingly, the occupation realised its important role in sabotaging and disclosing its goals due to its presence, defence, strength, and steadfastness.

Furthermore, the paper examines the concept of *Ribat* through the lens of contemporary time, attempting to reconcile the idea of the old *Ribat* with the contemporary phenomena as observed in the Palestinian context. The researchers accordingly agreed that the empowerment of Muslims, particularly women, is a continuation of historical processes; rather than issues which may have recently emerged. One could conclude that the leadership of Muslim women in Islamic countries is still evolving, and slowly many societies are recognising that Muslim women can take leadership into the wider spectrum of societies that require leadership. Women in Islamic leadership are still being debated by scholars and due to misinterpretation or misuse of Islamic principles and teachings. Broadly speaking, some Muslim countries have recognised that Muslim women can serve the *ummah* at various levels of politics, economic, cultural, social, spiritual, community development, and civil welfare. Future researchers could study other forms of *Ribat* in other contexts. In addition, researchers might study Muslim women's empowerment in other conflict areas for further research endeavors.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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