CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Fahimeh, a woman called Um Riad by her neighbours in the Jenin refugee camp, was sitting on her balcony, half of which had been destroyed during the Israeli invasion in 2002. She was talking to me while making food for her children, the ones who were still with her, as one had been killed and two others had been imprisoned. She keeps a piece of paper in her brassiere – the *Kushan* that establishes her ownership of her house in Haifa, which she has owned since 1948 but which she has been unable to visit due to her displacement and exile. She said (the translations are mine): '*Kataluna Bi Dun Rahmeh*' – 'they killed us without any mercy'. She added: 'We were tortured, humiliated, invaded [she paused for a couple of seconds] … how history repeats itself, history repeat itself'. She stopped talking momentarily while gazing around her at the destruction of her home and the neighbouring houses and then continued: 'In their crimes they strengthened our history … with our resistance we will build our future; let me finish cooking for those who are still with us'.

Um Riad's ordeal points to the three main issues that this book addresses. First, it shares and thereby reveals women's suffering in war zones. Second, it shows the way in which women in war zones and under military occupation become warriors and resisters, what I call frontliners. As with Um Riad, with her few possessions, with her wrecked balcony, her hidden *Kushan*, and her survival strategies, the contribution of women frontliners to resistance is usually invisible to outsiders and for the most part goes mostly unnoticed, but it exhibits a great deal of power and resilience. Fighting with whatever resources they can muster,

women such as Um Riad – with her destroyed balcony that symbolizes her losses but simultaneously also signifies her history, legacy, and activism – reflect the hidden energies within women who are confronting political violence. Her voice, as with many other women's voices in this book – and indeed in other conflict areas across the globe – speaks truth to power through her daily resistance against the settler-colonial project and its gendered violence in all of its geo-political, bio-political, economic, and psychological forms. As such, a major theme of this book is how Palestinian women's resistance, agency, and victimization, as with all women in conflict zones and under occupation and as exemplified by Um Riad's resilience, is an inescapably analytical feminist location that should be acknowledged and acted upon.

The third issue addressed by this book is the complex way in which hegemonic economic, political, and patriarchal powers, including the mass media, ostracize Palestinian women and reproduce oppressive gender politics. If someone looks at Um Riad through the hegemonic lens, he or she might construct an image of this Palestinian woman based upon the popular discourses, such as the US media's portrayal of Palestinian women as 'bad' mothers who 'couldn't care less' for any of their losses, or who encourage 'terrorism', support extremism, and generally promote violence. Too often, their suffering, pain, and voices are camouflaged by the physics of the authority of Empire and the politics of representation that are a-historicized and de-contextualized. As an Orientalist perspective, this discourse transforms men and women into faceless, voiceless, and a-historical subjects who lack agency and who are in need of 'modernization' to raise them up from their 'uncivilized' state. Other discourses focus only on women's victimization, their displacement, and so on without looking at the complexity of the geo-economic politics of their suffering and loss. The dramatization of women's helplessness and victimization, the demonization of their actions of resistance, and much else that falls in between will be extensively discussed in this book, all based on women's own words and experiences. In Chapters 3, 4, and 5, I discuss various discourses that are related to the complex ways local and global forces impact women while showing the way the machinery of oppression turns women's bodies, their sexuality and minds, into symbols of heroism, victimization, helplessness, and identity, and ultimately create them as boundary markers. In so doing, I show the way in which colonialist military power carves its strength and inscribes its boundaries on the most personal realms of individual women's lives, bodies, families, sexuality, homes, spaces, and gender relations.

Fourth, I look at the way the issues of women's 'modernization', liberty, and 'rights' can be discussed when the politics of women's resistance in a conflict zone is deeply affected by the global economy of fear. Women's rights to education, freedom of movement, freedom from violence, right to resistance, and so on are perceived as part of the general ideological war between the haves and the have-nots, the West and the rest, the 'civilized' and the 'Otherized', thereby turning women's bodies, suffering, and lives in conflict zones into ones that have no right to *right*. The rights of many women living in the global South who face political violence and continuous displacement are negotiated constantly, as are their spaces, places, locations, bodies, sexualities, lives, and futures, thereby turning women into boundary markers (see Kandiyoti 1992: 246). The use of the language of 'rights' and the language of 'modernization' and 'liberation' turns out to be very problematic, not because it is a façade – a lie – but because one's rights and liberty are defined by those in power, by the state, the occupiers, etc. As Abu-Lughod stated in her introduction to her edited volume *Remaking Women*: 'With regard to remaking women, discussion revolved around the roles as mothers, as managers of the domestic realm, as wives of men, and as citizens of nation … with a critical eye for the way in which they might not have been purely liberatory' (1998: 8). This need to 'remake' and 'liberate' women transforms women's voices – and feminist discussions concerning these voices, discussions that wrestle between the extremes of Orientalism and fundamentalism – into what Abu-Lughod termed 'minefields' (in reference to the current imperialist obsession with 'the plight of Muslim women') that require careful scrutiny (Abu-Lughod 2002: 783). In her discussion of the project of 'modernization', Mervat Hatem posed the question of whether such a project exacerbated class and gender inequality and jeopardized working class and rural – and I would add women's – statuses in terms of violence against women in conflict areas and war zones (1993: 117–22). The fact that such feminist analyses are considered part of the global economy of fear that are also affected by the multiplicity of violent contexts in conflict zones and the global structure of power must further complicate our analyses.

Sally Merry Engle traces the links between global production and local appropriation and examines how human rights law works in practice, reminding us that even the human rights language is challenged when dealing with gender violence. As she states:

> Like colonialism, human rights discourses contain implicit assumptions about the nature of civilized and backward societies, often glossed as

> modern and traditional. Concepts of civilization and savagery, rationality and passion, that were fundamental binaries of thinking during the imperialist era creep back into debates over human rights and social justice. The practice of human rights is burdened by colonialist understanding.
>
> (2006: 226)

Many questions remain to be addressed. How can we sustain the multiplicity of women's resistance and agency, and how can we uphold a 'politics of difference', in a world that constantly homogenizes diversity? How can the voice of the subaltern be raised, heard, and sustained? How can I bring into writing representative spaces of the female subaltern Other? And how can I gather together women's voices in a way that can help me create more power to prevent silence and silencing? In drawing from my activism and research as a Palestinian woman in the field, it seems that I am always borrowing meaning from the voices of those negotiating a narrow path between moments of power, agency, and victimization; moments of dire need; moments when one needs to scream when one's words have been stolen. When the tears have yet to dry, Palestinian women continue to fight back. Perhaps the world did not hear Um Riad, maybe it missed the complex connection between victimization and agency that lies in her voice; but this book tries to unravel the complexity of the connection between women's suffering and their agency for a world in denial. In her way of sitting on her balcony, in her preservation of her *Kushan*, I heard a cry to historicize suffering; in her silences I heard echoes of the very painful present, and even more her survival and resistance. The story of Um Riad is only one reflection of the story of the suffering of the Palestinian people, my people, who were dispossessed as a result of the Zionist actions, who suffered from the settler-colonial project that resulted in the Nakba (catastrophe) of 1948, who have been persecuted in their Diaspora and exile, and who have been disregarded and denied rights by the Western Empire. But it is also the story of those who have, like Um Riad, risen with new strength from every disaster.

In listening to Palestinian women's voices as they engage in acts of resistance – whether minute or large-scaled – this project considers these women to be miraculous survivors of a sustained attack on their historical legacy as well as on their socio-economic and psychological well-being. I advocate the use of the term frontliners in referring to Palestinian women, for they always incur the first wave of violence as well as the final one. As the narratives in the ensuing chapters will

reveal, whether as guerrilla fighters or protectors of the domestic sphere, the 'frontlines' that these women occupy constitute the most visible position in the field of activity in daily life within a conflict zone, positions of grave responsibility. Occupying the material space of the frontline, these women must often carry the burdens of the outcome of the fighting. These women survive both the daily assaults against their quotidian activities and the psychological warfare that is endemic to a militarized zone. By bringing the voices of these frontliners to the forefront of my work, I hope to reveal the unseen and unrecognized agency of these women.

This project has come to fruition amidst moments of such urgency, while sitting on the balcony with Um Riad, while walking with women in their daily struggles for survival. The book was written while witnessing and living the Palestinian Intifadas (uprisings), the invasions, targeted assassinations, internal violence, house demolitions, land confiscations, imprisonments, torture, and more. It is based on my observations and interventions as a feminist activist, my clinical work as a therapist, my research projects as a criminologist and victimologist, and my own personal experiences as a Palestinian woman born and raised in Haifa, a mother of three young women, and an Israeli citizen living for the past twenty-seven years in the Old City Jerusalem. Given this mix of positions and persuasions, no doubt contradictions abound in my own words and I leave those contradictions in place.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

> Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long traditions, in present needs, in future hopes, of far greater import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land.
>
> (Arthur James Balfour, 11 August 1919)

> The Palestinians must be made to understand in the deepest recesses of their consciousness that they are a defeated people.
>
> (Moshe Yaalon, Israeli Army Chief of Staff, August 2002)

Both the international political legacy and the Palestinian genocide, as reflected in the previous epigrams, affect and mirror the current socio-economic, geo-political, and military situation affecting gender relations in Palestine. The tragedy of Palestine and the Palestinians, the continuing occupation of the land and the resulting oppression, was best

described by the late Edward Said in his explanation of how the Palestinians were rendered voiceless (1984). For a group of people who are constantly being 'summarized' by the West, I am generally resistant to providing 'short histories' of Palestine but for the purposes of this introduction, an overview is necessary.

Prior to, during, and following 1948, the Jewish colonial movement and then its state massacred thousands of Palestinians, demolished entire towns, and forced inhabitants to flee or be killed. One question that was raised by Falak, a nineteen-year-old student in Al-Najah University, was addressed to her mother. She asked, 'Why did we leave our houses in 1948?' Her mother answered: 'I wish we had died instead of leaving but they threw us out of our houses.' Why did the Palestinians leave their homes, lands, farms, animals, and belongings to the newly arrived Jewish immigrants? Why did my own mother leave, leaving behind her parents, her house, her memories, having to walk, bare-footed, carrying three children aged four months to three years, with only the clothing that she was wearing? Why, by the end of the 1949 fighting, were almost a million Palestinians forced off their land? The history of the Palestinians shows that 400 to 500 Arab villages in Palestine were taken over by the Jewish state while leaving the inhabitants refugees lacking the right to return (for more detail, see, for example, the writings of Illan Pappe 2007 and Nur Masalha 1992). In the Palestinian village of Safsaf, for example, four women were raped, four were killed, and fifty-two men were tied up with a rope, dropped into a well, and then shot, with an additional ten more killed separately. In Sa'Sa, another village, there were cases of mass murder with over 100 dead and the whole village population expelled.

Rashid Khalidi argues that: 'it was Great Britain rather than the United States that initially created the problem of Palestine. But in Palestine, as elsewhere, it has been the lot of America, Britain's successor as the Western power with undisputed hegemony over the Middle East, to contend with this problem and its seemingly unending sequels.' Khalidi continues by stating:

> The outlines of the problem can be simply stated: with the Balfour Declaration of November 2, 1917, Britain threw the weight of the greatest power of the age, one that was at that moment in the process of conquering Palestine, behind the creation of a Jewish state in what was then an overwhelmingly Arab country. Everything that has followed in that conflict-riven land has flowed inevitably from this decision.
>
> (Khalidi 2004: 118)

Jewish Israeli historians have discussed the abuses inflicted upon Palestinians by the Jewish state, defining the Nakba, the Palestinian disaster in 1948–9, as 'ethnic cleansing' or 'crimes against humanity' (Kimmerling and Migdal 2003; Morris 2001; Pappe 1994, 2007). Others, such as Norman Finkelstein (1995) and Edward Said and Hitchens (2001) have argued that, at bottom, Israel offered two limited options for the indigenous Palestinian people: either eviction and expulsion or semi-imprisonment within a 'semi-Apartheid' state. Despite the clear injustice that Palestine and the Palestinians have suffered, political powers including the US supported the Zionist state for political reasons, ignoring the human disaster that it caused. Unable to marshal a powerful lobbying group, the Palestinians have consistently failed to gain a fair hearing. Hence, the terrible memories from the Holocaust, combined with the vivid biblical narrative that justifies the Jewish 'right' to the Palestinian land, and supported by the vivid and familiar narrative of an America that leans towards supporting Israel, have together made it difficult for both Arabs and Palestinians to make an impact on the political system of Empire. Rashid Khalidi explains:

> in the wake of the murderous, suicide attacks of September 11, 2001, on New York and Washington, the convergence between the policies of the Bush administration and the government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has reached the point that they are virtually indistinguishable in a number of realms, notably as regards what has become their shared rhetoric on the topic of 'terrorism'. Nowadays, Palestinian militant groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad are lumped together with al-Qai'da in the statements of the Bush administration and the Israeli government, and increasingly appear to be the object of the similar attention in US law and as a target of law enforcement agencies.
>
> (2004: 122)

In general, the attitude of Jews towards Arabs when the former reached Palestine was hostile. In 1917, the British government, in secret and without regard for the existing native majority, transmitted a promise to the Zionist Federation concerning the creation of a Jewish 'homeland' in Palestine. During the British occupation of Palestine (1918–48), Palestinian peasants, who in 1920 constituted approximately 80 per cent of the indigenous population, contributed more than any other class to the national resistance movement, yet due to lack of economic means they never led it (Sayigh 1979). The Palestinian peasants' exclusion from knowledge and decision-making

was deepened during the British occupation, an exclusion that contributed to their vulnerability and led in many cases to their eviction, displacement, and Diaspora during the catastrophe of 1948. However, the Arab resistance to Zionism prior to the founding of the Israeli state was overt and explicit. Between 1936 and 1940, Palestinians conducted a nationalist revolt against the British Mandate that expressed an implicit resistance against Zionism that was clear to many of the Zionist leaders, including Ben Gurion. In his book *The Fateful Triangle*, Noam Chomsky (1984) illustrates the way in which Palestinians viewed the Zionists as aggressors who wanted to take their lands. In May of 1948, the state of Israel was created, and approximately 700,000 Palestinians either fled the area or were expelled.

The story of the Palestinian catastrophe is the story of people who are paying for 'the sins of Europe and America'. Chomsky summarizes:

> The Jews of Europe suffered a disaster on a scale and of a character unknown in human history, following upon centuries of persecution and terror. Their growing national movement turned back to a homeland that had not been abandoned in memory of tradition. The author of the Balfour Declaration expressed widely-held sentiments in the industrial West when he wrote, in 1919, that 'Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long tradition, in present needs, in future hopes, of far profound import than the desires and prejudices of 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land' … Somehow the Palestinian peasants mired in their prejudice, were never able to appreciate their moral responsibility to expiate the sins of Christian Europe. Whatever one may think of the conflicting claims to national and human rights in the former Palestine, it is difficult not to be appalled when Western politicians and intellectuals explain their backing for Israel's policies in terms of 'moral obligation', as if the sins of the Nazis and their predecessors, or of the Americans who closed the doors to refugees from Hitler's horrors, require the sacrifice of the Palestinians – on moral grounds. How easy it is to meet one's moral obligations by sacrificing someone else's life.
>
> (1991: 3)

Moreover, Hanna Arendt states:

> after the war it turned out that the Jewish question, which was considered the only insoluble one, was indeed solved – namely, by means of a colonised and then conquered territory – but this solved neither the problem of the minorities nor the stateless. On the contrary, like virtually all other events of the 20th century, the solution of the Jewish question merely produced a new category of refugees, the Arabs, thereby

> increasing the number of stateless and rightless by another 700,000 to 800,000 people. And what happened in Palestine within the smallest territory and in terms of hundreds of thousands was then repeated in India on a large scale involving many millions of people.
>
> (1951: 290)

Hanna Arendt's insight shows us that Hitlerian politics should not be seen as exceptional but rather as exemplary of a certain way of managing vulnerable populations. It is a policy that produced the ordeal of Um Riad and many other Palestinians, and also the pain of expulsion and loss of family, land, and home. Subsequently, it rationalized the expulsions of the Palestinians as 'stateless people across the borders', to gather them in small enclaves and camps in order to render them largely invisible to the outside world. These moves were part of a process defined by Pappe as 'the ethnic cleansing of Palestine'. Pappe investigates the fate suffered by the indigenous population of Palestine in the 1940s at the hands of the Zionist political and military leadership. He offers a detailed account of the events of 1947–8 that eventually led to the biggest refugee problem in modern history. During this period, around a million people were expelled from their own country at gunpoint, civilians were massacred, and over 400 to 500 Palestinian villages were deliberately destroyed. Pappe persuasively argues that the consequent dispossession of a million native Palestinians from their homeland and the continued denial of their right of return constitute a violation of international human rights. He decisively links these events to contemporary Middle East politics and the prospects for a lasting peace in the country and, therefore, in the region (2007).

It is against this history that we need to contextualize the ongoing fear of ethnic cleansing in Palestine, a fear that is understandable given the reality of such crimes in the past. These crimes against the Palestinians have been manifested in various ways, including massacres of villagers (such as took place at Doueimah, Qibya, and Kafr Kasem), population expulsions (such as that of 70,000 residents from Lydda and Ramle), and displacements (as with thousands of Bedouins) (Said and Hitchens 2001). Israeli state crimes have included, among other punitive policies against Palestinians, deportation, assassinations, and collective punishments of civilians, demolition of homesteads, torture, and a fatality rate maintained at between 50 to 100 Palestinians dead for every Jewish fatality.

The onset of the First Intifada in December 1987 awakened the West from its slumber concerning the issue of Palestine and raised awareness of the Palestinian cause and its demands for justice. At the Oslo

conference in 1993, labelled the 'peace process', Palestinians were led to believe that Israel would withdraw from the West Bank and Gaza and would come to an agreement with it on both the status of Jerusalem and the right of return of Palestinian refugees. However, regardless of which political party was in power, Israel has continued to demolish houses, take over Arab neighbourhoods in East Jerusalem, confiscate land, imprison Palestinians, and construct new checkpoints, all the while restricting Palestinian freedom of movement by interfering with access to workplaces, hospitals, schools, and other spaces of everyday life. As Palestinian protests grew in response to these continuing oppressions, the Israeli army rocketed several Palestinian cities, destroying entire neighbourhoods and causing large casualties. By September 2000, many Palestinians realized that Israeli policy was not aimed at ending the occupation, nor was it seeking peace. Uri Avnery, an Israeli peace activist, stated on 3 February 2001 that Prime Minister Ehud Barak

> promised peace and brought war, and not by accident. While speaking about peace, he enlarged the settlements. Cut the Palestinian territories into pieces by 'by-pass' roads. Confiscated lands. Demolished homes. Uprooted trees. Paralyzed the Palestinian economy. Conducted negotiations in which he tried to dictate to the Palestinians a peace that amounts to capitulation. Was not satisfied with the fact that by accepting the Green Line, the Palestinians had already given up 78% of their historic homeland. Demanded the annexation of 'settlement blocks' and pretended that they amount to only 3% of the territory, while in fact he meant more than 20% would remain under Israeli control. Wanted to coerce the Palestinians to accept a 'state' cut off from all its neighbors and composed of several enclaves isolated from each other, each surrounded by Israeli settlers and soldiers … Boasts publicly that he has not given back to the Palestinians one inch of territory … When the intifada broke out, sent snipers to shoot, in cold blood from a distance, hundreds of unarmed demonstrators, adults and children. Blockaded each village and town separately, bringing them to the verge of starvation, in order to get them to surrender. Bombarded neighborhoods. Started a policy of mafia-style 'liquidations', causing an inevitable escalation of the violence.
>
> (Avnery 2001)

PALESTINIAN WOMEN ON THE FRONTLINES

Palestinian women's proactive responses to oppression, those voices and their choices made within the complex reality of occupation, were and are deeply influenced by the legacies of loss and the constant fear of