

Tales of Strength and Danger: Sahar and the Tactics of Everyday Life in Amari Refugee Camp, Palestine

A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place . . . it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized "on the wing." Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into "opportunities." The weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them.

—Michel de Certeau (1984, xii)

Sahar, thirty-four years old, was born, grew up, married, and bore her five children in Amari refugee camp on the outskirts of Ramallah, a Palestinian town nine miles northwest of Jerusalem in the West Bank.¹ During the last two of three interviews conducted with her in 2003 and 2004 by a research team from the Institute of Women's Studies at Birzeit University, Sahar was pregnant with her sixth child.² Sahar's father fled

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¹ Names have been changed to protect the privacy of the interviewees.

² Three interviews were conducted with Sahar and her family at their home in Amari refugee camp by the Institute of Women's Studies at Birzeit University in 2003 and 2004 as part of a project researching three neighboring Ramallah-area communities during the warlike conditions of the second intifada, which began on September 29, 2000, and continues as of this writing. Selwa Jaradat and Shadi Al Khawaja conducted the first two interviews on September 21, 2003, and April 2, 2004, for the Institute of Women's Studies research team, which shares all interviews conducted in this project. The third interview was conducted by the author, Lamis Abu Nahleh, and Rula Abu Dahu on July 8, 2004. In the first interview, fieldworkers were instructed to interview a number of informants in each community concerning key events in each of their communities, using and comparing the periods of the first intifada, the years of interim Palestinian self-government (the Oslo years), and the years of the second intifada. In the second interview, Sahar and her family were selected for an in-depth family interview. These interviews aimed at discovering the social world that individuals and families inhabited and the social and physical changes—in place, marriages,

as a child with his parents in 1948 from Na'ani, a village near the towns of Ramla and Lydda on the central coastal plain of historic Palestine, during a siege by the Haganah, the chief military force of the nascent Israeli state (see Morris 1987, 127). The family settled in the then newly established Amari refugee camp sometime in mid-1949. Sahar's mother is a refugee from the same coastal region; however, her family ended up in Gaza, where she lived in the Shatti refugee camp until her marriage.

Born in 1972, Sahar grew up during the Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Her teenage years were spent during the first Palestinian intifada, and she dropped out of secondary school in Ramallah during the long curfew Israel imposed on Palestinians in the Occupied Territories during the first Gulf War in January and February of 1991. She was then engaged to Marwan, a neighbor six years her elder whose family originated in Lydda. She describes her marriage to Marwan (a construction worker and a then-recent graduate of Israeli prison), with some regret, as a "traditional" marriage. Sahar married at eighteen, the median age of marriage for Palestinian women in the occupied Palestinian territories; however, she considers hers an early marriage and mourns her lost education and the opportunities it might have yielded.

War, conflict, and military occupation, on the one hand, and early marriage, child bearing, and family duties, on the other hand, have been shapers of the major events of Sahar's life. Refugee camp life is marked by the contours of both past and present conflicts. Amari, a camp with a population of about six thousand in 2004, has a history of both political militancy and heavy-handed Israeli repression: in the first intifada (December 1988–September 1993), for example, the Israeli army sealed the camp's main entrance for over four years; this action was an eerie precursor to the regime of closures, blockades, and checkpoints of today.

On the face of it, Sahar has had little space for independent action; her life is not replete with lifestyle choices or opportunities for self-development. Yet this is a view decidedly from a distance. Close up, after over a decade of marriage and five, going on six, children, Sahar seems a powerful figure in her family and kin circle—and perhaps in the community that surrounds her. The setting in the third interview in the summer of 2004 is telling. Sahar, heavily pregnant and dressed in a purple and pink dressing gown with short sleeves, sits in her small, whitewashed salon surrounded by her

work, household composition, family relations—that families have experienced since 1948, punctuated by wars and shadowed by occupation. The third follow-up interview piqued my curiosity. After reading the texts of the first two interviews, I was intrigued as much by Sahar's dramatic storytelling (including what might be called tall tales of moral danger) as by an interest in learning more about the events she described.

children and accompanied by her sister Ruba, a shy woman who wears a *mandil* (head scarf) and works running errands for the staff in the camp's girls school. Sahar's ten-year-old son, who has a learning disability, leans on her knee, protected by his mother. Sahar has persistently intervened with camp organizations to ensure his enrollment in special education programs and sent a daughter with him to summer camp with orders to make sure "no one laughs at him." She has taken on a role particularly important for camp families—and one that often falls to women: to secure as many entitlements as possible from the institutions that serve refugees, whether the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) that administers the camp or nongovernmental organizations operating in the camp. Her husband, Marwan, admits in a separate interview that he has nothing to do with institutions (or even visits to his own family); all that is left to Sahar.

In the precarious and insecure conditions of life in a Palestinian refugee camp, women's responsibilities to, and activities for, children and families may take them far beyond the threshold of the home. In a 2005 interview with Um Taysir, another woman from Amari, we learned how the terrible events of the past years (her fifteen-year-old son was killed by an Israeli sniper at the Ramallah City Inn checkpoint in November 2000, and four other sons were subsequently imprisoned) have propelled her into a seemingly endless round of visits and contacts with every human rights organization, quests for permits for prison visits, and a campaign to get medicine and treatment for one son in prison who is seriously injured.³ Her husband, bowed with grief and arthritis, seems unable to assist but proudly urges her to exhibit her impressive notebook full of phone numbers and contacts. When she recounts her appearances on television stations to appeal for her sons, he reminds her, "You were also on Japanese and Algerian television." Um Taysir has extended her maternal duties of care—and perhaps has taken on the paternal duties of protection as well—into the public realm. Nonetheless, her ceaseless activity is often fruitless: prison visits are denied, medicine does not get to her injured son, and human rights organizations and lawyers have no real power to intervene. Her situation points to the "linked failures in protection" (Johnson and Kuttub 2001, 37) during the second Palestinian intifada, in which both families and society and polity as a whole are unable to truly protect their children.⁴

³ Interview with Um Taysir, conducted at her home in Amari refugee camp by the author, Jamil Hilal, and Rula Abu Dahu, January 27, 2005.

⁴ In a disturbing reversal, Palestinian parents, particularly mothers, were subjected to allegations that they sent their children to die in the highly unequal confrontations at checkpoints during the first months of the al Aqsa intifada. In fact, parents often desperately went

Sahar frequently refers to the necessity of protecting her family: in the circumstances of Amari today it is not an easy task. “You are the cleverest child [*ashtar walad*],” Sahar tells Mohammed encouragingly, giving him a half shekel to buy a treat. The rest of the children need only a nod from Sahar to bring cold drinks or perform other hospitable tasks; two daughters, ages twelve and nine, are perched on a nearby sofa and listen attentively to their mother’s stories—stories in which she is quite definitely the hero. Her husband occupies an adjacent hallway for most of the interview, only entering when Sahar’s stories exasperate him to the point of intervention. Marwan’s role as an irritable audience is a useful reminder that “storytelling is strategic. Narrators tell tales in order to achieve some goal or advance some interest” (Ewick and Sibley 1995, 206). Although, as we learn, Marwan has twice been angry enough to pronounce a *talaq* to divorce Sahar, she nonetheless proceeds consciously to provoke him by noting his jealousy of her strength of character and ridiculing his attitude toward women.⁵ “He says women are like a spring; they need to be stepped on,” she caustically tells us, causing Marwan to rush into the room in his own defense. Sahar may partly be trying to wear down Marwan in a battle over her behavior and her desire to advance a somewhat vague plan of hers to open a shop in the house. However, she is also treating us to a bravura performance of a self-described but socially defined character trait: being *'awiyye* (*qawiyye*, strong).

How did a young bride become a strong adult in very constricted circumstances? What does it mean to be a strong woman in Sahar’s conditions, and what mark does she make on the canvas of family life and relations? How does she incorporate the hostile world around her into her family and social world, and how does she interact with it? In what I term the *domesticated tales* of the third interview, Sahar delights in displaying her personality as *'awiyye*: her narratives yield a repertoire of rhetorical and life tactics (closely related)—including boasting, exaggeration, deflation, domestication, and inversion—where the structural events that dominate and often constrict her life and the hostile world that surrounds her are domesticated into Sahar’s world, or even overturned, if

to the checkpoints to try to save their children—as Abu Taysir did unsuccessfully with his son, who “slipped out of his grasp” and went to throw stones at the soldiers.

⁵ *Talaq* is the unilateral divorce of the wife by the husband, but only when a *talaq* is pronounced three times (generally on separate occasions) is it irrevocable. Divorce laws in the West Bank and Gaza are based on Islamic law.

only for the duration of an anecdote.⁶ These victories are more like punch lines, however, than steady advances in her or her family's welfare. Her most stable achievement—acquiring after nine years of living and quarreling with her in-laws the independent house in which we meet—is the subject of a triumphant tale but is also, as we shall see, overshadowed by the large and catastrophic public events around her: her house as a refuge from the instabilities and interference of the public world may be increasingly important, but dangers encroach nonetheless.

By examining three of Sahar's domesticated tales—her struggle to break free from living with her in-laws and to establish an independent home, her arrangements for the marriage of her brother to a holder of a prized Israeli identity card, and the recent arrest of her husband at the Kalandia checkpoint—I will attempt to understand how Sahar deploys being *'awiyye* as a narrative and life tactic that turns to her advantage, in a phrase of Michel de Certeau, the abundant and diverse “forces alien or hostile” (1984, xii) to her, whether in-laws who deplore her loud voice and quarrelsome ways or the Israeli occupation forces who imprison her husband. But Sahar also tells other kinds of tales—dark tales of public immorality, dissolution, and danger, both in the city of Ramallah and on the home ground of the camp. From other interviews in the camp, we know that these tales, in numerous versions, circulated incessantly through the camp for several years: a tentative hypothesis is that these tales are in some sense collectively produced by a community trying to come to terms with the collapse of political (and moral) authority around them and with omnipresent danger. The concluding section of this essay will explore the relationship between Sahar's narratives that celebrate her own strength and domesticate or subdue the hostile world around her and these collectively produced legends of danger and immorality. The latter invoke a logic of necessity whose everyday effect is to convince Sahar to confine her daughters to the house after school and impose restrictions on their freedom despite her ambitions for their future. Sahar seems partly to be reproducing in her daughters the subordination she has suffered in her own life.

***'awiyye*: Strength as a tactic against adversity**

Sahar's is perhaps a typical life for a married Palestinian woman living in a refugee camp, constricted as much by war and occupation as by matters

⁶ I am here indebted to Michel de Certeau's notion of tactics as everyday practices of the weak that manipulate events—here through speech—to win a temporary advantage over the dominant powerful.

of marriage, child rearing, and gender relations. Perhaps also not so atypically, she is by her own and others' description a strong woman—'*awiyye*, a word that resonates with many meanings. Sahar, for example, uses it with pride as a badge of identity; others might use it to censure or at least to caution. *Enti 'awiyye* (you are strong) is a common phrase a mother directs at her daughter, sometimes with rueful pride and sometimes in admission that the disobedient daughter has won a skirmish, or outmaneuvered her mother, in the ongoing mother-daughter battle over proper behavior. The latter meaning is important: '*awiyye* is a combative and also a manipulative identity forged in the crucible of family relations. As such, it has multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings, in contrast to the more straightforward and institutional discourse of women's empowerment circulating in the public world of nongovernmental organizations. And it is an identity central to Sahar's perception of herself and others' perceptions of her. Indeed, after her third interview, our research team reached a conclusion that, if not scholarly, at least deserved more probing: Sahar was perhaps the strongest woman we had ever met.

It is, however, a paradoxical strength. Manipulation is a key aspect of being '*awiyye*, where gender power relations are manipulated rather than directly challenged. Sahar's complaints about Marwan are largely in this vein. As Rosemary Sayigh notes, "Complaints against husbands are, I argue, an indigenous form of women's consciousness that operate not to criticize or challenge the sex-gender system but to remind men of their responsibilities within it" (1997, 174).

In the second interview, Sahar's rosy and rather idealistic description of her family and conjugal relations illustrates the contradictions of being '*awiyye*: Sahar affirms that she is "dedicated to my husband" despite her recognition that "my personality is stronger than his," giving the examples that she brings a cup of coffee to him before any guest and that when he returns from work, she is "eager" (*harisah*), prepares food, and is ready to receive him. Sahar's stress on her eagerness to greet her husband has a mild sexual overtone; she is demonstrating key duties of an obedient wife—ready food and ready sexual availability to her husband. She goes on, however, to say that she is the real protector and guide of the family: "I am able to protect my family and its independence because of my strong personality and can give my husband guidance in a clear way." It is a working paradox: assertion through deference and control through performative submission.

Sahar's stance toward the world echoes in other Palestinian, occupied, subaltern lives, whether male or female, and calls for a redefinition of the somewhat outworn term *samoud* (steadfastness), often characterized as passive endurance but here understood as a series of tactics deployed against

a hostile reality where “the weak must continually turn to their own end forces alien to them” (de Certeau 1984, xii). De Certeau’s point that these gains are always temporary is particularly relevant to Palestinian civilian life under the siege conditions of the second intifada: the young men who drive the often unlicensed and rogue Ford Transits on a new route every day as well as the passengers who ascend and descend from the same at each roadblock are employing tactics in precisely this sense, where the next day will negate their gains and they must start all over again. Rema Hammami calls these tactics of manipulation and adaptation “the uprising’s ethic of getting through anything, by any means” (2004, 28). Such tactics are emblematic of the second intifada and in contrast to the first intifada, where action was premised on effecting profound and positive political change. In the current circumstances, as de Certeau observes, “the actual order of things is precisely what ‘popular’ tactics turn to their own ends, without any illusion that it will change any time soon” (1984, 26).

These tactics are also embedded in the contradictions of refugee camp life as it has been lived for over half a century. Arjun Appadurai cites these “quasi-permanent refugee camps” as “extreme examples of neighborhoods that are context-produced, rather than context-generative” (1997, 192–93). There can be no doubt that refugee camps are spaces marked by surveillance, restriction, and regulation; they are almost by definition spaces that are in many ways defined by the inhabitants not wanting to be there. But at the same time, Palestinian refugees in camps continually make and reshape their environment, both physically through the small (sometimes illegal) improvements made to dwellings and socially through kin, community, and political networks that can extend far beyond the camp. As Julie Peteet has aptly observed, Palestinian refugees “imprint their own sociality and spatiality on camps, rendering them multiply-inflected, indeed, often contradictory places” (Peteet 2004, 6). As we will see in more detail below, in several of Sahar’s anecdotes of key events in her own life she is a trickster hero who manipulates opportunities to her own ends—to the extent that her husband’s imprisonment is presented as an opportunity for home re-decorating.

Anecdote versus biography

Sahar’s interviews do not constitute a biographical narrative of her life; rather, she tells a series of stories or anecdotes in which she figures as a character. This is partially due to the structure of the interviews and the interviewers’ diverse questions, to which Sahar responds with her tales. However, it is also worth considering anecdotes as another way to tell a

life story that may differ from sustained biography. Anthony Giddens sees “coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives as part of the self-reflexive project of modernity” and notes that they “take place in the context of multiple choice as filtered through abstract systems, choices which can be characterized as lifestyle choices” (1991, 5). Sahar’s narratives are less sustaining and coherent narratives than a series of anecdotes that take place in the context not of multiple choices but of highly restricted choices or even no choice at all. These anecdotes nonetheless issue challenges to the world around her through tactics where the hostile world is subsumed into her domestic world (domestication), through deflation (deflating public events to the domestic), and through role reversal (the unwanted public becomes the desired domestic). Fredric Jameson draws our attention to Walter Benjamin’s vivid description of the anecdotal: Benjamin compares the anecdotal to a “street fight or an insurrection,” while formal history is “comparable to the institutions of the military, which browbeat daily life” (Benjamin 1999; quoted in Jameson 2002, 217), suggesting that anecdotes are a way of articulating (and understanding) daily life, that arena that formal history may leave unexamined or marginalized.

The sense of self and self-identity in anecdotes may also differ from biography, with its emphasis on the sustained self-development of the individual. A liberal notion of individuality with its emphasis on unrestricted choice and progressive and reflexive self-development is less salient than Sahar’s own evocation of a strong personality (*sakhsiiyye*) or character that asserts itself in the circumstances of everyday life. In the interviews, Sahar has a complex and somewhat contradictory relationship to individuality and private life. At several points in the interviews, Sahar stresses her aversion to interference in her private life and the value of preserving her family’s independence and privacy, both in relation to her in-laws and in her condemnation of the pernicious effect of community gossip and talk. While she succeeds in establishing herself and her family as independent from her in-laws, as noted in the story related below of her struggle for an independent house, her relation to community gossip—and its effect on her behavior—is much more ambiguous. Despite her condemnation of such talk, she is an active participant, as is evident from the almost breathless series of stories of moral corruption that she tells in the first two interviews and that will be examined in the concluding section. And it is community talk, as well as the dangers it portrays, that cause her to restrict her daughters’ mobility and to regulate their behavior, as she says, so that she and her family will have no “dust” marring their reputation.

Sahar's struggle for an independent home

After their marriage Marwan and Sahar lived with Marwan's parents in a small two-story dwelling, a cement-block shelter like most of the other houses in Amari (Johnson 2005). An unmarried sister of Marwan's also resided in the house. It is likely that the generally poor economic conditions of the first intifada led to Sahar's initial acceptance of these arrangements. The bride's right to a separate dwelling, enshrined in Islamic sharia-based family law, has been subject to interpretation and reinterpretation as families and communities prosper or decline. Writing on Dheisheh refugee camp near Bethlehem, Maya Rosenfeld observes that prior to the first intifada families of brides had been demanding separate apartments as a "precondition for marriage," but the "ongoing deterioration of the economic situation led to flexibility and the lowering of demands," where brides' families accepted lower dowers and sometimes settled for a room instead of a separate dwelling (Rosenfeld 2004, 92). This lowering of expectations—and again marriage conditions here are shaped by war and its consequences—cannot have been so easily accepted by all brides, and that certainly included Sahar. Indeed, she stressed that her marriage, "like that of others," was partly the result of parental pressure, as families wanted to take advantage of the lowered costs of marriage during the Gulf War and late intifada, when no expensive wedding parties were required.

Although Marwan and Sahar were able to build an extra room with a separate kitchen and bathroom, Sahar was unhappy living with her in-laws. After nine years of marriage—and according to Sahar "as the result of many conflicts with her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law"—Sahar finally convinced Marwan to sell their home in the family house and buy a place of their own "far from the family." They faced some problems in selling the room to a stranger, so they went to the Sulha (arbitration) Committee, whose members were from their hometown of Lydda, which convinced the brother of her husband to buy the rooms for 10,000 Jordanian dinars (about 12,000 dollars). With this money, Marwan and Sahar bought a cement-block house for 14,000 dinars near the mosque at the opposite end of the camp from the family—a desirable location. Smaller than Marwan's family dwelling, their new home had two stories—a first floor with three small rooms plus a kitchen and bathroom and a second floor with two rooms and access to the roof. Sahar proudly listed her amenities and electrical appliances, including water, electricity, a satellite dish, boiler, and a washing machine. Searching for more income, she also convinced Marwan to rent out one room as a storage room for a vegetable merchant.

Sahar attributes her ability to persuade Marwan in all these matters to

her “strong personality.” As a result of her personality, she went from being oppressed by her in-laws to being sought out by them so that they now “circle behind her” (*dayeereen waraha*), seeking her out for assistance and social relations. Previously, the female in-laws had not wanted Marwan to marry Sahar—they thought she was *samra* (dark) and had a loud voice—the latter attribute cheerfully admitted to by Sahar. They summed her up as *'awiyye*, giving this trait the characteristically negative connotation. Now, Sahar says (somewhat callously since Marwan is in earshot) that they prefer her to their own son. Sahar is quite clear on the importance of Marwan’s steady income to her family’s independence and the negative consequences of his current status as an irregular day labor. However, this sometimes seems a limiting and limited role next to her female force of character.

Sahar acquired her independent house—a signal positive event in her life—during the “Oslo years,” the years of Palestinian interim rule that commenced in 1996. Sahar was occupied with family affairs and child rearing during these years of Palestinian self-government when Ramallah was booming with new wealth. But she viewed the influxes of population and the explosion of new residential housing, commercial centers, cafés, and places of business as evidence of corruption and negativity. When asked about the main events in Amari during the Oslo period, Sahar began with a common observation of the “extensive commercial activity” (*hara-kah*), the new buildings and restaurants in Ramallah, and the building boom in the camp, “especially the building of (new) floors” on top of existing buildings. But then she offered a different image to this paradigm of bustling development: the newly constructed tall buildings in Amari camp cast a shadow on smaller dwellings (like her much-prized new house). The darkness, Sahar says, brings disease like the “days of tents,” a reference to the dark days after 1948, when the new refugees from the sunlit coast lived in unhealthy tents in the cold and damp Ramallah hills. This perspective on these signs of development and modernity is significant in the context of the legends of corruption that will be explored later. Stretching the point perhaps, the “days of tents” reference may contain an elusive hint that these seemingly prosperous Oslo years may darken the prospects for the rights and well-being of camp refugees.

Sahar’s story of marriage arrangements

Sahar’s position as the eldest child (and perhaps a favorite of her father) in her natal family may well have contributed to her strength of character and most certainly did to her roles and responsibilities in relation to her

younger siblings and her prominent role in their marriage arrangements. Although it is common for women, particularly mothers, to take a leading role in marriage arrangements, Sahar's rather ruthless search to provide her younger brother with a bride bearing a precious Israeli identity card stretches this convention to the limits.⁷ In projects to marry off her two younger brothers, Sahar deploys being *'awiyye* to overcome adverse situations that are part of the (so far) unchangeable realities of occupation, siege, and closure. Marriage is not in a separate private sphere but is at the very heart of either overcoming or adapting to these negative public conditions.

The project of finding a wife for her brother Ibrahim, the oldest son in the family, is a clear example. It began with the problems Sahar's father had while managing his garage in East Jerusalem. As a holder of a West Bank identity card, he was barred from travel to Jerusalem during Israel's frequent closures of the West Bank.⁸ He also confronted business matters that needed a Jerusalem or Israeli identity card, which none of the family possessed.⁹ So Sahar, accompanied by other family members, undertook a journey to Lydda where Sahar "knocked on doors and asked if they had any brides" or even more directly said, "We want girls" (*beddna banaat*). Sahar the storyteller relishes the physical vigor of her knocking and the verbal vigor of her demands. Although some households did not have any girls of marriageable age, everyone was hospitable. Finally, a seemingly poor family with too many girls (*kuṭr al banaat*), perhaps as many as ten according to Sahar's emphatic estimate, offered a sixteen-year-old girl who became Ibrahim's bride. (Ibrahim was then in his early twenties.) Ibrahim secured an Israeli identity card, and the garage was successfully registered in his name. Here, the marriage project was clearly embedded in tactics for survival and mobility in the adverse and discriminatory conditions of Israel's closure regime, and Sahar pursued the objective with an almost military boldness of attack. It is significant that she also turns to Lydda, the coastal town near her family's original village and marriage pool before 1948. Although Sahar herself was born in Amari and has rarely visited Lydda (her family's village of Na'ani no longer exists except for a few

⁷ In his study of Breij refugee camp in Gaza, Dag Tuastad notes that the "social contacts and preferences of mothers" dominate marriage arrangements (1997, 107).

⁸ Today, travel between Arab Ramallah and Arab Jerusalem, a nine-mile journey, is even more difficult for West Bank residents, requiring a military-issued permit to enter the city.

⁹ Arab East Jerusalem was part of the West Bank territory occupied by Israel in June 1967 but was annexed shortly afterward to the Israeli state despite the illegality of such an action under international law. East Jerusalem residents thus hold Israeli resident identity cards.

deserted houses), she obviously feels ties of affiliation, and Lydda's current Palestinian residents become a reconstituted marriage pool.

In turning to Lydda, she had to leave aside more usual concerns about some of the personal characteristics of the bride. Asked about these, Sahar was precise: the bride had good qualities, the most important of which was that her family was "clean" (*ndiifeh*). But Sahar admitted that the bride was *samra* (dark) and her hair was quite crinkly. Sahar has subjected both her and her subsequent children to chemical treatments to improve their hair. Given that Sahar herself was criticized by her husband's relatives for being *samra*, this rather dramatic action does not perhaps address all the underlying tensions in this marriage project.¹⁰

The wedding itself took place comfortably in Lydda: Sahar says: "We are all peasants (*fellaheen*) and have the same customs," an interesting remark given that her family has been away from the village and land for over half a century. Sahar's family took six Ford Transit vans (*Fordaat*) from Amari to attend the wedding. (At that point, it was relatively easy to get to locations inside Israel as long as the van had an Israeli yellow plate rather than the white and green license plate that marks West Bank cars.) Sahar characterizes the marriage as a happy one.

On the face of it, this marriage project contradicts Sahar's contention that she married too young (at age eighteen) and wishes for her own daughters to marry at a later age, insisting that she wanted her daughters to be more educated and to have a degree. Her ambitions for them did not extend to a big university, such as the nearby Birzeit University; the UN woman's training institute in Ramallah, which teaches young women clerical and semiprofessional skills, would suffice. She even noted that "awareness" (*wa'i*) had changed, awareness used here, and by other women, to denote a will to change customary relations between women and men. She cites the case of a man who chose an older bride because he wanted someone "not just for cooking" but for mutual companionship. However, Sahar was firm that she had done the right thing in the case of Ibrahim's marriage to a sixteen-year-old girl: this case is different because the family was poor and there were too many girls. It is a logic of necessity that Sahar may well apply to her own daughters in certain circumstances.

¹⁰ The ideal of a fair and beautiful bride is not racial in the Palestinian context but shaped by cultural and class dynamics, as well as by the symbolic importance of marriage itself. I have argued elsewhere that marriage functions in symbolic opposition to war; in the narratives of another woman in Amari camp who is pursuing a bride for her son, the beauty of the bride overwhelms the very real economic needs that initially motivated her original quest for a bride for her son (Johnson 2006a).

Sahar is currently searching for a bride from the camp for another younger brother—although he is already engaged to a relative from Gaza. Here again, marriage is shaped by conditions of closure and war. Various schemes to bring the bride and her family to Amari have failed because of Israeli restrictions and closures: Gaza residents cannot enter Israel in order to travel to the West Bank. In the meantime, Sahar fears the bride may be changing in unfavorable ways—and certainly she is getting older. Thus, without telling the Gaza family (who are kin, which magnifies her obligation toward them), she is looking around in the camp and has at least one criterion—“we want someone calm”—a qualification that, of course, contrasts with her own loud and assertive personality.

Sahar's story of Marwan's arrest

After Marwan left the house for noon prayers at a nearby mosque, we asked Sahar about Marwan's periods of detention by the Israeli army.¹¹ After noting his previous arrest during the first intifada, she told the story of his recent arrest at Kalandia checkpoint, which separates Ramallah from Jerusalem and its environs. Checkpoint tales are a noted feature of Palestinian daily discourse, but Sahar's story had an added twist.¹² It was a tale she told with relish and in a distinctly antiheroic mode—at least for Marwan. Traveling to Jerusalem with Marwan, Sahar went through the checkpoint without a problem—there is a sense in her words of sailing through—and met relatives on the other side. Marwan, however, was detained and put in prison for eighteen days.¹³ Sahar pauses and delivers the punch line: “*Inshallah* [God willing], there should have been a zero or two added!” such that Marwan would spend 180 or 1,800 days in prison. She goes on to explain how she used the time profitably and energetically to redecorate the house, benefiting both from an UNRWA prison allowance and from the absence of Marwan, who does not like to spend money on the house. For the first time, Sahar, heavily pregnant, rises from her seat. With a flourish, she removes the cover of a sponge

¹¹ We had been trying to raise this question with Marwan but could not get a word in edgewise as he launched into a passionate defense of his position against Sahar's derogatory remarks of his alleged view that a woman was a spring that must be stepped on.

¹² In January 2006 the United Nations reported fifty permanently manned Israeli checkpoints, eight partially manned checkpoints, and 571 physical obstacles separating Palestinian locations in the West Bank (OCHA 2006, 1), in addition to the Wall, or separation barrier.

¹³ Under the prevailing Israeli military law, Palestinian detainees can be held for eighteen days (without access to a lawyer) before being brought before a military judge for charge or an extension of detention without charge. Marwan was released without charge.

sofa to show torn sponge that needs repair—another piece of evidence against Marwan.

Sahar's story is a brief anecdote and well told: indeed, one suspects it might be a set piece in her repertoire, particularly with the surprise ending, the punch line where she wishes Marwan in prison for a much longer time. But what is Sahar saying? Her deflationary account of Marwan's imprisonment opposes those heroic narratives that Iris Jean-Klein (2000) found mothers and sisters telling of sons and brothers imprisoned and tortured during the first intifada, when women relatives became the voice of the silent hero. And indeed, a checkpoint arrest in the second intifada may well be a deflated, passive experience as opposed to arrests for defiant stone throwing, distributing clandestine leaflets, or participating in armed attacks. But Sahar also incorporates the arrest into her domestic world (it becomes an occasion for redecorating) again, forming a curious opposition to women's activism in the first intifada, in which women expanded their domestic and mothering roles into the public sphere, for example, claiming young men as their sons to protect them from arrest and beating by Israeli soldiers.

Although Sahar's rather scornful account also stems from the character of her conjugal relationship, there is perhaps more going on in her brief tale of a checkpoint arrest. It is unlikely that she experiences this event as placidly and opportunistically as she recounts: detentions by the Israeli army are perhaps familiar, but they are also frightening. In the first days, sometimes weeks, families are not informed as to why or even where the detainee is held, mistreatment is common, and fates are highly uncertain. The narrative tactics Sahar employs—deflation, reversal, domestication—are familiar from other tales that women and men tell of their lives in the second intifada from the endangered, often helpless, position of Palestinian civilians in the face of Israeli military assaults. A colleague of mine at Birzeit University, for example, lived perilously close to the new police compound in Ramallah, which was bombed by Israeli warplanes during the summer of 2001. The experience was clearly terrible: reverberating shocks, fear, and high anxiety. Her account included the terror but also undercut it with a rather comical focus on dust—she is known to be a fussy housekeeper—and the problems of cleaning up the same. In her book of narratives of the second intifada, Wendy Pearlman notes that on day four of the intifada, the Israeli attack helicopters joined ground forces, triggering fear and panic among Palestinian civilians. She then recounts the story of a single man who told her how he rushed to his corner market and bought everything on the shelves, including a five-pound tin of Nido powdered milk and one thousand tampons (Pearlman 2003, 59). In the

fearful confusion of war, a bachelor pokes fun at his embarrassingly inappropriate—and feminine—acquisitions.

For Sahar, Marwan's arrest is an occasion for deflationary humor and perhaps for deflecting her own anxieties and fears of the dangerous world that surrounds her and her family. In her more public tales, the physical dangers of the second intifada are hardly acknowledged; instead, she focuses on moral dangers, particularly corruption and sexual deviance.

Public events, collective tales

During the second intifada, Amari camp has been both a location of heightened resistance and a special target of repression. Amari youth were disproportionately present at the highly unequal confrontations at the City Inn checkpoint on the outskirts of Ramallah in the first several months of the intifada, when rock-throwing youth were met with Israeli army fire (Abu Toameh and Kershner 2001). During a demonstration at this checkpoint in November 2000, Um Taysir's fifteen-year-old son was killed by a rubber-coated steel bullet fired into his chest by an Israeli soldier.¹⁴ This terrible event, Um Taysir says, propelled her remaining sons into militant activism, which resulted in their subsequent arrest and imprisonment.

As the conflict escalated and became more militarized, Amari had the uneasy distinction of being the home of the first Palestinian woman, Wafa al Idris, to conduct a suicide operation; her family home in the camp was subsequently demolished by the Israeli army.¹⁵ Israeli reprisals and attacks took their main toll on civilians: for example, an Israeli missile directed at the car of a Hamas activist, Hussein Abu Kweik, in Amari camp on March 6, 2002, killed six people—his wife and three children and two passersby. Amari even had its own local Israeli invasion several weeks before tanks rolled into Ramallah on March 29, 2002, when the Israeli army invaded the camp from March 12 to March 16, 2002.

These dramatic and often tragic events do not, however, seem to capture Sahar's imagination. For her, the Israeli invasion, which generated an outpouring of highly charged eyewitness accounts from middle-class Ramallah residents, was nothing special: it was *'aadi* (ordinary), with children playing in the streets of the camp when the Israeli army was busy elsewhere (see

¹⁴ Amnesty International reported that eighty Palestinian children under eighteen years of age were killed by the Israeli army in the first three months of the intifada, calling Israel's lethal use of force against demonstrators excessive and illegal (Amnesty International 2002).

¹⁵ Wafa al Idris, an emergency health care worker, blew herself up in Jaffa Road in West Jerusalem on January 27, 2002, killing one Israeli man.

Shehadeh 2003; Amiry 2006). Describing difficult or painful events—checkpoint crossings, harassment by soldiers, curfews—as *‘aadi* is a deflationary tactic that is not uncommon in daily Palestinian discourse, but Sahar carries it to an extreme here, a narrative tactic that she uses to great effect elsewhere. This is not because the intifada has not touched her family: her cousin, the son of a favorite aunt, was killed by the Israeli army in Ramallah in December 2002. But even this event is mentioned only when she is asked about her social network and how often she visits her relatives.

Sahar’s most persistent responses to the present warlike conditions are to keep her daughters close to home, to bemoan—and sometimes berate—her husband for his loss of income as a construction worker, and to tell tales focused not on the physical dangers of invasion but rather of the moral dangers of a corrupt society and polity. It is these moral dangers that are extraordinary—decidedly not *‘aadi*—rather than those repressive actions taken by Israeli soldiers. In distinction from Sahar’s domestic tales, the elements of many of these stories are collectively produced and circulated in the camp: they are present, for example, in many other interviews conducted with Amari residents during this research project. And despite the harsh realities of Amari camp, the camp is counterpoised to the dangerous and immoral terrain of the city of Ramallah as a (relatively) secure and moral place—a community of shared sensibilities.

Sahar’s stories of moral danger

The tales of moral danger are not situated solely in the period of the second intifada: they are anchored in the transformations of the Oslo years (from 1996 to the present). Many of Sahar’s tales of immorality and public danger were in response to questions in her first interview on main events during that period in her community, whether Ramallah in general or Amari in particular. As in the stories of other informants in the camp, the link between the perceived political corruption of the governing Palestinian Authority (colloquially known as the *sulta*, meaning authority) and moral dissolution (*inhilaal ikhlaa’i*) was central. After repeating “street talk” that “a specific group benefited at the expense of others” (a frequent refrain from most interviewees in the camp), she added: “In regard to the problems and corruption in the city, some of these people and the employees of the *sulta* . . . take salaries without going to their institutions and obstruct opportunities for others. And also moral dissolution has increased greatly in the city and restaurants and places where male and female youth behave in an immoral way because of an absence of law to call them to account.” The theme of a few benefiting at the expense of many runs through a majority

of the interviews conducted in the camp in this research project, reflecting actual practice and undermining core notions of a unified Palestinian people in the troubled terrain of the Oslo years. It is also interesting that the theme of moral dissolution, prominent here and in other accounts, was stressed at a time when political authority—the central authority of the *sulta*—was in fact in danger of dissolution, with Yasser Arafat under siege in the rubble of the authority's headquarters in Ramallah.

Political corruption and moral dissolution are significantly intertwined. Sahar blames the owners of Ramallah restaurants and cafés, many newly opened in the interim years and catering to single young people with disposable income (and freedom) garnered from jobs in nongovernmental organizations, international agencies, and the media. She is particularly incensed because the owners do not question the “kin relation” of the youth; in other words, they do not ensure that girls and boys seated together are suitably related (such as sisters and brothers). Sahar thus both calls for a more abstract “law” and berates the absence of a highly personal, even familial, oversight responsibility from owners of these establishments. She calls out the names of iniquitous cafés—one of which is called “Stones” in English—that she has learned from her husband or community gossip and generally castigates places of “dancing and drinking.” Economic class resentment can be detected in her complaints; Amari families cannot afford to frequent restaurants, let alone nightclubs. Sahar's account moves seamlessly from the political misdemeanors of the authority, whose corruption in her view primarily consists of political patronage in jobs, to moral corruption in the city, which is home to the new cafés and restaurants of post-Oslo Ramallah and where the consorting of young people, drinking, and dancing take place. It is interesting that Sahar's accusations of political corruption, like others in Amari interviews, focus on political patronage but exclude criticisms of other matters, whether the Oslo agreements themselves, the Palestinian Authority's weakness in negotiations with Israel, or even possible compromises on refugee rights.

Sahar is not alone in merging political and moral corruption. When asked about the period of the *sulta*—the years of rule by the Palestinian Authority—a middle-aged electrician in Amari replied: “When there is a problem between two people, the conflict is not treated through right/law (*haq*) but by *wasta* (influence), and *wasta* does everything even if the *haq* is against him, and it (the *sulta*) opened bars and nightclubs.”¹⁶ Again, the Palestinian Authority's disregard of law and use of patronage merges

¹⁶ Interview with A. B., conducted at his home in Amari refugee camp on March 16, 2003, by Amal Ghanem and Kefah 'Awawdeh.

with the opening of bars and nightclubs, this time by the *sulta* itself.¹⁷ Bars, nightclubs, and the *sulta*'s corruption are placed firmly outside Amari and in the city. But when Sahar mentions specific incidents of immorality and danger, the focus begins to shift. In the first interview, Sahar first notes a new phenomenon of "harassment by telephone or *pelephon*" (nickname for a mobile phone), where young men dial numbers in a random manner hoping a young girl will answer—a phenomenon that by its nature cannot be located in one place. Then she notes the increased incidence of rape: her examples are of four young men (*shebab*) from Amari raping a girl from the adjoining neighborhood of Um Shariyet and of a gang of sixteen- and seventeen-year-old boys from Amari kidnapping and raping a girl from nearby Kadoura camp. Here the offenders are from the camp and the victims from nearby neighborhoods. As she continues, common themes about the camp itself, echoed by numerous camp residents in the period of our interviews (2003–4), enter her conversation: the camp is a "headquarters for car theft," and young men carry arms without the *sulta* doing anything about it, since the youth are supporters of the *sulta*.

Now located in the camp, Sahar turns to a theme that is more particularly hers, at least in its emphasis: the dangers to young girls posed by the "moral dissolution" around them, sometimes by their own loose behavior but also by the "talk" directed against them. She contrasts her childhood (citing the years between ages eight and thirteen) playing with the neighbors and says "today I will not permit my ten-year-old daughter to play with the neighbors' children." The school itself is a site of bad behavior and temptations for girls—smoking in the sixth and seventh grades, aggression and fighting among the girls, and, more mysteriously, "sexual harassment among the girls." A sequence of cautionary tales about fourteen-year-old girls going around in cars with boys and an attack on a seven-year-old girl by a fifteen-year-old boy makes it clear that the school itself is a site of moral danger.

Sahar returns to this theme in her second interview, emphasizing that "there is fear for the generation of twelve to fifteen," where, of course, her own daughters are located. She tells the story of a girl of that age who stole a pair of jeans and told a series of lies about where she acquired them without the mother investigating her claims. On this and other occasions Sahar clearly blames mothers and their lack of control and dis-

¹⁷ The Amari electrician is partly right in that politicians in or close to the authority invested in restaurants and other new enterprises in Ramallah and elsewhere. However, the authority's actual control of commercial activity was in the form of public monopolies on commodities such as fuel and cement (see Nasr 2004) rather than nightclubs.

cipline, “which encourages deviation (*inharaaf*) and looseness (*faltaan*) in which the new generation live,” especially, she adds quite specifically, the “eighth and ninth grades.” Again, she is clearly thinking of the perils facing her own daughters.

For Sahar’s daughter, twelve-year-old Dunia, frustration with the restrictions in her life was palpable during her interview. Burdened by her responsibilities as the eldest daughter, Dunia feels her mother is always pushing her into housework, while Dunia dreams not only of continuing her education but also of “living like other girls who come and go.” In her lexicon, mobility clearly stands for freedom. She is not the only girl in Amari who makes this equation—teenage girls in a 2006 discussion group in Amari, for example, complained that they only moved between “school and home” and repeatedly said they didn’t want a future of “just sitting at home” (Johnson 2006b, 15).¹⁸ She is “not at ease” and would like to live outside the camp. “I feel I am imprisoned in the camp,” she says succinctly. Interestingly, however, she also tells similar tales to her mother of the problems at her school and of girls who curse, steal, and play hooky from their classes. At one point she blames these problems on “romantic relations” and also, without explanation, on the popular satellite television programs *Star Academy* and *Super Star*, where youthful competitors from across the Arab region sing, dance, and vie for fame.

Sahar circulates these tales of moral corruption, but the role of “talk” in her world is also a pernicious one. It is talk rather than actual danger that makes her forbid her daughter from playing with the neighbors, and it is the dangers of talk as well as actual perils that confine her daughters to the house after school. While Sahar herself could perhaps be considered a rumormonger, she says that “people talk too much” and that “people believe rumors and keep the black point [*nuqtah sudah*, the negative element] whether it is true or not.”

Sahar’s own talk about young girls has four dimensions: the moral dangers from others, particularly young men; the moral looseness of the girls themselves, from inappropriate clothing to petty crime to “full sexual awareness”; the failure of parents, particularly mothers; and, finally, the perils of “talk” directed at girls. These elements are not distinguished in

¹⁸ It is interesting that boys in the seventh and eighth grade, in another discussion group of youth from the camp, also worried about and feared “sitting at home.” With their experience largely confined to the camp, one even said he liked going to Ramallah—literally outside the doors of the camp—because “there was no Occupation [Israeli military occupation] there” (Johnson 2006b, 4). Although his friend corrected him, the sense of confinement that youth in the camp experience differs at least by degree from other young people in Ramallah.

her discourse, as they probably are mixed in her practices toward her own daughters. Indeed, tales about young girls are also shot through with troubled ambiguity. An interesting example is the story of a seventeen-year-old who disappeared from the camp for ten days on a visit to Ram, a sprawling working-class neighborhood between Ramallah and Jerusalem. Sahar reports that “rumors circulated a lot about the reason but no one knew. Her family spread a rumor that she had gone for a martyrdom operation but no one believed it.” The story thus stays ambiguous—a sexual escapade or a suicide mission, but the former, in the climate of Amari and the second intifada, seems more probable to the community than the latter. Whereas in the first intifada, youths—primarily male but also female—were a source of hope and resistance, in the second intifada, youths—primarily female but also male—provoke fear for their future and the community’s future. Shortly before the second intifada, one Amari youth observed that he and his friends had gone from being viewed as heroes to being viewed as “hooligans” (Farah 2000, 2).

Sahar’s focus on her fears for young girls is found even in her rendering of a tragic event that occurred in Amari in 2002 when a widow with children was murdered by male family members after she gave birth to an illegitimate child and returned to the camp. In the story recounted by several interviewees, the seducer was said to be from outside the camp and the victim drugged by a cup of tea or fooled in a similar way.¹⁹ The moral Sahar draws from the story is simple: “no one will want to be engaged to her daughters.”

’awiyye and the logic of necessity

There are many interesting and significant questions to explore about the stories of moral danger that Sahar and other Amari residents tell—tales that circulate in Amari to a much greater degree than in the other two neighboring communities under study. I do not have sound empirical evidence on the incidents circulated through rumors or the general prevalence of crimes such as rape to be able to position the sharp sense of danger and dissolution in these tales told in Amari against an empirical background of crimes and their resolution in the camp. Although there are national crime statistics that report a low incidence of rape, rape is an underreported crime. It is interesting that these tales, so dominant in

¹⁹ Interviews with R. B., a thirty-nine-year-old married woman, July 6, 2004, and F. H., a fifty-four-year-old married woman, July 27, 2004. Both interviews were conducted in the women’s homes in the Amari refugee camp.

interviews with Sahar and other camp residents in 2003 and 2004, are less prominent in conversations with camp residents in 2006. They may thus signal a kind of moral panic, which does not imply that “something does not exist” but does imply a form of cultural politics that crystallizes public anxieties (Cohen 2002, vii).

However, the strong connection between political and moral corruption expressed by Sahar and other residents—and the trumping of the political by the moral in these discourses—is important to consider for its implications for the shape of Palestinian politics as well as for the lives of camp residents. Sahar herself expresses a longing for political and moral authority—on one occasion, she even mentions missing the “masked men” of the first intifada who punished moral transgressions. Amari as a moral community is perceived as under great threat: while general perceptions of moral corruption are located in the restaurants, bars, and nightclubs of the city, tales of sexual and moral deviance also come close to home.

There have certainly been other moments in popular Palestinian discourse when political and national crisis is figured in moral terms: after several years of the first Palestinian intifada, stories of *isqat* (sexual entrapment) by Israeli Shin Bet agents or Palestinian collaborators circulated widely, and collaboration and women’s immorality were conflated as several women accused of being prostitutes were killed as collaborators. For a time, young men, especially in Gaza, redirected their stones at women not wearing the *hijab* (head scarf), equating covering the head with showing respect to the dead and wounded of the intifada. Ted Swedenburg describes these incidents as an “uncanny repetition” of events in 1938 during the Arab Revolt when Arab peasant revolutionaries attacked the Westernized dress and “European hats” of urban elite and middle-class women (1995, 189). Although the urban male headgear (the *tarboosh*) was also censured, the effect seems to have been primarily on urban women and their public activity. Both of these campaigns peaked when nationalist resistance was under severe threat, and both contain contrasts between the draconian repression befalling the Palestinian people and the presumed frivolity of the elite—a contrast that is also found in Amari residents’ visions of Ramallah. What is particularly relevant is that in both women are used as moral markers in a time of political crisis. Although certainly not an elite population, young girls in Amari seem to have inherited this mantle.

Sahar faces the physical dangers of the al Aqsa intifada with a fairly high degree of equanimity—they remain *‘nadi*—and deflates and domesticates events such as Marwan’s arrest. She deploys being *‘awiyye* to manipulate her husband, advance the welfare of her children and kin, and secure a measure of independence for herself and her family. She is able

to exercise a measure of control over the warlike conditions around her through deflation but inflates or at least gives extraordinary emphasis to moral dangers in a kind of return of the repressed. Convinced of the evils of rumor and gossip, these evils nonetheless begin to rule her actions, especially toward her daughters, as the logic of necessity dictates restrictions on their mobility and the conditions of marriageability dominate decision making on their current and possibly future behavior. Sahar is not advancing her own opinions necessarily: for example, she leaves it up to her daughters whether to wear the *hijab* or not. However, her strength of character (being 'awiyye) does not extend to breaking public or community gender norms: instead, she becomes a (partly unwilling) agent of community talk and of the perceived and actual dangers it circulates. What she wins on one front, she seems to lose on another.

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