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Hammas Police Force Recruits Women in Gaza

By TAGHREED EL-KHODARY

GAZA CITY — The policemen of [Hammas](#) now have company: since the Islamic group took over here last June it has been recruiting policewomen as well.

Since mid-August, 60 women have been accepted into the force. Unlike policemen, the women have not played any role in resisting the latest Israeli incursions, instead working mostly on cases that involve dealing with women, like drugs and prostitution, and helping out at police headquarters and the central jail.

Restoring internal security to the lawless Gaza Strip was one of the main challenges for Hammas upon taking over the area after a civil war with [Fatah](#). The policewomen are one way Hammas has tried to fill the security gap.

Faced with diplomatic and internal isolation, Hammas has also struggled to recreate a criminal justice system, in part because the [Palestinian](#) president, [Mahmoud Abbas](#) of Fatah, is paying salaries to the old judges, prosecutors and police officers, mostly from Fatah, and telling them to stay at home. Hammas has named only four judges so far.

It is a paradox of Islamist societies that their deeply conservative restrictions on women and the mingling of the sexes necessarily create opportunities for women in certain areas, like sports, criminal justice and medicine.

But in Gaza, female empowerment and Hammas-style religious orthodoxy are not always an easy mix. Many religious women refuse to do police work because it involves working closely with men and requires working nights.

There are other uncertainties. For example, Rania, 26, the leader of the women's force, refused to give her full name during an interview. She felt that her future with the police was not yet assured, and that she might one day need to go back to her former career as a religious instructor in mosques. If so, her interlude as a policewoman may spoil her relations with her students, she said.

Like most of her female colleagues, Rania wears the niqab, a full veil that leaves only a slit for the eyes. A sign of modesty, it affords her a degree of anonymity as well.

One recruit, Fatma, 27, who preferred not to give her full name, wears only a head scarf, which leaves her face exposed. But she complained that it was hard to run in her long Islamic robe, known as a jilbab. She said that her bosses were thinking of designing a new uniform for easier movement. "They are talking about pants, and a jilbab that is open on both sides," she said.

Twenty of the female recruits have received training in interrogation techniques, and in shooting pistols and

AK-47s, police officials said.

Though Gaza is generally conservative, growing economic hardship intensified by the isolation of the strip under Hamas leadership has pushed more women to leave the house for the working world. Since Hamas began recruiting women for the police through its television and radio stations, and calling on women in mosques to consider the job a religious duty, hundreds have applied.

They are often highly qualified, with more than two-thirds having studied civil and criminal law at Al Azhar University, the only institution here that teaches law. But nothing in school can quite prepare a young woman for a drug raid, said Fatma, who studied law at Al Azhar.

“The first time, it was scary,” Fatma said. “We hadn’t received any special training. But the second time was better.”

When raiding the house of a suspected dealer, Fatma said, four policewomen are typically assigned to join 30 men. The policewomen search female suspects who may be hiding drugs on their bodies, and go into areas off limits for Hamas policemen, like family bedrooms.

Another recruit, Fida Abu Husain, 28, is single and lives with her family in the Jabaliya refugee camp, north of Gaza City. “I used to tell my family that my dream was to join Qassam,” she said, referring to the Hamas military wing. “I’m not Qassam, but I’m in the police force. It’s considered jihad,” a holy mission, she said.

Ms. Husain works for Amin Nofal, general manager of the military court system. Mr. Nofal cannot see much of her behind her full veil, but says he identifies her by her voice and manner.

“Some women cover their beauty, and others hide their ugliness,” he said, referring to the niqab. “It’s fair. There are those who feel comfortable wearing it when dealing with men.”

Rania had been working on the case of an unmarried female university student who had been photographed having sex. It was unclear whether she was engaged in prostitution, which is a crime. Either way, she had put herself in a compromising position that, in Rania’s view, could harm the Palestinian cause. Drugs and prostitution lead to “collaboration with Israel,” she said.

Rania took the pictures to the woman’s family and told them of the student’s “wrongdoing.”

Maher al-Ramli, 45, the chief of the Hamas police, said that the police usually aimed for reconciliation, but Rania acknowledged that in cases of “family honor,” the women often ended up dead at the hands of male relatives or were sometimes married off to those they had slept with or had been raped by.

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