

Building bridges for peace

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There are always some essential points and distinctions to be made in any discussion about the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, but in this short essay I will focus on questions about Israeli and Palestinian identities, and highlight the situation of Palestinians inside Israel (those who remained in their land and became Israeli citizens), especially after the second *intifada*. The second part of the essay offers a brief description of a feminist peace organisation, Bat Shalom, on whose Board I serve in my capacity as a Palestinian from Israel, and its partnership with a similar Palestinian organisation, the Jerusalem Center for Women, and their co-ordinating body – Jerusalem Link.

Questions of identity

The concept of identity encompasses various cultural components: language, religion, customs, traditions, symbols, and history. A history of suffering and the need for a homeland are the most dominant aspects of both the Palestinian and the Israeli identities. The legitimacy of and international support for both nations are very much based on the homelessness of the Palestinians on the one hand, and of the holocaust and its survivors on the other. In both cases, we see a nationalist ethos cultivated through stories of noble fighters who gave their lives for the nation, and of young people who devote their lives to building that nation.

Another important aspect of both identities is the diaspora. The Palestinian refugees and the Jews in Israel represent only a minority of their nations, and both peoples justify the ‘return’ of the diaspora. The Zionists would like all Jews to come to Israel and be a part of the Jewish homeland, while the Palestinians fight for the return of their people who have twice been expelled from their homes and villages, first in 1948 and again in 1967.

I would argue that both the Palestinian and the Israeli ‘imagined communities’ are stepping-stones on the way for the Palestinians and Israelis to co-exist: the Israeli connection to the Jewish diaspora and the ‘law of return’, which aims to keep a Jewish majority inside Israel, and the Palestinian refugees’ right to return, something which is unlikely to be accepted by the people and government of Israel in the coming decades.

Palestinian women in Israel

As for my own identity, I started my political life in 1982 at the age of 10, when I participated with my grandmother in demonstrations against the war in Lebanon in my home city of Nazareth, and we faced police violence with our own bodies. As a child I would recall this event as if it had happened only the day before. Ever since then I have been active in many organisations working for peace and co-existence, and a member of the Arab Students Committees both at school and later at university. Maybe my self-confidence and ability to be who I am derives from being born into a political family and enjoying my parents’ full support to go my own way and to hold my own beliefs, and their encouragement always to do my best.

My experience in peace and feminist organisations over 20 years proves that Israeli and Palestinian women can speak out with one voice and share the same vision for our common future. We can protest against the Israeli occupation, show support and solidarity with Palestinian and Israeli mothers, sisters, and daughters, with the families of victims from both sides, and with each other as individuals. We are struggling for peace and for the equality of all women and especially for the equal rights of Palestinian women from poor neighbourhoods in Israel. I believe that our organisation’s joint Jewish–Arab structure helps us to see that women on both sides have the same problems and the same future.

All the same, Palestinian Arab women in Israel do face particular problems, which is why I joined with 14 activists both from women’s organisations and from the universities in founding the Council for Palestinian Women in Israel in order to bring women’s voice into the public sphere especially after the last *intifada* and the uprising of the Arab population inside Israel. This council is a nationwide women’s voluntary organisation that seeks to raise public awareness of Palestinian women’s issues.

Working for peace – Jerusalem Link

Palestinian women in Israel have been and continue to be actively involved in peace organisations. During the first *intifada* many of us participated in Women in Black, a national organisation that held a weekly vigil in towns and cities throughout Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Today, some Palestinian women are members of the Jerusalem Link, a co-ordinating body established in 1994 in Brussels between two independent women's organisations – Bat Shalom on the Israeli side, based in West Jerusalem, and the Jerusalem Center for Women on the Palestinian side, based in East Jerusalem. The Jerusalem Link was the outcome of an ongoing dialogue between members of the two organisations dating back to 1989. Both organisations share a set of political principles, which serve as the foundation for a co-operative model of co-existence between our respective peoples. The Jerusalem Link mobilises Palestinian and Jewish women to contribute in various ways to the peace process, runs leadership seminars, and helps women to run for elected office.

The two feminist peace organisations which collaborate under the umbrella of the Link are autonomous and take their own national constituency as their primary responsibility – but together we promote a joint vision of a just peace, democracy, human rights, and women's leadership. Mandated to advocate for peace and justice between Israel and Palestine, we believe that a viable solution of the conflict between our two peoples must be based on recognition of the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and an independent state alongside the state of Israel, with Jerusalem as the capital of both states, and a final settlement of all relevant issues based on international law.

The two organisations don't agree on everything – differing, in particular, on the critical issue of the right of Palestinian refugees displaced in 1948 to return to their homes – but we have not allowed this to prevent our close collaboration over the last decade. The urgency of our mission today springs from two years of escalating violence since the outbreak of the second *intifada*, during which time we have witnessed in ever more devastating detail the catastrophic effect of war on women in particular. Our organisations are therefore launching an international initiative to stop the violence immediately. We are insisting that all negotiating teams include at least 50 per cent women – in the Israeli and Palestinian leadership, in the UN teams, and among representatives of all governments involved in attempts to resolve this conflict.

Box 1: The Jerusalem Link

The Jerusalem Link is based on the following principles:

We, Palestinian and Israeli women, united in a joint effort to bring about a just, comprehensive, and lasting peace between our two peoples, affirm our commitment to working together, within the framework of The Jerusalem Link, for the rapid realisation of our common vision of peace. This effort is based on the following principles.

- 1 Recognition of the right to self-determination of both peoples in the land, through the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel on the 4 June 1967 boundaries.
- 2 The whole city of Jerusalem constitutes two capitals for two states.
- 3 The Oslo Declaration of Principles, signed on 13 September 1993, and all subsequent agreements must be implemented immediately and in their entirety.
- 4 The permanent settlement negotiations must resume without any delays on the basis of the agreed agenda of the Declaration of Principles, the terms of reference being all relevant UN resolutions, including 242 and 338.
- 5 It is our conviction that all Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967 are illegal, as stipulated by international law, and violate the requirements for peace.
- 6 Palestinian: Israel accepts its moral, legal, political, and economic responsibility for the plight of Palestinian refugees and thus must accept the right of return according to relevant UN resolutions.

Israeli: Israel's recognition of its responsibility in the creation of the Palestinian refugees in 1948 is a prerequisite to finding a just and lasting resolution of the refugee problem in accordance with relevant UN resolutions.
- 7 Respect for international conventions, charters, and laws and the active involvement of the international community in the peace process are crucial to its success.
- 8 The realisation of political peace will pave the way for mutual understanding and trust, genuine security, and constructive co-operation on the basis of equality and respect for the national and human rights of both peoples.
- 9 Women must be central partners in the peace process. Their active and equal participation in decision making and negotiations is crucial to the fulfilment of a just and viable peace.
- 10 We women are committed to a peaceful solution of our conflict, also as a means for the promotion of democratic and non-violent norms and the enhancement of civil society.
- 11 A peaceful solution of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict and Israeli withdrawal from all occupied Arab territory, including Lebanon and Syria, are prerequisites for a just and comprehensive peace. This will pave the way for a Middle East characterised by good neighbourly relations and regional co-operation.

We have also come up with another mechanism, a proposed international 'women's commission', which would be formally attached as an advisory panel to any Middle East peace negotiations, not merely the 'road map', should it survive the current crisis. The commission, made up of Palestinian, Israeli, and international women peace makers, would have a specific mandate to review all documents in the light of the impact they would have on women, children, and normal, non-military society.

The key plank to this proposal is a UN resolution 1325, which was passed in 2001 and which commits member states to promote the 'equal participation and full involvement' of women in peace processes, and 'the need to increase their role in decision making'. It was the first UN resolution ever to address the specific impact of war on women, and was passed unanimously. The Italian government (which holds the EU presidency at the time of writing) has given its support to the women's proposal, which also has the full backing of UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. And in September 2003, Baroness Symons, Minister of State at the Foreign Office in London, pledged the support of the British government in seeking to bring the commission into effect.

Palestinian women in these peace organisations have the opportunity to prove themselves in leadership positions, to participate in decision-making processes, and to attend and present papers in national and international conferences. And while most Israeli peace groups cancelled their activities during October 2002, for fear of being branded 'unpatriotic', the women at *Sukkat HaShalom* (the peace tent) stood up for their beliefs and continued to organise protest rallies and vigils, pay condolence calls to the families of victims, and monitor human rights abuses and discrimination. (For more information about their work at this time, visit www.batshalom.org/english/activism/program_sukkat.html (accessed 25 September 2003).)

A parallel initiative is that of the women's peace forum organised by the North Office of Bat Shalom. This was formed by Jewish and Arab women who, as the peace process advanced, sought a better dialogue with the Palestinians of the occupied territories. Some members of the former Women's Network for Peace (now Bat Shalom) and Women in Black came to the conclusion that true peace should begin at home, with peace and understanding between close neighbours along the pre-1967 borders. We were all active in the

Women's Network for Peace and lived within the region that extends from Nazareth through the Jezareel and Beit Sha'an Valleys, up to Meggido county and Menashe Hills.

Arabs and Jews within Israel do not really know each other; they do not mix, and they live their personal and communal lives one beside the other, without any real contact between them. We felt that in order to make peace a reality, we should strive to truly know one another, our way of life, our beliefs, and hopes; and that we should promote understanding through equality, openness, and mutual tolerance.

All the women activists also go out to work and so carry the double responsibility of a career and family. They found it too demanding to participate in activities organised in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv. So the local branch of Bat Shalom provided a meeting place for them and for other women in this part of the country, who would otherwise have been completely beyond our reach.

The forum meets every 4–6 weeks, to discuss political and social issues, to decide on policies, and plan activities for women in the region. Meetings are open to everyone wanting to join. It was decided to focus on the broader issues of justice and human rights, and the end of occupation and of the oppression and discrimination against Palestinians in the occupied territories and against Palestinian citizens of Israel. Other priorities included women's rights and women's leadership. We have worked together now for many years in long-term projects and leadership workshops and also bi-national, open events held every 2–3 months, the venue alternating between a Jewish kibbutz or an Arab village or city. As this office is a branch of Bat Shalom, it also participates in activities in the wider national context, such as rallies, demonstrations, publishing newspaper ads, and so on.

Our goal is to promote political, social, and cultural activities for women, in which we strive to work together to empower women in each community and learn to work together, developing partnership and offering mutual support in order to reduce the mistrust of 'the other's' motives. The local atmosphere and the opportunity for a more informal meeting, often at short notice, encourages women from rural and traditional environments to voice their support for the process of peace and normalisation.

Resolving identity-based conflicts

Conflicts that are based upon or involve questions of identity are the most complicated ones to resolve, because an individual's identity is so fundamental to that person. In addition, because we live in a patriarchal male-chauvinist world which does not 'know' a non-violent way of solving conflicts, it may sometimes seem impossible to resolve them in peaceful ways. The only way to resolve 'identity conflicts' in the contemporary world appears to be by violent wars with great loss of life such as in Bosnia or Northern Ireland, or in the case of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. I do not believe that the number of 'identity conflicts' will necessarily diminish in the future, given that we are seeing the creation of new and distinctive identities around the world. However, if we are committed to resolving conflicts in a non-violent way, I would suggest two approaches:

- *Crossing ethnic boundaries* by bridging different identities through similar sub-groups, based on gender, social class, sexual identity, people with disabilities, etc.
- *Decentralising power* by undertaking alternative activities which aim to make politics irrelevant and creating a new form of a dialogue between the different groups.

I am aware that these two kinds of approach do exist in situations of conflict but their influence and effectiveness is as yet too limited. But I never lose my hope and dream that we might, in the words of the John Lennon song, '*imagine all the people living life in peace ... you may say I am a dreamer ... but I am not the only one*'.

We Israeli and Palestinian members of women's peace organisations want to share the resources of this land and its holy places, believing that the area can be shared between two independent and equal nations. Israel should not rule the lives of Palestinians, and neither Palestine nor Israel should believe that peace can ever be won through violence and force.