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UNSCR 1325 and Women's Peace Activism in the Occupied Palestinian Territory

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UNSCR 1325 and Women's Peace Activism in the Occupied Palestinian Territory

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Abstract

Palestinian women's organized resistance to the Israeli occupation is decades old and has been well-documented and analysed by feminists in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) and outside. Some of the most recent attempts to formulate and shape this resistance make reference to UNSCR 1325. The application of the Resolution in the work of three women's organizations in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and Palestinian-Israeli peace-making attempts are analysed in this paper. However, the paper concludes that the disconnects between women's activism on the ground and in academia, the intentions stated in UNSCR 1325, and the Israel-Palestine peace process are so vast that there is little evidence that the Resolution offers an effective mechanism for women to make their voices heard.

Keywords

occupied Palestinian territory, West Bank, Gaza Strip, women's peace activism, state-building, UNSCR 1325

INTRODUCTION

In her brilliant new book on the impacts on women of the war in Iraq, Cynthia Enloe observes that '[a]ny war takes place at a particular moment in the history of gender – that is, in the history of women's organizing, in the history of women's relationships to the state, in the history of contested masculinities, in the history of patriarchy's rationalization and reach' (Enloe 2010: 4). In this article, I reflect on how UNSCR 1325 relates to the long history of Palestinian women's contribution to resisting the ongoing Israeli occupation

of the Palestinian territory. I also analyse their recent record of trying to cope with and oppose the internal fragmentation of Palestinian politics since Hamas took over the Gaza Strip in June 2007, effectively extending the geographical division of the territory into a political split that was only overcome in May 2011 with the signing of a unity accord in Cairo.

Following what Enloe describes as 'a feminist curiosity' and her 'feminist discovery that paying serious attention to any woman's life can make us smarter about war and about militarism' (Enloe 2010: xii; see also Enloe 2004), I speculate on the relevance and visibility of women's activities and their possible efficacy in an endeavour to make peace that seems to be both stuck and utterly inaccessible to women. My observations derive from fieldwork conducted in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) since mid-2008, which includes ongoing semi-structured interviews with women's networks that are trying to advance peace in the different parts of the oPt.

UNSCR 1325 seems by now to be quite widely known in the oPt – at least theoretically – and, as a result, it crops up in the discourse of many organizations. This paper will show, however, that a large gap still exists between women's abilities to use UNSCR 1325 to make visible their activities and ideas on peace and security (see also Cockburn 2007: 154), and the normative patriarchal peace-building discourses and praxis that fixedly define notions of 'peace-making' and more recently 'state-building' in this always asymmetrical, old and seemingly intractable conflict.¹ I shall confine my reflections to three organizations which use UNSCR 1325 in defining their strategies: the well-established and internationally known MIFTAH (The Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy) in Jerusalem/West Bank, founded by the politician Hanan Ashrawi in 1998; the Wisal Coalition in the Gaza Strip, formed with the aid of The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to focus on women's well-being and crisis impacts on their access to healthcare; and the recently disbanded International Women's Commission (IWC), which included Palestinian, Israeli and international members and was founded with assistance by The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) in 2005 as a deliberate attempt to advance UNSCR 1325 by creating a group 'which would be capable of an intervention in any future Israeli/Palestinian peace negotiations' (Cockburn 2007: 154).²

As an international civil servant who can move relatively freely around the oPt, I have been privileged to talk to members of these organizations both formally and informally in the course of my daily work, drawing comparisons between their responses. Such comparative research would be much more difficult, if not impossible, for Palestinian feminists to do given the extreme movement restrictions imposed on them by the Israeli military authorities. The findings of my field research are supplemented by secondary literature, especially that produced by academics at Birzeit University's Institute of Women's Studies, with whom I am also privileged to have regular contact.

As state-building and improving weak governance systems have become central foci of international engagement in so-called fragile states, women peace activists have more vocally challenged the limited strategic priorities set by both the international community and national governments, which bypass the interests of ordinary people, especially women. UNSCR 1325 and subsequent Resolutions on women in conflict zones came about to try to broaden both the conceptual and the operational aspects of peace- and state-building (particularly as these relate to governance and security). Yet despite the formal recognition that it led to – that gender analysis matters for international peace and security – efforts made so far to integrate gendered concerns into peace- and state-building programmes have been paltry. A few women may have been allowed some access, but there is still no intention to use gender analysis to shift power relations.

This silence in the face of power inequities is particularly salient in the oPt, since the hoped-for independent Palestinian state has not yet come into being. Its birth relies on successful final status negotiations with Israel taking place, adding another layer of complexity to the process of state-building to which the thirteenth government of the Palestinian Authority, under Prime Minister Fayyad, committed itself in 2009.³

Because so many actors external to the oPt have a stake in it, there is quite a large gap between stated commitments to building the state and its governing structures in such a way that the polity feels engaged in the process, and the gestures towards state-building, including all forms of negotiation, that are actually taking place. These happen in an abstract and high-level manner in which elites speak to elites; and decisions are made with neither democratic participation from those who will have to live with them nor accountability to report the results of such high-level encounters to ordinary people (Johnson and Kuttab 2001; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2008).

In this, the oPt is like most other conflict-stricken places. As the international women's movement has observed, current state-building practices rarely consider, or derive from, what a population needs or wants.⁴ All too often the creation of post-conflict institutions is driven by a perceived lack of time and by financial constraints, especially when it comes to supporting machineries for women's political inclusion. As a result, priorities are set, and processes and institutions put in motion, that are divorced from the reality in the conflict or post-conflict zone. Nor are they fundamentally about examining and re-negotiating power to make state institutions more accessible and accountable to citizens, and therefore able to understand or respond to the needs of women and other marginalized stakeholders (Farr 2004).⁵

Not surprisingly, evidence from state-building efforts shows that stated commitments to ensure gender-responsive engagement with fragile states are not made operational. Certain areas are still stereotyped as gender-relevant

while others, especially security, are overlooked. Worse, gender considerations are too often sidelined to subordinate parallel tracks or de-prioritized altogether (Castillejo 2010; Schoofs and Smits 2010). Most problematically, far from advancing a feminist aim for social transformation, gender inclusion language is often misused to maintain the *status quo*.

In the Palestinian peace process, elites maintain their privileged positions using language and processes that grassroots activists cannot control or understand. This is also somewhat true of UNSCR 1325, which is not, in itself, something that ordinary women can wield effectively as a means to describe their peace and security-building work. Nor does it enhance their existing capacities to apprehend and use the sophisticated language and political procedures that form the currency of high-level negotiations, as fieldwork in Jerusalem has shown (UNDP/PAPP 2010b). This has important consequences for Palestinian civil society's ability to act in the present, let alone to influence the kind of state and institutions that may eventually result from a successful peace process.

Finally, the weakest element of UNSCR 1325 is that it does not focus on '*ending war itself*, which after all, was the main reason the United Nations was established and is precisely the Security Council's brief' (Cockburn 2007: 147; her italics). As such, the Resolution risks being yet another tool to underpin the neo-liberal peace-making approach characteristic of the Israel–Palestine conflict, which makes no effort to tackle the huge power differential between the two parties.

Although it is now seen as a failure, the international community initially described the 2-year period following President Obama's declaration of a new negotiation process (which saw six rounds of proximity talks and official leaders' visits to Washington, DC) as a 'critical juncture' (Malley and Agha 2010) in ongoing efforts to resolve the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.⁶ The talks, like all those before them, were never designed to be inclusive of all walks of Palestinian life. The unexpected Fatah– Hamas unity agreement of May 2011 was similarly elitist. In all aspects of this extraordinarily visible high-level discourse around ending one of the world's most intractable conflicts, gender issues and women themselves are nowhere to be seen.⁷ The rest of this article will ask why this is so.

CONTEXT: POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN THE OPT

Before looking in depth at how three organizations have used UNSCR 1325 in their work, I shall offer a brief review of the history of Palestinian women's resistance to military occupation and disenfranchisement by the State of Israel. Generations of Palestinians, old, young, female and male, urban and rural, have struggled, both violently and non-violently, to achieve an independent state.⁸ As in other protracted conflicts that have drawn in an entire population, leading and sustaining the movement for freedom has become a shared

responsibility amongst Palestinians, although there have been a few particularly outspoken leaders who have made a strong mark on the public imagination (Johnson and Kuttab 2001). Because it is a popular resistance struggle, an understanding of contemporary activism should be grounded in an analysis of local gender issues as well as an understanding of how political and social differences have played out in the oppositional strategies of generations of Palestinians.⁹ This is definitely not just the story of a few 'big men'.

A hard look at the history also shows that there is slim chance that a new 'peace' process with Israel will not be just another excuse for the subjugation of Palestinians. In the past, such processes have only ever resulted in more suffering on the ground. As a result, official leaders are often not the ones most trusted by Palestinians.

In addition to political pressure from the State of Israel and the international community, local leaders have also been vulnerable to internal party-political violence and repression, or to arrest or assassination by Israel, so they do not always conduct their work in the open or as part of an official political process.¹⁰ The risk associated with political leadership is one among many reasons why few women have emerged as local leaders, but independent-minded men are also marginalized from public roles. Sadly, while the Palestinian–Israeli peace process is possibly the most visible one on earth, and while Palestinians everywhere have articulate and passionate political opinions, it is important not to overstate the level of political involvement of ordinary people. Because of the duration and complexity of the struggle for independence, and the overwhelming impact of the Israeli occupation on their daily lives, no Palestinian can remain politically unaware or, to some extent, politically uninvolved. Yet there is, today, a desperate paucity of independent-minded and outspoken leaders at both local and national levels and a sense of directionless in how people see and use political processes and structures. Their wariness of the international community also means that few Palestinians know and use international instruments such as Security Council Resolutions to help them articulate and organize their struggles against both occupation and violent internal fragmentation.¹¹

Israeli-imposed movement restrictions in the West Bank and the military blockade of the Gaza Strip, the increasing impoverishment and isolation of Palestinians, restrictions on oppositional activism within Israel, the legacy of the Hamas–Fatah political split and a strongly patriarchal culture all mean that, as in many conflict zones, there are very few women who have either the courage or the economic, educational and social means to become and remain politically active. Hanan Ashrawi is a notable example of a woman leader, but it remains to be seen whether her long years of service to the Palestinian people will be recognized with a high-level official post in the government of national unity. Today, when asked their opinions on politics and resistance, the majority of Palestinian women respond that they have other, more pressing concerns to deal with.¹² They focus on daily survival and express a generalized mistrust of their leaders and the international community

including the United Nations. Instruments such as UNSCR 1325 are not widely known or seen as relevant to their daily lives. That ordinary women have become very distant from the grassroots liberation struggle is obvious in an examination of the new non-violent resistance movements that are being used by communities near the Separation Wall. With a few exceptions, these are male-organized and run and have scarcely any female members and no women leaders.¹³ At the same time, elite women are mistrusted and invisible at home and wield no local influence, although some have retained an international support base (UNDP 2010b).

Yet on the ground, UNSCR 1325 can and does help a small number of feminist analysts and activists think differently about their political engagement. A tiny percentage of Palestinian women use it in their work and have interesting things to say about what it helps them achieve, but there is scant evidence that their work is being usefully promulgated so that it can be taken seriously by activists, policy-makers and politicians. Gendered divisions of labour and different spheres of interest are obvious: what women do in their daily work (predominantly in private) to survive and resist this decades-old complex humanitarian and political crisis, is not reflected in what politicians (local and international) say in public they are doing to overcome the crisis.¹⁴ To use Enloe's words, the Palestinian struggle is shrouded in 'militarized gendered silences' (Enloe 2010: 217). Palestinians are disempowered in the final status process; women doubly, or even triply so if they are also refugees. Yet little 'feminist sense' is being made of this multiply asymmetrical conflict (Enloe 2010: 221). Instead, women's analyses, concerns, calculations and voices are invisible and of little influence even as the occupation daily worsens their lives.

Women's Actions in the oPt

While they are nowhere to be seen in formal processes, women's actions in Palestine predate UNSCR 1325 by several decades (Torres 1989; Johnson and Kuttub 2001; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2008). Throughout the decades of the occupation, Palestinian women have been important players in non-violent resistance, in state-building processes and in peace-making with their Israeli counterparts when this was considered strategic. Women's movements in Palestine, as elsewhere, have varied interests. Starting from a base that did not prioritize women's liberation, women found themselves increasingly involved in various forms of resistance and in service provision as political conditions worsened from the 1970s onwards, until, in December 1988, the impacts of the first intifada led to the establishment of a Higher Women's Committee which articulated, as an explicit goal, the need to address gender equality alongside national liberation (Torres 1989). Women were also instrumental in creating manifestos that captured their democratic ambitions; for example, the rights 'to freedom of movement and the right to full nationality' claimed in the Women's Charter of 1994 issued by the General Union of Palestinian

Women. These rights remain, until today, 'denied to all the population' (Johnson and Kuttab 2001: 23).

Palestinian women's movements face a central dilemma: the reality and necessity of their political engagement in resistance to the occupation contrasts strongly with the continued, and growing, impacts of conservative gender ideologies that aim to constrain their movements and choices (Kuttab 2008). So, even while the family is a source of strength in resisting the occupation, the emphasis placed on men's control over women (husbands over wives, fathers and sons over daughters and sisters) and its resultant attempts to confine women to the private sphere, remains powerful. It deprives women of full access to their rights, including their right to organize for an independent Palestine (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2008; Jad 2010).

Palestinian women's organizing is also profoundly shaped by what Islah Jad describes as an 'NGOization' process, through which women's energy and attention is directed into 'dealing with aspects of women's lives such as health, education, legal literacy, income generation, advocacy of rights and research' that cannot be properly addressed in the absence of a state (Jad 2004: 43; see also Johnson and Kuttab 2001 and UNDP/PAPP 2010b). Trying to provide services that women need but do not get means that the most capable and dynamic women are fully occupied and have little time left for political work.

Yet, as in other countries engaged in complex processes of political and social change, there are still ways in which engagement in the struggle has increased women's participation in public life and, to some extent, challenged patriarchal control. Male and female Palestinians alike acknowledge that the depredations of the occupation have been in some measure kept in check by civil society, especially women's organizations, which have been directly involved in a spectrum of activities including the provision of basic services, humanitarian care and early childhood education. The women's movement has also played an important role in civic education, especially in such taboo issues as violence in the family, and it has become quite skilful at helping Palestinians understand the interconnections between public, militarized violence and violence in the home. Women were crucial to helping their families survive during the 2008–9 Israeli military incursion into the Gaza Strip, otherwise known as 'Operation Cast Lead'. They are challenging age-old gendered divisions of labour in the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip, even as they remain largely excluded from its political sphere (Al Saqqa 2009; Muhanna and Qleibo 2009).

Some Impacts of Women's Exclusion

At the time of writing, despite high-level rhetoric and the recent unity process, things are getting worse on the ground in both the blockaded Gaza Strip and a West Bank threatened by ongoing illegal settlement and severe movement restrictions. Talks between Israeli and Palestinian leaders, when they take place at all, are remote from people's lives and bring little in terms of tangible

resolutions to the multiple crises Palestinians face. Today, Palestinians are more sceptical than ever about the efficacy of the United Nations or the international community, in particular the USA, as partners in solving the crisis, and they question why the administration of President Obama is increasing pressure on Israeli and Palestinian leaders to resume face-to-face talks when there are no efforts to stop Israeli territorial expansion.¹⁵

In such circumstances, women's ground-level activism and political organizing has proven all too easy to ignore. Both Palestinian and Israeli women activists are completely excluded from such formal processes as exist. Palestinian women have also been left out of the recent unity process. They are clear about the impacts of these exclusions, contending that it is because activist women have never been seriously consulted or played a central role in how peace and security is imagined, in either the oPt or Israel, that no progress is being made. They propose that the inclusion of women with a feminist and social equality mandate would fundamentally change how peace and state-building are envisaged, negotiated and implemented.¹⁶ Most practically, they argue that the gap between where ordinary people find themselves and where politicians focus is so significant that nothing decided at the top will have meaning when attempts are made to apply it on the ground. Their arguments make sense because the Israel–Palestine peace process is, indeed, making no progress. Nor can it until a real commitment is made to address the fundamental inequalities in power between the State of Israel and the people it militarily occupies. I neither wish to oversimplify a terribly complicated issue, or to fall into the hoary old trap of equating women with peacefulness when I agree with what Palestinian women peace activists say. In my view, recognizing women not as 'peaceful', but as multiply subordinated rights claimants who have valid opinions on peace-making, would profoundly shift the nature of final status negotiations. It would, at the very least, force a proper engagement with the core problem: power difference and the violence and dispossession it inevitably causes.

If women are to be included, significant shifts are needed in local and international understanding of how they could and should contribute to a peaceful solution. Their question is exactly the one posed by UNSCR 1325: do women represent a constituency that could look at the multiple challenges of this crisis with a new mind, and if so, what would and could they do to make a difference? To address these questions, the next section of this article looks at three women's initiatives that use UNSCR 1325 in their work.

WOMEN'S GROUPS AND UNSCR 1325

The International Women's Commission

In 2005, tired of waiting for their activism to be noticed and recognized formally, a group of highly educated and well-connected Palestinian and

Israeli women, with the support of international women and UNIFEM, formed the *IWC for a just and lasting peace*.¹⁷ Based on UNSCR 1325, it positioned itself as a women-focused policy-making entity with ‘fresh, incisive analysis and innovative proposals from women leaders for actions and strategies that can serve to advance the peace process’.¹⁸ One of the first initiatives by the IWC was to ensure the formal recognition of UNSCR 1325 by both parties; in Israel the resolution has been passed into law, if not acted on.¹⁹ On the Palestinian side, a Presidential Decree (a *de facto* law) from 26 September 2005 endorses both UNSCR 1325 and Palestinian participation in the IWC.²⁰ This formal recognition has had no visible policy impacts in either location.

In 2011, having survived many challenges to its commitment to present a unified Palestinian and Israeli women’s perspective on peace, the IWC disbanded. Some of its members argue that it had succeeded in opening windows in the European Union through which women’s issues could be addressed. However, from an observers’ perspective, while they were impressive to listen to and spoke with an authority borne of political experience, diplomatic skills and academic accuracy, the IWC’s political analysis was not always timely, alternative or particularly visible.²¹

Palestinian members of the IWC always struggled with the forum because it was set up for both Palestinian and Israeli women. In a tussle that mirrors the one facing men in the official negotiations, it was difficult for them to find common ground in the face of Israeli military aggression, especially Operation Cast Lead. More than anything else, then, the IWC ended up challenging the liberal feminist assumption that their shared gender oppression is enough to effectively bring together women from bitterly opposing sides and significantly different power bases, as a unified influence on larger peace processes.

There were other problems too. The IWC remained an obscure and even mistrusted initiative at home. Three reasons I can discern for this are: (1) while its members were, by necessity, from the elite (and thus had the support base to enable them to join this initiative) they were unsuccessful in communicating their work to ordinary Palestinians and Israelis; (2) while it failed to learn from or sharpen grassroots activism, there is a perception that it diverted scarce financial resources from more effective, inclusive and challenging work²²; and (3) it became increasingly difficult for Palestinian women to work with Israelis in the face of Palestinian calls to end joint projects, a matter that became gravely more problematic after the last Israeli incursion into Gaza. When this was not condemned by all Israeli IWC members, it led to considerable internal challenges from which the local members of the Commission never fully recovered, despite ongoing international efforts to keep going.²³

Most cruel, however, is the fact that the regard with which the IWC was seen in some quarters of the international community did not translate into substantial changes in peace-making practice at home. Its members still could not make effective public contributions to the high-level political processes it was designed to influence – either the intra-Palestinian dialogue or efforts to end the military occupation and build a viable Palestinian state.

The IWC, with its outward-looking focus, operated very differently from two other women's networks that also make use of UNSCR 1325 in their peace activism. These organizations approach their peace work very much as Palestinians, with little or no profile abroad and no interest in working with Israelis. They represent and reach very different constituencies from those for whom and to whom the IWC spoke.

The West Bank: MIFTAH

MIFTAH, founded in 2003 to focus on politics in the oPt, is not exclusively a women's initiative but, not surprisingly as it was founded by Hanan Ashrawi, it has a programme for the Empowerment of Palestinian Women's Leadership in which women's role in negotiations and elections has been a primary focus, along with advocacy and capacity-building endeavours for women, especially youth (MIFTAH 2007). As part of its efforts, MIFTAH has produced a booklet entitled *Palestinian Women and UNSCR 1325* and it is working on a training manual to give women practical ideas about how to utilize the Resolution in their work.

The primary obstacles faced by MIFTAH in using UNSCR 1325 are that it is little known and used among donors and international observers and participants in the peace process, and that its credibility among Palestinian women is tarnished by their mistrust of the United Nations. MIFTAH has also found that its partners' lack of technical capacity in navigating UN documentation, reporting and hearing structures means that they are not always able to collect the right information, analyse it in ways that can contribute to broader advocacy efforts, or use it effectively in lobbying. They are working to develop training materials to help address these problems.

MIFTAH is also concerned that dealing with increasing gender-based violence (GBV) within the oPt itself is distracting women's attention from more strategic concerns: because there is no state to serve the people, women do significant amounts of service delivery work and have fewer resources, including time, to focus on their rights, their political participation, and their contributions to resisting the violence of the occupation (Sanders 2010). This is a problem throughout the oPt, given the scarce resources available for women to work on violence prevention and the cultural taboos surrounding discussions of this problem. While sexual violence is not, thankfully, used in a widespread or systematic manner in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, sexual harassment and sexual humiliation at checkpoints and in prisons by Israeli Security Forces (against Palestinian women and men) is common. However, it is extremely difficult to react to it in effective ways given the power asymmetries between Palestinians and the Israeli Security Forces.²⁴

At the same time, domestic violence is a severe and under-reported problem that is being fuelled by the constant, low-level aggression experienced daily as a result of the occupation and the lack of an effective Palestinian national

response. MIFTAH argues that dealing with domestic problems of violence against women drains a lot of activist and advocacy energy, and financial resources, from women's groups. Palestinian women also face a great deal of difficulty in addressing this 'private' problem in such a way that their assessment of levels of domestic GBV and their suggestions for appropriate responses do not become part of the propaganda wars being waged by men in the political sphere, either internally in Palestine or in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

MIFTAH reports that the different intensities of conflict in the different parts of the territory challenge women's ability to use UNSCR 1325 coherently: while the Gaza Strip, Area C of the West Bank and East Jerusalem are clearly facing an escalating humanitarian crisis, the rest of the West Bank is comparatively stable and may even be thought of as a 'post-conflict' zone. This reality, in combination with the difficulties of moving around within and across the territory, suggests that strategies such as the development of a National Action Plan that have been successfully employed in other parts of the world are not a straightforward answer for the oPt.

Nonetheless, MIFTAH's future plans include scaling up their work with UNSCRs 1325, 1820, 1888 and 1889. They see these Resolutions as a way to continue to keep a focus on the oPt as an ongoing conflict zone and one means to unite liberation efforts within historic Palestine, in the refugee camps and in the wider Diaspora. It also helps them reach out to a global audience working on women, peace and security.²⁵

Gaza Strip: The Wisal Coalition

Perhaps the greatest among the many challenges to achieving a functioning unity between Palestinians is the fact that the Gaza Strip and the West Bank are so decisively cut off from each other, both by the geographical fragmentation of the territory and by the occupation with its draconian movement and access regime, including the full military blockade of the Strip. It is not surprising, then, that the Gaza Strip has its own UNSCR 1325-focused network, known as the Wisal Coalition, which does not, at present, work with any other oPt women's groups on UNSCR 1325.

Founded with support from UNFPA, this network of about twenty women's organizations across the Gaza Strip has been using UNSCR 1325 to advance its work since 2008, in concert with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and other conventions on human rights and equality. With a significant focus on women's health, Wisal considers the prevention of GBV to be a cornerstone of its work. In discussions with its members, it was clear that the same difficulties facing MIFTAH in its work on GBV are a concern in Gaza, possibly even more so since Hamas is imposing an increasingly restrictive gender regime in the Strip and making it ever more difficult for women to speak out, conduct

research or maintain contact with outside organizations which share their political and advocacy goals.²⁶

The Wisal Coalition does, however, report some successes in its advocacy work which it attributes to UNSCR 1325. In 2009, Wisal members led a demonstration to the Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process (UNSCO) building in Gaza City demanding that the Secretary General's Special Envoy to the Middle East, Robert Serry, state his position on UNSCR 1325 and its applicability to the oPt. In discussions, the leader of the Coalition, Mariam Zaqout, described how 'a most powerful moment was meeting Kofi Annan and being able to argue with him on women and security based on my 1325 experience'. The Coalition reports that it has been successful in discussing human rights from a UNSCR 1325 perspective and thinks its inputs, including the annual Secretary-General's report on women in Palestine, have become weightier because they are grounded in references to the Resolution.

The Coalition has focused on its networking within the Gaza Strip and is trying to find ways to get moderate Hamas and Fatah women members to work together to sustain national unity. It is building women's capacity for political participation and offering training on UNSCR 1325 and CEDAW. These efforts are not, however, either easy to maintain or presently bearing any fruit. Wisal members consider the current situation to be a 'depressing one, in which we see no real avenues for women's participation and limited space for us to work'.²⁷

CONCLUSION

Palestinian women have the capacity and the will to organize themselves, using international instruments such as UNSCR 1325 to magnify their efforts on the ground and to reach out to others who understand the complexities of organized resistance in a long-drawn-out conflict. Yet their efforts do not yield tangible results. Their struggles to be heard are one more reason to view the strident rhetoric around the Palestine-Israel peace process sceptically and, despite the hope that regional events may open up more spaces for critical thinking on political evolution, none of the feminists I talk to in my daily work, and whose opinions I have drawn from in preparing this article, feel positive about the outcome of contemporary efforts to negotiate for peace.

Indeed, the degree of asymmetry between what Palestinians can negotiate for and how Israelis can choose to react is so severe that a meaningful and durable solution does not seem imaginable. Within this imbalanced arena, the powerlessness and marginality of women are extreme. Put starkly, no matter what instruments they use to help them position their peace-building arguments, Palestinian women are trying to organize a response to a process that clearly does not prioritize or value women's voices for peace.

They are also hampered by acute forms of separation that are even bleaker, I would suggest, than what Enloe describes as a general condition of 'women in

warring states *not* discovering their connections with each other' (Enloe 2010: 3). While they are inside the oPt, women are not able to do much as political activists because of deep political, geographical and social divisions; they lack a platform or any sense of a national strategy around which to organize; and they have no effective counterparts. Their marginal position does not always seem to result from women's lack of capacity to debate important peace and security issues. As this paper has shown, women are quite well organized within the extremely limited space granted them by the occupation and Palestinian political patriarchy. Their capacity is also very obvious once they are able to present themselves outside the oPt, when they speak strongly and courageously, receiving recognition as 'women peace activists' with interesting political insights and vision.

The significant discrepancy between how they are perceived outside and what they can actually do at home means that women who could be serious counterparts in the peace process remain invisible and ineffectual where they are needed most. Like women in so many conflict zones, they cannot break through the patriarchal attitudes of either international or local leaders and political parties (Castillejo 2010) to forge a new space in which women's diverse and non-mainstream opinions are taken seriously. Yet they continue to express creativity, fortitude, pragmatism and sheer hopefulness when they discuss their work. Their courage attests to the importance of continuing to support their diverse efforts to influence political processes.

Women activists and academics in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank still seem to see better organization as one means to move forward. They always articulate a strong desire to find more effective common platforms and strategies for action to advance both their understanding of peace and security from a gendered perspective, and their participation in formal and informal processes towards a solution for Palestinians. In reality, however, more efforts to create networks would be futile because of the endless constraints on the ground that overwhelm activism. The only way to do this networking at present is by the cumbersome and not very effective means of video-conferencing or expensive, difficult and unsustainable attempts to help women meet each other outside historic Palestine – an approach which is particularly challenging for Gazan women, given how hard it is to get exit permits. Nothing but the full removal of the blockade on the Gaza Strip and the lifting of movement restrictions in the West Bank is going to solve this problem.

At the time of writing, a shrill rhetorical battle dominated by Israeli and US voices is once more raging about the question of Palestinian statehood. Palestinians, yet again, have few possible responses. Yet regional changes suggest that something new can – and urgently must – be done. If a new approach were possible, my strongest recommendation would be that women leaders globally agree (with like-minded men) to bring a halt to the current, futile attempts to 'make peace' without addressing the asymmetry between the parties. No more costly efforts should be made by male politicians in closed rooms. What is needed is a radical departure from the well-worn

paths that are currently being trod. There should be no further actions, proximal or face-to-face, until well-prepared women – Palestinians, Israelis, global leaders and experts on women, peace and security – are invited to share their insights, to discuss possible solutions to the conflict and offer alternative views on building a sovereign Palestinian state. If such women came into a process that has exhausted and baffled generations of male leaders, the results might surprise us all.

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Notes

- 1 The literature on the Israel–Palestine conflict is legion. For some of the earliest reflections, see Edward Said's groundbreaking *Orientalism* (Said 2003 [1978]). A feminist analysis of women's peace activism in Israel and oPt is found in Cynthia Cockburn's *From Where We Stand: War, Women's Activism and Feminist Analysis* (Cockburn 2007). The best contemporary academic resource on Palestinian women's organizing is the annual *Review of Women's Studies*, published by the Institute of Women's Studies at Birzeit University.
- 2 See <http://www.miftah.org/> and <http://www.iwc-peace.org/> (accessed 2 June 2011). The Wisal Coalition is a very humble, grassroots-based network that does not run an English-language website.
- 3 Entitled 'Homestretch to Freedom', the plan calls for the recognition of an independent Palestinian State by 2011 (Palestinian National Authority 2010). At the time of writing, the PNA intends to call for this state at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2011, even if a final status agreement with the State of Israel has not been reached.
- 4 See West 1997; Cockburn 2007; Castillejo 2010; Enloe 2010.
- 5 For an excellent account of this problem, see Enloe's 'Conclusion: the Long War' for a detailed analysis of how Nawal al-Samaraie, Iraq's minister for women's affairs, fared trying to run a poorly resourced, isolated Ministry, from which she resigned in protest in 2009 (Enloe 2010: 211–25).
- 6 President Obama appointed Senator George Mitchell as his Middle East Peace Envoy as he entered his Presidency in 2009. Mitchell's role was to facilitate 'proximity talks' between Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas. Indirect negotiations were intended to be launched in March 2010, but were derailed by the announcement of increased illegal settlement activity, including building 1,600 new housing units, in East Jerusalem. By 14 December 2010, Robert Malley and Hussein Agha, in an article published in the *International Herald Tribune*,

acknowledged that there was 'nothing left to talk about' between Israel and Palestine, and declared the last two years' efforts 'for all practical purposes and for the foreseeable future, over' (Clemons 2011). Mitchell himself resigned as Envoy on the 13 May 2011. Obama has, since then, made renewed attempts to revitalize the talks: the impacts of this effort remain to be seen.

- 7 No women representatives have taken part in the six rounds of proximity talks. One woman delegate from the Palestinian Legislative Council did participate in the 2009 Egyptian-led process to reconcile Fatah and Hamas, but she was not characterized by women peace activists as representing their aims. There were two women at the unity talks in Cairo in May 2011 but not in leadership roles. It is important to note that the rights of Bedouins as an occupied minority people, of youth, of the disabled and other marginalized individuals, also do not receive attention.
- 8 For a highly detailed account of Palestinian history, see Farsoun and Aruri (2006). While they offer a fairly detailed discussion of women as victims of violence and as workers, no mention is made in their study of how women have organized politically over the years.
- 9 For an in-depth discussion of Palestinian human security, see UNDP 2010a.
- 10 See Johnson and Kuttab 2001; Jad 2004, 2010; Farsoun and Aruri 2006; Johnson 2010.
- 11 See Johnson and Kuttab (2001) for an excellent account of the marginalization of Palestinian civil society from the political process from the Oslo period (1993 to present), especially as it manifested in the Second Intifada (2000). See also UNDP (2010b).
- 12 Despite public rhetoric about the improving economy of the West Bank, recent research shows that those living in Area C, the Seam Zone (areas between the 1949 Armistice Line and the Separation Wall) and East Jerusalem are experiencing growing poverty (see Save the Children 2009).
- 13 The documentary film *Budrus* records a popular struggle in which women were centrally engaged, but this example remains an exception (see <http://www.justvision.org/budrus>).
- 14 The Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Robert Serry, as part of the UN-organised Global Open Days on Women and Peace, has recently held a series of meetings with women representatives and has given his assurances that UNSCR 1325 will be reflected on in his reports to the Security Council, but this process is in its infancy and no impacts can be reported yet.
- 15 For some of the many accounts following Benjamin Netanyahu's May 2011 speech in the US Congress, see Richard Falk (2011a, 2011b).
- 16 The goal of the IWC was to change this, so that women who represent women's interests would be included in every aspect of the peace process. The example of successful popular organizing including women, in Budrus for one, shows that the inclusion of women really does make a substantial difference on the ground – including in changing how young male activists behave.
- 17 See <http://www.iwc-peace.org>
- 18 Statement 15 September 2006 (<http://www.iwc-peace.org>); see also the more recent statements issued in 2010 (<http://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/BDB7>)

- 6830578DFB0C8525773700685943, accessed 30 May 2011). I am also grateful to Amal Khreishe, General Director of Palestine Working Women Society for Development and a member of the IWC, for her analysis of the IWC's work and impacts in informal discussions in Ramallah throughout 2010.
- 19 In July 2005, the Israeli 'Equal Representation of Women Act' was updated by the Knesset, demanding the inclusion of women in teams appointed for peace negotiations as well as in committees setting guidelines for domestic and foreign security policy.
 - 20 See <http://www.wilpfinternational.org/middleeast/palestine1325.html> (accessed 15 December 2010).
 - 21 Their website, for example, was rarely updated. I have been unable to find an official statement announcing the disbanding of the IWC in any online source.
 - 22 Arguments over resource allocation are difficult to assess, but it is certainly true that organisations older than the IWC struggle to find funding, for reasons I do not have space to discuss here. One grouping that has been severely marginalised is the Israeli Coalition of Women for Peace, founded in November 2000 after the Second Intifada broke out. It brings together ten feminist organizations as well as independent activists and conducts a variety of activities inside Israel and in solidarity with Palestinian women in the oPt. See <http://www.coalitionofwomen.org/?lang=en> (accessed 2 June 2011).
 - 23 Supported by UNIFEM, the IWC held what turned out to be their last large international meeting, a colloquium on *Advancing Women's Leadership for Sustainable Peace in the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict and Worldwide*, as late as 1–2 June 2010 in Madrid.
 - 24 The Israeli Security Forces comprise several inter-related organizations (government, military and civilian) that focus on Israel's security.
 - 25 Interview with Bisan Mousa, Gender Desk Coordinator, MIFTAH, 10 June 2010. The MIFTAH website is also very informative.
 - 26 Hamas has been intent on defining itself as a movement which imposes a strict gender regime based on its interpretation of Islamic religious codes. Recent evidence of this was a ban on women smoking *argila* (water pipes) in public. See Palestine News Network 2010 and Guardian Newspaper Online 2010.
 - 27 The account of the Wisal Coalition is based on discussions with Mariam Zaquot and Maha Aria of the Wisal Coalition held in Gaza City throughout 2010, including at a public discussion on the occasion of UNSCR 1325's tenth anniversary which was hosted by Mary Robinson, Ela Bhatt and Lakhdar Brahimi of the Elders on 17 October 2010. Quotes are from these discussions.

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