

# Rejecting the Cycle of Violence: When Women Say No to War (Israel-Palestine 1987–2013)

Diogenes  
2017, Vol. 61(3–4) 97–111  
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/0392192117701073  
journals.sagepub.com/home/dio



**Valérie Pouzol**

Université Paris 8, France

## Abstract

During the already long history of the Israel-Palestine conflict, women from both sides of the Green Line have been highly visible participants in the often perilous enterprise of establishing dialogue, of maintaining links with the other side, and of thinking seriously about the conditions that will need to be brought together for the construction of a just and lasting peace. By their words, their often symbolic actions, and their activist strategies, they have durably contributed to the building of a 'clandestine' peace often far removed from the calendars and issues of the major international negotiations. In these collective actions, choosing the path of non-violence has often been at the heart of their repertoire of militant activities and their discourses. This article proposes to examine certain examples of such activities and involvement since the first Intifada of 1987 up until the very recent past, showing that the choice of non-violent strategies has been a significantly marked tendency of the activism of women, and that this is always associated with the formulation of renewed forms of discourse around peace and reconciliation.

Clad in costumes of mourning, now seen, now gone, but never flagging in their determination, the *Women in Black*<sup>1</sup> have been proclaiming for more than 25 years in Jerusalem their ongoing opposition to the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories and to the murderous logic which drives the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In their sombre garb, they have worn and continue to wear in a subversive fashion the emblems of mourning of two nations and are a constant reminder, through their weekly ritual, that the war is still causing victims. Such determined persistence sometimes produces a condescending smile on the part of observers who are pessimistic as to the political outcome of the Israel–Palestine conflict. Nevertheless, in the often volatile and fast-changing climate of the peace-seeking efforts, women from both societies have played a pioneering and determinant role in the attempts to arrest locally the cycle of violence and in the formulation of new political alternatives. One is struck, when following their campaigns, by the constant renewal of their initiatives and stands, and by their inventiveness in elaborating strategies of resistance which denounce the recourse to violence and the sacrifice of human lives. This work is often carried out beyond the glare of publicity through a day-to-day activism by means of often symbolic actions which have

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## Corresponding author:

Valérie Pouzol, Université Paris 8, 2 rue de la Liberté, 93526 Saint-Denis Cedex, France.  
Email: v.pouzol@wanadoo.fr

the merit of maintaining the link with the Other, and whose ultimate and more concrete aim is to challenge and weaken the force of political decisions.

On the Israeli side, women have made use of strategies of non-violent protest as such without necessarily adhering to any particular movement or to any emblematic figures representing non-violence. It is more on the Palestinian side that a more specific association with particular styles of non-violent activism has slowly been elaborated since the first Intifada and especially during the second uprising, principally under the influence of the American theoretician Gene Sharp, who on two occasions, in 1988 and in 2005, travelled to the Palestinian Territories (Norman 2013) and, at a conference held during the latter visit, set out how the application of a 'pragmatic' non-violent activism could be useful for Palestinians living under Israeli occupation (Kaufmann-Lacusta 2010: 50–51). In Sharp's view, all non-violent strategies are grounded in the idea that 'all power is exercised with the consent of those who are subject to it [and] who, if they withdraw that consent, can bring under control and even eliminate the power of those to whom they are opposed' (Sharp 1973: 4). Power and dominance are thus categorized as essentially fragile and susceptible to being destabilized by collective actions going from protest actions (marches, demonstrations etc.) to the refusal of all cooperation (boycotts, strikes).

In the Occupied Territories, non-violent campaigns are marked by an already long but not well-known history. Palestinian women have had a decisive involvement in them, particularly at the time of the first Intifada of December 1987. On the strength of these experiences, and for some of their feminist activism, these Palestinian women were able to selectively complement the initiatives taken by the Israeli women who, during the Intifada, had begun to emerge from their previous reserve to express their rejection of the occupation. Those common campaigns along with the meetings that have taken place between these groups of women generated a history which was in part played out, in part stymied, according to the constantly changing nature of a conflict which frequently reasserted itself to make all contact between the two peoples impossible. The campaigns, however, have been asymmetrical in that the Palestinian women have for the most part been living under occupation and in an uncertain political and territorial environment, whereas the Israeli women, while certainly campaigning against the political decisions of their state, have done so as citizens with full rights. The struggles undertaken were nevertheless not merely superficial. Their history, which is often down-played, shows that on several occasions, and through the use of non-violent techniques or through speeches denouncing violence, these actions have achieved non-negligible successes and laid the foundations for dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians.

Since the middle of the 2000s and the re-establishment of an Israeli occupation in postmodern shape (Latte Abdallah and Parizot 2011) in the Palestinian Territories, several conferences have been held on the theme of the use of non-violence as a relevant resistance method in the face of an Israeli occupation which is creating exclusive enclaves within the Palestinian space. In the initiative undertaken with the aim of reactivating the old resources of Palestinian mobilization (the *Sumud*) while at the same time adopting new and more effective militant tactics, Palestinian women have again played an important part, supported by Israeli and international women activists.

How, and under what temporal modality have women taken it upon themselves to formulate political alternatives and to open up dialogue which breaks with the logic of confrontation between Israelis and Palestinians? In this process, what militant options do they have, and how have the themes of violence and non-violence been incorporated both in their discourse as in militant strategies? By retracing the often tortuous paths followed by these campaigns of protest, this article will seek to examine how successful and effective these have been, but also will critically examine the adoption of non-violence as a structuring factor of these struggles against violence or for mobilizing non-violence as a mode of action.

## The first Intifada: women take possession of the public space to denounce the occupation ...

Since 1948, informal encounters between Israeli men and women and their Palestinian counterparts, whether living in Israel itself or the (subsequently) Occupied Territories have been the work of small marginal groups close to the non-Zionist and anti-Zionist left in Israel (Hermann 2009) and of Palestinian activists acting individually and anxious to sensitize the Israeli public to their cause. These encounters and exchanges were perforce clandestine and often took place abroad, since up until 1993 it was officially forbidden for Israelis to establish contact with members of the Organization for the Liberation of Palestine (OLP). It was notably in Israel, from within the women's section of the Israeli Communist Party (MAKI) that, from 1951, around one thousand Arab and Jewish women came together around a common anti-Zionist ideology and founded TANDI (*Tnou'at Nashim Ivriot*; the Democratic Union of Israeli Women). Within this women's section of the Communist Party, the women at that time defended the idea of a secular bi-national state within which both Palestinians and Israelis would coexist at the same time as they addressed the question of the oppression of women in each of their societies (Pouzol 2008).

Over the history of the slow creation of a body of citizens in Israel committed to pursuing peace, it is women who have often been in the forefront, in particular when it has come to demonstrating firm opposition to the militarist choices adopted by their government, as was the case in 1982 at the time of the Israeli intervention in Lebanon. At that time a first group of *Mothers against Silence* was established to make clear to Israeli leaders their opposition to the operation 'Peace in Galilee'. The history of how this protest group was founded and subsequently developed clearly shows the difficulty that Israeli women came up against in their country in engaging the authorities in questions related to politics and more generally to the way the conflict was being handled (Wolfsfield 1988). Shoshana Shmueli, the mother of a soldier sent to Lebanon, was the first to confront the government by having a letter published in the daily newspaper *Ha'aretz* demanding the immediate withdrawal of Israeli troops from that country. As a result of the passionate response stirred up in the country by her initiative, she was contacted by a group going under the name of *Parents against War* which had recently been set up in Jerusalem and which was contesting a right to demonstrate while their children were engaged in military operations. Within a few days, this first group of protesting women in which mothers of soldiers were in the majority was absorbed within *Parents against War* when men insisted on being fully included within this group (Gillath 1991). A series of demonstrations then began in front of the Prime Minister's residence, in which mothers of soldiers who came very largely from the Ashkenazi middle classes but had no particular political affiliation were still in the majority. This group of the *Parents* carried on a campaign of non-violent protest and lobbying directed towards the Israeli government and were finally received by the Prime Minister Menachem Begin on 13 June 1983. Its action continued for more than a year until the partial withdrawal of the Israeli army from Lebanon. In this episode, as with the experiences of militant women from left-wing groups in Israel, the activist women all told of how they had been rendered invisible and how difficult it was to find their own specific place in groups dominated by men, where discourses of violence were often entertained and where the men rapidly took over all functions of responsibility and formulated the directives (Pouzol 2009). The marginalization of women was also associated with the story of the foundation in 1977 of what was to become the most cohesive of the Israeli peace groups, *Shalom Ahshav* (*Peace Now*). Reserve officers of the Israeli army drew up a protest letter to be sent to Prime Minister Menachem Begin, contesting his defence of the occupation of the Palestinian Territories while a peace process and dialogue was under way with Egypt since the visit of Anwar Al-Sadat to Jerusalem in November

1977. When this committee was set up, the only woman member of the group of officers, Yael Tamir, was excluded from signing the protest letter on the grounds that she was not part of a combatant unit. When this group's life was extended and adopted a formal structure, certain activist women initially had trouble finding a place in it. Since its formation, in fact, *Shalom Ahshav* has always proclaimed its support for the state, the army and for Zionism. As with the majority of Israeli peace groups, this one is not pacifist, in the sense that it does not systematically oppose all war but only those which it considers as unjust and unjustified (*Milchemet breirah*: literally, the 'wars of choice'). If it remains the group most able to mobilize supporters, it nevertheless rapidly became oriented principally towards programmes of education for peace rather than to any real opposition to the Israeli occupation. Although the majority of this group supported the idea of political negotiations in place of military solutions, they remain army reservists who consider that their personal contribution to national defence fully justifies their right to debate political options around questions associated with national security. The tensions between men and women within organizations of the Israeli Left and in the early protest movements as well as the security-related conception of the work of promoting peace as it came to be defined within the group *Peace Now* are surely not irrelevant to the fact that in 1987 Israeli women decided to form women-only organizations to address the question of military violence.

From December 1987, Israeli women were also extremely disturbed at the images of the Israeli repression of the Palestinian uprising in Gaza and the West Bank. This repression was all the more shocking in that the soldiers were confronting civilian resistance from women, youth and children who had come out in the streets in large numbers. From that moment, women who were already active in groups close to the radical Israeli Left, but also other women who were for the most part new to active protest, came together to create with Israeli society around 15 women-only protest groups.<sup>2</sup> The common feature of these new groups was that they had no hierarchical structure nor any designated spokesperson, and that they brought together in the main Israeli Jewish women, even if at the beginning of the Intifada some Israeli Palestinian women were also involved.<sup>3</sup> In their overwhelming majority, these associations worked without financial backing or permanent headquarters or offices, and their meetings generally took place in activists' homes or in public facilities (municipal halls or synagogues). They relied above all on the energy of women who mostly had never been engaged in politics but who drew up information, circulated petitions, and called for collective mobilizations.

Particularly emblematic of this form of non-violent protest were the *Women in Black* who united in their group alone a certain number of the characteristics of these groups from the time of the first Intifada. The founding members decided, within this period of armed confrontation, to bring before the public view a weekly silent march of women wearing the clothes of mourning, at first in Jerusalem then progressively in other cities in the country, under the minimalist slogan 'End the Occupation' which has remained unchanged to this day. In contrast to *Mothers against Silence*, *Women in Black* has never asserted a particular maternal identity as an emblem of their struggle, but to the contrary has employed the disturbing image of women acting out the scenes of death in the streets of Israeli cities. In difference to the Argentine protest group *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*, there has been no allusion made to the personal loss of children nor to any association with the idea of motherhood. Their silent demonstrations expressed the mute anger of women in mourning for two nations. For some activists, their marches suggested the image of phantoms or sibyls evoking more a process of subversion than the simple and more reassuring image of anxious mothers (Svirski 1990). While employing a non-violent form of protest, the women taking part in these weekly demonstrations were not trying particularly to evoke an emotional response as to bring the Israeli public to a state of awareness of the effects of the violence. The reaction to this was immediate and religious counter-demonstrators did not spare their insults directed at members of the group.

Behind this experience of using a non-violent form of protest lay the question of the legitimacy of women to act as full citizens within the public space of the Israeli state. Although *Women in Black* has never claimed the label of a feminist group, many participants in their protests have declared that they have become feminists as a result of their experience of taking part in these demonstrations. It is not surprising that, in such conditions, as militant lesbians have also found, Israeli feminists have discovered in this radical and readily accepting protest group a space of affirmation allowing the national oppression of Palestinians to be linked with the oppression of women in general (Pouzol 2006). Although there had existed a feminist movement within Israel since the middle of the 1970s, it had been very divided between radical and liberal forms of feminism and had always remained extremely reticent about broadening the spectrum of its demands to include a political dimension. From the 1980s it was essentially directed towards improving the condition of Israeli women in the country, an issue which was certainly a priority one. But for many of its activists, it was not relevant to their cause to become interested in other phenomena of oppression, nor in particular to establish a link with the cause of the Palestinians.

In these groups – which do not all use the same strategy of collective performance but which rather act in concrete solidarity with Palestinian women, as in the case of the WOFPP<sup>4</sup> (*Women's Organization for Political Prisoners*) – what is noticeable is that for the first time women act for other women without the militant control or approval of men. Founded in part by women lawyers and teachers, the WOFPP collective, whose headquarters is in the private apartment of its founder, has sought to denounce the gender-specific character of the Israeli repression and to bring attention to the particular forms of violence exercised against female political prisoners, of whom there are many in the prisons and who are victims of ill-treatment, as revealed in an investigation undertaken by WOFPP. This group has made sure that these women prisoners have been given the chance to meet with lawyers who will take responsibility for following their cases and that they can also receive visits from their families. WOFPP has equally put in place a mechanism for providing material assistance by which the women prisoners may be provided with personal effects (like toiletries and clothing) which they might lack in prison. Along with setting up this assistance, the group has also distributed among the Israeli public numerous information leaflets which provide very precise reports about torture and other physical abuse of a sexual nature inflicted upon Palestinian women prisoners, thus bringing to light a new aspect of the Israeli occupation.

In the occupied Palestinian Territories, women were equally at the forefront of the uprising against the Israeli occupation. They were directly involved in a whole range of resistance activities in which non-violence had an important place, giving a new boost to the repertoire of Palestinian militancy. The sporadic confrontations between Palestinian militants and the Israeli army became transformed in a matter of weeks into a mass stand-off between the population of the Territories and the Israeli occupier (Picaudou 1997: 224). If the 'stone-throwing war' conducted by Palestinian youth against the army was an important characteristic of this uprising, it was also accompanied by a vast movement of civil resistance (King 2007). Along with the demonstrations there were strikes and boycotts of Israeli products with the aim of resisting from within by depriving the Israelis of financial gains linked to the occupation. The key idea of not engaging with Israeli structures (refusal to pay fines and taxes, ignoring requirements to obtain permits and licences) and of avoiding the consumption of the products of the occupying power had been promoted some years before the Intifada by the Centre for Non-Violence, founded by Mohamad Awad, a Palestinian psychologist trained in the United States, but without, at the time, meeting much response from the Palestinian population. At the beginning of the 1980s, the population of the Territories had already fallen back on campaigns of passive resistance to the occupation (the *Sumud*), in which the prime focus had been the survival of the people through encouraging the growth of the rural economy and on intensely promoting the fertility of Palestinian women. In the new context of the Intifada and in view of the broad extent of a coordinated uprising, these strategies of boycott and

civil disobedience took on a whole new purpose and induced the people to set up *people's committees*, which were alternative structures charged with building a Palestinian resistance economy. In this process, the Palestinian women of the Territories played a leading role in putting in place women's committees that encouraged the self-sufficiency of the Palestinian economy (through initiatives such as creating gardens and the raising of domestic animals), and developed parallel educational structures so as to mitigate the effects of the closure of schools and even universities by the occupying authorities. During this period, women not only experienced a full involvement in the resistance (by, for example, distributing leaflets calling for participation in the uprising), but also asserted their role alongside men, experiencing in doing so a new mixed-gender social environment. Palestinian women were thus in that period passing through a phase of full investment in a national cause as well as feminist assertiveness and empowerment, which up until that time they had struggled to express within the previous political structures of the Palestinian resistance (Abdo 1994). In a general sense, the initiation of the Intifada gave an unprecedented visibility to the Palestinian people and its claims of the right to self-determination, as well as and providing a sense of pride which was going to make possible certain encounters and common actions with Israeli women.

The city of Jerusalem, for long a focal point of tension and confrontation, was the theatre of several significant demonstrations and marches by Israeli and Palestinian women: through these they desired, at least for a limited time, to achieve a break in the cycle of confrontation and violence. By marching together and in particular by crossing the boundary between East and West Jerusalem, they on several occasions took part in the elaboration of an ephemeral space for peace. From 1988, a collective bringing together Israeli women and Palestinian women both from Israel itself and from the Territories began to assemble a gigantic cloth called the *Patchwork for Peace* (*Mapat Ha-Shalom*), which joined together a large number of small embroidered patchwork squares, some of which carried peace messages. This vast cloth, the work of several hundred women from both sides of the Green Line,<sup>5</sup> was intended as the cover for the future peace negotiation table. In June 1988, the enormous work was jointly unfolded before the doors of the Knesset, the Israeli Parliament, by Israeli and Palestinian women to demonstrate in material fashion their desire for peace.

At the end of 1989, at the instigation of Luisa Morgantini and Chiara Ingrao, two Italian peace activists, a large demonstration under the banner of '*Time for Peace*' was organized in Jerusalem, bringing together Palestinian, Israeli, and European NGOs. The most massive participation in this event, which was initially intended to include both men and women, was in fact by women. Coming from both sides of the demarcation line separating the two parts of the city, women joined together to take part in a common march and to form a gigantic chain around Jerusalem through both West and East Jerusalem, thus symbolically stepping across the 'frontiers'. This non-violent march was severely repressed by the police and some female demonstrators were injured. Hanan Ashrawi, a Palestinian militant and feminist, recalled how this event was something quite new for the time:

Women from all over the world linked arms and marched through Jerusalem, the City of Peace, chanting international songs of empowerment, freedom, justice, and peace. The power of our will and the excitement of the challenge seemed to hold the Israeli army at bay. [...]

The Human Chain also held a mixture of triumph and grief. Palestinians, Israelis, and representatives of international NGOs held hands and formed an unbroken Ring Around Jerusalem. Only such a chain, we felt, could free us from the recurrent cycle of conflict and the bondage of violence. The elation and sheer joy at our success could not be dampened by the colored water with which the army tried to hose us down as if we were soiling the streets of the Holy City. (Ashrawi 1995: 63–64)

Nevertheless, the Israeli and Palestinian women did not at that time share the same motivations for coming together. For the former, the guise of their involvement was complex, covering a range of moral and political motivations as well as the desire to show solidarity with their Palestinian counterparts. The Israeli women were seeking to promote political alternatives to a conflict that had become bogged down in violence. For the Palestinians, the event was essentially a political act: in the midst of a period of national self-affirmation, their meeting with Israeli women gave them the opportunity to make known to these latter the reality of the Israeli occupation on their lives.

The time of the first Intifada, in retrospect, marked a high point in the common protest for peace of women from both communities. But it was only after the negotiations leading to the Oslo Accords that women tried through official channels to formulate political options for the definition of peace for their communities and the means by which it might be constructed.

### **The Oslo Accords process and its aftermath: Attempts by Israeli and Palestinian women to define and build peace (1990–2000)**

Alongside these local and public initiatives, Israeli and Palestinian women began exploring from the end of the 1980s the possibility of developing a ‘diplomacy of women’ on the edge of the peace negotiations. This initiative led to the experimental creation of a network of women for peace, working as a bridge between the two societies (the so-called *Jerusalem Link*). The significant amount of activism shown by women on the ground, whether in protests or to show solidarity, had created favourable conditions and the necessary confidence for the emergence of a more institutionalized engagement, but one that was equally anchored in the political reality. The women who directed and took roles of responsibility in this network were this time often top-level political personalities. The enterprise of what was in 1994 to become the *Jerusalem Link* began in 1989 in Brussels when David and Simone Susskind, who were leading figures in the CCLJ,<sup>6</sup> had the idea of bringing together a delegation of Israeli and Palestinian women to offer a chance for the building of peace. This gathering, made possible through the goodwill and motivation of the Susskinds, by taking place in Belgium, presented the advantage of getting around the prohibition preventing Israelis from meeting members of the OLP and offered the opportunity to bring into contact Israeli political personalities with their counterparts from the Occupied Territories and the Palestinian diaspora. From the first meeting emerged an important Declaration of Principles recognizing the right to existence of two states (Ashrawi 1995: 62). A second meeting was organized in a much more favourable context in 1992 at the time of the return to power of the Labour Party in Israel, leading to the signature of a second Declaration, which in a certain sense prefigured what was to be under consideration in the secret negotiations which were on the point of getting under way in Oslo. Out of these meetings there was born, as well as the drawing up of the important texts of the two declarations, the plan to set up in Jerusalem an official network, financed by several international funding agencies, among which was the European Community, and based around two centres: one Israeli (*Bat Shalom: the Daughters of Peace*) and the other Palestinian (the *Jerusalem Center for Women*), which were tasked with promoting together, but also within their respective societies, a culture of peace and democracy.

It was clearly thanks to the Oslo process that this network of women for peace could in fact function through conjoint and institutionalized activities. However, while it was the intention from the beginning for the two centres to work together, notably by attempting to reach agreement on political declarations, it was clearly understood that each would have to work upon their own respective societies to promote the capacity of women to put forward non-violent options for action and to participate effectively in the building of peace. Inaugurated in March 1994 on

International Women's Day, these two centres functioned by reciprocally recognizing a series of common principles, which themselves had been updated after the conclusion of the Oslo Accords. Nine common positions were formulated after 1996 (when the first declaration of principles of the *Jerusalem Link* was made), among which were the recognition of the Palestinians' right to self-determination, their right to have their own state, and the joint choice of Jerusalem as the capital of the two states. This declaration also included the recognition of UN resolutions 242 and 338 and of the Oslo Declaration of Principles as the basis for negotiations, a firm condemnation of settlements in the Palestinian Territories occupied in 1967, along with the refusal of the recourse to force and the promotion of democratic values in the civil society (Farhat-Naser 2003: 'New Dimensions of Dialogue'). An example of the achievement of this *Women's Network for Peace* was to have organized in July 1997 a week of common celebration around the theme of 'Jerusalem: two Capitals for two States', at a time when this motif of a dual capital was supported neither by an organization like *Peace Now* nor by the Israeli Labour Party. The work of these two centres was, however, considerably constrained by the fact that in each of their executive committees were women who were active in the political environment who permanently had to seek the approval of their respective political parties to validate their stands. Despite this limitation, the *Jerusalem Link* was one of the few joint and bicephalous organizations able effectively to function during this period. However, on the ground, the non-applications of the peace accords and the very real difficulty for the women to come to agreement on the more sensitive issues such as the right of return for Palestinian refugees led the activists on both sides to put their cooperation on hold. This partly also arose from criticism within their own societies where, for example, the Palestinian women could be accused, within a climate of political tension, of favouring normalization and collaboration with Israel. This situation 'betwixt war and peace' placed the Palestinian women who were involved with the *Jerusalem Link* in a difficult situation leading several of the directors of the Palestinian bureau to resign from their positions (Farhat-Naser 2003).

Faced with the partial failure of this network, activists reoriented their militant activities towards an education for peace in their respective communities. The Palestinian women thus came to work within their society to protect women's rights and to sharpen up their definition of what the meaning of peace could be.

For the Israeli women, the ongoing implantation of settlements in the Territories and especially the resumption of violence from both sides led to the emergence of new groups of women against war, which clearly employed a strategy of non-violent activism without actually naming it as such. Some Israeli women decided to oppose the militarist choices made by their government not only in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but also with respect to the continuing presence of the Israeli army in Southern Lebanon. Several groups of women emerged in 1996 and subsequently in reaction to various different happenings. In February 1997 the attempt on the part of ultra-orthodox Jewish groups to dig tunnels beneath the esplanade of the Al-Aqsa mosque complex to excavate archaeological levels dating back to the era of King Solomon appeared to many women as a new and pointless provocation of Palestinian sensibilities. Similarly, the crash of an Israeli helicopter, also in February 1997, which cost the lives of 73 young Israeli service personnel on the way to Southern Lebanon where the Israeli army had been stationed since 1982 provoked a significant group of women into active protest. Several collectives of Mothers were formed at that time, bringing together women who had never before been involved in protest action, whether for peace or against the war. Their aim was to denounce the profitless dangers that the Israeli government's policies could expose their children to who were of an age to be called up. They brought particular attention to underlying moral issues by insisting on respect for the value of human life as well as on the necessity, for this latter to be protected, for an end to the conflict.



The most well-known of these groups, and the most effective in terms of the gains it made, was the *Arba Imahot* (the *Four Mothers*). This group protested strongly against the ongoing presence of the Israeli army in Southern Lebanon at a time when few other protest voices had made themselves heard in Israel and when the Lebanese Hezbollah were persistently calling for the bombardment of villages in the north of Israel until the last Israeli soldier was withdrawn. Most of the women founders of this group themselves lived in such localities close to the Lebanese border. In their protest actions, they clearly made use of and emphasized their identities as soldiers' mothers who were resolutely opposed to having the lives of their children exposed in military operations of 'conquest' rather than for the pure defence of the country. The very title of the 'Four Mothers' which they attributed to themselves was an echo of the four matriarchs of the Bible and was an attestation that these women wished to invoke an identity that had the highest level of legitimacy in Israel: that of a soldier's mother. In their demonstrations, in which they occupied the intersections of some of the main highways of the country, they appeared dressed in white, sometimes carrying celluloid baby dolls. They handed out leaflets and brandished placards bearing slogans like 'Pull Out of Lebanon' and 'No More Lives Sacrificed for War'.

Other groups of mothers emerged around the same time, such as that of the 'Mothers against the War', more particularly implanted in Jerusalem, then in Tel Aviv. Within these groups, the women assessed their situation in Israeli society, removed from the locus of the fighting, as being a factor favouring their opposition to war and violence. The fact that in Israel women had a shorter period of military service, and that during it they were generally drafted into administrative or teaching functions, or especially that they had dispensation from duty as reservists (*milouim*) once married or having had children, conferred on them a certain detachment with respect to the institutions of the military:

I believe that we have a lot of power but that we go unrecognized. The men in Israel are not much help because they identify with the warrior mentality and they are brought up to become soldiers. I think that we women have an alternative. For the men it is harder, because the army conditions them to be prepared to die: they are conformists. We women and mothers who no longer serve in the army have much greater freedom not to agree with all of that. (Mikhal, an activist of the *Mothers against the War*; interview with the author, Jerusalem 1998)

Whether it was in pioneering fashion in the constitution of a Women's Network for Peace, or in groups of Mothers against War, women in the decade following the Oslo Accords not only supported pioneering political initiatives but also condemned all recourse to force and violence. Simultaneously at the end of the 1990s, certain Israeli women continued to pressure the government into committing itself to the application of the peace accords on the one hand, and to withdrawal from Southern Lebanon on the other. Such actions, where the women put into practice a whole range of non-violent initiatives, bore fruit with respect to the Israeli presence in Lebanon. Unfortunately, on the Israel-Palestine issues, the attempts at closer relations with women of the two communities working together could not prevent the outbreak of a second flare-up of violence with the second Intifada.

### **'We refuse to be enemies': the contribution of women to the non-violent resistance in Israel (200-2013).**

The outbreak of the second Intifada in September 2000 led women from both societies to become actively engaged in protest activities once more. The total political impasse resulting from the

complete failure to give concrete effect to the peace accords and the lethal spiral of confrontations served to incite women to engage in actions which were often symbolic but which also aimed at opposing and denouncing the violence. The *al-Aqsa Intifada*, as the second uprising came to be called, was a veritable war of attrition, different in nature from the first Palestinian Intifada. Rather it was marked by the unprecedented level of its violence and by the propensity of each side to wish not so much to defeat the other as to wear them down (Dieckhoff and Leveau 2003). In what has become characteristic of asymmetrical conflicts, after a few weeks of general mobilization of the Palestinian people, the confrontations saw the Israeli army set against groups of fighters that were semi-clandestine and semi-terrorist in nature. On the Palestinian side, this second Intifada thus took on an armed and terrorist dimension which was not without consequence for the type of military repression employed by the Israeli army, which proceeded to reoccupy the West Bank. Within Israeli society, different groups of women then became engaged in an 'active non-violence' campaign which saw them adopt militant strategies which precipitated a direct confrontation with the occupation policy of the Israeli government and the reconquest of the Palestinian Territories. This active non-violence campaign took place on several different levels which sometimes overlaid each other: active solidarity with Palestinians when these latter were threatened, the work of fundraising and information spreading regarding abuses, and discrimination and lobbying of the Israeli authorities to denounce these abuses.

It was in reaction to this crisis situation and to the escalation of violence that in November 2000 a *Coalition of Women for a Just Peace* bringing together nine women's organizations, of which some were earlier-established groups like *Women in Black* and WOFPP, became mobilized. It demanded an immediate cessation of the Israeli occupation, full involvement of women in the holding of peace talks, a drastic scaling back of the militarization of the Israeli society, and social and political justice for the Palestinians of Israel. Most of the groups drawn in under the *Coalition* claimed the label of 'feminists for peace', leading to a markedly radical discourse on the *Coalition's* part which denounced oppression in global form, whether it be that of another national group (the Palestinians), communitarian (that of the Sephardic Jews by the Ashkenazi), gender-related (that of women by men), or heterosexist (that by heterosexuals against sexual minorities). It was in this climate that, within a group like *Women in Black*, lesbians progressively made their voices heard concerning the violence directed against them by an Israeli society that was highly militarized and hetero-normed. With groups of women prominently engaged in anti-war protest and the inclusion of a gendered dimension in the definition of their protest thematics and activist strategies, LGBTQ groups who were against the Israeli occupation also made their appearance on the public stage, both on the Palestinian and on the Israeli side. In this context one can cite the birth in 2001 of the *Kvisa Schora* collective ('dirty washing' or 'black sheep' in Hebrew), an LGBTQ group composed of Jews and Arabs of Israel which marched for the first time during the Tel Aviv Gay Pride with placards demanding the withdrawal from the Palestinian Territories by the Israeli army. Although the majority of Israeli LGBTQ groups reflect the national consensus and seek only to be integrated within the state, whatever policies it is following, a small and very marginal minority firmly holds to the principle of the cross-cultural and cross-social nature of the struggle and denounces what they see as a link between heterosexist oppression and the national oppression of the Palestinians.

The *Coalition of Women for Peace* has defended the idea that Israeli women could commit themselves to forms of civil disobedience by opposing in the field, alongside Palestinians, the most flagrant forms of discrimination and the seizure and destruction of property. As a consequence, the *Coalition* frequently took part in activities opposing the construction of the wall of separation from 2002 and the confiscation of land, and also assisted in the harvest of olives alongside Palestinians and in the reconstruction of Palestinian houses which had been destroyed by the army. Gila Svirski,

co-founder of the *Coalition*, describes the principles of the women's groups active in the struggle as follows:

Some of these involved civil disobedience, such as lying down on the street to block the entrance to the Israeli Ministry of Defense, as a way to protest 'closure' in the territories. Subsequent actions often in cooperation with mixed-gender peace organizations, involved other nonviolent but illegal acts—the rebuilding of demolished homes or the removal of blockades and filling in of trenches intended to enforce the closure. In other actions, individual women stood in front of army bulldozers or chained themselves to olive trees in an effort to prevent further destruction of Palestinian homes and property. Some of these actions ended in arrests. (Kaufman-Lacusta 2010: 303)

This *Coalition*, backed and financed by international feminist networks, has advanced the idea that concrete expressions of solidarity on the ground alongside Palestinians, but also including international activists, could in time prove extremely effective for reducing the level of violence directed against Palestinians. In a very openly political manner, the *Coalition of Women for Peace* took firm stances against the different military operations launched in 2006 in Lebanon and in 2008 and 2009 in Gaza. In 2009, the general assembly of the *Coalition* decided to openly support the Palestinian appeal for BDS (Boycott, Disinvestment, Sanctions), in doing so lining up with the international resistance movement which had taken on the task of bringing pressure to bear on Israel.

It was also under a feminist label and with the intent of proposing an alternative policy to the militarist options of the Israeli government that a radical protest group called *New Profile/Profile Hadash* was created in 1998 as a mixed men's and women's group. This collective does not undertake, properly speaking, non-violent public security policies of the country and the militarization of its social and political life. Since conscientious objection to military service is not permitted within this country, the militants of this group have invented a 'New Profile' (hence their name) which allows young Israelis of both sexes who wish not to undertake military service to escape from being categorized as a Profile 21 ('unfit to serve'), which leads to great discrimination in Israel against those so categorized. This protest group, while denouncing the militarization of Israeli society, is seeking to transform this latter into a community dedicated to peace in which there will no longer be any abusive occupation of others' land. In this sense, it is attempting to deconstruct the generic characterizations that have been codified by nationalism, refuting for example the themes of the heroic warrior and the strategist soldier, who alone are held to be capable of negotiating peace, and denouncing more specifically at the same time the over-important link between the army and political life. The group has therefore undertaken to engage action in different directions, notably towards young people, both young men and young women, who are refusing more and more to perform military service. In support of this, *New Profile* has multiplied information campaigns directed at these young people and in particular has proposed to bring young refuzniks into contact with specialist lawyers who are capable of pleading their cause. Alongside this groundwork directed at Israeli society in general, certain activist women from this group have, since the beginning of the second Intifada, chosen to demonstrate their opposition to violence by making visits of condolence to families of Palestinian civilians killed during the Israeli repression:

Today we went to call upon a grieving family. I realize that this is not the 'correct' term to employ in relation to Palestinians who have lost a son or a daughter. It is generally reserved for Jews. It is sometimes used for Palestinians when the person killed was in the service of the army or the police, or where the death was the consequence of a terrorist attack against civilians. But one does not speak of a 'grieving family' when the son has been killed by the Israeli police or by Jewish demonstrators or hooligans who are

protected by the police, nor when referring to Palestinians of the Occupied Territories who have been killed by the army. I consider as a result that the words 'grieving family' have been used abusively in our society. They are supposed to express a sort of homage which will give a sense to the death, to transform the stupid and blind end of a life into something which is part of a glorious collective history. I rather see these words as a means by which our society conditions people into accepting the death of their loved ones and into validating violent death. I personally never use this expression. It appears to me hypocritical, puffed up and manipulative. An instrument to lead us into giving respect to violence (something I recognize I did before), to believing it necessary. But this morning, on the way to Nazareth, I thought of these words as I was going to visit a grieving family. And the fact that we do not generally use this term in Israel to speak of a Palestinian family underlines itself alone the depth of the racism which is prevalent in our society.<sup>8</sup>

The second Intifada was also accompanied by an Israeli policy of ring-fencing the Occupied Territories, along with a multiplication of checkpoints, a division of the territory into security zones, and a reoccupation of areas that previously were under the control of the Palestinian Authority (Latte Abdallah and Parizot 2011). In 2001, a group of Israeli women, appalled by the humiliations endured by Palestinian civilians at the checkpoints, decided to organize themselves as a collective and to take up positions at different barriers in order to record in writing what they had observed and to bring pressure, by their simple presence and their gaze, on the soldiers manning the checkpoints. In lots of respects their action put into practice the resources available to non-violent protest. These women of mature age and belonging to the upper educated classes of Israeli society began at that time their patient work of gathering information, becoming in so doing the *Machsom Watch*, and eventually numbering some 500 women throughout the country, and publishing on their Internet site a 'situation report' of the different barriers. By their presence and their observations, they wished to maintain a constant pressure on the soldiers so that the instances of maltreatment and humiliation might diminish. After an initial period when they did not intend to make any active intervention but simply to record and inform, they then became veritable go-betweens, using their personal networks of relations to denounce abuses and keep the politicians informed of what was happening on the ground. Simultaneously, they made requests for the installation of toilets at the checkpoints, for the provision of drinking water and the construction of canopies to provide protection from the sun and rain for the people queuing. These women made use of the fact that they themselves could be mothers or grandmothers of serving soldiers to establish a close relationship with the latter while still reserving the right to maintain a watch over their behaviour. By their monitoring and mapping of the barriers, they were in particular progressively able to reveal to public opinion the extent of the reoccupation of Palestinian lands, but also to bring to attention the policies that were aiming at hindering freedom of movement between the Palestinian enclaves:

When we started, we identified the checkpoints as the place where the Israeli repressive policy is implemented. As we looked at the checkpoints in general as a place where perhaps activism could take place, a place where we could act. And as time went by, I think that the majority of women came to the conclusion that the closure policy has nothing to do with the provision of security to citizens of Israel. It didn't take much time for us to understand that it's within the larger framework of destroying Palestinian civil life, institutions of the Palestinian Authority, institutions of civil society, etc., etc. And this was made very clear when the closure ceased to be a means of separating the two peoples - what is called a general closure, to prevent Palestinians from entering Israel, which could be a measure understandable under the circumstances - and was directed actually at preventing Palestinians' movement between districts of the Palestinian territory itself. As time went on, we understood the much deeper implications of the closure policy, and our perception of our work changed. For example, on our tags we used to have just 'Checkpoint Watch' written, and now we also had 'Women for Human Rights'. (Kaufman-Lacusta 2010: 107–108)

The Palestinian women also became greatly involved in non-violent protest actions at the time of the construction of the wall and the expropriation of Palestinian lands. But, as Maxine Kaufman-Lacusta noted, the non-violent resistance movement on the Palestinian side developed more through the extension of the *Sumud* campaign (in its expression of passive resistance and refusal to leave the land) and was oriented towards actions with pedagogical, social, and informative aims more than towards collective demonstrations. The visit in 2005 of Gene Sharp, the American political scientist and theoretician of non-violent action, was the decisive moment for setting in motion a reflection on the value of incorporating that particular strategy into Palestinian resistance. It was in the wake of this reflection that non-violence was defined as a useful resource for the Palestinian resistance in the sense that it could on the one hand bring about a reduction in the level of violence against Palestinian activists and on the other achieve victories in the area of information by bringing Palestinians out of their isolation. Jean Zaru, a Palestinian Quaker activist, thus defined non-violence as potentially applicable to the Palestinian resistance and especially as a strategy that had already been tried in the *Sumud*:

Almost daily, in the Palestinian villages and towns of the West Bank, non-violent demonstrations took place to oppose the construction of the wall whose advance leads to the confiscation of lands, the separation of villages and the destruction of economic and social structures. Hundreds of men and women, both old and younger, have courageously sat down in front of the bulldozers and have inserted themselves between the machines and the worksites. Many of them have considered that they had nothing to lose, since if the wall is built along the route laid out, they will no longer have access to the land handed down to them from their ancestors. (Zaru 2008: 72)

The use of non-violence as a joint technique of resistance by Israelis and Palestinians to the occupation has in particular allowed the former to provide backing to the latter, for it is much easier for them to intervene 'in solidarity' than to act once the spiral of violence has been engaged.

## Conclusion

It was initially when contesting certain episodes of war or to denounce certain bellicose political directions that Israeli women began campaigns of non-violent protest which took a variety of forms (letters, marches, vigils) so as to bring the attention of those governing them to the potential consequences of such political choices. From the time of the first Intifada, they put in place their surveillance and their vigilance and more concretely carried out actions of solidarity so as to give tangible reality to their opposition. For a certain number of these women, the link with non-violence and even pacifism is nevertheless an uncomfortable one, because they live and protest within a society where their children, partners, and husbands are liable for military service. It is for that reason that they have on a number of occasions exploited their positions as mothers to embody their opposition to war and to violence. However, as a result of their experience of active protest on the ground, there has developed a certain radicalization in the discourse and activism of the Israeli women involved; some have indeed marked their distance from the military institution. Emerging from their conflict of loyalty, they have expressed positions opposed to military violence and have defined peace as a global concept which assures security for all; they have in particular expressed a relationship which does not accept the occupation of land (Pouzol 2013).

For the Palestinian women activists, relating to non-violent struggle seems to have been easier, and it has been considered as a resource which is finally well-adapted to the Palestinian situation: from the time of the first Intifada they had taken up various possibilities offered by civil resistance, boycotts, and procedures for getting around Israeli institutions. Since the second Intifada and

the renewal of violent clashes, they have been once more at the heart of a non-violent resistance movement, with some of them this time taking part in common actions with Israeli women and international activists against the construction of exclusion barriers, the confiscation of Palestinian lands, or the policies of ring-fencing of the Palestinian Territories. For a number of years now one has observed within the context of the Israel–Palestine conflict the emergence of a non-violent and trans-national resistance, in which symbolic actions and the spreading of information are available means for countering the logic of the militarists. In the shaping of these new activist resources, Palestinian and Israeli women have often been pioneers, in an empirical manner and despite the weak material means at their disposal. Bold and visionary, their engagement has always been grounded in the present time-context of the resolution of conflict, but also in a construction of the future and a preparation for emergence from war and the initiation of a process of reconciliation.

Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

## Notes

1. In Hebrew *Nashim Be Shahor*: a group of Israeli women founded in December 1987 opposed to the occupation by the Israeli army of the Palestinian Territories.
2. The principal groups are Women in Black, Patchwork for Peace (Mapat ha-shalom), Shani, Guesher, Tandi, and the WOFPP.
3. For example, within *Women in Black*.
4. A group founded in 1988 by Hava Keller, an Israeli professor of history.
5. The armistice line from 1948–49 which became the line of demarcation and de facto frontier between Israel and the Palestinian Territories, notably in Jerusalem.
6. The Centre Communautaire Laïc Juif [*Jewish Secular Community Centre*] of Brussels, a liberal Jewish organization in Belgium.
7. A slogan used several times in demonstrations in which Israeli and Palestinian women denounced the increased incidence of violence and called for an end to the Israeli occupation beyond the Green Line.
8. Rela Mazali, report of a visit of condolence by six women of *New Profile* to the home of the Yazgad family, whose son Wissam was killed during Yom Kippur on 11 October 2000.

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