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Illegal Occupation: Israeli and Palestinian Women Must Raise the Banner of Revolt

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On the sad occasion of the fiftieth year of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, I will be writing a series of articles that will propose a number of peaceful people-to-people measures—which have been largely missing—that Israelis and Palestinians must take to bring an end to the occupation. This is the first article that addresses the critical role of Israeli and Palestinian women.

Historically, women have played a critical role in solving major violent conflicts that have lasted for years, if not decades. Although Israeli and Palestinian women have protested in the past against the occupation, it was on a small scale and their voices were drowned by the intense resistance of the powerful settlement movement. While there is a majority of Israelis and Palestinians who consistently want an end to the conflict, neither the Netanyahu government nor the Palestinian Authority have pursued policies consistent with the requirements to reach a peace agreement. It is time for Israeli and Palestinian women to raise their voices en masse and demand peace now, and be prepared to resort to any peaceful measure to that end, regardless of how taxing and long this process may be.

The role of women in ending global conflicts offers a vivid picture of how women can impact the course of events. In Northern Ireland, the organization Peace People was instrumental in increasing solidarity across sectarian divides, delegitimizing violence, and providing the momentum for peace. The group organized marches, culminating in a 10,000+ strong rally in London, and further engaged in facilitating peace in local areas. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition ultimately gained representation in the Northern Ireland Forum (which led to the Good Friday Agreement) and provided a critical voice in the peace process.

A number of women's organizations were active during the conflicts in the Balkans, each providing its own voice to end the conflict. The Belgrade branch of Women in Black began organizing weekly silent vigils to protest Serbian atrocities in the region and supported the creation of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. Today, they continue their work through ongoing vigils and protests, along with supporting refugees and displaced persons from the conflict, and partnering with a Kosovar women's organization to create bridges between Serbia and Kosovo.

Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace was critical in facilitating the end of the second Liberian Civil War. Women involved with this group engaged in protests in their own communities (publicized initially by Catholic Church-owned radio stations, which later spread to other domestic and international news organization) and subsequently traveled to peace talks in Ghana, blocking all entrances and exits from the building where negotiations took

place until there was a resolution.

Perhaps one of the most famous women-led peace organizations in the world is Madres de Plaza de Mayo, which was formed in 1977 by mothers of the "disappeared" during Argentina's Dirty War. Their weekly protests prompted the civilian government starting in 1984 to investigate and prosecute those involved in the atrocities. A related organization, Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, was instrumental in the foundation of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team and the National Genetic Data Bank, which have located and identified the bodies of those disappeared, as well as their still-living children who were clandestinely and illegally adopted.

In Israel, civil society should support current efforts by groups such as Women in Black and Women Wage Peace to use their challenging power and make their voices heard. Women in Black have hosted vigils every Friday night in Jerusalem starting in 1988 to protest the Israeli occupation, and have in fact inspired a number of branches across the globe (including in Serbia, as previously mentioned).

Women Wage Peace has engaged in a number of activities, including a prominent hunger strike during 2014's Operation Protective Edge, which led to a meeting with Netanyahu and his promise that he would meet with Abbas at any time without preconditions. Other programs included country-wide screenings of Pray the Devil Back to Hell, a documentary about Liberia's peace movement, in Hebrew, Arabic, and Russian, to foster interest in peace and demonstrate how successful such movements can be.

Whereas all of these activities were absolutely necessary, they were limited in scope and failed to engender wide-spread public support – reflecting the overall complacency of Israeli society – and force the hands of the Israeli and Palestinians governments to commit to peace rather than pay lip-service by calling for peace but taking no concrete actions to demonstrate that commitment.

There are a number of joint civic actions that should be spearheaded by Israeli and Palestinian women that could change the dynamic of the conflict in a similar way to the examples cited above. To succeed, Israeli and Palestinian women should undertake multiple activities, remain consistent, and escalate these activities should their respective governments fail to respond to their demands.

Mass protests should be organized by the tens of thousands, and they must signal their intention to follow these protests with regular weekly demonstrations, on a relatively smaller-scale. These demonstrations should take place in different parts of the country to

voice their opposition to their government's policies, and demand an immediate shift by beginning a process of reconciliation to mitigate hatred and distrust between the two sides.

Should there be no official positive response or movement from the government, this is where escalation can begin—i.e. moving toward civil disobedience provided that violence in any shape or form is prevented.

Civil disobedience should include, but is not limited to, mass crowding of public spaces (airports, city squares, malls, etc.), as the general society needs to feel the tangible effects of these protests in real time. Many of the demonstrators can expect to be arrested; they should not resist arrest but welcome it, making it impossible for the authorities to cope with hundreds if not thousands of detainees.

Sit-ins at military checkpoints on both sides will greatly hinder security personnel from processing the movement of Israelis and Palestinians from one side to the other, making it especially difficult for Palestinian laborers to work in Israel where they are needed. This not only has an impact on Palestinian laborers, but negatively impacts the Israeli industries in which they work.

Protests at the separation wall will make it all but abundantly clear that peace will not rest on separation between the two sides, but on collaboration and full cooperation on all civilian and security interactions.

Protests at the Israeli Knesset and the Palestinian Authority's headquarters in Ramallah will send a clear message to legislators and those in a position to shape policy that the current deadlock cannot and must not continue, as there is no alternative to coexistence and peace.

Any and all symbols of the occupation need to be specifically targeted (e.g. separation wall, settlements) – possibly creating works of art on the wall that highlights the irony that Israel is in fact building a prison for itself while acting as prison guards against the Palestinians under siege.

To ensure peaceful marches, organizers should have a clear plan of action about any of the civil disobedience activity, have contingency plans on hand, and enlist volunteers to act as 'crowd control' to prevent any confrontation with police officers.

Israeli and Palestinian women should use their formidable power to demand an end to the conflict. They will have far greater sway than men if they join hands, go out in force, and remain consistent with the message to end the occupation.

After 70 years, the tragedy of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must come to an end. Israeli and Palestinian women have the power to raise the banner of peaceful revolt, and ought to use it now to bring peace to the land that both sides must inevitably share.

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