

## Israeli and Palestinian Women Reaching Across the Divide

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, December 21, 2005

Ariel Sharon's mild stroke this week was a reminder of just how critical this time is for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Granted, that's a familiar refrain. But I spent last week in the region and sensed first-hand the possibilities. Leaving the right-wing Likud to form a new centrist Kadima ("Forward") party, Sharon has created not only a political maelstrom but also a momentum for change.

Throughout the political storms, women's efforts to secure a just, sustainable peace agreement have been constant. Now, as party politics evolve, Israeli and Palestinian women leaders are putting themselves in the middle of the conversation, making their voices heard. They are pressing their governments to comply with UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which calls for the full inclusion of women in peace processes. With international law on their side, the women are securing major victories.

This past summer, Knesset members Eti Livni (Shinui Party) and Yuli Tamir (Labor Party) succeeded in passing an amendment to the Equal Rights for Women Law requiring fair representation of women when dealing with peace and security issues, as well as domestic policy. They didn't do it alone. Women's organizations rallied behind Livni and Tamir with a massive grassroots outreach and media campaign. Supporters of the bill flooded the offices of Israeli parliament members with phone messages, faxes and e-mails. In a model partnership between government and civil society, Livni and Tamir collaborated with the women's organizations in designing the legislation.

Livni, a self-described centrist, didn't enter the Knesset as a women's advocate but has certainly carried that flag in the past couple of years. Unlike in American electoral politics, Israelis vote for a political party rather than an individual candidate. The parties, in turn, have candidate lists: which politicians join the Knesset is determined by the percentage of votes the party receives in the general election and the rank of an individual candidate on the party list. To help ensure that her fair representation amendment is implemented, Livni is pushing a new and creative bill to increase the number of women in the Knesset, using an age-old incentive: extra expense funding for parties that elect more women. If the bill becomes law, parties with more than 30% women parliamentarians will receive double the financial allowance for all their female Knesset members. "Affirmative action," Eti Livni smiles.

Across the checkpoints, Palestinian women, led by Minister for Women's Affairs Zahira Kamal, have also lobbied hard to increase women's political representation. The result is a presidential decree endorsing UNSC Resolution 1325 and a quota for women's political representation. One of the first three names on any party's list must be a woman; then two of the next four, and one of the next five. That's a floor, not a ceiling.

The best news is that while pressuring their respective governments, Israeli and Palestinian women are once again working together. They've recently launched an International Women's Commission to ensure the representation of women in peace negotiations. Comprised of 20 Israelis, 20 Palestinians, and 20 international experts, the commission will create a new momentum for peace by presenting a strong, committed women's voice based on shared political principles and a practical plan for carrying it out.

Meanwhile, the Israeli and Palestinian people seem ready for change. A poll cited by the Jerusalem Post says that 77% of the Israeli public believes that it is important to have women in political negotiations. That includes 75% of the men who were polled. And 76% of the public believes that women bring unique perspectives to these negotiations.

On the Palestinian side, I was in Ramallah, the West Bank administrative capital, during their municipal elections last week. The most important mayoral post in Palestine went to a woman from a party that describes itself as "the third way"—an alternative to the Fatah old guard and Hamas fundamentalists.

As for Americans, in our strong third-party role, we can support Israeli and Palestinian peace efforts by ensuring women's robust presence at every official occasion and heeding their proposed solutions. These women leaders have their fingers on the pulse of their communities, and they know that the well-being of families on both sides depends on ending the conflict.

As one senior US official in Jerusalem remarked to me, "After all, our old efforts have failed. Why not try something new?"