

# Women Waging Peace

By Anat Saragusti

The summer of 2014 may not go down in world history as momentous, but for a growing number of Israelis it was certainly a turning point. That summer we endured one war too many. On July 8, the IDF launched Operation “*Protective Edge*” in the Gaza Strip. The operation lasted 52 days and sent the entire country, and especially communities in southern Israel, into a tailspin. Rockets with various names whistled through the air, disrupting lives all over the country and not only along the border. Palestinians suffered a death toll of at least 2,000 people and unprecedented destruction. Israelis lost 68 soldiers and five civilians, including a four-year-old boy and a Thai worker. The economy came to a standstill, with losses conservatively estimated at 2.5 billion USD.

That summer gave birth to a new movement: Women Wage Peace. Five years later, we are now the largest Israeli grassroots movement working to advance a respectful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Unlike similarly oriented organizations, Women Wage Peace does not enjoy air-conditioned offices in Tel Aviv, nor do we rely on expert branding or creative copywriting. We do not have a detailed strategic plan and certainly not a massive budget or paid billboard space. Quite the opposite. Women Wage Peace is filling a void that has remained gaping for years: a grassroots collective founded and run by activists who want a better future for Israelis and Palestinians. Activities are carried out by hundreds of volunteers throughout the country (in addition to two paid employees).

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It all began when a small group of women met at the Heinrich Boell Stiftung offices in Tel Aviv at the end of the war, to discuss how we could advance a political agreement to prevent the next bloody round. The strong sentiment in the room was “never again”: no to living from one bout of violence to another; yes to taking steps to stop this horrible cycle. It was clear that the power lay in the hands of women, who, until that point, had not played a key role in resolving the conflict.

The beginning was magical: an upsurge of innovation, creativity, commitment and devotion. Above all, we felt surprise. To understand the depth of this surprise, you have to step back and examine the unique position of women in Israeli politics and security. Specifically, how women have been absent, or excluded, from such discourse and particularly from influential positions.

Women Wage Peace- Source: [Shoot East](#)

## Foreign and Security Policy and Women

Since Israel was founded, national security and foreign affairs have been a top priority not only in public debate, but primarily in government policy and resource allocation. Since its inception, Israel has been embroiled in a violent conflict with its neighbors. After signing peace treaties with Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994, the main locus of violence remains the conflict with the Palestinians. In this reality, the defense establishment is a powerful force that makes up almost 20% of the national budget.

Although military service is mandatory for women – making Israel unique among democratic countries – men are the ones who move up the chain of command. They hold all senior positions in the IDF, and their

predominance in the defense establishment is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. A senior track record with the IDF, the Shin Bet or the Mossad affords Israeli men a ticket of one kind or another into the public domain, and especially into party politics. Former members of the defense establishment are considered ideologically sound, unbiased, and committed to the national good. They are assumed to be experts on crucial matters of security and foreign policy, and are regularly invited to speak on the media and other forums, often overshadowing alternative civilian perspectives. This longstanding tradition has consistently sidelined other voices in Israeli society, such as ultra-Orthodox or Arab perspectives and ideas put forth by women. Only one Israeli woman has ever attained the rank of major general, which lies one below chief of staff. The military is effectively a promotion ladder for men only.

In the government, too, women have never occupied an equal number of seats at the table and usually receive traditionally “feminine” portfolios. Few women have sat on the political-security cabinet; one did so in the last government as justice minister. Only two women have served as ministers of foreign affairs – Golda Meir, who later became prime minister, and Tzipi Livni.

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For decades, this reality has shaped the assumption that only men understand matters of security in Israel. Women are routinely excluded from equal participation in the debate, not as a conscious decision but as part of a *modus operandi* with roots that run deep. This happens to be beneficial to men, as it reinforces their superiority as professional experts whose knowledge stems from years of service in defense institutions. As women do not graduate this track, they are commonly considered less qualified for decision-making on these issues. But women’s voices are crucial for the public debate, also on matters of foreign and security policy.

The division is especially marked given the bloody Israeli-Palestinian reality. Living in the shadow of a violent conflict keeps security at the top of the national agenda, pushing aside equally important issues such as health, transportation, welfare, infrastructure and education. When the discussion is dominated by the security establishment, solutions for prevention, retaliation and even negotiation remain within the confines of military thought, and decision-making gets stuck in a rut. Creative thinking is not allowed in and discourse becomes automatic. Decisions are based on expert assessments that are all forged in the same breeding ground.

## **Not offering a solution**

Israel’s peace camp settled into this discourse in the late 1980s. At the time, calling for the official recognition of the Palestinians as a people and respecting their right to self-determination was considered radical, even transgressive. For a short while, it seemed possible. There was real hope that following that path would end with a thousand doves ushering in an era of peace with olive branches in their beaks.

The next step was translating this principle into an operative program titled the ‘two-state solution’. This idea, which embodied hope for ending the conflict, quickly became a slogan that divided Israeli society down the middle. Two vehemently opposing camps were formed, clinging to their respective positions for or against a Palestinian state, two states, withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza. The binary was so powerful that it left no room for other creative possibilities. Any attempt to break out of it from either the right or the left was deemed hallucinatory.

Politicians capitalized on this rift, broadening it with inflammatory rhetoric or sheer fear-mongering. Right-wing leaders employed a divisive discourse that cast those who believed in ending the conflict as delusional, naïve and unpatriotic. Supporting a solution became synonymous with being a leftist – that is, an individual willing to jeopardize national security, cooperate with the enemy and surrender parts of the homeland. In contrast, responsible Israelis were cast as those who understood that there was no partner on the Palestinian

side and no one to trust in the enemy camp, which consists entirely of malevolent anti-Semites. The natural conclusion was that Israel must build up its defenses, invest in more arms and training, and manage the conflict so as to retain the military and political upper hand at all times. This view presupposes a perpetual need for defense, including necessary periods of fighting.

Given this mindset – the exclusion of women from the security discourse and the binary rut of right versus left – founding Women Wage Peace was nothing short of groundbreaking.

From the outset, the movement championed two goals: a respectful agreement to end the conflict, and increased participation of women in foreign and security policy-making (in accordance with [UN Security Council Resolution 1325](#)). The aim to increase involvement is based on hard evidence that when women participate in peace processes, the agreements last longer and are more stable than those reached without women.

One of the movement's founding principles is to promote plurality, ensuring that “right”, “center” and “left” wing ideas are represented by members. Another guiding principle is a positive approach – again, as a way of acting differently, and not necessarily out of defiance or anger. As noted on the movement's website: *“We offer an alternative to what can be done, to the hope that action that promotes a political agreement is possible and good for the future of Israel.”* That is why our activities, slogans and texts contain nothing negative, dismissive or oppressive. We aim to foster hope, not quarrel with legitimate opinions. We aspire to stay in the debate, not hole up in self-righteousness. Another key principle is that we are an Israeli movement appealing to decision-makers and the general public in Israel. Women Wage Peace is not another Israeli-Palestinian movement. In this sense, too, the movement has broken out of the entrenched idea that Israelis and Palestinians necessarily have to work together to end the conflict.

None of these goals is innovative or revolutionary. Yet something about this movement, with its certain degree of naivete, is refreshing. After years of watching the Israeli peace camp slowly shrink and collapse into musty paradigms – “right or left”, “for or against a Palestinian state”, “for or against two states”, “for or against withdrawing from the territories” – a new young player has entered the field, determined to tear down entrenched notions. A grassroots movement that does not accept equating support for an agreement with the left and opposition necessarily with the right.

### **Women Wage Peace does not accept equating support for a peace agreement with the left-wing and opposition to one necessarily with the right**

Members of the movement also intuitively understood that calling for a peace deal does not necessarily have to go with an operative plan detailing exactly how such an agreement would look, and what every side should give and receive. They realized that is precisely the divisive discourse to avoid. This approach is largely viewed as naïve, and even flippant and irresponsibly evasive. It is also guided by the understanding that there are enough plans and solutions circulating, while adopting any particular position may distance the movement from its goals.

This is a smarter, more mature approach, better suited to the third decade of the 21st century. All the polls show that most Israelis want an end to the conflict. Most defense experts concur that an agreement based on mutual respect and shared interests will provide better security than any military force, no matter how well-equipped.

## **Peace agreements ensure security**

The treaty with Egypt – signed in 1979 by a president who was assassinated two years later for the move – has weathered various government changes in both Egypt and Israel. Relations between the two countries have actually tightened in recent years due to shared interests, and the agreement guarantees Israel a degree

of security that cannot be measured in money or lives. The same is true of the treaty with Jordan, which has also withstood several crises thanks to common interests.

In actual fact, Women Wage Peace is not a peace movement. The members understand that true peace is an elusive concept, and not necessarily a realistic one. It is hard to call Israel's relationship with Egypt or Jordan "peace." Yet both political agreements are robust. That is why the movement consciously and deliberately calls for a political agreement and does not carry signs embellished with doves bearing olive branches.

The call for an agreement is broad enough to include women from across the board. Settlers from Ma'aleh Zahav and Ofra can feel comfortable protesting or meeting with Knesset members to demand action. This broad demand is not colored by a particular party or affiliated with a particular program. It embodies a deep, painful longing, born in the summer of 2014: no more war. Israel must consider, and initiate, a return to negotiations in order to advance a respectful political agreement.

By requiring our leaders to reach a deal without elaborating the details, we are not avoiding confrontation. Rather, we are trying to reinvigorate Israeli thinking, which is still trapped in the division between the proponents and opponents of two states. We are trying to inject new energy into the public discourse and policy discussions in particular, with a new possibility of going beyond the right-left paradigm. It is a statement: We will not decide what this agreement will look like, or what each side will receive. We are offering leaders a chance to get off the high horse of preconditions – yes or no – and return to the negotiating table with a sincere intention of reaching an agreement, based on the mutual understanding that only an agreement will guarantee security for both sides.

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That was the idea from the beginning, and it is gaining strength as the activities and membership continue to expand. Breaking down the paradigm has successfully swept up thousands of women throughout the country.

## **Women discuss matters of national security**

Our most impressive achievement thus far may have been enabling women – on the right, center and left, from all over the country, with greater or lesser means and privileges – to enter the public domain for the first time and discuss national security, based on a profound belief that this can and should be possible. Women Wage Peace has managed to revive hope and draw new women into activism. In Israel's militaristic atmosphere, this is no small feat.

Where public discourse on these issues is dominated almost exclusively by men currently or formerly in uniform, who usually employ a language of military power and deterrence, it is not simple for a woman with no particular expertise in this field to stand up and speak out. It is not easy to stand at a junction near your home with a sign demanding a political agreement, to write a post on social media, to guide group discussions in homes, to go on activities. It is not easy to meet politicians without being ashamed to ask questions, pose challenges and demand answers. This is not obvious for women in general, and perhaps for Israeli women in particular. It requires courage, confidence, determination, and abiding faith in the end goal. It also requires knowledge and the ability to answer recurring difficult questions, usually a variation on one of two:

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1. So what is your solution? Most Israelis are used to the term “peace agreement” being coupled with a precise program, including proposed borders and a solution for the right of return, the issue of Jerusalem and the settlements.
2. Why women, in particular? In 2020, despite #MeToo, and although this question no longer crops up in many developed countries, it is still often defiantly voiced in Israel.

That is why it is so impressive to see women who have never engaged in activism, or never dared to speak up – even in friendly living-room conversations – about political and security issues, go out and passionately persuade more women. After four years of activity, many women feel very comfortable by now and have gained the confidence to make their voices heard.

Since the movement was founded in 2014, thousands of women have joined it. The passion, spirit and energy have not diminished. In fact, at any given moment, there are dozens of various activities going on throughout the country.

The movement has matured over time. While we started out with rather cautious demands, by our fifth year they have become more focused, based on accumulated knowledge and growing visibility, both in public and specifically among policy-makers.

The inspiration for this is the mass women’s action in Liberia that eventually ended the civil war there and even led to the election of a member as president – Ellen Sirleaf-Johnson. In fact, most of our early recruitment meetings were based on a documentary film about these women’s struggle, titled “Pray the Devil Back to Hell.” One of the protagonists, Leymah Gbowee, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize together with Sirleaf-Johnson, was also hosted by Women Wage Peace, meeting dozens of Israeli activists and attended a major event of the movement.

## **Knesset and Legislation**

In the past year, as part of an activity called Women’s Knesset, dozens of women have gone to the Knesset every Monday and met with members of parliament (MKs) to forge personal acquaintances. These weekly visits end with the women sitting together in the guest stall of the Knesset plenum. It is hard to ignore the presence of so many women (dozens a week), all dressed in the distinctive white shirt and turquoise scarf adopted from the Liberian movement. It is an impressive visual presence. Many MKs have expressed this impression in speeches before the plenum and on other occasions, amplifying the movement’s messages and very existence.

The first years centered on growing our numbers and holding major events once a year. In the first year we organized the March of Hope: dozens of women held short marches throughout the country (so that women from less advantaged areas could participate, too), as well as a large march and an event near the Dead Sea in which hundreds of Palestinian women in Palestinian Authority areas took part, ending with a mass rally in Jerusalem.

In the second year we held a similar event. These were mass events designed to make the movement visible in public, and to sow hope that there is a large group of politically diverse people calling for leaders to return to negotiations in order to reach an agreement.

Woman Wage Peace initiated a bill which obligates the cabinet to consider non-violent alternatives before launching a military campaign

In the last year we added another attempt to change reality and challenge fixed ideas: a bill initiated by Women Wage Peace called Political Alternatives First. If it is passed, this law will obligate the political-security cabinet to consider alternatives before embarking on a military campaign, and incorporate these considerations into routine deliberations.

Maybe... The next war can be prevented? – Source: Women Wage Peace

The bill was born after the State Comptroller's report on Operation Protective Edge was published, criticizing the cabinet for not examining any non-military alternative before launching the operation. In fact, the comptroller found that the cabinet had not discussed political alternatives at any stage along the way. This is a terrifying thought for anyone who believes in trying to prevent war and preserving human life as the highest value. Yet this finding went virtually unnoticed and remains buried among the pages of the report, gathering dust on shelves.

Women Wage Peace decided to take the critique one step further. The bill was formulated after intensive discussions with opinion leaders, experts, researchers, former military and security officials, former negotiators, leading politicians in the past and present, and other players. Many were enthusiastic and supportive, a minority disapproved, and others said it was hopeless. Whether it is passed or not, the bill is a powerful platform for broadening discussion on this matter. The idea that Israel's cabinet embarks on military operations without fully examining alternatives should instill panic in the heart of every Israeli.

In the midst of the current turbulent "election season", the movement is organizing an "election patrol" – dozens of members from all over the country are attending party meetings and public events, mainly questioning candidates and party leaders about how they will advance an agreement, how they will ensure women's participation in foreign and security policy debates, and how they will promote the Alternatives First bill. The women are dressed in white and turquoise and present themselves as members of the movement. This creates the impression that the movement is everywhere and that there is a strong demand in the field to pursue both goals: a political agreement and integrating women.

Women Wage Peace is not just a grassroots movement based on hundreds of volunteers. It is also non-hierarchical. There is no leadership and decisions are made together, by many members divided into teams with elected representatives. In the summer of 2019, the movement entered its fifth year. The big question remains: Is Israeli society open to these messages? Will thousands of women (more than 40,000 throughout Israel) be able to generate hope? Will the challenge to the established security paradigm take root? Is public discourse ready to hear women who were not raised in the military hotbed? Will decision-makers dare to include the voices of women bringing a civilian perspective to the table? At least one thing is certain, namely that Women Wage Peace will continue to work until this happens.