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The Role of Palestinian Women in Israel-Palestine Peace Negotiations

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Abstract

The participation and inclusion of women in mediation, negotiation, and conflict resolution enhances and alternates results prior to, throughout, and in post-conflict situations because women bring different perspectives to the negotiating table. However, there is a global absence of women in official peacebuilding efforts. This exclusion overlooks their abilities, and it hinders the potential to combat regional and international insecurity and other peace challenges. Using the case of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, this study stresses the importance of including Palestinian women in peacebuilding. By synthesizing existing literature, this paper 1) examines the role of women and lack thereof at different historical stages and at multiple levels of diplomacy related to Israel-Palestine peace negotiations; 2) addresses the barriers to the effective participation of women in peacebuilding; and 3) analyzes the impact of patriarchal culture in deepening the gender gap and the tokenistic use of women in peacebuilding processes. The paper then suggests several policy recommendations framed by an intersectional feminist approach that can advocate for the inclusion of women peacebuilding.

Keywords: Palestine; Israel; women in peacebuilding; UNSCR 1325

Introduction

The predominance of men as well as the significant marginalization of women in senior diplomatic and negotiating roles is amongst the most striking patterns of contemporary politics. While it may highlight the gender stereotypical view of foreign relations as the “domain” of men, the lack of women’s involvement in peacebuilding also corresponds to broader changes in global affairs (Aghabekian, 2019). In relation to Palestine, the historical background of occupation has affected women’s participation in politics more broadly. Defined by hegemonic masculinity and power consolidation, the political system and the cycle of Israel-Palestine peace negotiations continue to keep women at the margins, even as women’s political participation has slowly increased over the last decade (Aghabekian, 2019). For instance, ever since the ratification of the Oslo Accords between 1993 and 1995, women have been present across state-building and activism; nevertheless, the official representation of these women in formal negotiation processes has been weak and low (Aghabekian, 2019).

There is evidence suggesting that peace treaties with women at the negotiating table last longer, a statistic that is calculated by comparing the number of days between the ratification of the peace treaty and the resumption of conflict or warfare (Christien & Mukhtarova, 2020). Evidence also suggests that treaties with women signatories have a significantly larger number of clauses focused on progressive change (Nerenberg, 2018). This has been attributed to the fact that women signatories are more willing to cooperate with various social and political actors (Turner, 2020). As a result, they often have significant connections to civil society organizations (CSO), have valuable information about their own communities, and often agree to support the implementation of peacebuilding treaties at the community scale.

Drawing from this evidence, this policy paper presents and analyzes the historical evolution of Palestinian women's participation, or lack thereof, in peacebuilding negotiations. The first section presents a literature review of the issue and highlights some of the major causes and implications of the problem. The second section investigates how some internal and external policies have affected the participation of Palestinian women in senior diplomatic negotiations over time. The paper concludes with a discussion of potential policy reforms that can increase Palestinian women's participation in peacebuilding negotiations.

Overview

As per the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325), all actors, especially women, are encouraged to take part in negotiation processes, including at senior levels. UNSCR 1325 reiterates that safety, peacebuilding, and reconciliation activities are more sustainable when all members of society are equal participants in and are equally represented by peacebuilding processes (S/RES/1325, 2000). As a signatory to UNSCR 1325, the Palestinian government developed a national action plan (NAP) in 2016 to implement the resolution and to ensure that women were equally represented in peacebuilding talks and processes (Nerenberg, 2018).

Preceding the Oslo Accords, in 1991 a three-day Madrid Conference was held to jumpstart a political settlement between the occupying state of Israel, the Arab countries, and Palestine. However, during that time, the Palestinian-Jordanian delegation had no explicit Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) affiliations, and had only one woman, Hanan Ashrawi, present in the negotiation's delegation.

The Oslo Accords, which were signed 25 years ago, mark a key period and an important starting point for an analysis of women's participation in peacebuilding processes in Palestine. Although several women activists contributed to the resistance and promotion of a peace process at the grassroots level in besieged Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem, research shows that the lack of inclusion and marginalization of women at the formal negotiation table during the Oslo Accords set a damaging precedent for future negotiations and ultimately marked a turbulent and unsuccessful search for peace (Nakao, 2019).

In 1993, the chairperson of the PLO, Yasser Arafat, ratified the Oslo Agreement, titled the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements (DOP) with the Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin. The DOP was based on common standards established by the occupying state and the occupied state of Palestine that established a timetable for creating a Palestinian self-governing state over a period of five months (Nakao, 2019). The DOP was a profound paradigmatic shift and marked the end of a lengthy history of reciprocal hostility. The DOP was lauded for heralding the end of "contemporary colonialism."

Today, however, the "two-state" settlement, a negotiated solution to the occupation vis-à-vis the construction of two states, Israel and an independent Palestine, has not only failed but remains improbable. Although countless experts have analyzed the failure of the Oslo Accords, they do not agree on the reason it began to crumble apart (Nakao, 2019). Several feminists attribute the failure of the Oslo Accords to the absence of Palestinian women from the mediation and negotiation table. For this reason, they claim, the Oslo Accord was sexist and gender-blind from the very beginning, which limited the effectiveness and the inclusivity of the Accords (Nakao, 2019). For example, the fourteen confidential diplomatic senior negotiations

that characterized the Oslo process were held without the presence of women in senior decision-making positions. However, this limited involvement does not reflect women's active role in grassroots organizing in Palestine, who have been an active part of resistance since the onset of the occupation. For example, in 2003, a group of Palestinian women led the march against the wall that had been built by the Israeli occupation in the West Bank.

Where are All the Women?

There are different barriers limiting the effective participation of women in Track One diplomacy and international negotiations. Track One diplomacy refers to formal negotiations, whereas Track Two and Track Three frequently involve non-government actors, including civil society and activist groups. Track One peace negotiations and peacebuilding processes, at both the national and international level, have historically pushed women to the sidelines because they do not use an intersectional approach. This is partially because Track One processes and negotiations focus on state-building, which is a male-dominated process (Paffenholz et al., 2015).

The lack of women's engagement in Track One diplomacy also stems from the fact that key political actors such as the Palestinian government, international actors, and the Israeli government all contributed to a harsh socioeconomic climate for Palestinian women, which has limited women's ability to access political spaces and positions with decision-making power. After the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian Authority (PA), formed primarily of men, continued to downplay women's rights and concerns. They argued that nation-state building must be a priority, whereas women's rights were secondary to this concern. In addition, the involvement of foreign actors, worsened by donor conditions that dictated how local actors could spend their

budgets, crippled grassroots women's rights and feminist movements. Of course, the brutal reality of living under occupation played an equally important role in fracturing women's rights groups, as well as facilitating the continued domination of patriarchal structures in Palestine (Nakao, 2019). Finally, since most of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations have been hosted by male political or military figures, women remain absent in the process and are relegated to Track Two and Track Three diplomacy (Nakao, 2019).

While some research does exist on the absence of Palestinian women in formal Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, this research is limited in its scope. Broadly, this research confirms that women make up solely 4% of mediators and negotiators in international peace negotiations overall, which is still incredibly low. On the other hand, another study proved that amongst thirty-one international formal peace negotiations held between 1992 and 2011, only 4% of the signatories were women and 9% were negotiators (Nakao, 2019).

When addressing the low participation rates of women in peacebuilding processes, and particularly in an occupied Arab country that has been suffering from violent acts of apartheid, ethnic cleansing, war, and annexation, it is crucial to note that the participation of Palestinian women in politics has been modest. While political quotas exist—for example, Article 17 of the Palestinian Law on Local Council Elections enforces a 20% women's quota in local political offices—only 12.9% of parliamentarians are women, while a mere 12.5% of all ministerial level positions are held by women (UN Women, 2022). This is attributed to several things, most importantly the occupation, which has made it difficult for many women to participate in politics. Second, the consensus among political groups and many Palestinians themselves is that “gender issues” and women's rights concerns are secondary to nation-state building. Lastly, the

historically patriarchal organization of Palestinian society, just as much of the Arab states region, makes it structurally difficult for women to enter the political arena. The PLO, for example, which began as a Palestinian civilian movement against the Israeli occupation, has been controlled by men. Today, women make up only 8% of the PLO's Palestinian National Council (UN Women, 2022).

While there was a significant increase in government service under the Palestinian administration in the 2000s, Palestinians were recruited for these positions based on clientelism and favoritism rather than a defined administrative recruiting procedure. As a result, women were once again sidelined and pushed out of Palestinian political space. Today, women represent less than 50% of political administration posts, with most women placed in mid- and low-level positions (UN Women, 2022). Women are not regarded as legitimate decision-makers or political actors, in line with traditional gender attitudes that see women as passive, stay-at-home wives, mothers, and daughters rather than as political leaders. Relatedly, the appointment of some women to positions in government was often the result of their participation in traditional political groups, or with the support of male family members and friends. These affiliations made it difficult for some of these women to try to implement feminist reforms, which might be seen as threatening to traditional elites and the patriarchal system. Therefore, the process of state-building did not challenge traditional patriarchal norms, but rather resembled a "shift" from private patriarchal control within the family, to public patriarchal control organized through the state.

At the level of policymaking, the Palestinian Authority (PA) made very modest promises to tackle women's needs. While it adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of

Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) without hesitation, the implementation of legislation to enforce the CEDAW has been uneven. For example, the Palestinian legislative system has enacted minimal regulations that identify or penalize discriminatory practices. In 2003, the PA created the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA) to promote and encourage Palestinian women; however, the ministry's capacity to draw state funds to support women's rights has been minimal.

No Peace Without Women

Because Israel-Palestine peace talks specify who obtains what, when, where, and therefore, the allocation of resources, an absence of women in these peace talks has a wide range of adverse consequences. First, the disproportionate impacts of conflict on women are completely overlooked. Peace accords negotiated and mediated by men frequently ignore gender; they typically treat men's post-conflict demands as "human problems," or applicable to all genders equally, and therefore do not focus on issues that particularly affect women and girls. Moreover, the national legislative and administrative framework, while frequently viewed as gender neutral, is often unfriendly to women. The sort of voting system used, how social and economic concerns are handled, as well as the interaction between current regulations and civil rights all have a particular impact on women's rights. Thus, the absence of a gender lens has the potential to prolong oppressive practices.

The following recommendations can help to bolster Palestinian women's participation in peace talks:

- Stakeholders should restructure the framework and methodology of all international negotiations to ensure that most of the population is able to track the progress of negotiations. They should also include a space for the opinions of women and community members in formal negotiations, and they should visualize negotiations with a sustainable end goal that is in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).
- Guarantee at least 50% active participation of women throughout all mediation processes to ensure that women's needs are addressed and to promote openness of national reconciliation activities to the broader community.
- International civil society organizations must assist Palestinian women. This can include forming alliances with local women-led democratic organizations to raise awareness and to generate political will to address women's interests and needs through peace-building initiatives.
- The UN should monitor and examine the application of UNSCR 1325 and should challenge any discriminatory processes perpetuated by the Israeli Occupation and the Palestinian governing forces that prevent women from participating in peacebuilding and other political processes.
- Promote understanding and sensitization initiatives via decentralized regional and local non-governmental women's networks that educate about disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration procedures through a survivor-centered lens. These initiatives should target societal stigmas and gender roles concerning women soldiers and militarized masculinity.
- Call for the translation of the UNSCR 1325 into local languages and dialects for broader understanding.
- Ensure dedicated funding to support women's inclusion in peace processes.
- Ensure that all mediators obtain training on gender-responsive language and ways to engage with women in the public sphere. Political negotiators should also be trained on the local context and history of the region, to ensure that any suggestions made try to

work with these traditions rather than in opposition to them, when possible, with the goal to create collaboration rather than tension between local and international actors.

Conclusion

One thing is clear: There are not enough women engaging in formal Israel-Palestine peace negotiations and processes. This is detrimental to Palestinian women's progress. What is required to achieve a meaningful and serious breakthrough in senior diplomatic discussions is more women leaders and higher rates of women's participation in political processes. There need to be more women in positions with decision-making power to ensure that politics are more inclusive. Existing Palestinian and other international leaders must recognize the tremendous potential of including women in major diplomatic and conciliation processes. Without women, we cannot achieve peace.

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