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## Palestinian, Israeli Women Push Bilateral Talks

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*As U.S. and Israel discuss the possibility of unilateral action by Israel in the Occupied Territories, women representing both sides of the conflict are calling for engagement with Palestine and more women in the peace talks.*

WASHINGTON (WOMENSENEWS)--As the Israeli-Palestinian conflict appears increasingly intractable, a group of women are pressing bilateral spirit into a peace process they say still stands a chance of revival.

To keep the hope of peace alive, Israelis and Palestinians must engage in genuine negotiations, warned members of the International Women's Commission, a coalition of 60 female activists and government officials, two-thirds of whom are Israelis and Palestinian Arabs.



Naomi Chazan (left), former Knesset member and Maha Abu-Dayyeh Shamas (right), Palestinian member of coalition, in Turkey last year.

"Unilateralism is not the answer," read a joint statement issued earlier this month by the women, who came to the United States the first week in May to build support for a process requiring both sides of the dispute to redraw the West Bank borders.

On Tuesday President Bush met with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in Washington and encouraged him to reach out to Palestinians but said the U.S. would back a plan by Israel to redraw its West Bank borders behind a dividing wall if talks fail.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, a moderate, has uncertain power over the Palestinian legislature now that it is controlled by Hamas, a militant Islamic party regarded as a terrorist group by Europe and the United States.

Hamas won control of the Palestinian parliament in January, ousting Abbas' secular Fatah Party from power. The elections came after a debilitating stroke left former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon incapacitated; Olmert has since taken over Sharon's post.

### **'We Must Look at Backlash'**

"If we starve and don't negotiate with Hamas, the Palestinian people will inevitably believe that this is a Jewish-American conspiracy," Colette Avital, deputy speaker of the Knesset, said in New York. "We must look at the backlash."

The women took their case to the United Nations in New York and to Congress and the State Department in Washington, D.C., where they met privately with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. During their trip, they also pressed for statehood for Palestine; called for an increase in the number of women involved in official peace negotiations and worked to build a constituency of U.S. supporters by publicizing their efforts.

"Our message was heard by members who are working to put pressure on negotiators," said Noleen Heyzer, executive director of UNIFEM, a United Nations division that promotes women's empowerment and gender equality, speaking about the commission.

Commission members were thrilled to meet with Rice but were disappointed by the response from Capitol Hill, where many lawmakers denied requests for meetings.

Some members of the coalition also expressed frustration at what they characterized as an unreceptive U.S. media, which they said hindered their efforts to energize grassroots U.S. support. U.S. media coverage of the conference was light, members said.

Even potential allies in the women's rights movement are not devoting much attention to the issue because they are bogged down in a fight to preserve U.S. women's rights that are under attack by religious conservatives in the government, coalition members said.

### **'Women Under Siege'**

"It's very hard to get domestic women's organizations to do as much international work as they used to do," said Jessica Neuwirth, president of Equality Now, a New York-based international women's rights organization that is also working with the commission. "They are all supportive; they just feel like they're under siege in so many different ways."

The commission--composed of prominent Israeli, Palestinian and international women-- was founded upon ideas set forth in Resolution 1325, which passed the United Nations Security Council in 2000. It urges member states to involve more women in government efforts to prevent, manage and resolve conflict.

Some women have played key roles in peace negotiations in the Middle East, said Phyllis Bennis, a fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, D.C. Hanan Ashrawi, a Palestinian peace activist and literature professor, was involved in earlier stages of the process when Palestine was engaged, and Rice and Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni are now involved in negotiations between Israel and the United States.

But that "does not change the reality that in the Middle East and in the United States, like in every other region of the world, women are underrepresented" in peace talks, Bennis said.

The call for gender diversity in peace negotiations is based in part on the basic principle of equality. As more than 50 percent of the region's population, women deserve a say in a process that will directly affect their lives, coalition members say.

### **Pursuing Difficult Engagement**

The coalition also asserts that by its own example it is showing that women can help develop alternative models of political dialogue and to persist in difficult engagements.

"In a situation where everyone is claiming there is no partner, you have Palestinian, Israeli and international women working together with one voice," said Naomi Chazan, former deputy Speaker of the Knesset. "So anybody who tells you there is no partner: No, there is one."

The commission was launched in Istanbul, Turkey, in July 2005 and was introduced to Europe in December 2005 at a conference in Brussels. Members are now surveying people in their communities to get a vision for what a future peace might look like and will formalize those views in a forthcoming position paper.

As the main diplomatic channels narrow, the commission's role is becoming that much more crucial to ending the escalation of tension and violence, said Equality Now Executive Director Taina Bien-Aime.

"These women really are negotiating until they find common ground, which is more than we can say of the more general negotiating patterns, where people don't have the patience or political will," said Bien-Aime. "Yet you have this commission . . . of women who are sitting together and trying to address all the issues related to peace. That in itself is an extraordinary endeavor."

But the endeavor must move fast to succeed, women said.

Israel has indicated it will give peace talks until the end of the year.

"If things are not done now--coming back to the negotiations and stopping the unilateralist act--things are going to deteriorate so fast," said Maha Abu-Dayyeh Shamas, a Palestinian commission member who heads the Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling in East Jerusalem. "It will be bad for Israel; it will be bad for Palestine."

*--Elizabeth Dwoskin contributed to this report.*

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Women's eNews welcomes your comments. E-mail us at [editors@womensenews.org](mailto:editors@womensenews.org).

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