

# MIDDLE EAST TIMES

OP-ED: CARLA KOPPELL

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Women take lead toward Mideast peace:

While it's encouraging that two women - U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni - were key players at the Annapolis conference last month, the fact that women were central to the negotiations will only have an impact if the subsequent talks are structured to maximize women's contributions to the peace process. Done right, its steering committee meetings could leverage women's particular talents as peace builders.

Though women generally make up a very small minority of participants in peace negotiations, there is compelling evidence that they add particular value. In Guatemala and Northern Ireland, for example, women successfully advocated for greater attention to key social and economic concerns in peace accords. Women also have played an important role in ensuring negotiators are accountable to the general population and that information about negotiations filters back home. In Liberia, women from civil society ensured negotiators stayed at the table until talks concluded with an agreement. In Uganda and Sudan, I work with women to ensure that locals are updated about ongoing talks so that communities feel involved and invested in peace.

I have seen first-hand how pragmatic women can be in negotiations. The Initiative for Inclusive Security facilitates programs in which women develop common platforms to advocate the end of conflict. Women from the most divisive conflict areas - Iraq, Colombia, Sudan - never fail to develop a common agenda. These women are different in more ways than they are alike; yet they unite around an agenda because they believe that the shared goals of peace and prosperity take precedence.

Some of the key players in international peace and security already recognize the importance of women's participation. Rice, for example, has consistently endorsed the role of women in peace building. On International Women's Day this year, she said, "the empowerment of women is irrevocably tied to the safety, security, and prosperity of the world. Women are essential agents in bringing about change and are an often overlooked resource in the preservation of human security, in overcoming transnational dangers, and in managing threats arising from tyranny, trafficking, poverty, and disease. Advancing democracy, prosperity, and security worldwide is not possible without the empowerment of women."

In the case of Israel and the Palestinian National Authority, it would be easy to act on that recognition and commitment. Through Amendment 4 of the Law for Women's Equality, Israel passed legislation in 2005 guaranteeing women a substantial role in all peace-building efforts and negotiations. In September 2005, PNA President Mahmoud Abbas similarly decreed, "The PNA ... fully supports the full and equal participation of women in all and various efforts undertaken to promote and preserve peace and security, and shall endeavor to implement them."

In the Mideast, there are many qualified, well-educated women leaders in government and civil society. For example, a delegation of prominent Palestinians and Israelis visited the United States earlier this month to share their views on the renewed peace process. The International Women's Commission for a Just and Sustainable Palestinian-Israeli Peace, or IWC, involves members of the Knesset and the Palestinian Legislative Council, as well as prominent academics and non-governmental leaders who work together to push for an end to the conflict. The IWC is precisely the kind of organization to be constructively and substantively involved in post-Annapolis dialogs.

In structuring steering committee meetings, both Israelis and Palestinians should ensure that women comprise a significant percentage of each party's negotiators; women are likeliest to have an influence when present in substantial numbers. A role for civil society, one that prominently features women, could also be defined in the process, thus ensuring a robust range of perspectives is represented and reflected in the talks.

Israelis and Palestinians have an historic opportunity to create a model peace process that gives women their due voice and influence, while allowing them to demonstrate the difference women's participation can make. Hopefully they will seize that opportunity.



(Caricature of Condoleezza Rice by KRT 2001)

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