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Women's Mideast Peace Movement Marks 20 Long Years

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By Brenda Gazzar
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Women in Black have been publicly mourning Israel's military occupation of the West Bank for 20 years. As members mark the anniversary amid the latest peace talks, they say their message is still timely even if their street protests have dwindled.

JERUSALEM (WOMENSENEWS)--As a Woman in Black, Gila Svirsky says she has been pushed by passersby, called a traitor and a whore, and even targeted with flyers advertising her contact information and urging harm to the "black widows."

During the last two decades, she has received telephone calls threatening her children and heard gun shots echo as a warning of a caller's alleged plans for her.



Protesters with signs:
"Stop the Occupation."

Credit: Brenda Gazzar.

But the 61-year-old Svirsky says she is no longer afraid of such "empty threats," and she continues to stand every Friday in a Jerusalem square--dressed in black to mourn both Israeli and Palestinian victims--holding up signs that call for an end to Israel's 40-year military occupation.

Women in Black demonstrations began in Jerusalem weeks after the first Palestinian uprising erupted and soon spread to dozens of locations throughout the country. Dec. 28 marks two decades of weekly protest vigils by a movement that has turned global, with women congregating to fight violence and injustice all over the world, Svirsky says.

The Israeli dissidents--most of them Jews, but also some Arabs--will mark the 20-year anniversary with a special mass vigil in Jerusalem.

The "damn occupation continues and we still have to go out there every Friday because we are trying to remind people that it's not over," Svirsky says. "A lot of people think . . . we own the West Bank and we are going to keep it forever. For us, it's really important to remind people that it's not ours; it's Palestinian. We are not going to get peace until we give it back."

That view is widely disputed here.

"I think there is an occupation. I think there is an occupation by Arabs . . . of the land, which belongs to the Jews, which has been (the case) for thousands of years if you read the Bible," says Ruth Matar of Women in Black, which formed in 1993 to oppose territorial concessions.

Ambitious Peace Talks

Women in Black's anniversary coincides with a new round of peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians, an ambitious effort to sign a peace deal that would resolve nearly 60 years of conflict before President George W. Bush's term ends late next year. The last talks stalled in 2000 after the eruption of a second Palestinian uprising.

Negotiations have been complicated by Israeli plans to build homes on occupied land in the area of East Jerusalem--which Palestinians hope to make their capital of a future state--as well as near daily rocket fire that Palestinian militants launch from the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip and Israeli retaliatory strikes and assassinations.

Both Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas are considered weak in their respective societies, affecting their ability to close a deal.

When Islamist Hamas forces violently routed rival Fatah forces from Gaza in June, Israel sealed its borders with Gaza to all but humanitarian aid and has imposed economic sanctions in response to rocket and mortar attacks.

At its peak, Women in Black vigils were held in more than 30 Israeli cities but today vigils remain in only six.

Jerusalem, one of the most active sites, once boasted between 100 and 120 members but today the city's vigils draw around 20 to 30 participants. Despite the sharp drop-off, activists say their message is more important than ever.

'Destroying Israel From Inside'

"This occupation has to end because it's destroying Israel from the inside," says Women in Black member Aliyah Strauss, 72, an emigre from Ohio. She and her husband fulfilled a Zionist dream when they arrived in Israel 50 years ago and now live in Tel Aviv. "We cannot remain a healthy democratic society and at the same time have brutal control over another people."

Over the years, Women in Black has undergone a transformation, becoming more of an international peace network focused on a range of issues falling under the general anti-militarization theme, from the Arab-Israeli conflict to Neo-Nazism to the Iraq War to the violence of organized crime.

In 2005, more than 700 Women in Black members from nearly 40 countries attended the movement's Jerusalem conference, said Svirsky, who is originally from New Jersey.

"I think our main achievement has been to foster a huge international network of Women in Black who oppose the Israeli occupation and other injustices around the world," she says. "It's important for us to help people understand that conflict has to be addressed politically, not by violence."

Tactical Question

Gadi Wolfsfeld, a political science and communications professor of Hebrew University of Jerusalem, questions the group's dedication to public protest.

"These are obviously committed women and I respect that but I don't think it's the most effective way of bringing about political change," he says. Rather than conduct public vigils, groups that monitor and issue reports on incidents of abuse or violations appear to be more effective in influencing decision-makers and the public, he says.

A sociology professor at Israeli's Ben Gurion University in Beer Sheva disagrees. Sara Helman says Women in Black blazed a trail by crossing national boundaries during the first Palestinian uprising and calling for an end to suffering of both Israelis and Palestinians.

"You can live in Israel your daily life as an Israeli Jew perfectly and forget" about the occupation, she says. "What Women in Black did, they didn't let the issue of occupation be ignored . . . They brought it to the fore. They brought it to public attention."

A 1997 study that Helman co-authored with Hebrew University of Jerusalem Professor Tamar Rapoport found that Women in Black's protest methods "embodied an open challenge to deeply ingrained notions of femininity in Israel" and offering an alternative interpretation of a woman's place in Israeli politics and society.

Each woman, they found, created a new space that challenged and subverted the political, social and cultural categories that relegated women to marginality.

"They brought women's bodies into the public sphere," Helman says. "They stood there in the public sphere outside, quietly, silently with only signs that said 'Stop the Occupation.' The only means to protest was their bodies. That was also path breaking."

On Dec. 21, Efrat Halper, 31, participated in the Women in Black vigil near downtown Jerusalem with her mother and 3-year-old daughter.

Her mother, Shoshana, joined Women in Black shortly after the group was established and Halper, a nurse, started coming to the square while she was in high school. The weekly vigils are for her, she said, a way to relieve her own conscience as someone who resists her government's military occupation of the West Bank.

Halper, who also volunteers with Physicians for Human Rights, never expected that there would be a need for Women in Black to exist in Israel for 20 years.

After Israeli and Palestinian leaders signed the 1993 Oslo Peace Accords--which outlined principles for an interim period of Palestinian self-rule and a timeline for permanent status negotiations--she and others in the group stopped protesting, thinking that peace was on the horizon.

But nearly 15 years later, she is still waiting for resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She hopes her daughter, Zohar, won't participate in the same vigil her mother and grandmother have long attended. "But I'm not optimistic," she says. "I see what's going on."

Brenda Gazzar is a freelance journalist based in Jerusalem.

Women's eNews welcomes your comments. E-mail us at editors@womensenews.org.

For more information:

Women in Black:

<http://www.womeninblack.net/>

"Women Put Their Mark on MidEast Peace Efforts":

<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/3146/>

"Jewish and Arab Women Unite Against War":

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