

Security: a feminist perspective

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In the wake of the [second Lebanon war](#) [1] and in the face of an [Iranian nuclear threat](#) [2], Israel's politicians and generals focused on their country's national security at the recent [Herzliya Conference](#) [3]. Parallel to that high-profile annual event - which provides a platform for the prime minister, the military's general chief of staff and others to articulate policy - Israeli women's and peace organisations gathered to offer an alternative view: to examine security issues from a feminist perspective.

Organised by [Isha L'Isha](#) [4]-Haifa Feminist Centre and the [Coalition of Women for Peace](#) [5], the one-day "[Security for Whom?](#)" [6] symposium was convened in [Haifa](#) [7] to provoke public debate on the hegemonic notion of security. The city, 85 kilometre up the Mediterranean coast from Herzliya, sustained [Hizbollah](#) [8] rocket [attacks](#) [9] from Lebanese territory during the war in summer 2006.

Sarai Aharoni is a feminist activist with a northern Israeli women's NGO, *Isha L'Isha* – the Haifa Feminist Centre. She was formerly coordinator of the organisation's programme for implementation of UN Security Council [resolution 1325](#) [10], relating to the impact of armed conflict on women and girls, the role of women in peace-building and the gender dimensions of peace processes and conflict resolution

A raised voice

Women's voices have not been heard much regarding national security, which has been Israel's top priority since the [founding](#) [11] of the state in 1948. The focus, for so long, on strong [military](#) [12] measures in local and regional security policy has tremendously strengthened the political power of the male-dominated Israeli military elite.

As a result, women and their organisations have had considerable difficulty in gaining power from the inside. Indeed, very [few women](#) [13] hold decision-making positions in the Israeli political system. (Paradoxically, too, the military became stronger during the period of the "[peace process](#)" [14] from 1993 to 2000. "Peace" is considered a matter of "security" - and the Israeli army was the main organisation leading the negotiations. And that power has led, at times, to poor policies.)

In their opening remarks at the Haifa conference, two women jointly expressed the need to formulate an alternative definition of "security" by "deconstructing the term itself". [Nabila Espanioly](#) [15], director of the [Altufula Centre](#) [16] (an education-oriented women's centre in Nazareth) and Professor [Dalia Sachs](#) [17], of the University of Haifa's [department](#) [18] of occupational therapy, said that such an alternative needed to take into account the diverse

experiences of civilians confronted by economic insecurity, ethnic discrimination or gender-based violence [19].

The pair also questioned the silence of many women and men alike regarding the effects of Israeli bombings in Lebanon, stressing that Israelis need to understand the long-term connections between the lives and well-being of people on both sides of the border. Civilians were targeted during the thirty-four-day war by both Israeli and Hizbollah forces, disregarding international law, creating a dangerous precedent and possibly hampering attempts to reach a peace agreement.

A similar view was presented by Zehava Galon [20], one of only two Jewish members of the Knesset to speak out [21] against the Lebanon war. Criticising Israeli politicians for being inexperienced, arrogant and irresponsible in their disregard for the lives of soldiers and civilians, Galon said the war - which lasted from 12 July to 14 August 2006 - could have ended sooner (or been avoided altogether) if diplomatic measures were taken more seriously.

(In the first week of the conflict, for example, foreign minister Tzipi Livni [22] called for diplomatic negotiations [23] toward a ceasefire; her initiative was disregarded by senior military officials and politicians, who thought the fighting would bring about a "sound victory". After a month of fighting, diplomatic efforts resulted in compromises that might have been considered earlier.)

On a personal note, Galon said the experience of feeling alone - a woman politician talking about peace in the midst of war - was a difficult one. In a country where the majority of people perceived the war as necessary and just, relatively few publicly opposed it. A couple of thousand demonstrated in Tel Aviv, and Jewish and Palestinian activists protested daily before the international news media gathered in Haifa to report on Hizbollah's attacks on northern Israel.

A long campaign

To present an alternative definition of "security", a systematic understanding of women's lives and experiences is clearly needed. The work of Isha L'Isha - literally "woman to woman" - in the past five years has shown that the effects of the ongoing regional conflict on the lives of Israeli women need to be treated as historically and culturally situated. In other words, those working to assist and empower women and girls in conflict-zones - those addressed in UN Security Resolution 1325 [24] -- cannot assume the specific vulnerability of women; rather, they need to document it constantly.

This was the rationale behind a new report by the Mahut Centre [25] - which deals with training and employment for women. Entitled "The negative impact of the Second Lebanon War on the economic and social status of disadvantaged women in the north", the report outlined the personal stories of 130 Israeli women from low socio-economic backgrounds. According to the document, these women had suffered severe economic, occupational and emotional hardships because the government - including the welfare system - failed to aid the civilian population during Hizbollah's attacks. Presented for the first time at the Haifa symposium, the report highlighted the state of desperation, accompanied by an overall loss of trust in their government, which many of these women felt as a result of the war.

Beyond its military tactics, Israel has other means of controlling and policing populations. For example, the "demographic [26] threat" (the fear that too many non-Jews may someday become citizens of Israel) has been used to create legislation meant to minimise the number of Palestinians in East Jerusalem [27] and the West Bank [28].

The Palestinian peace activist Terry Boullata, who heads a private school in [Abu Dis](#) [29], cited some of the effects. Lacking official residency documents, for example, tens of thousands of Palestinians living in the West Bank do not have full access to basic services, while a [citizenship law](#) [30] denies Palestinians from the West Bank and [Gaza](#) [31] who are married to Israeli citizens the right to live in the country with their spouses. These practices are presented by Israeli decision-makers as necessary for "national security", and are neither questioned nor criticised by most of the Israeli public.

An even deeper silence exists when it comes to [Israel's nuclear-arms strategy](#) [32]. [Merav Datan](#) [33], a lawyer for [Greenpeace International](#) [34], and [Helen Caldicott](#) [35], president of the [Nuclear Policy Research Institute](#) [36] (Australia), spoke about the link between nuclear arms and security. Both women stressed that nuclear arms pose a global threat and should not be perceived as purely a local matter, or as a way to achieve national security. The need, then, is for - at the least - a broader regional solution.

Also, the ecological and physical effects of nuclear weapons should be better acknowledged, and international mechanisms are needed to encourage disarmament. The effects of nuclear arms are rarely discussed publicly in Israel, given the country's long-standing official [policy of ambiguity](#) [37] concerning its own nuclear capabilities. Datan says NGOs need to express a clear demand for a middle east that is free from all nuclear weapons, and urged Israel and the Arab countries to revive arms-control negotiations.

In Israel's militaristic society, in which most of the population serves in the army and is educated to unreservedly support its actions, it is very difficult for women to raise a civil voice. [Hedva Eyal](#) [38], general coordinator of Isha L'Isha, targeted the heart of that dilemma as the symposium drew to a close. Israeli women are educated to become "mothers of soldiers", she said, while many men from low socio-economic backgrounds join the army to gain a better future for themselves and their families. These assumed roles are among the main obstacles preventing civil society in Israel from developing an effective anti-war movement or a new peace camp.

These attitudes cannot be changed without a real attempt to achieve peace in the region, without a more positive future in view for the region. In the meantime, feminist activists will continue doing what they are doing: fostering education, media campaigns, protest activities, Israeli-Palestinian networks and international advocacy.

For the approximately 200 activists gathered in Haifa, then, the conference was a step in the ongoing effort to break hegemonic, masculine perceptions of security and to challenge the notion that only "real men" can talk about nuclear arms or decision-making processes. But above all, it was meant to show that some women do not accept the role assigned to them, vis-à-vis security issues, by culture and society. They do not wish to remain silent.

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[4] <http://telaviv.usembassy.gov/publish/civic/iscivicorg.html>

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[7] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haifa>

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- [19] http://www.who.int/topics/gender_based_violence/en/
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