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Isabel Hilton: Hello, and welcome to Open Democracy's second podcast from Galway. We're the first international conference of the Nobel Women's Initiative that is taking place.

I'm Isabel Hilton, and in this podcast I am joined by five of the conference participants: by Yanar Mohammed from Baghdad, founder and president of the Organization of Women's Freedom and editor-in-chief of Al-Mousawat; by Bronagh Hinds from Belfast, who teaches at Queen's University in Belfast and was a founding member of the Northern Ireland's Women's Coalition and a member of the Stormont talks, by Nadwa Sarandah from East Jerusalem, who is a member of the Parents' Circle Families Forum, a forum of 500 bereaved Palestinian and Israeli families, and from the United States, by Antonia Juhasz, from Oil Change International, and by Val Moghadam, Iranian-American, director of women's studies, and professor of sociology at Purdue University.

It's a sobering commentary on the state of the world that the women at this conference come from quite so many countries and quite so many states of conflict: from Africa, from the Middle East, some from exile from conflict. Others are activists who bring experience from different theatres. They've been convened by five of the seven living women laureates to see how, together, they might change both the facts on the ground and the larger paradigms of conflict.

And after listening to, now, two days of some terrible stories and some fierce debate, but also to those who engage in the daily effort of survival and the struggle for change, I doubt that anyone would underestimate the scale of the task. The conference is called "Women Redefining Peace in the Middle East and Beyond." Some of the people here argue feminist principles. Many do not. All of them have many stories to tell.

But how do you redefine peace, and how do you get a new definition to prevail? Yanar, I want to start with you. You live in Iraq, which I guess we could describe as having redefined democracy in a way. From the outside, any definition of peace seems a very long way off. It looks more like civil war. And I just wondered if that's how you've experienced it in the last five years, as a descent into civil war?

Yanar Mohammed: Since the beginning of the occupation of Iraq, and since the political formula was put in a way to represent Iraqis according to their



ethnicities, their religions, and the sect of their religions, we knew from day number one that this is a formula for civil war.

And we have warned it on all forums and on all newspapers and on media. We were expecting to reach the day where the neighbor would be looking for his or her neighbor - usually it's his neighbor - to be killing him because of their sectarian ID. We knew that it would come to this, and it is not that we did not have any other alternative, but an occupation is an occupation. It's a force put on the people of a country so as to follow a specific political formula.

This political formula was not for peace. It was a very successful blueprint, definitely, for a fierce civil war that had started in the last year and from which we do not really see the way out at this moment. We have been left with a government which is apart. The heroes of this civil war, the warlords, are the biggest officials of our government now.

For us, democracy is something we cannot speak about anymore. We just know that it was a pretext to start a war on our country. If we want to speak about democracy and peace in the Middle East, I would speak from a woman's and people's perspective.

If you are living in a country and your country's name was spelled out in a Congress meeting or by Mr. George Bush with the name of democracy, you immediately say, "Oops, we're going to be bombed in a month or two," because democracy for us in the Middle East means that you will be bombed massively, means that you will be losing half a million of your population, and also means that the resources of your country are going to be taken by laws.

We do not guarantee that we can step out in the streets and come back safe. We know that women do not have access to education and to work. And we know that there's a constitution that has been written where it just defines inequalities for women. Peace for us is, in reality, a civil war, and any document that does not guarantee the equality of women to men is something we do not acknowledge in Iraq.

The formula that we have witnessed was a formula for a civil war, for diminishing women's rights, for aborting the achievements of generations of women activists, and it also undermined all the possibility of living decades to come. We will not dream of peace in the decades to come, let's put it that way.



Isabel: Bronagh, Yanar is in, as it were, the beginning of a process. You lived through a not-dissimilar process: neighbor hating neighbor, an absence of democracy, warlordism in Northern Ireland. On May the 9th, you watched a power-sharing Parliament sit down and start business. Is there anything in that experience that you can say to Yanar that will help Yanar in the situation?

Bronagh Hinds: Well, it's very difficult, and I acknowledge the difficulty and the uncertain justice of the situation which is facing Iraq at this moment in time, and indeed our friends in the conflicts in Palestine and Israel, where the attention has actually moved from them to other theatres in the world, and who have been, in a sense, accompanying the conflict alongside Africa and Northern Ireland for so many years. It pains us to see people in the situation.

Iraq is at the beginning, and I wish I could say to Yanar that it won't be years, but it seems to me, when that lack of stability happens and the destabilization happens, it takes many, many years to rebuild it. What I can say is in Northern Ireland in its current cycle of the conflict, which has actually been over centuries, the last cycle has lasted more than 30 years, and we know that there is a hope for the future.

We have to admit that we are not a strategic site of world power in the way that the Middle East is, and that has to be acknowledged. I think there are questions there that have to be asked of other superpowers in the world and other strategic interests.

But nevertheless, what we can say is in a situation which was about territory and not about religion, it's important to name the situation for what it is, but in which tradition and culture and religious and other interests played a part. Through all those years, it was important that good people worked within their communities for something different that worked across the communities or at least kept doors open, kept lines of communication open and worked for something different.

That grew a civil society if civil society was not highly developed. In many conflict situations, it is highly developed, but we find that that was very much the saving factor in Northern Ireland. People were working through all of those years, through all the devastation, to hold communities together, and it was very often women who were holding families and communities together.

And we need to recognize at an international level - calling on situations like the UN Security Council resolution 1325 - we need to recognize that women from



civil society need to be engaged and interfacing with people who are making the decisions. We need more women in the political process, and we need to be working at many levels.

But we know that it is important your vision, your ambition, and your hope alive. And those women and men who can do that, their country owes an enormous debt of gratitude to them, because they are the people who keep things ticking over, who keep the energy alive, and know that people will actually come to a freedom and a new vision for the future.

And it will happen. It will take time, but it will happen.

Isabel: Nadwar, you live in the middle of a conflict in East Jerusalem, a conflict that is also of very long standing, which -- right now -- appears to be getting worse. We've heard about the importance of keeping doors open, of keeping communication open, and you're one of the people who does that.

What does it take -- in a situation in which people hate each other, or hate the community of the other side -- to talk to the enemy, as it were? In that situation, what does that take?

Nadwar Sarandah: Well, I think that I realize, after living under occupation for over 40 years, that if we don't talk, if we don't change the other side's opinion, if we do not humanize our struggle. They haven't recognized us for a long time. They wanted to erase our nationalism. They wanted us to disappear. And they were claiming that we wanted them to disappear.

I believe that both sides are not going to disappear. And if we don't talk to each other, the rest of the players in the area -- because it is a strategic area -- and the Zionist's dream is still on. They want to implement the rest of that plan in order to hegemonize the area, in order to stay there. A lot of religion is involved, because the creation of Israel was based on a religious ideology, and that's why religion got in the way.

If we do not talk to each other, if we do not change each other's opinion regarding the continuity of this conflict, we -- the people -- are the losers and not the people who are making decisions on our behalf. We have to change that.

And it's very difficult. And it's very difficult to take this decision of dialogue, because it can be dialogue of the deaf. They are misusing the word "dialogue" in



the political arena nowadays. They're using the word "reconciliation" - Sharon has used the word "reconciliation" - and he knows nothing about reconciliation, because if he wants to talk about reconciliation, he should start by apologizing.

First, recognizing that there is the justice part whereby why should the Palestinians -- the victims -- pay that price, the heavy price of their land being partitioned? So, this is an apology. I know it's so hard to go back to history, because a lot of facts have been created on the ground.

But what is being created is illegal. We all know all these facts, but we cannot work on the grounds with these facts. We have to start humanizing each other in order to reach to a solution. And we set the example for others, that all the myths that have been spread, all the misinformation, all the disinformation, is only misinformation. It's not a reality.

The Palestinians have always wanted to reach to a peaceful solution since the '70s. It's Israel who was against a peaceful solution. Their peaceful solution was to transfer Palestinians into Jordan, and they can have peace.

Isabel: Antonia, when one hears about dialogue, about people talking across these very difficult lines, it seems very difficult to imagine that this process, as it were, from the ground up -- could prevail against the forces that you recognize as central to this conflict, which are those of money, of corporate power, of ambition to corner resources.

How can these processes prevail?

Antonia Juhasz: Well, I think these peace processes that we're describing, as have been presented on the ground, are the only things that can prevail. All I try and do is expose what the agenda is of those that are creating -- either invading/creating -- the invasions themselves, supporting those, continuing other wars in their name. Those who are using the military to advance very clear economic agendas.

And if we can unravel those agendas and expose them, it makes it that much easier for us, gives us a focus for our organizing efforts and helps us to unite our organizing efforts.

So, one of the things that we've spoken about at the conference is how the United States -- and, in particular, the Bush administration and US corporations -- are



the instigator of so much instability around the world, and the perpetrators of so much instability and conflict and war around the world.

And that we in the United States bear a special responsibility to not only hold our government and our corporations to account, but to repair the damage that they're doing. And that one of the ways that I have found to do that is to expose the interests -- why the administration, why the corporations create so much violence.

And in particular, in the last decade, a dramatic change has happened in the United States, which has been the consolidation of power in the hands of just a few corporations and, in particular, and particularly important to this administration, our oil corporations.

Exxon has merged with Mobile to form the largest corporation in the world. They surpassed Wal-Mart last year to become the largest corporation on the planet. In 2003, ExxonMobile earned the highest profits of any corporation in world history ever. Adjusted for inflation period, the largest profits ever.

Then they topped that in 2004, then they topped that in 2005, then they topped that again this year, with \$40 billion in pure profit. Chevron merged with Texaco and bought Unocal. Conoco merged with Phillips. Total merged with Fina merged with Elf in Italy. And the list goes on and on and on. In France, excuse me.

What that money buys is going to be started with this concept of democracy. Was democracy brought to Iraq? Well, we certainly -- we meaning the United State government -- certainly didn't bring democracy to Iraq. And the United States government itself doesn't have a democratic process.

That money that those companies have buys them incredible undue influence in our democratic system. And in fact has bought them a government that is part and parcel to the oil industries. This is the first time in American history that the president, the vice president and secretary of state are all former energy or oil company executives.

They have used that position to wage wars very specifically for oil, particularly in Iraq. I believe that is their design on Iran. I believe it is part of their interest in supporting Israel, and absolutely everything that Israel does is to maintain a base of hegemonic control in the region.



The invasions of Iraq and Iran -- potentially for Iran -- also enable the establishment of a permanent military presence in the region. The first invasion of Iraq allowed the United States to establish a military presence in Saudi Arabia, in other countries across the region. A presence that very much upset many people of the region and led -- many believe, ultimately, through several channels -- to the September 11th attacks.

That military presence has been dramatically increased through the invasion of Iraq and the attempt to create a permanent military presence.

Through explaining this process at this gathering, Yanar and I have been able to meet and organize as an Iraqi woman and an American woman, to pull together the participants of this conference to say that we resist this process. We identify it, we see it, and we resist it.

We demand that our governments do not use war to transfer oil wealth from one country to another. We demand that our governments do not exclude the people and lie to the people from the processes that move forward. And we are already organizing to see that happen. And it's an incredibly powerful immediate outcome of this gathering.

Isabel: Well Antonia has a very clear narrative exposing agendas. A very exposition of what she believes happens in this process.

Many people find, however, the current situation very confusing. And there are many arguments, I think -- in countries that are involved in these wars, but at a distance -- about what is right, what should be done now, what the nature of these wars is.

It is a very confusing time for a lot of people. Why do you think it is so confusing?

Valentine Moghadam: We certainly do live in very troubling and unsettling and turbulent times. And I think there a lot of injustices and a lot of conflicts in the world today. And they are perpetrated by state actors as well as non-state actors.

It's hard for many people, including many observers and scholars, to really agree on what is behind many of these conflicts and how they can be resolved. One reason for this confusion has to do with the nature of the post-Cold War world order. And the fact that with the decline of communism and the Soviet Union, the United States emerged as a unipolar power.



For some, this was a very positive outcome and it was felt. There are scholars such as the historian Niall Ferguson who believe that US power is both necessary and positive to bring order in a chaotic world.

Whereas for many other observers -- for other scholars and for many activists -- what we see is actually a rather naked, aggressive hyper-power in the form of the United States trying to assert its power and authority around the world.

The United States is in the business of gaining, or regaining, control over resources in certain parts of the world. And the struggle over oil in the Middle East is not a new story, it's a very old one. It goes back at least to the beginning of the previous century.

So, we're living in very troubling and chaotic times, which are characteristic of a period of world systemic transition from a period of a certain stability -- which we knew about in the decades after the Second World War -- where we had a certain agreement among the victors of the Second World War. And even a sort of agreement between the two super powers: the United States and the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union, in fact -- and the United States to a certain extent -- played a certain moderating role. And certainly the Soviet Union had a moderating affect on any of the grander economic and political ambitions of the United States.

But this changed with the downfall of the Soviet Union and with communism. And the United States was able to assert itself and try to, in fact, implement its plan for a new American century.

Fortunately -- or unfortunately -- this has added to the confusion, to the turbulence, to the chaos. It has also met with the resistance of quite a number of non-state actors, as well as some states. So you see a certain number of states in the Middle East that are standing up to the United States, such as Iran and Syria, and that creates all kinds of tension.

We see networks of non-state actors such as various militant Islamic groups, groups such as Al-Qaeda, that are also engaging in their form of resistance to US hyper-power. And this is all very troubling and unsettling, because it's bringing about and exacerbating different forms of violence.



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And it becomes very difficult to see a way out of this. But for many of us who have been attending this conference, a principle solution to these difficulties and these conflicts and forms of violence is really to support and encourage participation of women's organizations in the defining and redefining of solutions to these problems.

For far too long, women in general -- and in particular, the most experienced women who have formed and built organizations throughout the world, that have engaged in dialogue and engaged in all forms of conflict resolution -- they have been marginalized. And they have not been invited to the table, where it counts and when it counts.

We have international instruments, such as Security Council Resolution 1325, which is supposed to encourage states -- and actually require states -- to include women in negotiations and also in all forms of post-conflict processes. But we see far too many conflicts today in which women continue to be excluded from these processes.

So I would say that we need to find some kind of a formula in which women's organizations, specifically those organizations that have played a major role during these conflict situations -- in peace building, in dialogue, in negotiations -- they have to be brought to the table because we have been hearing at this conference many creative, and many important and significant ideas for conflict resolution, for conflict prevention, and for ending all forms of violence.

And to keep these women shut out of formal processes of negotiations and mediations and post-conflict governance is simply a recipe for more disaster and for more violence.

Isabel Hilton: Bronagh, we have heard a lot of that. This is after all a conference of women so it's not surprising that the women here should say, "We need to be part of it and we need to be involved." I just want to ask though, what changes when women are involved? Is it necessarily true that women have a different approach, a better approach, are for peace instead of war? Is that necessarily the case?

Bronagh: Well, let's say very clearly that not necessarily all women agree. There are women who have been involved in military situations as well. But there tends to be a majority of men.



I would have to say from our experiences in Northern Ireland, in actually getting in at the table for negotiating peace, we did make a difference. Now, I hate to use the example of a man to actually give women credit, but given that the international facilitation of that came from Senator George Mitchell, who has consistently and is well respected throughout the world and I think has had some links in terms of Israel and Palestine as well, he has consistently said that women in Northern Ireland have played a significant role, quite outstanding in relation to the small mandate.

But let me give some examples. First of all, women adopted a new way of doing business around the table. They did not go into it with zero sum negotiating positions, refusing to move. They went in from both sides of the community in the one movement, having signed up to uphold the inclusion of every stakeholder in it when other parties wanted other elements thrown out, and for a real and comprehensive engagement. They went in committed to an open agenda and working towards an accommodation rather than from a fixed position.

In order to cope with the fact that women did not have a set position and manifesto, they developed a framework of principles against which it would judge all its submissions and inputs, both verbal and written, into the negotiations. Those were the key principles that I think are about building an agreement between peoples who disagree and building a sustainable peace, which is inclusion, human rights and equality. It is about a peace and a just and agreed settlement.

And on top of that and apart from the Chairs of those negotiations, the women were the only people who were paying attention to building relationships and the dynamics of the process: the body language, listening carefully to hear the misinterpretations that went on, communicating and translating for parties on either side what was actually meant. When we went into one discussion with parties, we understood that things had been misunderstood.

It's clear that if there is a conflict and a difference of opinion over a policy or a principle, that is something that has to be worked at. But actually fomenting more conflict because there's just been a misunderstanding is something we don't need to happen.

Building alliances of smaller parties in the negotiation to actually play a positive role in moving larger and more set blocks from their positions was quite transformative in that process. Being used willingly to explore ideas and different



ways of approaching things that sometimes could be put to other parties - women were doing that. There was no other party doing that.

The other way the women made a difference in the negotiations, which was often sometimes forgotten, in fact having stood on the principle for inclusion in order to make the men hear and the governments hear, we had to say, "We don't want to have to walk away ourselves." It was the only time we did it in the final days of the process because they forgot - we were so busy looking at enabling other people to work - they forgot that we had an agenda as well.

And our agenda was very simple, was two priority areas. One which we won and one which we lost, as well as negotiating other things into the agreement. One was to put something in to involve civil society in the future discussions and it referred to a civic forum alongside any political forum. And the other was to develop a new and different, inclusive election system which no other party would agree to because they all wanted to keep the power to themselves.

But we did get things written in about women. So when you ask about the difference, I think we made a difference. And all women, I think, if they get a chance, because we've heard about the power of women here, we know women have the skills. They can make a difference to the relationships, to the trust-building, to the process, to thinking out new solutions, about being problem-solving and actually putting women and the ordinary people in the center of the agreement.

Isabel: Well, it seems to me that one of the big things we're talking about here is different kinds of power, and how power is defined and used. And your experience, Bronagh, coming from a beginning in a situation where you apparently had no power, and ending up at the table in this key role, is an extraordinary example.

There's Yanar, if you like, in the reverse situation, where women in Iraq have gradually disappeared, where power has been usurped by an entirely different agenda. How do you begin to take back that power? How do you begin to assert power from the powerless against that?

Yanar Mohammed: The power that they show you comes in different levels: comes in Apache helicopters, comes in American tanks, comes in machine guns of the government pointed at you all the time, and also comes in the mentality that they have spread in Iraq by the media.



In the last few years, what we have witnessed is that almost 30 to 40 television stations were open for the Islamist parties where women are given a very small spot in society, and they are told to submit and just to withdraw from the social scene and the political scene.

So all kinds of manifestations of power against women that are very negative have pushed us thousands of years back in our history to a place that we have not witnessed before in the modern history of Iraq. They have turned us into an Afghanistan under the Taliban in the four years after occupation.

So our experience of power in Iraq, in relation to women's rights is a most dramatic one. And that's the reason that I am attending these conferences, one of them is the Redefining Peace that we are attending here in Ireland, so as to gain the support of an international women's solidarity, to support us asking for our rights in Iraq, starting from the legislative rights, because we have lost them totally.

Isabel: OK. I want just to close by asking you to give me one sentence in answer to a question, which is: Do you, looking at your individual situations or the wider situation, feel hopeful or not? And if you do, in one sentence, why?

Valentine Moghadam: I feel hopeful. It's sometimes difficult to feel hopeful when one considers all these conflicts and such. But I'm hopeful because of the progressive forms of resistance that we see on the part of the global justice movement, on the part of transnational feminist networks, on the part of very progressive civil society organizations and actors around the world.

So that gives me hope. It's the progressive civil society; actors locally and nationally and also linking up globally. But I should also say that one other thing that gives me hope is that in Latin America, for example, we have seen new governments elected which are very powerful and have shown a new way of distancing themselves from the American model, but doing so in a way that is based on popular participation and is based on a very peaceful, non-violent form of democracy. So they have...

Isabel: Yanar, hopeful or not?

Yanar: Hope is about challenge, is about finding a solution for this transitional wave we are going through. If hope brings a solution in Iraq, it may work for the



whole world. Yes, hopeful.

Isabel: Nadwa:

Nadwa Sarandah: I have to be hopeful if I want to keep on going and working because, without hope, we might as well kill ourselves. We need to make the changes in order to better our lives. I have children and I want to look forward to their future.

Isabel: Bronagh?

Bronagh: I want to start off by saying that I agree about the Latin American situation. I spend some time there as well, and I think that is a very hopeful situation, a lot of difficulties there but a very hopeful situation. I am hopeful and I put my trust in people, in the main.

What I have experienced here so far in the first two days, the skills of the women from analytical to organization, to mobilization, to the energy, to the vision, I believe that women can do it. We just need to look more closely at some of the things that we are not doing well enough yet, and to the challenge that faces us. I think women can do it. We do have hope.

Isabel: Antonia?

Antonia Juhasz: Because it's still very clear that the people of the world separate out the citizens of the United States from the government and the corporations of the United States, I have tremendous hope that all of my sisters who are around this table and are at this conference will help us in the United States to continue the struggle to rein in our government, to rein in our corporations. So I am always hopeful.

Isabel: [inaudible] ourselves also. Don't forget that. Antonia Juhasz, Yanar Mohammed, Bronagh Hinds, Nadwa Sarandah, and Val Moghadam, thank you all very much indeed. That's all from this Open Democracy Podcast from the Nobel Women's Initiative Conference in Galway. You can find this and all our other podcasts on www.opendemocracy.net.

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