

Hope, doubt and strength
Words from a Palestinian peacemaker
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As a response to the violence in the Gaza and the recent elections in Israel, WPP spoke to Hana Kirreh, a Palestinian peacemaker. Please read her words below:

How did you get involved as a women peacemaker?

At university I was involved in politics. I was convinced at that time already that we need resistance towards the Israeli occupation. However, my belief and conviction in the kind of resistance has transformed over the years. As a student, I felt that violence was necessary, although I do want to emphasize that I have never actually been involved in any violent act or demonstration. At a certain point, I read about Martin Luther King and his six principles of non violence. I also read about Ghandi and his life. I felt inspired by them, their philosophies, their life and thoughts. I strongly realized that violence can never lead to anything constructive. Violence can only lead to more violence and not to something positive. At that moment I tried to find more information on non-violence, through reading and discussions with people.

Somebody introduced me to the work of Wi'am, which is a Palestinian Conflict Resolution Center, located in Bethlehem on the Westbank. The Center helps to resolve disputes within the Palestinian community by complementing the traditional Arab form of mediation, called Sulha, with Western models of conflict resolution. I began working at Wi'am as a volunteer. I am working for them from my home in East-Jerusalem.

Please elaborate some on your work at Wi'am

I feel at home at Wi'am. I like their way of working and the way they think. I feel safe, and I feel I can speak my mind there. They try to resolve conflicts in a non-violent manner. It is even reflected in the name, Wi'am, means 'cordial relationships'. For me the name implies reconciliation as well. Working there, I developed my knowledge and skills on non-violence. Since Wi'am is a Branch of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR), I became familiar with their work, too. Through Wi'am, I also partly organized and participated in the Middle East Consultation¹ with WPP, which took place in 2004. We spoke on non-violence, empowerment and gender. I also participated in the Training of Trainers-cycle from 2006 and 2007 that was organized by WPP. I had received some training before on non-violence, but not in such a formal and structured manner. It inspired me often to meet these women working on peace and to learn about non-violence and gender.

In my work for Wi'am I focus on gender, non violence, leadership and conflict resolution. I also try to raise awareness on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. For instance, in December 2008, I organized, together with the Swedish Group 'Operation 1325', a seminar on UNSCR 1325.

Could you please explain what non-violence means for you?

As I mentioned, I started believing in the power of non-violence when I was a student. I strongly believe that we need non-violence in order to achieve real peace. I believe in Ghandi's theories, and I find it very important to see what I can apply in my own context and use non-violence in my daily life as well, and in my interactions with my husband, my children and others. For instance, when I disagree with somebody, I try not to become angry. I try to listen, understand the other and negotiate. I strongly

¹ From 1997 to 2005, WPP organized six regional consultations for women from areas of armed conflict; Europe (Hungary 1998); Asia (India 1998); Africa (Zimbabwe 2000); Latin America (Ecuador 2003); Pacific (Timor L'este 2004); Middle East (Cyprus 2004). The consultations aimed to empower women peacemakers, by providing a space where they can exchange experiences and strategies around peace building

believe that we truly need to listen to each other and negotiate in mutual respect. Respect for other fellow human beings is extremely important. For me, being a non-violent person does not mean that I accept the occupation. Non-violence means being strong and resistant, and does not mean being submissive. I feel that one needs courage to be a non-violent person, more even than for being a violent person. I feel I am still developing and maturing in knowing non-violence and applying it in my daily life.

Often, I receive positive feedback from participants on trainings that I conduct on non-violence. Many young women and men face challenges in the Palestinian society, also due to its patriarchal nature. One female participant noted how she had learned negotiation skills and techniques of non-violence that she applied in her communication with her father. The communication and relationship with her father improved a lot after the training. For me it shows the value of trainings on non-violence.

I believe in the power of marches and in peaceful demonstrations. In the December- January 2008-2009 aggression against Gaza, I saw the power of non-violence. I participated in a peaceful demonstration in East-Jerusalem. So many people responded against this attack, by donating blankets, food and money. In a non-violent manner they protested against what was going on. People expressed their refusal of and protest against it, and demanded to stop the violence against innocent civilians, including many women and children. The aggression resulted in killing more than 1345 people, and more than 5000 were injured.

In December 2008, you participated in a seminar on 1325. Could you please elaborate on this seminar?

Together with 'Operation 1325' from Sweden, Wi'am Conflict Resolution Center organized the seminar 'Implementation of UNSCR 1325,' which took place from December 10-17, 2008 in Cyprus. It brought together women peacemakers from both Israel and Palestine. We spoke about United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and 1820 and about the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). We also discussed the role of women in peacemaking and drew up Action plans. The seminar created a unique opportunity for Israeli, Palestinian and Swedish women to meet and exchange experiences and ideas on how to promote peace in the region and how to increase the participation of women in peacebuilding, with the support of UNSCR 1325. The seminar reaffirmed our commitment to work continuously for peace and for a world where women and men have the possibility to live decent and secure lives. The participants are still in contact with each other in a very positive manner; for instance, they exchange information, and even Christmas wishes were sent out around Christmas before the Gaza attack.

How did you respond to the Israeli army offensive in Gaza in December 2008?

It's quite difficult. I, and many others with me, have been working so much for peace between Israel and Palestine, and we have been giving so many trainings over the years on non-violence and reconciliation. Yet, this offensive happened. In a certain sense, I also feel quite powerless now. First of all, because I feel that there is a resistance in society towards discussing and achieving peace with Israel in non-violent ways, due to the violence in Gaza. I feel that things need to calm down a little bit, before I can continue with non-violence trainings. I still strongly believe in the power of non-violence, but I feel insecure in how to apply non violence in practice in the current situation and the injustice that is going on in Gaza. Secondly, I am not in any decision-making power position to really change something in this situation. I find that challenging. So many people have lost their lives, so many became disabled. So many children became orphaned. Many people are suffering. The questions that remain in my mind are; "How can we react towards this violence in a non-violent manner? How can we stop the cycle of violence that is going on?" And at the moment I find it difficult to answer these questions. I am wondering whether we have done enough. The question whether we should do more remains in my head, without being answered satisfactory. At the seminar on 1325 in December, there was a common

agreement that more women need to be involved in higher decision making levels, including the parliament. The people in power are the ones that can really make a change, and women should be there. Providing trainings to grassroots activists is important, but they lack power and control to really change something on higher political levels. I find that difficult to deal with. Providing trainings to women that are not in the position to lobby doesn't seem to be sufficient for me anymore. I also want to emphasize that it is not enough to state that women should be brought to decision-making levels. For me, Tzipi Livni is not a woman who is striving for reconciliation and peace in non-violent manners. I would rather specify that we need women working for this on higher decision making levels, rather than 'just women.'

What do you think should be done to settle the perpetual Israel and Palestine conflict?

I think it is very important for the international community to send out a strong signal to Israel that they can not continue anymore on the same road that they are on. They need to change and act humanely. I urge the international community – the United States of America, Europe and the Arab countries that have a relationship with Israel - to boycott Israeli goods and materials. This would be a strong and non-violent message. I understand that this might increase suffering for Palestinians as well in the short term, since the Palestinian economy is mostly dependent on the Israeli one. However, non-violence requires also creativity and finding alternatives, in this case alternatives for the survival of Palestinian economy and its people. I am sure that a boycott would benefit Palestinians as well in the long term.

Another thing that I think should be dealt with is the fact that Yasser Arafat, Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1994, for their efforts to create peace in the Middle East. I believe this was not grounded, and I feel that the Prize actually should be withdrawn. For me, Peres is not a good example of peace promoter, since I feel he has been involved in too much violence and I hold him responsible for massacres. On top of this, he has defended Israel's attack on Gaza. I can't agree with that. The Nobel Peace Prize should be an honour for those who are really keen on achieving and promoting peace in the world, and those who receive it should spare no effort to ensure that diplomacy and the values of peace should always prevail.

I also think that it will be important to focus more on lobbying for more women to be on higher decision making levels. I could consider working together with some of the women that participated in the Implementation of UNSCR 1325 seminar. This is not an easy task and we will need to reach common understanding. I want to cooperate more with women from both the Israeli and Palestinian side. However, I do believe that we planted a seed with the seminar, and we need to nurture it in order to grow.

Could you please comment on the outcome of the recent elections in Israel?

In my view, the outcome of the elections – which the Israeli right side won - in Israel is not good news for Palestinians. For me, it doesn't really matter who becomes prime minister, since I feel that both Likud's Binyamin Netanyahu or Kadima's Tzipi Livni will not be able to move toward peace. I strongly recommend that Israel is more pressurized to abide by international laws, including the Geneva Convention to reach a just and peaceful solution with the Palestinian people. We are looking for a two state solution to be the outcome of negotiation.