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Title	Women and the transition from conflict in Northern Ireland : lessons for peace-building in Israel/Palestine
Author(s)	Byrne, Siobhan
Publication date	2009
Conference details	Paper presented at the conference “The Impact of Devolution on Everyday Life: 1999-2009”, Newman House, Dublin, 6 February 2009.
Series	IBIS Working Papers; 89
Publisher	University College Dublin. Institute for British-Irish Studies
Link to online version	<a href="http://www.ucd.ie/ibis/filestore/wp2009/89_byrne%20rev%201.pdf">http://www.ucd.ie/ibis/filestore/wp2009/89_byrne%20rev%201.pdf</a>
Item record/more information	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10197/2416">http://hdl.handle.net/10197/2416</a>

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**WOMEN AND THE TRANSITION FROM  
CONFLICT IN NORTHERN IRELAND: LESSONS  
FOR PEACE-BUILDING IN ISRAEL/PALESTINE**

**Siobhan Byrne**

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Working Papers in British-Irish Studies  
No. 89, 2009

**Institute for British-Irish Studies  
University College Dublin**

IBIS Working Papers  
No. 89, 2009

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ISSN 1649-0304

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## ABSTRACT

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### **WOMEN AND THE TRANSITION FROM CONFLICT IN NORTHERN IRELAND: LESSONS FOR PEACE-BUILDING IN ISRAEL/PALESTINE**

When we take the experiences of women seriously, the lessons that we can draw from the Northern Ireland peace process for future peace tracks in the Middle East are not necessarily the same lessons that are highlighted in popular comparisons of the conflicts in the press, by politicians and in the conflict resolution literature. Some of the challenges that Northern Ireland, in general, and feminist peace activists, more specifically, have faced in the post-conflict period may also surface in a future post-conflict period for Israel and in a new Palestinian state, given the similar actors involved and elite model of conflict resolution that is preferred there, as elsewhere.

In this paper, I argue that the successful inclusion of women in the Northern Ireland peace process and the world class commitments to human rights and equality enshrined in the final peace deal have all been important (but often ignored) elements of the peace in Northern Ireland. As well, the conservatism in the post-Agreement period in Northern Ireland, which has thwarted some of the efforts to advance important social policy issues, along with the poor representation of women in Northern Ireland's new political institutions more than a decade after the peace agreement was signed are similarly unlikely to inform prescriptions for Middle East peace. In my view, the experiences of women, who are located largely within the informal sector, can offer important insight into how we come to understand and define security and also how we come to assess the kinds of changes that will improve security for "ordinary citizens" in a post-conflict period.

#### ***Publication information***

Paper presented at the conference, "The Impact of Devolution on Everyday Life: 1999-2009", Newman House, Dublin, 6 February 2009.

The conference was part-sponsored by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

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# WOMEN AND THE TRANSITION FROM CONFLICT IN NORTHERN IRELAND: LESSONS FOR PEACE-BUILDING IN ISRAEL/PALESTINE

Siobhan Byrne

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## INTRODUCTION

On 18 January 2009, Israel unilaterally ended 22-days of air-strikes and a ground assault on the Gaza Strip, just two days before the inauguration of American president Barack Obama. In this recent and bloody instalment of the protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict, over 1,400 Palestinians and 13 Israelis were killed and thousands of Palestinians were wounded.<sup>1</sup> Israel's "harsh" and "disproportionate" response, in the words of outgoing Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, was intended to strike a blow against Palestinian militants who have launched thousands of crude rockets and mortar shells into the southern region of Israel over the last decade.<sup>2</sup> Israel's massive military offensive was launched on the heels of an economic blockade of Gaza. Since Hamas' rise to power in the Gaza Strip in June 2007, Israel has severely curtailed the movement of people, goods, medical supplies and industrial fuel for Gaza's only power generator between the Gaza Strip, Israel and Egypt. Clearly the Middle East peace process, launched over a decade and a half ago, has been a complete and catastrophic failure. In this context of escalating violence and deep political discord, political observers and practitioners have been speculating about what lessons the celebrated Northern Irish peace agreement, which marked a new period of peace and governance, might offer Israel/Palestine.

In my view, it is important to critically interrogate those lessons from the Northern Ireland peace process that such analyses attempt to apply to the Middle East so that we are clear about which aspects of the process may be desirable to replicate. At the recent conference hosted by the Institute for British Irish Studies in February 2009, entitled: "The Impact of Devolution on Everyday Life: 1999-2009", Bronagh Hinds and Elizabeth Meehan drew attention to some of the difficulties women in Northern Ireland have encountered in the post-Agreement period, including persistent inequality and continued political exclusion. If we are going to talk about lessons, then, for Israel/Palestine, these experiences should also inform our thinking on conflict resolution and peace-building.

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<sup>1</sup> The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights compiled a list of Palestinians killed in Operation Cast Lead. See: "The dead in the course of the Israeli recent military offensive on the Gaza Strip between 27 December 2008 and 18 January 2009," Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, 19 March 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Following the Gaza offensive, outgoing Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert remarked, "The government's position was from the outset that if there is shooting at the residents of the south, there will be a harsh Israeli response that will be disproportionate". See: Nidal al-Mughrabi, "Israel bombs Gaza tunnels in series of air raids," Reuters.com, 01 February 2009.

I begin this paper by situating the most recent analogies being drawn between Northern Ireland and Israel/Palestine in a longer established body of scholarly literature and political practice. Such literature and practice tends to focus on elite ethnonational actors, eschewing insight from feminist analyses and ignoring women as an important empirical category. Next, I outline why a feminist analysis that takes the experiences of women seriously can offer an important critical position from which we can assess the relative success of the Northern Ireland peace process. Given the ways in which women do not feature in conflict resolution and peace-building thinking, I outline the kinds of lessons we can anticipate the chief mediators and architects of a future Middle East peace will glean from the Northern Ireland case. In the remainder of the paper, I propose an alternative set of lessons that we can learn from Northern Ireland when we consider the experiences of the women's feminist movement, revealing some of the successes that are not likely to be highlighted and some of the failures that are likely to be ignored. Specifically, I argue that the successful inclusion of women in the Northern Ireland peace process and the world class commitments to human rights and equality enshrined in the final peace deal have all been important (but often ignored) elements of the peace in Northern Ireland. As well, the conservatism in the post-Agreement period in Northern Ireland, which has thwarted some of the efforts to advance important social policy issues, along with the poor representation of women in Northern Ireland's new political institutions more than a decade after the peace agreement was signed are similarly unlikely to inform prescriptions for Middle East peace. I close this article with a few thoughts on the implications of this argument for the pending peace process in the Middle East.

### **COMPARING NORTHERN IRELAND AND ISRAEL/PALESTINE**

Signaling renewed American engagement in the Middle East, newly elected US President Barack Obama appointed former US Senator George Mitchell as US Special Envoy to the region in his first days in office in 2009.<sup>3</sup> As the former chair of the all-party negotiations leading to the Belfast peace agreement in Northern Ireland from 1996 to 1998, Mitchell is popularly remembered as one of the principle architects and heroes of that peace. Beginning with Israel's recent offensive on Gaza and the appointment of Mitchell as envoy to the Middle East, the press has been awash with editorials and public statements by politicians in Northern Ireland and the Middle East that draw analogies between the Northern Ireland and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts and speculate about how Mitchell will apply the lessons he learned in Northern Ireland to the Middle East. For example, Jonathan Freeland of the Guardian writes: "... the mention of Northern Ireland, once a byword for strife, is now an invocation of hope. If republicans and unionists—who once wished each other dead—can sit in government together, then surely Israelis and Palestinians

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<sup>3</sup> This is not Mitchell's first foray into the Middle East. From 2000-2001, he chaired a fact-finding inquiry into the causes of renewed violence in Israel/Palestine called the Mitchell Commission.



are not fated to fight for ever".<sup>4</sup> In the *Irish Examiner*, columnist Stephen King asks: "Can Mitchell do a Belfast in Jerusalem?"<sup>5</sup> And Niall O'Dowd, former American liaison between Washington and Sinn Féin, insists, "The fact that Mitchell and his boss, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, have the experience of Northern Ireland to draw on when seeking to resolve the conflict in the Middle East is of tremendous benefit to them. Anyone who believes differently is simply (sic) uniformed".<sup>6</sup> In such popular comparisons, Northern Ireland stands as an example of a successful peace process: the 1998 Belfast Agreement established a political assembly, North-South and East-West institutional bodies and new equality measures based on parity of esteem between the two main communities. There has also been a significant reduction in sectarian violence since the signing of the Agreement. In contrast, successive mediation efforts in the Middle East have failed, despite the initial optimism following the signing of the 1993 Oslo peace agreement. The peace process that followed this agreement was rendered a complete failure due to events such as the 1994 killing of more than two dozen Palestinian worshipers at a mosque by Israeli off-duty army reservist Baruch Goldstein; the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by an Israeli extremist in 1995; the deepening of the Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip through the expansion of Jewish settlements; the launch of the second Palestinian intifada, also known as the Al-Aqsa Intifada, in 2000; along with a spate of Palestinian suicide bombings and a wave of militant attacks.

To be sure, drawing analogies between these conflicts and between the ensuing peace processes is fraught with difficulties. Northern Ireland and Israel/Palestine stand worlds apart in terms of the disparate scale of military and paramilitary violence as well as the unique historical conditions and geopolitical influences that have been brought to bear on these cases of protracted ethnonational conflict. For example, the Police Service of Northern Ireland estimates that 3,375 people have been killed in Northern Ireland between 1969 and 2008 as a result of the security situation.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, over 8,500 Palestinians and 1,500 Israelis have been killed since the start of the 1987 Palestinian intifada alone.<sup>8</sup> The natures of the settlements in both cases are also very different. In Northern Ireland, the peace process worked towards building a power-sharing political assembly between the nationalist

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Freedland, "Amid the horror and doom of Gaza, the IRA precedent offers hope," *Guardian.co.uk*, 14 January 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen King, "Mitchell the peacemaker will need a miracle to do a Belfast in Jerusalem," *Irish Examiner.com*, 04 February 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Niall O'Dowd, "North Lesson for Mideast," *IrishCentral.com*, 11 February 2009.

<sup>7</sup> See: "Deaths Due to the Security Situation in Northern Ireland 1969-2008," 2008; available from [http://www.psni.police.uk/deaths\\_cy\\_to\\_date.pdf](http://www.psni.police.uk/deaths_cy_to_date.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> The Israeli human rights group B'Tselem compiled two tables that include total number of fatalities during the first Intifada (December 1987 to September 2000) and the second Intifada (September 2000 -December 2008). See: "Fatalities in the First Intifada," B'Tselem; available from [http://www.btselem.org/english/Statistics/First\\_Intifada\\_Tables.asp](http://www.btselem.org/english/Statistics/First_Intifada_Tables.asp); "Statistics: Fatalities," B'Tselem, 2008; available from <http://www.btselem.org/english/Statistics/Casualties.asp>. I combined these figures with the 1,400 Palestinians and 13 Israelis killed in Operation Cast Lead (27 December 2008 to 18 January 2009).

and unionist communities. In the Middle East, a partition-style settlement is favoured through the creation of an independent Palestinian state alongside the State of Israel, known as the "two-state solution".

Despite these obvious differences, there remains a vast body of political analyses and scholarly literature that contemplates the similarities and the differences between these cases in an attempt to devise workable models for conflict resolution. In the conflict and conflict resolution literature, scholars have compared the ideology and methods of revolutionary movements in the 1970s and 1980s like the Irish Republican Army (IRA), Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), and the African National Congress (ANC). Indeed, since the 1970s, and particularly following the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, key figures in the Irish republican movement have issued statements in solidarity with the PLO.<sup>9</sup> Such solidarity has also been expressed through the use of murals and the flying of Palestinian flags in Nationalist areas.<sup>10</sup> The focus of these comparisons has been on the male leaders of revolutionary movements and elite (mostly male) politicians. In the early 1990s, scholars similarly drew comparisons between Northern Ireland, Israel/Palestine and South Africa. Because all of these conflicts were understood to be intractable, it was reasoned that the successful institution of peace processes in South Africa and the Middle East could offer hope for Northern Ireland.<sup>11</sup> Of course today, scholars are asking what the Middle East can learn from these cases instead.

Current comparisons, especially made at the national political level in both Ireland and the UK, focus on the lessons that the Northern Ireland peace process can offer other cases of intractable conflicts. For example, politicians involved in the Northern Ireland peace process have been traveling to hotspots around the world to offer assistance. Recently, Jonathan Powell, former chief of staff to Tony Blair during the Northern Ireland peace process, and Gerry Kelly, member of Sinn Féin and Northern Ireland's executive's junior minister, were in the Philippines, helping to broker a peace deal between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the government.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Sinn Féin member Raymond McCartney, a former political prisoner, has participated as a member of Northern Ireland's International Development Committee, traveling to Middle East, South Africa and the Basque region to discuss issues related to conflict resolution.<sup>13</sup> The Republic of Ireland also established the Conflict Resolution Unit in the fall of 2006 to "facilitate elsewhere the peaceful outcome of

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<sup>9</sup> See: Andrew Hill, "The Flying of Israeli Flags in Northern Ireland," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 15, no. 1 (2008): 33. See also: Adrian Guelke, "The Lure of the Miracle? The South African Connection and the Northern Ireland Peace Process," in *Global Change, Civil Society and the Northern Ireland Peace Process*, ed. Christopher Farrington (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 78.

<sup>10</sup> "Row over Palestinian flag at SF office," Derry Journal.com, 09 January 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Adrian Guelke, "The Peace Process in South Africa, Israel and Northern Ireland: A Farewell to Arms?" *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 5 (1994): 95.

<sup>12</sup> See: David Gorman, "Peace in Mindanao: No Other Option," Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 28 January 2009; Barry McCaffrey, "Kelly and Powell head peace talks," Irish News Online, 13 January 2009.

<sup>13</sup> See: Michael Glackin, "An Irishman offers advice in Beirut," *The Daily Star.com* (04 August 2008). Also see: Mark Devenport, "NI-Middle East parallels still drawn," *BBC News Online* (4 August 2006).

conflicts and share the lessons we have learned through the Northern Ireland peace process".<sup>14</sup>

And, once again, some of the same mediators that helped broker the Agreement in Northern Ireland are now attempting to launch a peace process in the Middle East. Like Mitchell, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, now the special envoy of the Middle East Quartet to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (representing the US, Europe, Russia and the United Nations) claims his experiences as part of the Northern Ireland peace process are pertinent to the problem of securing peace in the Middle East.<sup>15</sup> Liam Clarke from the *Sunday Times* observes that Northern Ireland "is fast becoming a conflict-resolution laboratory. The north is regarded by the rest of the world as a model of how to break down barriers and build peace".<sup>16</sup> Clearly, UK and Irish state agencies, as well as other international actors, expect that those men who championed the peace process in Northern Ireland, including prominent politicians, reformed terrorists, and leaders of religious organizations, will "do a Belfast" in other conflict zones around the world. The knowledge and experiences of those women on the island of Ireland who organized around issues related to peace a justice throughout the conflict and who fought for a place at the negotiating table are not similarly exported.

## **LOCATING WOMEN IN OUR ANALYSES OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

Women are certainly not the usual go-to actors in assessments of peace processes; they rarely feature in analyses of peace processes at all. But their reflections and experiences leading up to the Agreement in Northern Ireland, during the negotiation phases, and in the post-Agreement period point to limitations of the negotiations and post-conflict peace building processes that should similarly inform our prescriptions for the Middle East. Thinking about what has worked and what has not worked in Northern Ireland, from the perspective of women and feminist activists, may be further instructive for Israeli and Palestinian feminist activists who are struggling to translate their anti-war and often-times strained (but persistent) cross-community activism into concrete measures to build more inclusive, transparent (and therefore just) peace negotiations.

In the literature and in practice, the politics of peace processes and post-conflict peace-building privilege the accounts of elite actors including politicians, leaders of revolutionary movements, military and police representatives and third-party mediators. And as V Spike Peterson notes, identity groups associated with political

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<sup>14</sup> "Minister for Foreign Affairs announces €4 million in grants for UN conflict resolution and peacebuilding activities," Department of Foreign Affairs Press Release, 20 January 2008.

<sup>15</sup> For example, see: Philip Webster, " Hamas must be brought into peace process, says Tony Blair," Timesonline.co.uk, 31 January 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Liam Clarke, "Peace model can be deployed worldwide," *SundayTimes.co.uk* (18 January 2009).

power, like ethnic and national groups, tend to be based on gender inequality.<sup>17</sup> The implication of privileging the experiences and expertise of elite and mostly male actors misses other important social dynamics within societies in conflict that are not reflected by these actors; moreover, it risks reproducing existing social hierarchies in both our analyses and in our political prescriptions.<sup>18</sup> Women do not find themselves in leadership positions in conflict, but are usually located, as Sonja Licht notes, in the informal sector. Licht argues that "... people in this sector often have a much better insight in the needs and expectations at the grass-root level, they are also able to give...much more realistic information about the security needs and concerns of the so called ordinary citizens, to provide the necessary foundation for a bottom-up approach of a comprehensive peace operation".<sup>19</sup> In this sense, knowledge produced in the informal sector can offer important insight into how we come to understand and define security and also how we come to assess the kinds of changes that will improve security for "ordinary citizens".

Feminist peace activists, organized locally in each of these cases of ethnonational conflict, but also transnationally as well, maintain that security is usually defined in terms of the military security of the nation-state, thereby reinforcing the privilege of military actors and also ignoring the local, social and economic insecurity that conflict produces for disenfranchised and powerless groups. For example, in 2007, Israeli women convened a feminist security symposium at the same time that high-ranking members of Israel's military establishment were conducting a conference on national security.<sup>20</sup> Participants highlighted the ecological effects of war, the gendered impacts of living in a militarized state (one which rewards the military service of men), and the economic hardships and negative health implications of the occupation on Palestinians, who are denied access to basic educational and medical services.<sup>21</sup> Taking the accounts of non-elite or "ordinary citizens", as Licht advises, improves our understanding of the security needs and desires of the broader social constituency in a post-conflict context. Moreover, it helps us to be cognizant of how social hierarchies have operated in societies in conflict so that they are not replicated and institutionalized, once again, in conflict resolution processes that focus on the inclusion and legitimization of ethnic elite male actors in new post-conflict political orders. As such, peace agreements should be viewed as more than just the moment at which protagonists agree to lay down arms; they are also transformative constitutional moments and an opportunity for democratic renewal. In this sense, the emphasis of peace agreements should also be on creating inclusive

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<sup>17</sup> V. Spike Peterson, "Shifting Ground(s), Remapping Strategies and Triad Analytics," in *Globalization: Theory and Practice*, ed. Eleonore Kofman and Gillian Youngs (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2003), 113-114.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>19</sup> Sonja Licht, "Women as Agents of Change in Conflict and Post-Conflict Situations " in *A Human Security Doctrine for Europe*, ed. Marlies Glasius and Mary Kaldor (London: Routledge, 2005), 212-213.

<sup>20</sup> Ruth Eglash, "Women hold alternative conference in Haifa," *Jerusalem Post*, 21 January 2007.

<sup>21</sup> For one feminist peace activist's reflections on the women's meeting, see: Sarai Aharoni, "Security: A Feminist Perspective," *OpenDemocracy*, 2007.

models of governance right from the start of conflict resolution processes—and not left until after an agreement has been reached between the main protagonists.

In my view, the Northern Ireland case offers a unique opportunity to draw on the experiences of women in the Northern Ireland peace process as women feminist activists were uniquely part of the all-party talks leading to the final Agreement. In this sense, we can assess their relative contribution to the peace and to their political role in the decade that followed the signing of the Agreement.

### **LESSONS WE CAN EXPECT PRACTITIONERS TO DRAW**

As part of the peace process launched in Northern Ireland in the early 1990s, elections were held for delegates to the official peace talks called the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue (hereafter the Forum). Women representing both unionist/Protestant and nationalist/Catholic communities hastily formed the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition Party (Women's Coalition) in April 1996 to stand in elections to the Forum. Smaller parties were given the opportunity to be represented on the Forum by a unique electoral formula that was designed, primarily, to allow minor sectarian parties (like the Ulster Democratic Party and the Progressive Unionist Party) a better chance to get elected to the Forum. Each electoral constituency returned five members and the ten parties with the largest number of overall votes were allocated two additional "top-up" seats. Surprisingly, and unintentionally, the newly formed Women's Coalition managed to secure two of the top-up seats under this formula.<sup>22</sup>

Led by Monica McWilliams and Pearl Sagar (consciously representing the nationalist and unionist communities) their agenda specifically prioritized inclusion, equality and human rights—as more than just the parity of esteem between the two main communities. Their position was informed by decades of feminist activism and dialogue in the Northern Ireland feminist peace movement and work in policy spheres related to housing, employment, social security and also alliances with other equality advocacy groups. The Women's Coalition is credited with ensuring the final peace Agreement included a first-class equality agenda, including the creation of a Human Rights Commission, charged with defining the scope for a Bill of Rights, and an Equality Commission.

Bronagh Hinds, former member of the Women's Coalition, singles out Senator Mitchell's support of women delegates in his role as chair of the peace talks and applauds his personal commitment to women's equal political participation.<sup>23</sup> Mary

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<sup>22</sup> Barbara O'Shea, "Women and the Implementation of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement," (2005), 6.

<sup>23</sup> Bronagh Hinds, "Impact of Devolution: Women's Political Participation," IBIS Conference: 1989-2009: The Impact of Devolution on Everyday Life: 1999-2009, Newman House, St. Stephen's Green, Dublin, Ireland, 6 February 2009. Also see: Roisin Ingle, "DemocraShe: Changing the Face of Politics in Northern Ireland," *Ms. Magazine* Online (Winter 2004). Of the DemocraShe project, George Mitchell explained at a Northern Ireland Women's Initiative event on 29 January 2003: "The cause of women in Northern Ireland is essential to the cause of peace. The success of the Northern Ireland Women's Initiative can be measured by the political progress of the women they train -- and by the way they train them. By working inclusively across all party

O'Dowd, Professor of gender history at Queen's University Belfast, similarly maintains that Mitchell gave the Coalition "widespread praise" in his memoirs "Making Peace".<sup>24</sup> In both accounts, Mitchell appears to acknowledge the contribution of women to peacemaking. A closer reading of Mitchell's memoirs, however, reveals scant mention of the Women's Coalition. In a single passage in his book, Mitchell notes the "courage and commitment" of members of the Women's Coalition but he fails to acknowledge how their contribution shaped the final agreement, ensured a human rights perspective or differed from other party leaders.<sup>25</sup> His personal support for the role of women in achieving a peaceful settlement, as indicated in his statements to women's post-conflict political initiatives in Northern Ireland, has not translated into a broader acknowledgement of the gendered dimensions of making peace.

Indeed, such statements and support have not, thus far, impacted the choice of actors he has met with in the course of his new position as US Middle East envoy. On Mitchell's first week-long official visit to the Middle East from late January to early February 2009, he confined his meetings to include elite diplomatic representatives of the Palestinians in the West Bank and leaders in Israel and other neighbouring states in the region. He did not elect to visit the Gaza Strip, the site of the latest carnage and tremendous loss of life, nor did he elect to meet with representatives from women's groups.<sup>26</sup>

From recent statements made by Mitchell, we can anticipate some of the lessons from Northern Ireland that he may apply in the Middle East. In 2007, Mitchell and Richard N Haass (also a former US envoy to the Northern Ireland peace process, following Mitchell) co-wrote an article titled "Irish Lessons for Peace". Mitchell and Haass stressed that aspects of peace negotiations must be conducted in private

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lines, NIWI is making real progress toward the Good Friday Agreement's goal of "full and equal participation" for women -- and is planting seeds of trust and collaboration among the different parties who must work together to build a shared future in Northern Ireland". "DemocraShe: Building Peace and Democracy by Promoting Women in Politics," *Northern Ireland Women's Initiative* (2006).

<sup>24</sup> Mary O'Dowd, "Women and Politics in Northern Ireland, 1993-2000," in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*, ed. Angela Bourke (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 413.

<sup>25</sup> The passage from Mitchell's memoirs that O'Dowd signals out as an indication of his praise for the role of women reads as follows: "The women [from the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition] overcame a great deal of adversity. Early in the process they were not taken seriously in our talks and they were insulted in the Forum. I would not permit such conduct in the negotiations, but it took many months for their courage and commitment to earn the attention and respect of the other parties. In the final stages of the negotiations they were serious, important participants, and were treated as such". George J. Mitchell, *Making Peace* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2000), 44.

<sup>26</sup> Feminist peace organizations, like CODEPINK in the US, point out that respect for human rights and the initiation of peace must include the perspectives and interests of those most devastated by the conflict. Their online petition states: "While President Obama said he was dispatching you to the Middle East to reach out and listen to the people in the region, on your first trip you did not even visit Gaza, a region that has been devastated by a brutal Israeli invasion. We implore you to visit Gaza, to see the devastation firsthand, and to listen to the views of the people, especially the women. Their perspectives are critical if you truly want to promote peace and human rights in the region". "Online Petition: Ask George Mitchell to meet with the women of Gaza," *CODEPINK* (2009).

(which, in Northern Ireland, included media blackouts that resulted in low levels of transparency and little opportunity for public deliberation) and include the chief political actors. Violent groups, they maintained, must also be brought into the process. As the republican party Sinn Féin, understood to be the political wing of the IRA, was brought into the Northern Ireland talks, we might expect an emphasis on including the political arm of Hamas. Part of the process should also prepare civil society to accept that “even partial success is preferable to continued armed struggle”.<sup>27</sup> In this sense, a peace process is about selling an agreement to civil society, not about consulting civil society about an agreement. This last point clearly speaks to Mitchell’s decision not to meet with Gazans or civil society actors in Israel and the occupied Palestinian areas while on his first official visit as the US special envoy to the region. Peace processes, in his view, are clearly top-down secret affairs.

Just like conflict resolution mediators such as Mitchell, mainstream ethnonational conflict resolution literature also favours elite accommodation models of conflict resolution whereby conflict resolution depends on the willingness and ability of elites to negotiate an agreement.<sup>28</sup> In this sense, success in Northern Ireland is a result of the willingness of elite political actors to sit at a negotiating table together as political equals. Such analyses would therefore suggest that procedures of elite accommodation might be replicated in Israel/Palestine to deliver a successful outcome. Such procedures, however, are likely to replicate existing social hierarchies in post-conflict political institutions, maintaining the kind of gendered political order discussed in the last section. In Northern Ireland, some opportunities were seized, and indeed, some opportunities were missed, to overcome such a social and political hierarchy during the peace process and in the ten years of peace-building that followed. In the next section, I outline some of the lessons from Northern Ireland that challenge the dominant narrative that ethnonational elite-level bargaining, during the peace process, is responsible for the “success” of the peace in Northern Ireland. From the perspective of feminist peace activists, we can see how there were other important factors which laid the groundwork for this “peace” and that also complicate how we define success in the new post-Agreement political order.

### **SUCCESSSES THAT PRACTITIONERS ARE UNLIKELY TO HIGHLIGHT**

One of the successes of the Northern Ireland case that is unlikely to be highlighted in future Middle East peace tracks is the impact of the inclusion of women in the peace process. As I have already discussed, women who had backgrounds in community development and activism managed to secure a place at the peace talks by organizing as an all-women’s political party. As this peace process, like many others, was not just about ending violence but also about building institutions

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<sup>27</sup> Richard N. Haass and George J. Mitchell, “Irish lessons for peace,” *International Herald Tribune* (07 May 2007).

<sup>28</sup> For example, see: John McGarry and Brendan O’Leary, *The Northern Ireland Conflict: Consociational Engagements* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); John McGarry and Brendan O’Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland: Broken Images* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1995).

for a new political order, women wanted to ensure that feminist commitments to human rights, equality and inclusion—beyond parity of esteem for the two main communities—were also prioritized.

Yvonne Galligan and others note that the development of an all-women's party in the face of an "inhospitable political landscape" in Northern Ireland was the result of not just the opportunity afforded by the talks but also due to the mobilization of established women's networks.<sup>29</sup> There is a similar long-standing network of women's organizations in both Israel and the occupied Palestinian areas. The development of these networks followed a similar trajectory of feminist activism—influence by growing global feminist consciousness, made visible through events and resolutions such as the United Nations Decade for Women (1976-1985), the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing (1995) and UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on women, peace and security (2000), and through similar experiences of militarism and violence within Israel and while living under occupation. The lesson here may not be that women in Israel and women in the occupied territories should form a political party; elections to Middle East peace talks are unlikely to occur as Israel would surely claim that its elected leaders already represent the Israeli body politic just as elected Palestinian leaders, including Fatah and Hamas, would similarly claim. The inclusion of women in peace talks in Israel/Palestine may be more likely to occur through the Palestinian Authority and Israel's commitment to UNSCR 1325, passed in 2000, which calls upon United Nations member states to include women in all institutions set up during peace processes.

In the occupied Palestinian territories, Palestinian women managed to secure support for resolution UNSCR 1325 from President Mahmood Abbas. Similarly, in 2005, Israeli women activists were successful in getting Israel's 1956 Equal Representation of Women law amended, mandating the inclusion of women on Israeli peace negotiation teams—but without a mandated quota.<sup>30</sup> While these were important achievements, the realization of these commitments has been less successful. For example, the Israeli government held up the appointment of Tzipi Livni, the current foreign minister, to the 2007 Middle East peace conference in Maryland as an example of its commitment to implementing the newly amended law. Feminist peace activists in Israel/Palestine argued, however, that Livni did not identify herself sufficiently with feminist issues nor did she demonstrate a commitment to peace and reconciliation.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Yvonne Galligan, "Women in Northern Ireland's politics," in *Representing Women in Parliament: A Comparative Study*, ed. Manon Tremblay Marian Sawyer, Linda Trimble (New York: Routledge, 2006), 208. Also see: Bronagh Hinds, "Women Working for Peace in Northern Ireland," in *Contesting Politics: Women in Ireland, North and South*, ed. Yvonne Galligan, Eilis Ward, and Rick Wilford (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1999), 121-122.

<sup>30</sup> "Press Release: Israel - Parliament/Knesset Passes New Law Mandating Inclusion of Women for Peace & Security Negotiations & Policy," *Isha L'Isha* (21 July 2005); Paula Mills, "Working to Promote 1325 in Israel: Opportunities and Challenges Facing Activist Women and Isha L'Isha," *The Boston Consortium on Gender, Security and Human Rights* (29 November 2006), 7.

<sup>31</sup> For example, see: Ruth Sinai, "Women's groups: Livni not feminist enough to represent Israel at summit," 15 October 2007.



In 2007, women activists in Israel began to change their tack and suggest that peace processes should not just include women, but should also include a “feminist perspective” that considers “other, non-military aspects of the conflict, such as the social and economic aspects of peacemaking and reconstruction”.<sup>32</sup> While UNSCR 1325 opened up new opportunities to discuss the gendered structure of peace talks in Israel and the Palestinian areas, the mere inclusion of so few women (just one in this case) does not satisfy the feminist goals of understanding security from the perspective of ordinary people and of developing new political institutions that advance human rights and equality considerations.

In my view, what worked in Northern Ireland was really a concrete mechanism, through elections, in which women could secure a seat at the table. Without a mandate to open up negotiations to a broader representation of Israeli and Palestinian society, and given the way in which UNSCR 1325 is being interpreted (where Livni, who takes a hard line on the question of a future Palestine meets the threshold for compliance with UNSCR 1325), it is difficult to imagine how a feminist perspective would be included in future negotiations and post-conflict peace-building. To date, the demands of feminist groups in Israel and the occupied territories related to the inclusion of women through UNSCR 1325 have remained largely abstract, and lack specific proposals to include women and a feminist agenda as part of future negotiations. For example, in December 2008, the Israeli organization Women Lawyers for Social Justice, on behalf of several other Israeli women’s organizations, called on the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to investigate the failure of Israel to fully implement UNSCR 1325. However, their petition failed to include specific recommendations for how the United Nations could intervene or put pressure on Israel to increase the representation of women.<sup>33</sup> In Northern Ireland, it was the Northern Ireland Women’s European Platform that requested that the Northern Ireland Office recognize a women’s network as a political party on the lists drawn up for elections to the Forum.<sup>34</sup> Like the women in Northern Ireland, Israeli and Palestinian activists may have to similarly develop and propose concrete measures to ensure their inclusion through mandated quota systems or other participatory democratic mechanisms.

There was also an opportunity to include world class commitments to human rights and equality as part of the peace Agreement in Northern Ireland. As stated earlier, peace processes are not just about ending political strife; participants of negotiations also draft the architecture for new political institutions. The Northern Ireland Agreement enshrined human rights and equality protections through, for example, the establishment of the Human Rights Commission, the Equality Commission and new statutory duties under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act. There have been

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<sup>32</sup> "About the Project: Women, Peace and Security: Implementation of UN Resolution 1325 in Israel," *Isha L'Isha*.

<sup>33</sup> Urgent Request to Examine the Implementation of UN Resolution 1325 by Israel: Women from Diverse Population Groups are Not Represented in Israeli Political System (ITACH: Women Lawyers for Social Justice, 22 December 2008). Copy of letter deposited in personal research files.

<sup>34</sup> Galligan, "Women in Northern Ireland’s politics," 208.

four periods of suspension of the Assembly since devolution ten years ago (the longest period of which stretched from October 2002 to May 2007) in addition to other periods of political deadlock. Even while living under direct rule from Westminster, via the authority of the Northern Ireland Office, citizens and new residents have been included (albeit to a sometimes limited extent) in public deliberations over new legislation. For example, the duty of the Human Rights Commission to consult the public on a proposed Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland provided a structure for political participation. As Christine Bell and Johanna Keenan, legal scholars at the University of Ulster's Transitional Justice Institute, recognize, the human rights and equality agenda in the Agreement was intended to "take the sting from the Constitutional question of British versus Irish sovereignty—resolution of this question having been left open—by ensuring that in the interim, society would be fair for everyone".<sup>35</sup> Similar features in a Middle East peace agreement could help to maintain the engagement of those members of civil society who have been active during the conflict—but excluded from official talks, without political portfolios after the conflict, and therefore without opportunity to be represented and protected in the years that it takes an agreement to get off the ground.

We cannot really speak of a unique constitution moment for Israel, as it is already established as a state, with defined political institutions and practices. However, the changes, at least in law, related to women's political inclusion as part of UNSCR 1325 indicate some of the opportunities that exist during conflict and conflict resolution periods to build more inclusive state institutions. Other issues that are important to Israeli women as well as other marginalized groups include the militarization of Israeli society; the status of women, especially related to their unequal rights in matters of divorce; and also the status of Arab or Palestinian-Israelis (who make up 20% of the population of Israel) in the post-Agreement period. It may be that periods leading up to peace agreements are opportune occasions to tackle some of these issues, as was the case in Northern Ireland.

### **FAILURES THAT PRACTITIONERS ARE LIKELY TO IGNORE**

There have also been significant setbacks and failures in the Northern Ireland case that should similarly inform prescriptions and practices in future Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. For example, the conservatism at the national political level that has characterized the post-conflict period has made change on social policy issues difficult. In this sense, the post-conflict period has not been a hospitable environment in which to address equality considerations for some identity groups located within and beyond ethnonational identity constituencies. The case of Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender (LGBTQ) rights in Northern Ireland is a good example of this difficulty.

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<sup>35</sup> Christine Bell and Johanna Keenan, "Lost on the Way Home? The Right to Life in Northern Ireland," *Journal of Law and Society* 32 1 (2005): 69.

Remarkably, the first same-sex civil union ceremony in the UK was performed in Belfast, for Shannon Sickles and Gráinne Close on December 2005, even before Elton John and his partner tied the knot in cosmopolitan London. The progressive equality legislation that permitted the ceremony in Northern Ireland draws on the Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission and statutory duties committed to by all parties to the peace Agreement. However, the equality legislation related to sexual orientation was imposed in Northern Ireland, by the Northern Ireland Office, while the political Assembly was suspended. The passage of such legislation, like the 2003 Employment Equality which addresses Sexual Orientation, the 2005 Civil Partnership Regulations, and the 2007 Equality Act Regulations, would have been inconceivable in the context of a functioning political Assembly given the very public attitudes of political leaders. For example, when the Civil Partnerships Regulations passed, Seamus Close, city councillor and former deputy leader of the Alliance Party, argued that the wedding room in the Lisburn City Council should not be used for same-sex civil unions, clearly in violation of new equality duties related to discrimination under the Agreement. And on a BBC Radio Ulster program in June 2008, Iris Robinson, a prominent Unionist MP, assembly member, and chair of the Northern Ireland Assembly's Health Committee, said that she would be happy to put any homosexual in touch with a "lovely psychiatrist" she knows, that could help them "turn away from what they are engaged in". Robinson also told a parliamentary committee on sex offenders that "There can be no viler act, *apart from homosexuality and sodomy*, than sexually abusing innocent children [emphasis added]". Clearly, the views of Mallon, Robinson and others indicates the difficulty activists would have had enforcing the equality provisions laid out in the Northern Ireland Act if the Assembly been running without suspension.

This is an important lesson for those in Israel and the occupied Palestinian areas who anticipate that the political and social conservatism, which has characterized the long period of conflict, will give way to improved equality protection after conflict. For example, Gila Svirsky, veteran Israeli feminist peace activist, argues that the liberation of women will come when the conflict is over and the masculinist-military ethos of the state is suspended. But it may be that in periods in which political institutions are in flux that there are more opportunities to engage in discussions around difficult and controversial issues. There is no reason to expect that the masculinist-military ethos that Svirsky describes will give way in a post-conflict context. At a recent conference on women, Ehud Barak, leader of the Labor Party in Israel, said "women are now being exposed to military fields that were previously men only ...We're one of the only nations with a female fighter pilot".<sup>36</sup> Former foreign affairs minister Livni, who ran for the office of the prime minister in the February 2009 elections, has made it clear that she did not enter politics to promote a feminist agenda.<sup>37</sup> For Barak and Livni, militarism and the advancement of women can go hand in hand. The kind of changes that Palestinian women would like see in

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<sup>36</sup> Yael Levy, "Major candidates court female votes," YNet News.com, 26 January 2009.

<sup>37</sup> Haviv Rettig Gur, "Major parties belatedly realize women could be election key," *Jerusalem Post.com* (30 January 2009).

a new Palestine related to, for example, the growing prevalence of early marriage, the poor protection of women under the Palestinian Penal Code and the violation of women's rights in matters related to divorce and child custody, may be more difficult to implement in a post-peace agreement period.

Another lesson that I would like to underline relates to the representation of women in politics. Women in Northern Ireland are still underrepresented in post-Agreement political institutions—despite the high levels of women's political engagement and mobilization in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. The Agreement provided for the protection of the two ethnonational communities in Northern Ireland, such as the "freedom and expression of religion" and the right to "freedom from sectarian harassment". Included among these rights were the right of women to "full and equal political participation" and the right to "equal opportunity in all social and economic activity, regardless of class, creed, disability, gender or ethnicity".<sup>38</sup> The inclusion of these rights indicates some of the broader aspirations for the post-conflict period. And yet, the post-Agreement Policing Board for Northern Ireland has only four women out of a total of 19 members and the strategic review panel set up by the government to review parading has only one woman representative on a panel of seven members. Without the necessary mechanisms to include the interests and views of the broader electorate, such as quota systems to mandate the representation of women or deliberative democracy mechanisms to promote civil society participation, women in Israel/Palestine can similarly expect poor post-conflict representation.

Women are also underrepresented in the Northern Ireland Assembly; women were elected to just 18 seats out of a total of 108 seats in both the 2003 and 2007 Assembly elections. There was an increase in women's representation at the local council elections (21.5 per cent of councillors are women) but the increase is small and wholly underwhelming. Again, the expectation of better political representation for women in post-Agreement Israel may be similarly thwarted. Today, 21 women sit in Israel's Knesset, an increase of 3 women from the last parliament. The total number of elected women is unimpressive for a state that boasted a remarkable 11 women in the first Knesset in 1949 and it does not keep pace with changes in other parliaments around the world. According to the last Inter-Parliamentary Union's ranking of women in National parliaments, Israel ranks an appalling eighty-second out of 136 countries.<sup>39</sup> To date, women have managed to secure only 17 per cent of 120 seats in the present Knesset. These are some of the areas that women like Svirsky expect will change in a post-conflict context. Again, it may be a long time before these kinds of issues can reach the top of the political agenda in a peace-building period. In a new Palestine, there may also be less political space to advocate for the better representation of women. As was the case after the 1993 Oslo

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<sup>38</sup> "The Agreement: Agreement Reached in the Multi-Party Negotiations". *Northern Ireland Office* (10 April 1998).

<sup>39</sup> Shahar Ilan, "Israel falls behind world parliaments on number of women MKs " *Haaretz.com* (14 March 2008).

Agreement, it was the elite male actors that sat around the negotiating table who went on to secure the top seats in government.

## CONCLUSION

When we view conflict resolution in Northern Ireland from the perspective of feminist peace activists, the lessons that we can draw from the Northern Ireland peace process for future peace tracks in the Middle East are not the same lessons that are highlighted in popular comparisons of the conflicts in the press, by politicians and in the conflict resolution literature. Some of the challenges that Northern Ireland, in general, and feminist peace activists, more specifically, have faced in the post-conflict period may also surface in a future post-conflict period for Israel and in a new Palestinian state, given the similar actors involved and elite model of conflict resolution that is preferred there, as elsewhere.

The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition Party advocated for the kinds of human rights and equality instruments during the peace negotiations that have proved useful in the post-conflict context for protecting the rights of all communities. Such commitments, made during a peace process, may also be important for a future post-conflict Middle East. The failures of Northern peace process also tend to get overlooked in mainstream analyses, such as the inability to address social policy issues related to group rights, beyond the two main communities ten years after the Agreement was struck, as well as the poor political representation of women. As national leaders (mostly men) took office in post-conflict Northern Ireland, an emphasis on Christian morality and ethnic homogeneity snapped back many of the creative feminist projects built during the conflict. An analysis, then, that considers the experiences and ideas developed within feminist peace communities and women's movements encourages us to think about "success" and "failure" in conflict resolution differently. Success is not just the absence of violence and failure is not just the breakdown of ceasefires. Success also includes the promotion of human rights and equality and inclusion—the denial of which is part and parcel of protracted and bloody conflicts and the insecurity that they generate. It may be that the successful advancement of human rights, equality and full political and social inclusion in the Middle East is more likely to occur as part of peace negotiations and enshrined in a final agreement, as was the case in Northern Ireland.

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