

# A law to prevent the next war?

Women Wage Peace launches Political Alternatives First legislation

By Patricia Golan

**HOW DO** we make decisions? What drives the decision-making process, and why is it so difficult to imagine alternatives? How are life and death decisions made under stress? It's a question that has profound implications not only for individuals, but for states, crucially when it comes to national security.

"A government which is functioning under great pressures needs some sort of mechanism under which it must consider alternatives," declared Dan Ariely, addressing an Institute of National Security Studies (INSS) conference at Tel Aviv University.

Ariely, professor of psychology and behavioral economics at Duke University and one of the world's leading experts in decision-making, was applying the question to Israel's political reality.

The INSS event, which included several Israeli security experts, was organized by the grassroots movement Women Wage Peace to discuss and promote its proposed legislation called "Political Alternatives First – the Law to Prevent the Next War."

The draft bill calls for the creation of a legally binding decision-making process for the Israeli government. It would require it to maintain a systematic examination of non-military political alternatives to resolving security crises and challenges.

Israel has been in a state of ongoing crisis since its founding, under nearly permanent pressure to make tactical decisions. It may seem obvious that there would be some sort of proper decision making process that would involve measured deliberations on strategy, and not merely shooting from the hip.

In March 2017, Israel's state comptroller published its report on the July 2014 military operation called Protective Edge. That 2014 Gaza War, as it was also known, was one of the deadliest conflicts between the

Palestinians and Israel in decades. In 50 days of near constant warfare, the combined Israeli airstrikes and ground bombardment, and Palestinian rocket attacks, resulted in thousands of deaths, the vast majority of which were Gazans.

The comptroller's conclusions regarding the cabinet's decision-making processes before and during the operation were extremely damning, charging that there had been no discussion before the fighting to determine Israel's objectives and policy vis-à-vis Gaza. Furthermore, "the complete rejection of alternatives in the diplomatic realm, without their being presented to the cabinet, prevented the cabinet members from considering these alternatives and discussing their chances and their risks," the report stated.

The grassroots movement Women Wage Peace was established shortly after Operation Protective Edge in response to the feeling of profound despair over that most recent war. Its single guiding principle is the demand of achieving a political agreement to end the decades-long conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, with the active participation of women at all stages of negotiations.

When members of WWP read the comptroller's report that political alternatives to the 2014 war had not even been discussed, they were horrified. "In other words, we embarked on this battle, this confrontation that was in the making before our eyes for five years, without first considering whether it was possible to do something else. How could we ignore such conclusions?" Tami Yakira and Yael Admi, the two women who drew up the proposed law, explained in an op-ed published last year.

"For so many years life and death decisions have been made without a unifying, thought-through process. We wanted to find



a law that would solve these difficulties and failures," Admi, a software engineer with a PhD in philosophy, told *The Jerusalem Report*. She and Yakira, a workers' rights attorney, researched the issue for nearly two years.

Together with other WWP activists they met with some 50 experts in the fields of politics, security, diplomacy and the law, including people who had been involved in decision making, and organized two major conferences. "We received a lot of support from people who had been involved in negotiations. Little by little we began to understand the method by which decisions were made," says Admi. They turned up a list of serious diplomatic proposals that have not ever been debated by any cabinet.

The result of the dogged research is a 375-page summary, a "doctorate" which



formed the basis of the proposed Political Alternatives First legislation. “We felt that we simply cannot allow things to continue the way they have for so long,” she says, then hastens to add that “it’s not that these decision makers are evil or have bad intentions, but our children’s fate is in the hands of these people. If there’s no orderly mechanism to decide, this is simply irresponsible.”

In brief, the proposed law requires that time be allocated for discussion of political alternatives, the allocation of resources for examining and developing political options. It also specifies that there be monitoring and reporting to the Knesset’s Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee and the public. “This proposal is a way to set up norms for the decision makers, to be sure that no stone is left unturned to find solu-

tions. Decide in the end what you believe is right, but at least there’s been a way to reach these conclusions,” states Tami Yakira.

Yakira and Admi have received a great deal of support and hands on guidance from veteran negotiator and attorney, Gilead Sher. Today a senior researcher at the Tel Aviv Institute for National Security Studies, Sher was involved in negotiations at the highest levels in the 1990s under prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, and again under prime minister Ehud Barak from 1999 to 2001, as negotiator at the Camp David and Taba summits. Photos from those sessions line his Tel Aviv office.

“Many states have a ‘war cabinet’ to ensure a proper decision making process at a time of war,” says Sher. “What we propose is to have a ‘peace cabinet’ to make

Women Representatives of Women Wage Peace demonstrate in Tel Aviv against the government’s annexation plans



MOSHE MILNER/GPO



Gilead Sher (left), then director-general of Prime Minister Ehud Barak's bureau, greets US President Bill Clinton at the White House in 2000

sure that Israel does not go to war without looking into other alternatives to solve the conflict."

"The Women Wage Peace initiative is a very important venture," Sher continues. "The purpose of the law is to improve the quality of the decision making process and produce optimal solutions and alternatives to security and policy challenges. What we want to do is to exhaust and exploit the opportunities for political arrangements to avoid wars."

Included in the proposed law is the integration of women in the decision making process. This means implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, the year 2000 landmark resolution which "reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts". (The 1325 resolution became part of Israeli law in 2005 but has yet to be implemented.)

In the previous (20th) Knesset the bill gained wide support among Knesset members of nearly all parties, including members of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's own Likud and the religious Shas party. Now, after three rounds of elections which resulted in many new MKs, WWP activists are rebuilding the support of the proposed legislation. "There's really no reason why anyone would not support this bill, since it only sets out the procedures in which decisions are made. There's no one in the country that doesn't understand how important this is," says Yael Admi.

The emphasis by Women Wage Peace on a legislative tool to examine and pursue diplomatic solutions is consistent with the organization's single mission: to reach a mutually agreed peaceful agreement to end the conflict. But the founding principle that the movement be steadfastly non-partisan, and not advocate any one political solution over another, was profoundly tested in June.

Following the formation of a national unity government after a year-long political struggle and three elections, Netanyahu announced that as early as July 1 he would start the process to formally annex Jewish settlements in the West Bank and the Jordan Valley, as he had pledged to do in his campaign.

Women Wage Peace immediately launched demonstrations across the country to protest the move. "This is a move that is being done unilaterally and it's something we cannot accept," declared WWP activist Vered Eyal-Saldinger, demonstrating at a Tel Aviv rally. "One of our principles is that we say what we are for, not what we are against. As a movement that has promoted from the beginning the declared goal of achieving a negotiated, political agreement, we see this unilateral step as something that will permanently block any chance of an agreement in the future."

"If you look at the founding principles of women wage peace it's not all that surprising that we decided to launch this anti-annexation campaign; it was quite clear almost from the beginning that we cannot be quiet about a unilateral step," Hamutal Gouri, an organizational consultant and one of the founding members of WWP tells the *Report*. "There was a long, lively critical discussion among the activists of WWP on how to craft our message," she

admits. "We are mindful of different voices in the movement and not advocating one political solution over another, but there is broad agreement that annexation is a unilateral step."

In late June, while WWP representatives were inside the Knesset to brief the State Control Committee about the Political Alternatives First bill, outside the Knesset in the Wohl Rose Garden a mass open-air protest conference organized by WWP was taking place. It included leaders of civic organizations, military and diplomatic experts and Knesset members.

Addressing the rally, Gilead Sher pointed to the annexation declaration as "proof again of the necessity of passing the Political Alternatives law. Imagine that before this act the Israel public knew that there had been comprehensive teamwork and research regarding all the aspects of such a move: political, social, intelligence, a thorough and transparent examination of the issues, and then reaching a decision. We're not asking our elected officials to think out of the box, we're simply asking to think inside the box, but at least make an effort at consultation. Not even this is being done," he charged.

"Unfortunately, no women were included in the planning nor in the formulating of the annexation program – neither on the American nor on the Israeli side," stated Prof.



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Tami Yakira and Yael Admi address the INSS conference

Professor Dan Ariely

Gabriela Shalev, former Israeli ambassador to the UN. “It’s a pity that the only voice that is heard is that of politicians and generals.... In the UN, I saw the benefits of the work of women diplomats and leaders. I learned that women in senior positions and as negotiators behave differently and carry on a different type of discourse – inclusive, moderate and practical.”

**IN ANY** event, the coronavirus resurgence in Israel and divisions within Netanyahu’s own government has, for now, sidelined his annexation plans. For its part WWP members continue to promote the Political Alternatives First, hoping to get the bill introduced during this term.

“There’s a connection between our view of why this bill is so urgently needed and the current situation. The coronavirus crisis is an example of what we’re talking about,” says WWP co-director Yael Braudo-Bahat. “It’s happening again, the government isn’t exploring alternatives and the same mistakes are being made.”

“It’s not that we oppose annexation or applying sovereignty,” adds Braudo-Bahat. “We’re not taking a position on the issue. What we oppose is a unilateral decision, what we’re saying is that there must be an agreement. Had this law been enacted, it would have changed the entire political discourse now.” ■



GAL MOSENZON

Representatives of Women Wage Peace protest in front of the Knesset to endorse the Political Alternatives First legislation