

A Gender Perspective on Security

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The Van Leer Program on Women in Public Life recently held a discussion on gender perspectives on issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Women dealt with the core issues of the conflict, namely borders, settlements, refugees, etc. in an attempt to determine if a gender perspective would add or otherwise change the negotiators' approach to these issues. This was not the often-held discussion on women and peace or whether or not women are more peace-loving than men, but rather an effort to see if a look at the issues through a different lens might produce a different approach or suggest something not noticed before. One of these issues is that of security arrangements — an area generally perceived to be the exclusive domain of former military or security figures, most of whom are male.

Until now, the basic concept underlying Israel-Palestinian negotiations and discussions of security arrangements has been a concept not based on peace, that is, an agreement to usher in a new reality of peace. Rather, they have been based conceptually, at least on the Israeli side, on the idea of creating a situation in which Israel will be prepared for the next war (or hostile actions). As a result, security arrangements have concentrated on such things as the need for an Israeli military presence in the Jordan Rift valley, fences and walls, early warning stations, control of air and electromagnetic space, etc. All of this is based on an anticipated threat or expectation of war, not peace.

Hard and Soft Security

Given this approach, only measures of what is termed “hard security,” that is, arms, weapons systems and the like, are accorded serious (if any) consideration. If one were to conduct negotiations on the basis of peace

with the intention of building and accommodating an environment of peace then security arrangements might be considered measures connected with “soft security.” These would include, for example, peace parks along the borders, designed for tourism, industry, recreation or educational centers and the like. In creating a physical environment for peace, the foundations for the development of trust would also be created.

The point would be to move from a concept of building “security from a threat” to one of building “security to live.” Such a move is commensurate with a shift in international relations, codified by the United Nations, to a broader view of security as “human security.” This relates to the security that people feel in their daily lives, with regard to livelihoods, food, shelter and health. Applying this to security arrangements would mean, at minimum, consideration of how a border, whether a fence or any other physical barrier, would affect daily life on both sides. Considerations of this type would have priority over those of territorial expansion or strategic heights, for example.

Even in the absence of peace, such physical barriers as may be deemed necessary would take into account access to hospitals, schools, and markets. A criterion of collective punishment, employed within the occupied territories during the second intifada, would clearly defy even the idea of (hard) security, not to mention that of human security. Similarly, the placement of movable/temporary checkpoints deemed more efficient (fewer personnel needed) and to some degree providing easier movement of goods and people, nonetheless impedes human security. Such arrangements



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bring with them a strong element of uncertainty for the local population. Indeed, it is the uncertainty that renders “spot checks” the favored method of totalitarian regimes, for it creates fear as well as instability in daily life. Concretely, one may never know if one can reach work on time, pick up the children at a designated time or plan one’s basic daily life. These, too, are elements of human security.

Using Soft Power to End Wars

Related to these different concepts of security are varied concepts of power, namely hard and soft power. Hard power, as noted above with regard to hard security, is identified with military might — weapons, missiles and the like. In the era of globalization, with the emergence of “new wars” as the norm rather than the exception, the idea of soft power has emerged. The “new wars” discussed by political theorist Mary Kaldor are not wars between states but, rather, within states or between non-state actors, involving civilians not only as victims (or targets) but also as protagonists whose support is essential. Moreover, the end of a conflict will most likely produce a situation in which the protagonists will have to live together or in close proximity. Therefore, even militaries today recognize the need to “win over hearts and minds.”

This is where soft power comes in to play. Rather than the force of arms, such concepts as persuasion and understanding are needed. Indeed, peacekeepers have become peacemakers and peace-builders. An international force brought to maintain security finds that it must deal with more than “hard security” such as disarming protagonists or conducting armed patrols. It must also engage with the local population, interacting not only with officials in order to keep order but also with NGOs, religious leaders, neighborhood groups and the returning Diaspora community. Whether part of their mandate or not, they must deal with day-to-day matters and issues of human security, for which soft power is far more appropriate.

Examples in Liberia, Afghanistan and the Middle East

Given these tasks, many have found that women may be more suitable than men in view of the fact that women, usually lacking the tools of hard power, are more accustomed and possibly more skilled in “soft” power. Thus, the UN sent an all-women Indian peacekeeping force to Liberia, and the U.S. marines in Afghanistan include women engagement teams in their forces. In many cases, women are used not only to moderate behavior (the role, for example, of MACHSOM Watch at the checkpoints) but to actually carry out the many tasks associated with human security and winning over

the hearts and minds of the population. Research has indeed found that women tend to take on the stereotypical “tough” characteristics of males in the military, but there is also evidence that police forces, for example, have become more restrained when large numbers of women have been added to their ranks. Other research has shown that men may react more favorably to women, believing women (according to the stereotype) to be more fair than men, more considerate and trustworthy.¹ There is of course, the risk of exploitation of this stereotype or misuse by the military of soft power, for purposes other than genuine peace-building, but the advantages as distinct from “hard power” may be worth the risk.

Women May See Things That Men Don't See

This is not to say that men cannot employ soft power, undertake the tasks of human security, or come up with peace-building ideas such as peace parks instead of early warning stations. Indeed, a man, Dr. Alon Liel, proposed that a peace park be created on the Golan Heights once it is returned to Syria, and the idea has been employed in southern Africa for some years. However, a gender perspective of security arrangements would most likely focus on solutions with the potential to produce different ideas or introduce different considerations. Even as women differ from one another according to class, culture, background and so forth, women's experience of daily life is different from men's experience. Women, therefore, may well see things that a man does not. This is one of the reasons why security studies deal with the subject of agency and in particular human agency, which is increasingly associated with non-state actors, including women. Women become the ones doing the job, but they also set the discourse, raise the issues, determine priorities, suggest what must be done and articulate just what constitutes security, by and for whom. Thus women become not only the recipients, or the object of security considerations, but also resources for deciding on and producing security. And with this, women can perhaps contribute to a change in the concept of security to a concept more suited to an era of peaceful post-conflict relations rather than the concept of hard security that characterizes the Israeli scene today.

¹ Maoz, I. (2009). The Women and Peace Hypothesis? The Effect of Opponent-negotiators' Gender on Evaluation of Compromise Solutions in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. *International Negotiation*, 14, 521-538