

Interfaith women's group marches for an Israel-Palestine peace agreement

by [Naomi Darom](#) in the [December 7, 2016](#) issue

Of the 4,000 women gathered at the Qasr el Yahud baptism site in the Jordan River Valley, many wore white T-shirts emblazoned with the words "Women Wage Peace" in Hebrew, English, and Arabic.

An Israeli in a sleeveless white tunic embraced an elderly Palestinian in a black hijab, as the gathering swayed to the beat of doumbek drums and tambourines and chanted: "Hey Ya, women walk for peace!"

A little later they marched down to the banks of the Jordan River and sat on the ground. Liberian Nobel Peace Prize laureate [Leymah Gbowee, a Lutheran who previously worked for her church's Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Program](#), stepped up to a microphone.

"If you see the march today and you don't see hope [and] you don't see peace—you are blind," she said. "What the women have done here today is put an end to the rhetoric that 'there is no partner for peace.' We, Israeli and Palestinian women, are partners for peace!"

The crowd cheered.

The event at Qasr el Yahud—attended by about 1,000 West Bank Palestinians and 3,000 Israelis, both Jews and Arabs—was one stop on a two-week March of Peace in October that started near Israel's border with Lebanon and ended in Jerusalem. It was organized by an Israeli movement called Women Wage Peace, which unites Jewish and Arab activists in a call to restart negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. The group's rallying cry is "We won't stop until there's an agreement."

The culmination of the march—a rally October 19 in front of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's official residence—drew 20,000 participants.

The organization was born out of Israel's 2014 war with Hamas, which included daily missile attacks and killed 72 Israelis and more than 2,000 Gazans.

Amal Abou Ramadan, a Muslim teacher and single mother from Jaffa, was one of those shaken by the bloodshed. She recounts how Jewish and Arab neighbors stopped speaking to each other but also how during a siren warning of incoming rockets she found herself comforting a Jewish woman, a complete stranger, on the street.

“She was crying and shouting, she needed someone to hold her, so I did,” she said. “I didn’t know her, but it didn’t matter. We are all brothers and sisters.”

After the war she felt deeply depressed, and when a friend invited her to a meeting of a new peace movement, her first impulse was to pass: “I said, another movement? What difference is it going to make?”

Today, she is a regional coordinator.

For the past two years, the women have combed the country with marches, protests, and parlor meetings. Last year, on the anniversary of the Gaza war, they held a 50-day fast for peace in front of Netanyahu’s residence, and this year, during the autumnal Jewish holiday of Sukkot (the Feast of Tabernacles), they set up a “Sukkah for peace.” They also organize screenings of *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, the documentary film about Gbowee’s women’s peace movement in Liberia.

There are no Palestinian members from the West Bank or Gaza—the decision from the start was to keep the organization Israeli, the better to influence local public opinion—but they work closely with Huda Abu Arqoub, a Palestinian from Hebron and director of the Alliance for Middle East Peace.

Abu Arqoub helped them conceive of the march and mobilized West Bank Palestinians to come to Qasr el Yahud.

“I still get the chills when I think of the buses arriving and women streaming out,” she said. “I wish we could take them all to Jerusalem,” she added, referring to Israel’s policy of limiting West Bank residents’ access to the city.

She herself couldn’t continue marching with the Israelis and had to return to Bethlehem and go through a checkpoint in order to speak at the rally. “In a conflict zone, we cannot afford hopelessness,” she said. “It will be the end of us.”

Instead of calling for one of the specific proposed solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—two states, one state, a binational federation—the movement simply calls

for an agreement.

“There are enough initiatives: the Geneva initiative, the Saudi initiative, the American initiative, the world doesn’t need another one,” said Hamutal Gouri, a founding member. “We are saying to leaders, take the layouts you’ve got and reach an agreement. Whatever is agreed on both sides, we will accept.”

The general message enables the support of women who wouldn’t normally find themselves in a more standard peace organization, such as Michal Forman, a Jewish settler who was hurt last year in a stabbing attack and spoke at the rally. But it also leaves them open to criticism.

“Their demands are not forceful enough,” said Hanna Herzog, professor emerita of sociology at Tel Aviv University and codirector of the Center for Advancement of Women in the Public Sphere at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute. “They’re walking a tightrope trying to be so inclusive, and it makes it very easy to silence and neutralize them. On the other hand, at least they’re demanding peace, which is so rare in Israel nowadays.”

In a survey of Israelis taken in June by the Democracy Institute, 52 percent of Jews and 69 percent of Arabs said they would support an agreement requiring Israel to pull out of most of the West Bank. However, 55 percent of Jews also supported continued control over Palestinians in some form.

A study of 40 peace processes in 35 countries over the past three decades showed that when women’s organizations were effectively involved—whether as a political party, as in the case of the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition, or by actively campaigning for the end of hostilities, as in Liberia—an agreement was almost always reached and had a higher chance of implementation.

The reason, according to Marie O’Reilly, director of research at Inclusive Security, a think tank based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, is that women tend to reach across ethnic and religious divides and think of the day after the big signing. While that day still may be far off, the activists are not deterred.

“From the beginning, we set our deadline at four years,” Gouri said. “We have a clear goal, we have determination—and we have plenty of hope.” —*The Christian Science Monitor*

*A version of this article appears in the December 7 print edition under the title "Interfaith women's group marches for peace in Israel."*