

# Limits of Liberal Feminist Peacebuilding in the Occupied Palestinian Territory

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FRANCISCA MARTINS REINA, DEC 21 2022

In this essay, I will discuss the implications and limits of liberal feminist peacebuilding in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), a context marked by the ongoing Israeli colonial occupation and the concomitant Palestinian anti-colonial resistance movements. Here, 'liberal feminist peacebuilding' refers to an encounter between liberal feminist and international peacebuilding discourses and practices. Typified by the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), liberal feminist peacebuilding has become a central component of post-Cold war security policy, particularly in the agenda of post-war reconstruction.

Although scholarship on the WPS agenda has expanded significantly in the past decades, the connection between liberal and feminist peacebuilding agendas deserves further problematisation. This essay uses the Palestinian case as a privileged entry point to investigate how Western feminist and liberal approaches converged in peacebuilding interventions within the OPT and assess their interaction with the local political context of occupation and resistance. More specifically, it sets out to investigate how the liberal feminist peacebuilding agenda has constrained the possibilities for agency and resistance by local movements against the backdrop of colonial occupation.

The argument is structured in three parts. It starts by problematising the connection between liberal and feminist agendas in peacebuilding practices, building on recent debates in critical and feminist peace studies. Then it moves on to discussing two competing meanings of peace in the post-Oslo period, one associated with liberal peacebuilding interventions and the other with anti-colonial resistance. Finally, building upon secondary literature and two in-depth interviews with female experts from Palestine, it analyses the main contradictions of the liberal feminist peace agenda from the perspective of the Palestinian women's movement. It concludes that Western support for the WPS agenda in the OPT has fostered two concomitant processes of 'hybridisation' and 'NGOisation' that ultimately contributed to depoliticising local women's movements.

### Connecting the Dots: Feminism, Liberalism, and International Peacebuilding

In Johan Galtung's earlier work (1975), the term 'peacebuilding' referred to the actions taken to address the root causes of conflict and enhance local capacities for conflict resolution toward sustainable peace. But it was only after the end of the Cold War that external-led peacebuilding became widely recognised in international policy discourses, mostly in response to UN secretary-general Boutros Boutros-Ghali's *Agenda for Peace* (1992). The *Agenda for Peace* describes post-conflict peacebuilding as an "action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict." Crucially, the policy document endowed the UN with a more proactive position in relation to conflict and post-war reconstruction by expanding its role from conflict mediation towards direct intervention in the economic, political and social roots of conflicts.

Underpinning the UN's peacebuilding discourse was the liberal peace thesis, which is rooted in the belief that inter-state conflicts can be prevented through the establishment of liberal democratic institutions. As a result, the liberal peacebuilding approach places 'state-building' at the centre of the agenda and seeks to promote peace by supporting a series of "reform processes associated with liberal-democratic free market frameworks, human rights and the rule of law, and development models" (Richmond, 2010, p. 23). Yet, as became apparent in the following

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years, the practical implications of liberal peacebuilding stood in stark contrast to Galtung's original emphasis on structural transformation as a means to build 'positive peace', defined as the absence of structural violence through the realisation of social justice, whereas 'negative peace' refers to the absence of violence or conflict in a more limited sense (Galtung, 1975).

The liberal peacebuilding project, thus, attracted enormous criticism, particularly after the US interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq (Paris, 2010). One major criticism pointed to its top-down, external-led approach to peacebuilding, which "reinforces neoliberal prescriptions (...) that neither take sufficient account of local needs and agency, nor reflect on the role of global capitalism and structural adjustment policies as drivers of conflict" (Cooper, Turner & Pugh, 2011, p. 2000). Moreover, the liberal peace was regarded as "a modern version of *themission civilisatrice* in its attempt to implant Western sociopolitical and economic forms" (Turner, 2016, p. 432), such as liberal democracy and free market capitalism, which were presented by the UN and its member states as universal templates to be replicated in conflict-affected countries. Ultimately, rather than reducing widespread inequality and curbing the social, economic and political roots of the conflict, a large number of allegedly 'benign' peace-building initiatives ended up contributing to sediment neo-colonial power relations between states and further authorising the imposition of Western standards, ideas and values across non-Western societies.

These critiques have nonetheless overlooked the extent to which the liberal peace project is also a gendered project (Hudson, 2012; McLeod & O'Reilly, 2019) that mobilises universalist discourses on women's rights to legitimise external intervention, often at the expense of local feminist struggles. Though the emergence of a gender and peacebuilding discourse in the UN can be traced back to transnational feminist advocacy in the 1990s (Cohn, 2008), the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (2000) was a particularly important milestone. The resolution recognised the protection and participation of women in conflict resolution and peacebuilding as crucial to the promotion of international peace and security. However, as pointed out by several critical feminist scholars, Resolution 1325 also functioned to instrumentalise gender in order to legitimise the post-Cold War US-led hegemonic discourse of liberal peacebuilding, which has put an increasing emphasis on women's rights and violence against women (Harrington, 2011).

Because of its significant impact on international donor agendas, the liberal feminist underpinnings of WPS have likewise come under increased scrutiny. Feminist scholars criticised its subordination to international security agendas, such as the US-led 'War on Terror,' and the co-option of feminism into neo-colonial and imperial projects (Parashar, 2018; Pratt, 2013); its reification of essentialist gender discourses that constitute (non-Western) women as a monolithic group equated with peacemaking and vulnerability (Väyrynen, 2010); or its attempt to depoliticise local women's struggles and impose a (neo)liberal conception of 'equality' or 'empowerment' that disregarded the structural constraints to women's agency (Pratt & Richter-Devroe, 2011). In sum, when translated from discourse to practice, Resolution 1325 does not necessarily align with local women's agendas of social and political transformation, as will be demonstrated in the following sections focusing on the Palestinian case.

## **The Competing Meanings of Peace in the Occupied Palestinian Territory: Between Liberal (Colonial) Peacebuilding and Anti-Colonial Resistance**

The implications of Western liberal peacebuilding interventions in the OPT must be understood in its interaction with the local context of Israeli colonial occupation and Palestinian anti-colonial resistance. Thus, the notions of 'conflict' and 'peace' applied to the Palestinian case deserve critical examination and contextualisation. Interviewee one, a female diplomat from the West Bank, remarked that "to use the word 'conflict' implies that there are two sides to the violence with equal powers, not to mention placing blame on Palestinians for resisting Israeli occupation." Whereas positive peace recognises that removing the structural sources of violence is necessary to promote justice and equality, negative peace aims for an end to physical violence or conflict, thus prioritising stability and pacification as a means for conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

Since the 1990s, two peace paradigms have competed for popular legitimacy in the OPT: (liberal) peace- and state-building, on the one hand, and resistance and just peace, on the other (Richter-Devroe, 2018). Liberal peacebuilding materialised in the 1993 Oslo Accords, the first peace agreement between the state of Israel and the Palestine

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Liberation Organisation (PLO). As the UN, the World Bank, the EU and the US became the dominant international actors involved in the post-Oslo 'peacebuilding industry', state-building was accorded high priority (Turner, 2016). A large portion of EU aid thus targeted the newly created political and security institutions of the Palestinian Authority (PA) through the promotion of good governance, democracy, the rule of law, and security sector reform (Bouris, 2019; Sen, 2022). Besides, the Oslo Accords established a People-to-People framework supporting joint Palestinian-Israeli civil society (and increasingly women) initiatives that focused on reconciliation and dialogue as informal methods of conflict resolution (Richter-Devroe, 2009).

Yet, the contradictions of Western liberal peacebuilding in the OPT rapidly became apparent. Instead of establishing the basis for the emergence of long-term, sustainable 'liberal-democratic peace', the Oslo Accords ended up creating the conditions for the perpetuation of authoritarianism and colonial occupation. Crucially, the EU's support for state-building was intended to promote Israel's security rather than Palestinian sovereignty: the repression of violent political insurgency was transferred to the Fatah-led PA's security forces, thereby infusing state-building with the colonial logic of counter-insurgency. For instance, after the armed group Hamas (later considered a terrorist group by the US and the EU) took over the Gaza Strip following its electoral victory in 2006, the territory has since been under siege (Sen, 2022; Turner, 2015). Moreover, the hegemonic role of the (pro-Israeli) US has effectively marginalised the EU, which has often condemned (at least on a rhetorical level) the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and its illegal settlements.

Because the Oslo framework was unable to tackle the power imbalance between Israel and the PA, the root causes of the 'conflict' were ultimately left intact, thus maintaining the status quo of prolonged Israeli colonial occupation and domination over the Palestinian population. Interviewee two, a Palestinian legal expert from Jerusalem, defined Israel's practices in the OPT as a form of "settler colonialism, perpetrated through a prolonged military occupation, apartheid, and persecution." She went on to describe how her everyday life is severely affected by state and settler violence:

"As a Palestinian in Jerusalem, it is not very hard to understand (from a very young age) that you are a constant target to the Israeli forces and settlers" (...) you cannot help but to constantly think about, when is the next time they will refuse to renew my "permanent residency permit", or when will I be summoned for taking part in a protest or a funeral or for posting something on social media, when will it be that I get the next beating for speaking up the truth? (...) You are certainly not safe from settlers as a Palestinian in Jerusalem – on the street, in your place of prayer, or in your home"

The reproduction of Israel's colonial rule in the OPT depends not only on direct violence and exploitation but also on the extensive use of repression, through arbitrary detentions, collective punishments, or targeted assassinations. Another form of state violence against the Palestinians is population control, an expression of biopolitical power that combines restrictions on movement (materialised in checkpoints, barriers, and the Separation Wall) with highly unequal access to citizenship rights, particularly in the realms of residency, family reunification and marriage (Turner, 2016; 2015).

In turn, this regime of apartheid along with the dynamics of territorial fragmentation created by forced displacement and the expansion of settlements are crucial elements in the operation of what Mbembe terms 'necropolitics'. The concept refers to the use of power to create "*death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*" (2003, p. 40). In the OPT, necropower is accomplished through specific tactics of 'infrastructural warfare' targeting the entire Palestinian population through the demolition of houses and cities or the destruction of cultural and political symbols of the Palestinian state (Mbembe, 2003, p. 29).

Against this violent background, Palestinians have opposed the liberal peace paradigm in favour of a politicised framework of resistance and just peace, especially with the outbreak of the second *intifada* in 2000. According to Richter-Devroe, whereas liberal peacebuilding does not reverse "the structural asymmetries between colonizer and colonized", just peace aims for political resistance against "the structural discrimination inherent in Israeli policies of settler colonialism, ethno-religious nationalism, and occupation" (2018, pp. 15-16). As she also points out, despite

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anti-colonial resistance being “the main mobilizing and legitimizing frame for all political actors” (2018, p. 9), international donors disregarded local forms of agency and peacebuilding in the OPT.

As I will argue in the following and final section, the WPS agenda and other related initiatives have likewise contributed to depoliticising peace and neutralising feminist struggles by separating them from the local political agenda of resistance that has long provided the framework for Palestinian women’s activism.

## Depoliticising Palestinian Feminism: The Contradictions of Liberal Feminist Peace

Before the Oslo Accords and the adoption of Resolution 1325, there was a deep-rooted tradition of women’s peace activism and organising in the OPT. From the outset, feminist claims for social transformation were intimately connected to the ongoing political struggle for national liberation. However, in the post-Oslo period, Western donor agendas guided by the liberal-feminist WPS framework ended up contributing to gradually depoliticise the Palestinian women’s movement in two different but interrelated processes: first, through the promotion of joint women’s peace initiatives; second, through the ‘NGOisation’ of Palestinian women’s activism.

As mentioned above, in the early 2000s there was growing international support for women’s participation in joint Palestinian-Israeli peacebuilding projects aimed at reconciliation and dialogue between the two sides. Relying on the gendered construction of women as ‘peacemakers’ inherent in the WPS agenda, these initiatives have nonetheless failed to raise local awareness of and support for Resolution 1325 for several reasons.

First, some women’s organisations and government institutions have tried to adapt it to the context of occupation by advancing a rights-based rather than liberal interpretation of the resolution (Richter-Devroe, 2018), thus generating a ‘hybridised’ or localised WPS agenda. The International Women’s Commission (IWC) was the most striking example, in spite of its dissolution shortly after in 2010. Founded in 2005 with the UN’s support, IWC was comprised of Palestinian, Israeli and international female delegates and it was created to monitor the implementation of Resolution 1325 in Israel and Palestine (Arestizábal, 2019; Farr, 2011). Interviewee one, who works on diplomacy, also noted that the protection of women amounted to Israel’s obligations as an occupying power. She further expressed the commitment of the PA to promote gender equality albeit stressing the need for more effective political institutions.

Although WPS provides a strategic framework to hold Israel accountable for violations of women’s rights and security in the OPT, one must not overlook Palestinian scepticism towards the UN and other international actors that stems from a general lack of commitment to ending the Israeli occupation. Therefore, the resolution “risks being yet another tool to underpin the neo-liberal peace-making approach (...) which makes no effort to tackle the huge power differential between the two parties” (Farr, 2011, p. 542). The majority of women’s joint initiatives under the WPS umbrella are carried out by Western-funded NGOs, being perceived as “foreign-imposed and elitist policies (...) leaving unaddressed the political root causes of the conflict and people’s everyday needs unaddressed” (Richter-Devroe, 2009, p. 159). One of my interviewees mentioned that most Palestinian women’s organisations were put in a difficult position where local actors perceived them as “foreign agenda agents.” Besides, as Palestinian NGOs became highly dependent on international donor funding, WPS has disciplined rather than strengthened Palestinian women’s political activism: “it has functioned to normalize certain forms of female political agency (e.g., joint peacebuilding) while delegitimizing others (e.g., women’s popular and everyday resistance)” (Richter-Devroe, 2018, p. 31).

Second, the liberal feminist agenda for peacebuilding has fostered an interrelated process of ‘NGOisation’ (Jad, 2007) in the Palestinian women’s movement. Under the liberal peace framework, international aid was to support institutional reforms towards a specific (Western) model of political organisation. An important part of donor assistance to the PA and Palestinian NGOs (particularly from the US government and UN agencies) was allocated to democracy and civil society-building programs, some of which centred on gender equality. These programs adopted a liberal feminist paradigm that promoted individual ‘women’s empowerment’ and access to decision-making in formal political institutions rather than women’s political resistance against the occupation. As such, it encouraged professional women’s NGOs to reorient their mandates to include technocratic activities such as gender training, awareness campaigns and lobbying (Hanafi & Tabar, 2005).

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Nonetheless, this large influx of international aid had unintended consequences. It created a 'globalised elite' of Palestinian NGO leaders, which aligned with international donor agendas and the Oslo liberal peace paradigm (Hanafi & Tabar, 2005). By only supporting depoliticised liberal women's organisations that could access donor funding and marginalising the others, Western donor assistance centred on 'women's empowerment' largely contributed to the fragmentation of the national women's movement. This was mainly a result of "Western donors' lack of understanding of the Palestinian women's movement (...) and lack of recognition of the extent to which women were adversely affected by the ongoing military occupation policies" (Jamal, 2015, p. 235). Thus, one fundamental contradiction emerges from donors' liberal feminist agendas: the strategies through which women's political empowerment was to be promoted (i.e., donor assistance to a selected group of professionalised NGOs) undermined the core goal of promoting women's participation by disempowering grassroots women's movements embedded in the local political culture of resistance against the colonial occupation.

## Conclusion

"To talk about peace and security, we first need to talk about liberation and freedom." This statement from interviewee two elegantly encapsulates the limits of liberal feminist peacebuilding in the OPT that have been the focus of this essay. The Western-led, liberal conception of peacebuilding that was adopted in this context meant that justice and liberation had to be sacrificed for the sake of (negative) 'peace' and 'security.' This limited conception of peace was largely reflected in international donor assistance to state-building, which functioned as a counter-insurgent method of stabilisation and pacification of Palestinian anti-colonial resistance. While the PA institutions were co-opted to meet the security needs of the state of Israel, the Palestinian population continued to experience the consequences of prolonged colonial occupation. Similarly, Western funding of liberal WPS programs contributed to undermining an already fragmented women's movement, which became increasingly depoliticised and removed from local women's needs and struggles.

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