

Talking for Peace – A Karl Klahanie Lecture Series

The Bruno Kreisky Forum for International Dialogue
in co-operation with the Karl Kahane Foundation and Hadassah Austria

kindly invites to a lecture about Machsom Watch

Can One Do the “Right” Thing in a “Wrong” Situation?

by

Miriam J. Hirschfeld, Nurith Wagner

Welcome address:

Patricia Kahane

President of the Karl Kahane Foundation

Moderator:

Renata Schmidtkunz

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Miriam J. Hirschfeld

holds a doctor's degree in nursing science from the University of California, 1978. From 1989 to 2002 she held various posts at the World Health Organisation in Geneva: 1989-1997 Chief Scientist for Nursing, January 1998-November 1998 Director of the Division of Human Resources Development & Capacity Building, November 1998-February 1999 Acting Director of the Department of Health Systems, February 1999-December 2002 Special Advisor/Director of the Cross-Cluster Initiative, home-based and long-term care. She is since June 2004 Professor at the Department of Health Systems Management at the Yezreel Valley College in Israel. Miriam Hirschfeld has published extensively about long-term care.

Nurith Wagner

holds a Ph.D. and serves as the head of the Israeli Nurses Association ethics bureau. She is a member of the national bioethics bureau for the Israeli government and of Hadassah International, a medical outreach liaison to communities around the world. In the past Nurith Wagner was the Director of the Kaplan Academic School of Nursing affiliated to the Hadassah School of Nursing. She also served as the head of the Masters programme in Nursing at the Braun School of public health of Hadassah and the Hebrew University School of Medicine, and as Director of Nursing at the Hadassah Medical Centers. Nurith Wagner has lectured and published extensively mainly on ethics and ethical decision-making of nurses in their work

Renata Schmidtkunz

holds a degree in protestant theology, since 1990 she works as editor, moderator and filmmaker at ORF (Austrian Broadcasting). During her travels in Israel and Palestine she made many documentaries and radio broadcasts (such as: „Jerusalem – Du Heilige Stadt. Macht, Mythen und Legenden“, ORF 2001; „Neve Shalom – Oase des Friedens“, ORF/Ö1 2002; „Zwischen Antisemitismus und Islamophobie. Wahrnehmungen des Nahen Ostens“ ORF/Ö1 2005; „Wie die Bibel heilig wurde. Josef Hader im Heiligen Land“, ORF 2005).

Machsom Watch was founded in January 2001 in response to repeated reports in the press about human rights abuses of Palestinians crossing army and border police checkpoints. The excessive Israeli response to the El Aksa Intifada, the prolonged closure and siege of villages and towns on the West Bank provided the stimulus and the motivation for what at first seemed an impossible mission. The initiative of three women – Ronnee Jaeger, a long time activist with experience of human rights work in Guatemala and Mexico, Adi Kuntsman, a feminist scholar who emigrated from the former Soviet Union in 1990, and veteran activist Yehudit Keshet, an orthodox Jewess – Machsom Watch now boasts 400 women all over the country.

The goals of the group are threefold:

1. To monitor the behaviour of soldiers and police at checkpoints.
2. To ensure that the human and civil rights of Palestinians attempting to enter Israel are protected.
3. To record and report the results of observations to the widest possible audience.

Patricia Kahane

Welcome to this evening here at the Kreisky Forum. With the Karl Kahane Lecture Series Talking for Peace we, my sister, my brother and I, are trying to keep talks going and keep conversations alive on all possible levels between those who will be able to make peace and live in peace, that means people and individuals, women and men in Israel and in an future state of Palestine. This is why we have invited tonight Miriam Hirschfeld and Nurith Wagner and Ms. Schmidtkunz to present to you the human rights organization Machsom Watch which was founded by three women, Jewish Israeli women in Israel in the year 2001 to monitor the checkpoints between Israel and the occupied territories. They have three main points of activity. They are there very day at forty checkpoints and monitor the behavior, the attitude of soldiers and police. They want to insure the protection of human and civil rights of Palestinians entering Israel and maybe also live in Israel. They are doing a lot of work widely publicizing the reports as well as they can with several publications. Both ladies are highly qualified nurses and nursing teachers. Ms. Schmidtkunz works as an editor, moderator and filmmaker at the ORF and is going to moderate the discussion. I wish as all here an interesting presentation and discussion and to all those women and men who dream of a life in dignity in peace that they shall life to see the day. Thank you very much.

Renata Schmidtkunz

Good evening. It is a pleasure for me to be here tonight, especially because I was following the work of Machsom Watch for many years now. I am very happy to present this evening the two ladies present tonight. Nurith Wagner is a nurse. Actually she is now the head of the Israeli Nurses Association and is member of the National Ethics Bureau. Nurith told me that her first mother tongue was German because her parents were German, but she lost her German on the way. Miriam Hirschfeld also holds a Ph.D. in Nursing and is teaching at a college close to Nazareth. I will start with Miriam because Miriam had the idea to tell you about last week.

Miriam Hirschfeld

First of all, thank you very much for inviting us. It is lovely to be back in Vienna. I wanted to give you a bit of the context in which we are living because it looks so simple on the news. I just give you the context by describing to you how I experienced this last week. I am going to start with last evening. I came back from the college. It was eight o'clock in the evening. The evening news, the news of nineteen Palestinians killed by a stray shell. The last news item was that two of the severely wounded were being transported by ambulances to Israeli hospitals for high quality care. There is something insane about the situation we live in. This morning at the airport, five o'clock in the morning to catch the Austrian Airlines flight to Vienna I picked up Ha'aretz, Israel's main liberal paper. I am going to read to you from the Leitartikel under the heading "Nineteen Palestinians killed by an IDF Stray" written by Yossi Sarid, a socialist politician from one of the left wing parties, he had been Minister of Education before. I am just reading short excerpts. He is speaking to our political leadership and the army:

"Please, I beg you. Do not tell us you feel sorrow and do not apologize. On no account apologize again after who knows how many times. All of them wasted apologies. The IDF regrets sounds exactly like the IDF is investigating. Try living with these deaths and you probably succeed. You have tried before. Only now with the shells arrival will it really be over until it starts again. And Olmert and Peretz and Halutz (Chief of Staff), no longer hear the blood crying out to them from the earth. Had they but heard, they would long ago have draped themselves in black flags and vanished from our lives, from our deaths. But no. They persisted continuing and giving orders and dragging this country down to hell. It is as though they were saying, let our soul die with the dead."

I go back to last week, last Friday. A concert in Abu Gosh, an Arab village in the Jerusalem hills, the end of a long concert series of baroque music. A church packed with a Jewish audience listening to the Matthäus Passion sang in German. My friend next to me was mumbling, it is strange, we are listening here to a German choir singing the Matthäus Passion, the story for which Jews have been persecuted for hundreds of years in Europe, and remembering the Kristallnacht, she added, I watched my father being beaten to death and a neighbor then said – it is for Christ's death; in Vienna by the way.

On Saturday night there was the big demonstration in Tel Aviv, in memory of the murder of Yitzhak Rabin, 11 years ago. David Grossman spoke in front of 120,000 people, mainly young. I was there again with two friends. One friend came originally from Poland. Her daughter three years ago had been killed in one of the busses that had been blown up. She had come to Tel Aviv to talk with me and another friend about how to give better care to her father, whose mother was caring for. We had coffee together. We were sitting in the center of Tel Aviv. On the way back she was blown up in the bus in Jerusalem. She could only be identified by DNA testing. Anna Orgel, she had been the main convener of conferences of Jewish and Arab writers. She had translated and edited a big edition of Arabic poetry. This is part of what our reality is. And David Grossman at that square was talking and emphasizing that he is not speaking as a bereaved parent (his son Uri was killed in the last Lebanon war, two days after David Grossman gave an impassioned plea on Israeli TV that Israel should agree to a cease fire and do everything to stop the war...), he is speaking as a concerned Israeli. After saying that any reasonable person in Israel and in Palestine he believes knows what would have to be the solution, he said, "let's take a look at those who are meant to be our partners. The Palestinians have elected Hamas to lead them, Hamas who refuses to negotiate with us, refuses even to recognize us. What can be done in such a position? Keep strangling them more and more, keep killing Palestinians in Gaza, most of whom are innocent civilians like us, kill them and get killed for eternity? Turn to the Palestinians, Mr. Olmert, address them over the heads of Hamas, appeal to the moderates, those who like you and I oppose Hamas and its ways, turn to the Palestinian people, speak to their deep grief and wounds, acknowledge their ongoing suffering." A lot of the media said that all the youngsters came there only to hear the music. I was there. These youngsters listened, and these youngsters applauded and were there with David Grossman, flying banners for peace and reconciliation. That was Saturday night.

On Sunday we had a meeting – our work week starts on Sunday – in Jerusalem in the office of the World Health Organization. I am meeting with Palestinian nurses regularly. It came out of a new publication that WHO initiated, a new Palestinian-Israeli magazine on public health where they wanted to have an issue on nursing. They had asked me to bring it out. I said, get me some Palestinian nurses so that we can do it together. One of the articles should have been on what are we doing together. I looked at my counterpart who was the Dean of one of the colleges in Ramallah, and said, we can't very well write an article about drinking coffee; what are we doing together? They had several requests. We did have quite a few activities. But their main request was, "we want your help to get doctoral education". Since then we have been working on trying to see how we can help those nurses to get prepared for such studies and start doctoral education, possibly by long distance. All of them have masters degrees, most of them from Palestinian universities. We visited together departments at Tel-Aviv University and Ben Gurion University of the Negev and we found open doors and many Israeli faculty ready to help. The meeting at WHO started with one of the colleagues from Al Qudz University, a woman with a Ph.D. herself, saying, 'I am afraid to come'. I asked why. She said, "we got anonymous letters from the Committee for Breaking off Links with Israelis, and this project is seen as a project that is meant to strengthen the links between Palestinians and Israelis". She continued, "I have children, I am scared". Now we are trying to "hide" the Israeli connection, as not to endanger them. We were trying to find some solutions as being unpaid WHO consultants. On the same day in the afternoon we went to do interviews in Sheba hospital, a big tertiary hospital, the largest in the Middle East, interviewing nurses on problems they have with their conscience, good conscience, bad conscience. Amal, a nurse from Ramallah is our co-investigator in this research project. She came along because she is interviewing nurses in Palestine, and we wanted to make sure that we both are doing the same kind of interview.

One of the issues that came up in the interviews of these nurses were, we don't really know what to do, we have a ward with patients from the last war and from terror attacks, with young people who have severe back injuries in rehabilitation. We have two terrorists there, too. Some refuse to be in the same room. Is that right, isn't that right, is that okay? The discussion among them was interesting. In the pediatric ward they said, we try to accommodate families and not have them in the same room. The others were quite adamant and said, we treat everyone the same, it does not matter whether they are from Gaza. This government hospital accepts many patients from Gaza, despite the political situation, some 20% of the pediatric patients come from Gaza.

Flashback. In the middle of the war in August when rockets were falling on the entire North of the country and my college was shelled, I suddenly get a phone call: "Dr. Miriam, I am calling from the Ministry of Health in Gaza. Can you also help us have a doctoral group of nurses in Gaza?" In the middle of the war. I said I will try. But at times the absurdity of the situation is really mind blowing.

On Monday huge discussions in the Israeli press. The gay pride parade. The country is on fire. The orthodox Jews are setting fire to half of Jerusalem. All of the garbage cans are burning. Bnei Brak, an orthodox municipality next to Tel Aviv is on fire. And suddenly I hear an interview on a radio station, I do not usually listen to, the mayor of Um al Fahm, a big Arab city in the north of the country, a mayor who comes from the Islamic fundamentalist party, is giving an interview to the radio station of the settlers. We have an alliance and 'true understanding' among the most right wing settlers, representatives of the Muslim faith and the major Christian churches, as well as the Jewish orthodox establishment, as they finally have the answer to what is causing all of the disasters in the Middle East. It is homosexuals parading in Jerusalem. When I make a remark on the way back to the driver of the cab, an Israeli Arab, he said, "but you must understand, it is written in the bible, this is Sodom and Gomorrha, don't you have that in your Torah, it is important". So we have strange bedfellows on strange topics. That was Monday.

On Tuesday I went back to the college, our semester started. Our semester started two weeks late because the college is in the north and there were about 3.900 rockets falling on the north. Part of the trees are still burnt in the surroundings. There were quite a few rockets falling around the college. 20% to 25% of our students are Arab, in nursing even more, because like in all countries it is a profession of upward mobility. If you come from the villages it is a sure way to have a job and to be able to be promoted. There was something unreal when I asked. How did the summer go, was it hard? Together, those from Nazareth – there were rockets falling on Nazareth, too, and they actually did not distinguish between Jews and Arabs, and there were rockets falling on other Arab villages, as well as on the Jewish towns, Kibbuzim and villages -, two days before there were memorials for two students who had been killed during the war. Coming back to Tel Aviv in the evening, the Cinemateque had a special show of Fellini films. The place packed. Hard to get tickets for Fellini movies. The last time I had been in the cinematique they showed "Paradise Now". It is a movie about Palestinian suicide bombers. There was much discussion in Israel that it was wrong to idealize them. Others, me included, felt it was an important document. The hall had been packed and people listened. It was a very haunting quiet, because people have very mixed feelings. There is nobody, who does not know people who were killed in terror attacks. My niece sitting next to me, remembered her husband's cousin who had taken a day off to go to see the black irises, blooming on the Gilboa mountain. Once a year there are black irises growing there. On the way back he was blown up in the bus. We have friends who remained severely disabled and know families, that never recovered. Israel is such a small place. All of us know many people, who have been involved personally and we, as the Palestinians harbor so much personal pain and anger.

I finish with this, just as an introduction. Renata started out by saying, we should analyze the situation by saying what is right and what is wrong. And I said, that this is too simple. There are so many things that are right and wrong at the same time. The situation is so complex, so multifaceted that also people of good will – and there are many people of good will on both sides have often great difficulty to speak out. I think it is easier for the people of good will in Israel to speak out because, as I said before, nobody is going to do anything to me if I stand in the middle of Dizengoff square in Tel Aviv and say that Olmert is a bastard. I can say it here, I can be quoted back home, and the only thing that might happen is that my cab driver, or some of my friends say, Miriam, you only love Arabs and you don't care about Jews. That is the worst insult that can happen to me. But to the Palestinians this is not what can happen to them. In one of the discussions when asked why he did not speak out in public and say the same things, he was willing to state privately, one Palestinian said to me, "if I speak out I have got to send my son tomorrow to be a martyr. Because if not, we are seen as collaborators". We Israelis often blame the Palestinians that they do not speak out against terror and war. But it is not so easy to speak out. And for the Israelis, many of us have become tired and we can't see it anymore. Yesterday I asked, how are you? And the answer I got from three different people was, fine, I did not watch the news.

Renata Schmidtkunz

Thank you. As you quoted me I have to say that I said at the beginning, let's start like this, because this is the title of the evening "Can one do the right thing in wrong situation?" So I should we should talk about what is right and what is wrong. Miriam and me, we agreed about the fact that I was not talking about, let's judge the situation. But I think that every person in that country which I know very good, and also the problems, and sometimes it can drive you crazy, has to decide one day or the other. This is what I wanted to talk about. I want to ask Nurith to talk about her work. Because her work for Machsom Watch is something where people are decided, and we don't talk about people, we talk about fourhundred women, decided at least to try to do the right thing in a wrong situation. The question is if they always achieve their goals, but at least they try. Nurith, please explain to us what is your work. Is this question, if there is a right thing in a wrong situation or wrong thing in a right situation, a question that you are asking yourself?

Nurith Wagner

We ask ourselves at least once a week when we go out to the checkpoints. But first of all I would like to thank for the invitation to the Kreisky Forum, Ms. Kahane and the Kahane Foundation, and Ms. Auer, and Susi Shaked, the President of Hadassah. We feel honored to be here and to really share with you our experiences which are to say the least not easy. But we really try to do something about it and not just stay at home and talk about it and be frustrated.

I will try to talk as a nurse, as a woman, as an Israeli, as a mother, as a mother of a soldier, and share our experiences.

What is the background? We have to say a little bit more about the background. From the second Intifada the statistics show that we have 5.000 Israeli wounded, many killed in terror attacks between the year 2000 and 2005, people who were riding a bus going to a mall, or sitting in restaurants. Many more Palestinians were killed and injured. During this period I was Director of Nursing at Hadassah Medical Centers where we cared for half of those wounded. It is a terrible experience to care for those who come into the hospital after a terror attack. Our son is a Lieutenant Colonel in the Air Force. I say this because this is who we are with all the conflicting things. The background is that terror attacks resulted in really genuine fear and deep feelings of frustration and insecurity on the Israeli side which led to the policy of barriers, checkpoints, and fences. The intended effects of the checkpoints were a.) More security and protection for the Israeli population and b.) apprehending terrorists.

The un-intended effects were a.) the restriction of movement and control in matters of 'everyday life' of the Palestinian population resulting in an immeasurable increase in frustration and hate and b.) the effect on the Israelis was an immeasurable impact upon the 'souls' of young Israeli soldier's and the collective ethic of Israeli society.

You can see how many people pass the checkpoints, but you can't measure the level of hate, frustration, anger. The result is terror brings more terror.

What we do at the checkpoints has an effect on the soldiers. And they are the future. And we are worried. As a matter I am worried also for the future of our society.

It was said yesterday in this wonderful lecture that I attended here at the Kreisky Forum. At the Tariq Ali said that we need political leadership. What he mentioned is really a top-down solution. And we Machsom watch women are really representing a bottom-up movement

What is Machsom Watch? It is an Israeli movement, started by three women, peace activists in Jerusalem. They heard about the violation of human rights of the Palestinians at the border, at checkpoints in the Westbank and in Jerusalem. They started this movement. Since then we are fourhundred women, all volunteers. Our goal is first of all to protest against the occupation and the existence of the checkpoints. We believe the checkpoints have to go except if they are on the borders of Israel which is fine. We have to eyewitness and report daily on the website the soldiers behavior towards Palestinians, human rights

violation, intimidation, restriction of movement, to intervene when it is possible and offer help in humanitarian related events, and to impose physical and other conditions at the checkpoints. Each day we have two shifts, morning and afternoon, who go to forty checkpoints. I am talking only about the internal checkpoints within the Westbank in the occupied territories which means that those checkpoints impede the movement from village to town, from village to village, from village to their groves or their work. It is in the Palestinian territory, and these are not checkpoints controlling the entry into Israel. There are about five hundred different checkpoints. There are checkpoints which are temporary, there are checkpoints which are permanent, there are flying checkpoints, different fences and barriers.

Before I start with the ethical dilemma that we confront I just want to say that the Palestinians when they have to go through the checkpoints need a special permit. Some areas are closed. They can't move from one area to the others. There are limitations of age which change often and sometimes only when they come to the checkpoints they learn that they are not in the age range where they can cross the checkpoints. Usually it is between twenty to thirty five, sometimes it is sixteen to thirty. One Palestinian came to me and said with a smile, this is the only country where it is wonderful to be old. There are also checkpoints which we call back to back for trucks. The Palestinian trucks have to pass their grocery or whatever they have loaded to another truck so that they can move to the other side. There are roads also for ambulances that can go through. Ambulances are also checked. But they are checked faster so they don't have to wait in line.

Tuesdays is my shift. I go out with two women whom I did not know before. We go to the checkpoints with our driver, an Israeli Arab who translates for us since my arabic is still poor. We pass through beautiful pastoralic landscape with ancient olive trees. The settlements are next to Arab villages and fences dividing between them. We go to one checkpoint which lets only the cars go through. We count the cars. If we see that there are more than thirty cars we stop and go to the commander of the checkpoint. (We work through the commander. We don't want to interfere in the hierarchy). We ask the commander what is wrong. If we see the line is impossible and it takes hours to go through we have a contact list which is to the army, people in higher ranks that we can call, sometimes the press, sometimes the Ministry of Health where we have a liaison. We have different contacts that we can call, and we can intervene and help. We usually take also the phone number of one of the Palestinians so that even when we leave to go to the next checkpoints we can follow up and see if something is happening and if it helped. Then we drive to Chawarra checkpoint which is the largest and the most complicated checkpoint in the west bank. It is at the outskirts of Nablus which is very large Arab town which is in Area A which is run by the Arabs. Israelis can't go in, except with special permits. Humanitarian cars, and people like WHO, or hospitals or others can go through with permits. Over there we had two checkpoints. One checkpoint was for people going in to Nablus and another checkpoint for people coming out from Nablus. Between them there was about half a kilometer walk which means that people had to leave their cars and walk. For me it is easy. But if you are handicapped, or old, or sick or carry luggage, it is very problematic. I think it was also with our help that the checkpoint which was going to Nablus closed (we thought was ridiculous, if somebody wants to blow himself up in Nablus, let him go.) It is now a market place for the Palestinians. And there is only the checkpoint for people coming out from Nablus. About six thousand people go through daily. When people go through this checkpoint it is not the only checkpoint they have to go through. Sometimes they have to go through numerous checkpoints until they get to their destinations. They never know if they will go through and at what time they will get through to see a doctor, to go to work, to go to school, to see a family member. It is a luxury sometimes to see a friend, to keep a social life. We intervene in different cases.

The M.W activity aims are: 1. To protest against the occupation and the existence of the checkpoints; 2 To eye-witness and report on a website unacceptable soldiers' behavior toward the Palestinians, human rights violations. Intimidation and restrictions on movement. 3. To intervene (where and when possible) and offer help in humanitarian-related events. 4. To improve physical and other conditions at the C.P.

Some of the questions the women of MW ask ourselves are:

- 1 Are the restrictions on the Palestinian population movement justifiable as means of preventing suicidal terror attacks?
2. Can we empathize with the young soldiers who are doing a job they were sent to do, and at the same time empathize with the suffering of the Palestinians?
3. Can we protect Israeli citizens without humiliating and intimidating other people, without harming the sick?
4. By intervening in cases of emergency medical care as crucial humanitarian-related events, we exclude other basic human rights such as getting to work, to school, or visiting family that have an impact on the well being and the health of the population
5. Do our interventions to improve the conditions at the checkpoints countervail our protest against the existence of the checkpoints.
6. What is the effect of the checkpoints on the soldiers and on the ethics of the Israeli society which really worries me? We have lots of talks with the soldiers because I really want them to look into the mirror and see a nice, human face and not an indifferent who does not see the people that go through (the Palestinians) as people.

The first question is: can we balance our needs of security and the Palestinians right of free movement? The prevailing assumption is that life and safety come first for the Israelis. This is what we believe. But even if we accept that we, the women of MACHSOM WATCH, argue that we can't measure the growing hate and frustration of the people that pass there. Since the suicide bomb attacks we Israelis tend to generalize the Palestinians collectively as dangerous. It is a problem. But this is one of the things that we carry on.. Many Israelis hoped that the Palestinians would take action against terror attacks, but it did not materialize. The Palestinians either did not want to or were not able to prevent terror. Many of them view terror as a justified mean to fight occupation, While we do not agree with this view/ the question remains on how can we balance our need for security vs. the Palestinians needs and basic human rights.

The second question is :Can we empathize with the young soldier who is doing the job that they were sent to do by our democratically elected government and at the same time sympathize with the suffering of the Palestinians. We came to the checkpoint there was a lot of tension The soldiers were nervous, a lot of pressure, hundreds of people standing in the waiting line. The day before a sixteen year old Palestinian was caught with an explosive belt. The soldiers themselves are kids. They are eighteen, nineteen, twenty years old. They look at us sometimes as their grandmothers who come, watch and criticize them, look at their behavior or misbehavior, and report it on the internet. After the finish their shift they go and read what is written about them. Most of them are really good, young kids. But being in the situation for months, it changes them. They become cynical, they lose their compassion, they become task oriented, prevent terrorists pass at any price, catch the bad guys, and watch for their own safety first. As a mother I would tell my son , if there is danger you better sit in jail, but don't endanger yourself, your life and safety come first.

In another day at the checkpoint there was twentyfive year old woman with a baby. He looked about three, four months old. I looked at the baby. He looked pale and lethargic. His colour was sick. So I took her out of the line to the front. The commander checked his lists and said she can't go through. She has no permit to go through. I called my contact person in the Ministry of Health. She checked and told me that the woman can't go through, she is on the list of the security authority.. I went back to the commander and said, what are we going to do. My fear and frustration level went up- I went back to the commander, he really wanted to help and said, maybe if she gives the baby to somebody else who will go through and get him to a hospital. The woman gave it to another woman and she ran across. This mother stood there for about an hour and then she went home. When I came home after this shift I could not stop crying. Would I give my baby to some stranger to get health care? This was the situation. It really had an

effect on me. It was in the beginning of my duty at Machsom Watch. I did not take her phone number, I couldn't even follow up what happened. Since then, if there is something like this I take a phone number and I follow up.

Why are we women keeping an eye on our defenders, the soldiers? What is our relationship with the soldiers? I am always asked, what do the soldiers say about you. The soldiers sometimes say that they don't like that we are watching them. On the other hand they are asking us, have you been in the army, is your son in the army? And I tell them about my son who is in the airforce, was an airforce pilot. Sometimes they are not happy with what we publish and sometimes they are happy with what we publish. But being there has an effect on what they do. I tell them that 'why I do what I do that I worry about the effect the duty at the checkpoint has on them' and I want them to look in the mirror at the end of the day and see a humane person. Many of them tell us that they don't want to be at the checkpoints. None of them really wants to do this job. They came to the army to be soldiers and not to work with civilians at checkpoints, and they are sent to do it. The feeling is ambivalent. They have to have us because we are there and some of them don't like it. But what can you do? I also would rather do something else and not be there if it wasn't necessary.

We are asked also about the relationship with the Palestinians. Quite often Palestinians thank us. They know us. There were two sisters from Jordan. They were born in Palestine, but their parents moved to Jordan, After a while the Jordanians did not renew their passports, and they could not get a getback their Palestinian passport. So they were without papers. We were able to help them, and they got their Palestinian passports back. We do a lot of intervening whenever possible Sometimes our mere presence stops the soldiers from delaying dozens of people and cars for long hours for no operational reason. We try to shorten the waiting time and restore at least some of their human dignity. We bring some kind of caring, humanity. They can talk to us. They know who we are and what we stand for. I think it is very important for them to know that there Israelis that really want to forward peace, and that we are peace activists, and that we are trying to help. Some of them, after standing in line for three hours, when they come and see us they say, "why do you stand here, couldn't you help anymore". So there also is frustration. But usually the ambulance drivers know us, they wave at us,.

The third question was: Can we protect the Israeli citizens without humiliating and intimidating other people and without harming the sick? People have to go through the checkpoints with wheelchairs crutches which is long walk and difficult. Sometimes in the beginning when they had to go through they had to bring a certificate or a referral from a physician to be able to see a doctor in another place. The soldiers have no knowledge, no expertise to read them, they came to me because I am a nurse and asked if urgent need, if he hve to see a doctor. I explained that if they have a referral they have to let them pass. Now they can go through if they have a permit to see a doctor or to go to a funeral.

Fourth question was if by intervening in cases of emergency medical care don't we exclude others needs? And that is exactly the problem because we really intervene and use all our guns and all our amunition if it is an emergency. But what if it is not? There was an Israeli Arab woman who wanted to go to her father's funeral. And she did not have papers because she did not have time to go and get the papers in time for the funeral. It was Ramadan last year. She was pregnant, and she did not eat, and she was very pale, and she did not have the papers to go through. We were able with a few calls to help her and she went to the funeral.

On another day a young women (nurse) came with her two kids baby and a three year old girl and a large bag from Nablus. She wanted to visit her mother who lived in Chawarra the vilage which is five minutes from the checkpoints. The soldiers would not let her pass because there was a closure. She told us that took a day off from the hospital to visit her very "retired" mother she said , tears in her eyes. We were not able to help her and she had to turn back home – three hours ride back home.

The fifth question is: Do our interventions to improve the conditions at the checkpoints countervail our protest against the existence of the checkpoints. At the checkpoints there was no water, no toilets no roof in the summer under the hot sun and the winter in cold and rain. We have it now a build checkpoint we had

improved the conditions. But there is a big debate if we should or should we not intervene in that since we are against the existence of the checkpoints within the occupied territories/.

The sixth question is; What is the effect of the checkpoints on the soldiers and on the ethics of the Israeli society which really worries me? We have lots of talks with the soldiers because I really want them to look into the mirror and see a nice, human face and not an indifferent who does not see the people that go through (the Palestinians) as people. The effect of our soldiers on the ethics of the Israeli society is enormous. In violence you forget who you are. This is something that really is very problematic. The conclusion is that we ourselves have to be aware and we owe it to our children to give witness, to show respect and reach out. We owe the Palestinians a fair chance to build their nation. And the Palestinians owe us a life without fear of being blown up in a bus or in a café. MACHSOM WATCH is a bottom up movement. Instead of looking who is the bad guy, who to blame, we have to look for top down, politically visionary leadership, people who can think differently at the situation and to look for creative solution, together with bottom up movement like the MACHSOM WATCH women and other organization that work with Palestinians and try to really promote trust and some kind of a dialogue. I think this place here in Kreisky Institute is wonderful place to promote dialogue for a better life in our region for everybody. Thank you

Renata Schmidtkunz

Thank you very much. It was very important to see exactly how MACHSOM WATCH is working, how are the details of your daily work. Just a month ago I went to Bir Zeit University. I left from a northern village which is part of Jerusalem. It took me two and a half hours to go to Bir Zeit which is twenty kilometers away because I had to take my car and go over all the hills because I wanted to avoid all the checkpoints. If I would live like this every day and if I would have to be afraid to take a bus every day going from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. You pointed it out very well, especially what you owe to the Palestinians and what the Palestinians owe to you.

Question

Since you asked what could be done I think that the main thing that should be done is to strengthen democratic forces in the Palestinian population. You showed us the fear to talk and to speak up, the fear of retaliation. All this together creates a situation of a dead end. I am convinced that in the Palestinian population there are as many peace minded people as in Israel. I do appreciate your work. It touches me so much. I feel it is very brave of you to do this. I know that if my husband was here now he would immediately say, where are the four hundred Palestinian women who do this kind of work. I hear this argument many times. I want to know what can we do to allow the four hundred Palestinian women to go with you to do peace work?

Nurith Wagner

Don't forget that the Israelis are in control. It is not the same starting point.

Question

I know this. But I want to know positively, constructively what can we do, what can any of us do to strengthen the liberals?

Miriam Hirschfeld

First of all I think the responsibility for Palestinians is with the Palestinians. I don't think that one can from the outside, not the Israelis, not the Iraq war, bring democracy to the world. But I do think that Europe has a tremendous role in being an honest brokers, in trying to enable, and help, and push, and control and strangle if we do not move and sit together. It has got to put pressure on both sides, pressure and incentives. There are suggestions, there are plans where you have the involved parties work together with the Americans and the Europeans, trying to encourage a development that goes toward a peaceful solution. We are at the moment in a situation where we ourselves can't do it, the Palestinians themselves can't do it. There was recently an interview with Khaled Mashal, the leader of Hamas in Syria on Egyptian television. He was told that the Palestinians suffer so much, why do you increase the suffering?

His answer was, "suffering makes us stronger". I think we had hundreds of years of experience in being the victims, we the Jews as Jews. I think the Palestinians have taken on our role of being the prime victims. That is insane. They are hungry, the health service is terrible, and everyday there are terror threats to the big crossings where all the trucks go in with food, where the exports come out, and there are threats to be blown up. Because the interest today of a lot of Palestinian groups is to make the suffering even worse. And the problem is that we feed into it, as well.

Nurith Wagner

The Israelis thought that if they will suffer through the checkpoints they will do something against the terror. Amnesty had a report a month ago which said it did not happen. Either they did not want to or they could not.

Renata Schmidtkunz

We talk about occupation. There you could also specify the responsibility of Jewish women that are doing this work. Because it is occupation. It is not because there are two states being in war.

Question

It is very important to find peace minded people on both sides. I am in Israel often and meet many people. The situation is like a joke. If I meet with the right wing people they tell me they are great, and I think they are right. Then I meet with the left wing people and they tell me you have to talk. I say yes, you are right. So I know the situation very well, but I am an outsider. What I think especially after the war is that there is no real partner to talk to. This what makes me so worried. Miriam, you said this is a problem of the Palestinians.

Nurith Wagner

This year we had the chicken flu pandemic threat, the virus does not recognize the checkpoints - and the threat of this disaster brought us together. And then we had a cooperation.

Question

But she said you wanted to make a cooperation and the Palestinians said no, we can't cooperate with you because we will be dead after that. This is the point. I see it like that.

Miriam Hirschfeld

We are talking on two different levels. I think on the individual level in many cases there are good relationships. Relationships are going on. One has to be careful to keep individuals safe. There is the political level where one has to change the perception that there is no partner. We have been saying for years and years there is no partner. And they have also been saying there is no partner. And that is why we are saying it needs a change in the political approach with outside help. It is not that simple going to the Palestinian public, but it should be possible. How did Saddat get a partner in the Israelis? It was unbelievable. We had war with Egypt. And the situation is different. But still, I remember when Saddat came to Jerusalem it was incredible. People could not believe this was our 'Erzfeind'. That was a terrible war with Egypt. The feddayin were coming in and were killing. I remember the fear before the Six-day-war. We were digging mass graves. Yes, and then we had a great victory and we did not have the wisdom and we kept the territories under the illusion of a having a grand country. That is one thing. But I remember the fear before 1967. I remember being in a Kibbuz where people who came out of the concentration camps came to the clinic, where I was working and asked for poison. So that is why we need the compassionate help and the compassionate push of the world that says, you have to move.

Question

But Saddat came. Hamas would never recognize Israel. This is the big difference. The situation now is completely different. Nobody has access to the Hamas.

Nurith Wagner

There are groups and there are people who try.

Question

There are also villages in the Westbank which are ruled by Hamas mayors. There has to be some sort of coordination, cooperation. But there is factual coordination with the Israeli army.

Miriam Hirschfeld

There are some even within Hamas. Part of the problems today is that it has become a worldwide issue with Hezbollah, with Syria. Part of it might be that one has to move on the Syrian front. I am not a political analyst. But there are people who are working on it. There must be ways to try and to turn us around. Part of the disaster about the Camp David talks is that it proved to us we don't have a partner. And it was not necessary. We are in a vicious cycle where we over and again prove to each other that we have no partner. My brother has two sons. When they were little, the four year old came crying: "Daddy, it all started with Dudu (his older brother) hitting me back!". We are constantly hitting back, the Israelis and the Palestinians are constantly hitting back. We can't be trusted and they can not be trusted, but there must and can be a way out.

Renata Schmidtkunz

I want to stop this kind of discussion, and I tell you why. Because now we are getting into this question who is better and who is less better and so on. One of the main and most dangerous arguments which you could have inside the Israeli society and inside the Palestinian society is, we don't have a partner. Because this gives you an excuse for everything all the time. To come back to your work. The amazing thing is that although you are living in the Israeli society, although you hear the arguments every day, still you are doing that work. It is true that you are not going to jail and you are not intimidated immediately when you speak out against Olmert. But I know that people get socially isolated in Israel when they have your point of view. Why do you have this point of view? Although you are living in that society with all these arguments, ideological arguments, you still have another point of view, you still would say, I try to trust, I try to go there, I believe in something else.

Miriam Hirschfeld

On the human level the strange thing is that we are so much alike. This is not just that we are cousins from the bible. But there is an incredible likeness. One of the most unbelievable experiences for me was when I was in Geneva working with the WHO when the Oslo Agreement came through. A big Palestinian delegation came to the World Health Assembly. And that was always a horrific experience for us. At that time we were not that awful. And then we met with the Palestinian delegation. I listened to them and brought some Israeli friends along. And they sounded exactly like us. Nobody was as much victims, nobody was as just, nobody wanted as much peace. And on an emotional level it is very strange. I have many American and British friends. Something is always a bit off. I am either too friendly, or not friendly enough. There is a strange not-fit very often, just because it is not the culture I grew up in. With the Palestinians, if you are close you are really close. There is a way that links people. But I think the basics is just basic values on how you grew up. A human being is a human being. And we do not want to see Israel be the society it has become. One that is callous. I hear the word Jewish blood and I cringe. I know A blood, and B blood, and AB. What is Jewish blood? And if blood is spilled it is blood, is blood, is blood. And I don't see the difference between a Palestinian child or a Jewish child. I think those are basic Jewish values. Those are the values I grew up with, basic Jewish values. They are basic values of much of what I knew as a Zionist tradition. I grew up in a Zionist, socialist group. For us to be Zionist and to be socialist goes together perfectly well. Yes, it is difficult. I don't believe we have no partner. That is a self defeating way.

Nurith Wagner

Human rights don't differentiate between different humans. Human rights is human rights. If we are living in a situation which is crazy then we have to make it right. It is the responsibility of everybody who lives there regardless of nationality. And there are groups who work together. There are people who lost family on both sides. Palestinians and Israelis who go to schools and tell the story. As Miriam said the political solution has to come from outside.

Renata Schmidtkunz

Miriam, Nurith thank you so much not only for coming here tonight but also for doing what you are doing. Thanks to Patricia Kahane and to Gertraud Auer who gave the space for this conversation. Thank you for coming and have a good evening.