Chapter 8

Dancing Tango during Peace Building: Palestinian-Israeli People-to-People Programs for Conflict Resolution


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Introduction

For the past three decades, the discipline of international relations has distinguished between conflict settlement and conflict resolution. While the first approach prioritizes military and diplomatic intervention, the second approach consists of efforts to create “two-track diplomacy” between belligerent peoples, which means to facilitate negotiations between states on one level, and on the other level, to promote contact between the societal actors (e.g., the ethnic groups in conflict). In fact, the nature of protracted “ethnic” and colonial conflicts is society-wide and not, in essence, a matter between governments. Therefore, many people suggest in this context that the most appropriate “party” to deal with is the identity group, not the nation-state or even the “governing structure.” Some researchers stress that the people of such societies need to be empowered before they can forgive, heal, and restabilize their lives (Montville, 1991).

While official government-to-government mediation does not address this issue, there is much that the approaches of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) can offer. NGO initiatives fall
under the category of “People-to-People Programs” and are applied in regions that have undergone national and ethnic conflicts. Such projects, as shown in Table 8.1, consist of cooperation in all domains: the private sector, culture and the arts, as well as dialogue and joint projects for civil society groups. In the Palestinian case, in the spirit of the peace process, and in line with the Israeli-Palestinian September 1995 Interim Agreement, many donors began to encourage and fund these programs. In fact, following the Oslo Agreement, mediation projects have developed in the Palestinian Territories targeted at the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to bring together national and international practitioners in training programs focused on conflict mediation skills. The Norwegian Applied Social Research Center (FAFO) implemented the first major people-to-people program.

People-to-people is not a specific program; rather the term refers to all projects related to the cooperation between Palestinian and Israeli groups. This includes cultural and educational activities such as summer camps, concerts, theatre, and the development of school curriculum on history, as well as environment projects and media. The variety of 158 joint projects funded by FAFO (Mu’allem, 1999) is shown in Table 8.1.

Regarding projects involving dialogue, there are dozens of projects encouraging Middle East dialogue implemented both in the region and abroad. Some of these projects were initiated prior to the Oslo Agreement, creating mainly face-to-face dialogue groups. The factors determining the success or the failure of these projects vary and include objective as well as subjective factors: language barrier, ubiquitous checkpoints, security fears of Israelis entering the occupied territories, and Palestinian concerns that they will be viewed as “collaborators”.

The Palestinian National Authority and the Egyptian and Jordanian governments have generally been in favor of cooperation programs. Moreover, important forms of cooperation have been established between Israeli NGOs and Palestinian NGOs as well as some Palestinian
ministries (such as the Ministry of Youth) before the arrival of Hamas. However, while the Palestinian NGOs have readily accepted this cooperation—as they live together with the Israelis—in general, almost all of the Arab institutions and NGOs still refuse to work in regional projects or bilateral projects.

Having said this, it is apparent that the presence of a third-party mediator often expedites cooperation projects. The EU-dubbed “Barcelona process,” for example, was an occasion for many NGOs in the region to create networks for many sectors (human rights, environment, media, etc.) in which Israel was included. In the academic field, joint projects between universities and research centers in the Arab world and in Israel are quite prominent. In his inventory of these projects, Scham (2000) counted 217 projects between Israel and some of the Arab countries: in the Palestinian Territories, 133 (62%); Egypt, 39 (18%); Jordan, 26 (12%); Morocco, 11 (5%); Tunisia, 6 (3%); and Other, 2 (1%). Some 195 projects among them cover many fields of research: social science, 49 projects (25%); medicine, 35 (18%); agriculture, 35 (18%); water, 30 (15%); environment, 11 (6%); education, 14 (7%); marine, 10 (5%); physics/technology, 6 (3%); and veterinary, 5 (3%).

Programs of cooperation increased in a significant manner because of the interest of the donor community to revive the contacts between Palestinians and Israelis, especially by the United States and the European Commission. However, the breath of people-to-people projects run jointly between two groups does not mean that such initiatives are uniformly admired; in fact, these types of projects remain problematic and have yet to be accepted by all civil society actors. Some evaluations of people-to-people projects identify negative aspects associated with the idea of the project and the manner in which it was implemented (Mu’allem, 1999; Scham, 2000). These type programs have become popular for the funding donors, but not always for the recipient society. In
March 1999, an international conference organized by the Welfare Association Consortium (a coalition of three organizations to manage the World Bank fund directed to Palestinian NGOs) elicited strong criticism from the Palestinian scholarly and NGO communities on the topic of people-to-people projects. Projects are considered as neglecting the power structure between the Palestinians and Israelis in favor of the latter, and criticized on the basis that the Israelis are taking a lot of legitimacy from such projects. Some articles in local newspapers also reflected this heated debate against people-to-people projects. Building structures for peace seems, to many NGOs leaders, as neglecting the power structure between the belligerents.

For the donor community, this type of program is based on the idea that regardless of the achievements of the peace process, meetings between the two people are important and should be encouraged. If this idea is valid, then the manner in which it has been applied in practice has made the objective very misleading. The application of this program has two characteristics: the first one consists of gathering people who do not possess the sufficient requirements necessary to establish a basis for common ground. In this case the “meetings” between the Israeli and Palestinian partners become more of a juxtaposition of actors than a dialogue between them. The second characteristic is the total separation between political issues, on one hand, and academic, economic, and cultural issues, on the other hand.

This chapter examines issues related to the following two hypotheses: The first, concerning the conception of the approach, is that the structure of cooperation for both belligerent parties has a long-term impact on pushing the peace agenda. The second hypothesis, which concerns implementation, proposes that the context of peace making by political leadership has an impact on the success (or process) of the implementation of the people-to-people projects.
Conflict Resolution Methods

There have been few efforts to assess people-to-people programs in the region. One such effort done by Norwegian researcher Lena Endresen (2001) looks at people-to-people activities as part of the formal peace process and not outside of it, as the Oslo Interim Agreement (Annex VI and Article II) refers to the People-to-People Program. Endresen notes that the asymmetrical relationship between Palestinians and Israelis in the conflict has great influence on the implementation of these types of programs, and makes a close connection between making peace by the political leadership and building peace by people and the civil society. According to her, “five years later, the experience from the People-to-People Program suggest that this notion may be valid in cases where people build peace as a supplement to a peace that political leadership make” (2001, p. 26).

Palestinian researcher Nassif Mu’allem (1999), who has also conducted the only available Palestinian study on people-to-people projects, says they are more accurately called “persons-to-persons” projects. Significantly critical of this approach, Mu’allem concludes that normalization should proceed after the fulfillment of Palestinian national and legitimate rights and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. After the launching of the second Intifada, voices emerged in the Palestinian newspapers that raised the question of whether Israeli peace organizations should prioritize working with their own public who refuse to acknowledge the rights of Palestinians as opposed to working with their Palestinian counterparts. For its part the PNGOs—the most important Palestinian NGOs network—called on its members not to proceed with joint projects with Israeli organizations, unless the latter “support the Palestinian right to freedom and
statehood and a comprehensive, just and durable peace that meets Palestinian national rights” (Palestinian NGOs, 2000).

The Israeli-Palestinian Center for Research and Information (IPCRI) established an initiative to assess people-to-people programs in the Palestinian/Israeli context, which showed mitigating effects of this program. The IPCRI research project included a workshop for those who have initiated, organized, and funded people-to-people activities, interviewed organizations and people involved in such programs (Baskin, 2001).

Outside of the region, some research has studied the experience of conflict resolution methods in conflict-ridden areas, such as Transcaucasia, Bosnia, Kosovo, where strife has been based on either an interstate or modern ethnic conflict. According to Baird, in the post–Cold War era, the main type of conflict results mainly from group psychology (1999). Hence, the methods of conflict resolution focus on the psychocultural aspect of the conflict (related to identity, “false consciousness,” irrational myths, mistrust, and fear), at times neglecting the structural cause of the conflict related to colonization.

As an example of the focus on trust and mistrust, Hancock and Weiss (1999, p. 1) considered the “basic problem” of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as one of trust: “Unlike the late premier Rabin, who grew to trust Arafat and was trusted in return, [former Israeli prime minister] Netanyahu has long had a personal dislike for the Palestinian leader. For his part, Arafat is suspicious of Netanyahu’s real aims, with the Israeli leader being an unknown quantity even to most of his own people . . . It is our belief that current tensions between Israel and the Palestinian Authority are embodied, to a large extent, in the fractious relationship between Netanyahu and Arafat.”
While it is true that psychocultural aspects can play a role in the process of the conflict, contributing to its escalation, duration, and intensity, this dimension cannot be considered the cause of the conflict. In this regard it may be that in the Palestinian case, people-to-people programs cannot tackle the psychocultural aspect of the conflict while disregarding the structural aspects of colonization. Otherwise, the logic of the conflict resolution effort is one that works to halt the violence while the conflict continues unabated. Certainly there are psychological roots underlying this conflict, especially insofar as the history of the conflict has been accompanied by a process of establishing, stabilizing, and defending coherent individual and collective identities. However, it is clear that the nature of the conflict has remained a territorial one based on colonial structures with bellicose forms of action occurring on a daily basis, such as ethnic cleansing (in Jerusalem), territorial expansionism (the settlements), and aggressive nationalism (the Jewish nature of the state of Israel).

Recently a project to evaluate the many initiatives on peace building was established under the rubric of the Reflection on Peace Project (RPP). During Phase I of its work (September 1999 through April 2001), RPP completed 26 field-based case studies that document the experiences of specific international, national, and local agencies working in postconflict settings, conflict-prone areas, and in areas of active warfare. In several consultations, practitioners reviewed and analyzed these cases. Through this process, a series of key issues emerged as critical across the many different types of conflict interventions. But the major concern was negative impacts that actually leave the situation worse than before the program started, rather than things that caused the program to fail or to be less effective than it could have been. The experiences from the case studies and workshops affirmed six categories of negative impacts: worsening divisions, increasing
danger for participants, reinforcing structural or overt violence, diverting resources, increasing
cynicism, and disempowering local people.

Beyond this general discussion two points deserve special attention: the role of the mediator
and its neutrality, and the relationship of identity and “otherness” in people-to-people programs.

**The Role of the Mediator and Neutrality**

Some literature criticizes the neutrality of the mediator. Critics argue that powerful states
have been criticized for not sufficiently using their political, economic, or military leverage in the
form of carrots and sticks (rewards and sanctions), or that their behavior did go beyond mediation
to arbitration (Miall et al., 1999 p. 12). In the conflict settlement process in the Middle East, the
United States is not seen as neutral since it simultaneously provided arms and military funding to
Israel, thereby contributing more to the militarization of the conflict. Contrary to the belief of many
scholars, even Norway, a self-styled “neutral” small-state actor, was arguably not a truly effective
peacemaker in its most famous mediation case, the Oslo Accords; while these accords claimed to
recognize all of the parties and to pursue communicative action, in examining what happened, little
was done to denounce the continuation of Israeli settlement policy during the implementing of
these accords (Lieberfeld, 1999).

William Zartman, representative of traditional international mediation theory, went further
in demystifying the mediation role. According to Zartman, neither in track one nor in track two are
the motivations of the mediator or the facilitator peace-oriented. He portrays mediation as a geo-
strategically manipulative activity, the aim of which is not long-term conflict resolution but a self-
interested strategy of advancement by all individual parties in a conflict, including the mediator (2007, p. 45).

In moments of intense hostility between the belligerent parties, as with the current state of renewed conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, questions emerge about the efficacy of people-to-people programs. In general, the mediation of the third-party actor has been looked to as a technique that ensures the viability of this method of conflict resolution. On the basis of its neutrality, it is assumed that the mediator has the capacity to direct and advance the cooperation. However, it should be recognized that at times this neutrality could become a handicap (a burden) rather than serve as an asset in resolving the conflict, as Baird has described, in that mediators sometimes refuse to take a position, arguing that their “neutral” posturing is essential to their credibility in the long term (1999).

However, recently there have been new developments in this conflict resolution method based on the integrative approach or so-called Harvard Negotiation Method (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1991), which employs the value level of a conflict. The essence of this method revolves around a distinction between principles and positions, and between values and interests. Most mediators try to find compromises between the interests of each side without realizing the values that are determining these interests (Miall, 1992).

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**Relationship to Identity and “Otherness”**

One of the major justifications for people-to-people projects is the importance of identity, not necessarily in the conflict itself but in the conduct of any conflicting relationship. However, identity is “more than a psychological sense of self . . . it is extended to encompass a sense of self
in relationship to the world” (Northrup, 1989, p. 55). With this understanding, the relationship to “otherness” becomes a factor complicating the conflict. During the conflict, belligerents try to dehumanize and objectify “the other,” projecting negative attributes onto “the other” and depersonalizing “the other” to support the separation needed to maintain one’s own identity. Even if the rooted cause of a conflict is land, the lack of communication between the belligerents on both sides of the conflict reinforces the warped perceptions of what the other side stands for and what threat they really pose. Moreover, when it is a case of protracted conflict, the stereotypes and/or demonizing of the others can lead to a massive violation of human rights, particularly against the civilians.

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**Dialogue or Juxtapositions?**

Following these characteristics of people-to-people programs, the dialogue between the two partners becomes a simple juxtaposition between people around a table where everyone tells small stories, making the dialogue a kind of narrative in the postmodern meaning: there are neither victims nor oppressors, or all are victims and oppressors. Moreover, there is no truth and all are relative. This is illustrated by a meeting that took place between Israeli and Palestinian teachers at the end of 1996. Without proper preparation, the participants exchanged stories, some about their life experience during the first exodus at 1948, while others talked about their suffering from problems related to the adaptation/assimilation in the Israeli society during the first years following their migration. While the meeting started warmly, it finished in violence between the two groups, with Palestinians feeling that no common ground had been reached with their counterparts. Another project consisted of bringing together Israelis and Palestinian journalists in Neve Shalom—a
community of Israelis and Palestinians that is considered an oasis for peace. After a day of cultural activities and discussions about current news, the facilitators asked the group to write a common press communiqué about an event that happened that day. This communiqué stopped with the second sentence when some Israeli journalists announced that they do not recognize the West Bank and Gaza Strip as occupied land. The relative failure of both of these projects shows that there is the absence of a minimum basis for dialogue between the belligerents about the nature of their conflict.

Other projects also show mediocre results in the two societies and even in the belligerent groups. For example, Palestinian and Israeli cultural NGOs planned a project to hold two concerts in order to promote contact between the youth on each side. Two musicians trained together, and it was agreed that two performances should be held in East and West Jerusalem in July 1998. However, the Israeli public refused to go to East Jerusalem, and the Palestinians did the same concerning the performance in West Jerusalem. In the end, the two communities did not mix at all. In the final analysis, this project facilitated musicians and two composers meeting, but not the people.

In the same spirit, in the field of science, a project of cooperation was organized between two chemical laboratories in Al Quds and the Hebrew universities. Once the funds were obtained and divided between the two of them, the Israeli counterpart refused to meet with his Palestinian partner under the pretext of a lack of time. In fact, this easy availability of money encourages opportunism in both Palestinian and Israeli sides.
Separation between Politics and Other Spheres

The other logic behind the people-to-people program is the separation of the political sphere and the cultural and academic spheres, in the name of their respective autonomy. To illustrate this logic, I offer the example of a project of cooperation between Palestinian and Israeli civil societies, which reveals the dysfunctional nature of projects based on this separation logic. In the end of 1998, the Jerusalem Spinoza Institute called the Palestinian University of Al Quds (based in Jerusalem) to cooperate with it in order to organize an international conference in August 1999 entitled “Moral Philosophy in Education: The Challenge of Human Difference.” Nothing could be more banal than such a project between two institutions on a subject such as education that touches directly the Palestinian and Israeli populations. However, between May and August 1999, a serious incident happened. The Ministry of Interior of Barak’s government withdrew the identity document of Musa Budeiri, a director of the Center of International Relations in Al Quds University, a native and resident of East Jerusalem, whose family has lived there for hundreds of years under Ottoman, British, and Jordanian rule. He was given a tourist visa, valid for four weeks, and told that he would have to leave Jerusalem by August 22. Another problem emerged that the Israeli Ministry of National Education became a financial partner of the conference. In light of these two problems, Al Quds University hesitated between continuing the cooperation or stopping it altogether as a way of expressing solidarity with Professor Budeiri and protesting against the partnership with the Israeli Ministry.

The pros of keeping the collaboration going were supported by two arguments. First, the cooperation would persuade the Ministry of Education to recognize Al Quds University, taking into account that nonrecognition is purely political. The second argument is related to the first: it
consists of trying to convince the Ministry of Interior not to expel the university administration, which is located in Jerusalem to the outside of this city (as announced once by an Israeli official). In fact, these two arguments show that the romantic view of cultural cooperation between two civil societies hides all the power imbalance between the two societies (between an occupied and occupying people). As the president of the Spinoza Institute argued: “We are here to put apart divergence and talk in science, philosophy and education, far from politics.” Finally, the Al Quds University team decided to pursue the cooperation, hoping that the organizer would act in favor of Al Quds University’s cause and Musa Budeiri’s expulsion.

In the opening session, Sari Nusseibeh, the president of Al Quds University, contrary to his habit, gave a very moving speech exclusively about the case of Musa Budeiri and his family. To outline the roots of the Budeiri family in this city, he discussed a manuscript on Jerusalem history written by Musa’s father, which has never been edited. Nusseibeh, the pioneer of dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians, finished his speech by saying that he is torn morally by these events, adding that the Israelis should not expect to conduct further dialogue with Palestinians as the latter are increasingly becoming tourists! Almost all of the participants were moved, but the organizers were not. The president of Jerusalem Spinoza Institute commented on Nusseibeh’s speech saying that, “There is some military problems between Israelis and Palestinians which have not yet been resolved,” while the rector of Hebrew University asked Nusseibeh where he can find the Budeiri manuscript as the Hebrew University would like to have it. Finally the organizers of the conference refused to send to the Minister of Interior a petition in favor of Budeiri and signed by the majority of the participants—arguing that there is separation between the academic and political spheres, and that as scholars they cannot take a position. However, the commission of recognition of universities, which is composed mainly of scholars, shows how the academic sphere is implicated
in Israel’s colonial project. According to the logic of the Israeli side, the application of this conception of “autonomy” of the academic sphere and the notion of “neutrality” of the people-to-people program is taken to mean abstaining from action or abstaining from taking a conscience position in favor of an interlocutor whose rights as citizen have been denied. In this case, the program “people-to-people” becomes a program of dominators-to-dominating or occupants-to-tourists. Following the same logic, one can talk about the nonrecognition of the Palestinian side by the people-to-people approved projects that are signed only by Israeli and donor sides. The Israeli side is even afraid that clashes could ensue with the Palestinian side from the outset of the first sentence of the contract; for example, if the Palestinian NGO wants to designate the territories as Palestinian Territories, while Israel recognizes only the label Palestinian Authority.

To me, it is very clear that many projects in the people-to-people program do not pay any attention to the imbalance of power between the parties and sometimes even hide such discrepancies behind the equal number of participants, while the conception of the program is elaborated in the way that the colonial side decides the rules of the game. In the context of occupation, the line between the cultural sphere and the political is very blurry. In a recent article in the Israeli newspaper, *Ha’artz*, an author expressed his astonishment at the Arabic world’s (and especially those with whom Israel has diplomatic relations) refusal to participate in the Jerusalem Film Festival, as this festival is a “pure cultural event.” This astonishment would have diminished if the journalist had attended the Mayer reception in David Tower organized for the festival participants where this reception and dinner were dedicated exclusively to putting forth the idea of the unification of Jerusalem under Israeli control, with everything supporting this theme, from the first song inaugurating the reception to all the speeches, including that of then-Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert, and finally to the prize given to the guest of honor, movie actor Kirk Douglas.
These observations of some people-to-people projects illustrate the problem of a program that functions independently or in isolation from the achievements of the peace process. Cooperation between the two civil societies cannot be undertaken in a manner so as to escape responsible action, and if need be, as in the Budeiri case, taking an active position supporting the occupied side. Failure to do so misrepresents reality and presents a false image of the conflict. While the Western and Israeli media focus their attention on this type of program, the number of settlers has increased three times since the launching of the peace process (from 160,000 to 480,000). This reminds one of the ART Franco-Germanic television channel’s comments on Michel Khalief’s film *Wedding in Galilee*. This channel presented the movie as an example of peaceful coexistence between Israelis and Arabs because the Israeli soldiers were invited to the Palestinian wedding, but the commentators neglected to note that the precondition imposed by the military forces in order for them to issue permission for the wedding—set during the period of curfew—was the very presence of the Israeli soldiers that these commentators were celebrating in their review.

The conclusion that I would like to draw here is not to undermine the reason d’être of people-to-people programs but to question the current form in which they are conducted—in a hasty manner and thwarting their own objectives. The way to resolve the conflict is not to ignore or hide it, but to present it openly in an honest manner in order to prevent it from accumulating and merging with other problems, creating irremediable rupture between the belligerents. Furthermore, the efficacy of the people-to-people approach is related not only to the approach itself, but to the degree of development of the ongoing peace process achievement. People-to-people meetings have no meaning if the first-track negotiation does not succeed to allow freedom of movement for
Palestinians. Also, people-to-people programs will suffer if accompanied with the extensive settlement activities.

The idea of summer camps is a good example of effective people-to-people programs, as children are at an age in which they can change their attitudes. However, facilitators who have participated in such projects report that in some cases Palestinian children suffered trauma and alienation because of these camps. Playing for one day with Israeli kids in the playgrounds in Tel Aviv proved to be a source of great alienation and discomfort when these kids compared the comfortable situation of their counterparts (the Israeli children) in Tel Aviv with their own more dire circumstances in Dheisheh Refugee Camp.

While it is true that there are funds being dumped into people-to-people projects, some of these projects were a real success without funding. For example, I have followed intellectual dialogues between some Israeli historians and some Palestinian scholars debating issues concerning Palestinian and Israeli nationalism as well as Israeli colonial practices and been surprised that such meetings were so fruitful to the point that there were more discussions than dialogue, in the sense that the divergences between the Israelis themselves were wider than with the Palestinians and vice versa. These meetings were a laboratory for the emerging of new narratives.

References


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