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Citizen Diplomacy – Creating a Culture of Peace

The Israeli-Palestinian Case

In face of the disillusionment with the Oslo Process and the many disappointments arising from politicians, a movement of citizen diplomats has emerged with the intention to change reality and facts on the ground. This movement is growing and taking form through different people-to-people initiatives designed to bring Israeli and Palestinian civilians together in order to put a human face to the *Other* and hopefully generate sufficient momentum and pressure from below to bring about the long overdue political will to move forward toward a peace agreement. In this paper I draw a brief analysis of this phenomenon which we have been witnessing for the last decade. In doing so I will build on my course work from the Conflict Resolution program at Ben Gurion University, public presentations I have delivered, conversations with colleagues and fellow activists and my professional experience gained over the years. I would like to note that this paper falls short of covering all aspects of citizen diplomacy that has developed over the years in Israel and in the Palestinian Authority and the occupied territories. It is rather intended to provide an overview and a sense of civil-led trends whose sole intention is to cope with the disruptive effect of one of the most protracted and intractable conflicts in the world.

Key words: Non-violence, culture of peace, citizen diplomacy, people-to-people, positive peace, negative peace, women-led diplomacy, peacebuilding, civil society led action, conflict transformation

Theory of Change

Solutions to end conflicts may be provided by either politicians or by civil society leadership. Politicians typically hold negotiations in an attempt to reach a political agreement or truce – a process known as “first track” diplomacy, whereas civil society leaders and activists engage in people-to-people initiatives – also known as “track two” diplomacy, civil society-led actions or Citizen Diplomacy.

The term “track two” diplomacy was coined by Joe Montville. John McDonald and Louise Diamond invented the term “multi-track diplomacy” and they list nine tracks through which civil society organizations or individuals may interact alongside official negotiations: (1) official (track one) diplomacy (2) unofficial, yet professional conflict resolution processes (3) international business negotiations and exchanges (4) citizen exchanges (such as teacher exchanges) (5) international research, education, and training efforts (6) activism (7) contacts and exchanges between religious leaders



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and followers (8) international funding efforts, and (9) public opinions and communication programs.

With regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict we can observe all tracks but the first taking place.

Citizen diplomacy aims at providing both sides of the conflict with opportunities to interact and work together resulting eventually in creating a “culture of peace” which may have a transformative effect on the outcome of a conflict. The theory stresses that gradual shifts in attitudes among a critical mass of people can yield major changes in the level of conflict between groups. This change must come from all aspects of society - decision makers, civil society and civilians.

Conflict transformation is required in cases of asymmetric conflicts in which one side has a structural advantage over the other. Such situations require the intervention of a third party otherwise they are deemed irresolvable and liable to follow a path in which the advantageous side will always have the upper hand. Based on this understanding the nineties saw the development of new frameworks for transforming – differing from resolving - armed conflicts, in which the intervention of a third party will bring about a structural-normative social change that will push towards the transformation of the conflict. This transformation is designed to kick off processes of social-political change that will prevent conflict escalation in the future. According to Lederach - one of the scholars who developed such a model - transformation of conflicts can take place and be sustained only if the process includes all layers of society including at the grass roots level of society.

A “culture of peace” can effectively be fostered (or alternatively, undermined), inter alia, by educational programs, bi-national dialog groups and the mass media, as the media shapes public perceptions of events, of the Other in the conflict and of its claims or grievances. The media discourse plays a critical role in societies in conflict by shaping and at times even creating dominant narratives that permeate public opinion and thus limit the options that people are willing to consider.

Many of the civil society led programs embrace the theory of “building bridges” which holds that if key actors from groups in conflict have opportunities to interact, they will better understand and appreciate one another; reduce prejudice and stereotypes of one another; be better able to work with one another, and prefer to resolve conflicts peacefully.

Typology of Civil-Led Actions

Considering the scale of potential people-to-people initiatives one can loosely categorize them or at least mention the different types of such initiatives:



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1) Peacebuilding through topical activism - Programs that attempt to address a shared need or issue are more typically cross-border projects. Examples of such initiatives are Keshev – The Center for the Protection of Democracy and Friends of the Earth Middle East. Keshev conducts peacebuilding activities through media monitoring and imparts critical media consumption skills to Israeli and Palestinian journalism students and the wider public. In cooperation with its Palestinian partner organization it operates a cross-border project applying the same media analysis methodology and advocacy tools for Israeli and Palestinian target groups. Through this joint-but-separate action a dialog is taking place both between Israeli and Palestinian staff and Israeli and Palestinian students for most of whom the encounters in the framework of the project are the first time they meet the Other in non-conflict settings.

Friends of the Earth Middle East, on the other hand, conducts peacebuilding efforts through environmental activism around shared water resources. These actions mobilize youth, local authorities' officials and the wider public through environmental and educational actions which are always jointly led by Israelis and Palestinians and always target bi-national audiences.

2) Pure dialog groups – This category is most crowded, it seems, with initiatives designed to simply provide Palestinian and Israeli civilians with the opportunity to meet in neutral settings and air their narratives and personal stories with the assistance of a facilitator. Through these encounters it is anticipated that participating individuals will undergo an internal process enabling them to put a human face to the Other, eventually fostering a culture of peace as per the Contact Theory. It is hoped that these individuals will become agents of change in their immediate surroundings, thus cultivating peace in ever-widening circles and reducing the intensity of the conflict. A successful example of such action is The Bereaved Parents Circle.

3) Solidarity grass root movements– two prominent examples in this category are Combatants for Peace (I mention them further down) and The Sheikh Jarrakh Solidarity Movement.

Development of Citizen Diplomacy in Israel

The disillusionment with the Oslo Accord and the stall of the peace process pushed civil society on both sides of the conflict to take leadership in search of dialog and joint actions to create a culture of peace in the absence of political will.

As Palestinians realized that adopting practices of violent resistance during the second Intifada (started in year 2000) did not serve their just cause the situation started slowly changing. This insight on the part of Palestinians introduced non-



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violent means of struggle to the equation and contributed to joint Israeli-Palestinian action that later developed to become a peace and solidarity movement.

In the absence of governmental action and support we are witnessing the emergence of a plethora of initiatives in diverse areas that enjoy the support of foreign governments and foundations. The relationship between civil society in Israel and its parallel in the Palestinian Authority and the occupied territories is widening over the heads of politicians on both sides. However, taking stock of the many non-official efforts one may wonder as to their efficacy and effectiveness in furthering peace. This leads to the hypothesis that “peace” and “culture of peace” are not identical. Further, it raises a question regarding the scope of change brought about by citizen diplomats or - otherwise put - to what extent these initiatives succeed in changing a well-rooted reality (we often feel we are talking to each other and not reaching out to the wider public).

In 2011 this trend has grown exponentially. Civil society organizations are leading ever more actions and running programs allowing Israelis and Palestinians to interact and work together towards a common goal. These projects are funded by foreign governments through their embassies and political parties through their related foundations. The European Union (EU) each year funds a number of projects that address human rights, education for human rights, people to people initiatives. Clearly, one of the European Union’s budgeted strategic goals is to encourage Israeli and Palestinian civilians to work together towards ending the conflict. Likewise the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has been playing a significant role in the area of peacebuilding and conflict mitigation since 2003 and is expanding its involvement by funding more Israeli-Palestinian initiatives as well as Jewish-Arab ones in Israel proper.

Having stated the above, the inevitable question would be the following: is the growing number of civil society organizations focusing their efforts on conflict mitigation and peacebuilding related to the extent of financial support that governmental agencies are allocating to support this type of initiatives? Reality certainly proves this hypothesis right. Foreign governments, in particular the European Union, became more involved in peacebuilding efforts in Mediterranean countries following the second Intifada (Palestinian uprising) with the expansion in 2004 of the Barcelona Process that started in 1995 at the Barcelona Euro-Mediterranean conference. Since then many more projects have been conceived and there has been dramatic growth in the number of professionals working in this sector.

A different form of support by foreign governmental and inter-governmental agencies and institutions are the many consultations and conferences that are carried out abroad on a neutral land to which civil society organizations are invited to devise



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collaborative actions by providing a platform for sustainable exchanges that give impetus to the civil peace movement.

For many years the Israeli public bought in to the national narrative which cultivated fear and anger towards Palestinians. In the last 10 years this unconditional loyalty started to crack when combatants and civilians alike noticed that there is a gap between what they are told by politicians and their first-hand individual experience. This is how the movement Combatants for Peace came about. Some 200 reserve soldiers signed a motion in which they decreed their refusal to serve in the occupied territories. This refusal action has grown and culminated in an encounter on Palestinian land between a group of former Palestinian prisoners who were detained in Israeli prisons and IDF reserve combatants from elite units. This encounter gave rise later to the Combatants for Peace movement that has now expanded to include other peace activists. The Combatants for Peace movement is an Israeli-Palestinian solidarity initiative aimed at leading non-violent actions against the occupation and promoting dialog and legitimizing each other's narratives.

Challenges and Opportunities

The work of those who choose to follow a professional career path in the field of conflict mitigation and peacebuilding is challenged on a regular basis and the obstacles are numerous. At the same time there is a growing sense that these initiatives are replicating themselves without creating any significant change. Over a decade down the road since the wave of the innovative people-to-people programs started, we observe that the region is no closer to a peace agreement and the political will to turnaround the situation is ever absent. One could well wonder how effective we are and whether a change in direction is due.

Based on my experience and that of others we may want to consider some of the obstacles that hinder the work of the peace movement:

- 1) Normalization – The term “normalization” is widely accepted amongst Palestinians and is intended to signify that collaborating with Israelis actually “normalizes” the occupation. It stems from the recognition that not only the peace movement does not get us any closer to ending the occupation it may in fact perpetuate the occupation by making it more bearable for Palestinians. As this assertion takes hold in the consciousness of Palestinians and Israelis people-to-people initiatives are increasingly seen as an act of normalization. From that point on it started to become more difficult for Israelis and Palestinian alike to work together as such joint efforts were badly perceived by the Palestinian public. It is important to note that Palestinians do not ban Israelis as a whole but they do require from Israelis who work with them to a) recognize their suffering; b) make a statement that they



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are against the occupation. This is sometimes a 'make or break' point beyond which partnerships do not continue.

- 2) Lack of trust – As we operate within the framework of a conflict that is asymmetric in nature, a lack of trust inevitably exists between Palestinian and Israelis which makes it harder to widen the circles of peace activists willing to work with each other. The immediate consequence of this assertion is that even those who have already joined the ranks are very aware of the fact that the Israelis are the oppressors and Palestinians are the occupied party. This adds an extra layer of complexity to the way we communicate with each other and forces us to be aware of how we do things.
- 3) Constraints on freedom of movement - whatever results we may have we must remember we operate in a conflict zone whereby restrictions on the movement of both sides exist. Israeli civilians cannot lawfully go into the areas under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority and Palestinians need permits to enter Israeli territory, which in the worst case are not given. At best, where a permit is issued it will have significantly added to the already heavy workload of the organizations that have lodged the permit application.
- 4) Culture gap – when it comes to professional settings staff working for Israeli and Palestinian organizations need to adhere to acceptable best practices in order to accomplish work. Very often, these practices are ones that are widely used in the western professional setting but less known in other cultures. Therefore capacity building is always necessary.
- 5) Gender issues – women in formal and informal Palestinian forums are predominantly absent which hinders the inclusion of wider circles of society in the peace movement.
- 6) Content issues - If organizations do not include content as do Kehsef and Friends of the Earth Middle East they are not likely to be effective or be sustainable.
- 7) Sustainability - since most actions are supported by foundations and foreign governments for a limited period of time the question of sustainability is always present. Receiving support from governments imposes an enormous workload on organizations that are typically small. In addition organizations are in a constant search for more resources to sustain themselves. Once a project reaches its end there is no guarantee that funding will continue. If projects are discontinued skilled staff may have to be laid off, thus wasting efforts and resources.
- 8) Funding opportunities vs. needs – when organizations raise funds from foundations and governmental agencies they must follow the strict guidelines put forth by the funders in accordance with the goals the foundations expect to



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support rather than considering the true needs of their target groups. This may result in projects that are badly designed who end up having no effective results.

Among the opportunities we could mention:

- 1) I would like to stress the issue of funding which is currently a challenge but may also be an opportunity. As mentioned above peacebuilding organizations are constantly in search of funding so they can sustain their projects and staff on the long run. The ironic reality is that those who dedicate their career for the cause of building peace are those who also have relatively low income. Therefore, if funding is secured it may turn into an opportunity for the peace movement in our region.
- 2) In a reality of growing restriction on freedom of movement of civilians the dimension of “virtual peacebuilding” is certainly an opportunity. Facebook and tools of that ilk bring people together and enable contact – although virtual - between Israeli and Palestinian civilians.
- 3) One cannot ignore the phenomena such as the Israeli Summer and the Arab Spring. Social protests of such kind introduce a great opportunity that should be used wisely especially by Israeli politicians rather than holding on to the occupation. The social protests we were witnessing throughout the last year demonstrated that civil engagement cannot be suppressed and it may serve as an indication of the power and effectiveness that citizen diplomacy may have.

Considering the above challenges and opportunities we may want to re-evaluate our work as conflict mitigation professionals and make changes that will lead to more tangible and significant results.

The Future - Conclusion

Although the number of organizations has increased and the peace movement has gained momentum there is a growing sense that all we do is conduct meetings without achieving any tangible or significant results.

I mentioned earlier that in the early days of the peace movement one of the main reasons to initiate Israeli-Palestinian encounters was to humanize the Other in the hope that this would help override national narratives and contribute to reducing conflict intensity as the Contact Theory implies. With hindsight we realize that this was not sufficient and given that the root reason of the conflict is political then the solution must be political as well.

This leads us to believe that the only way to build trust and be effective is to carry out joint popular struggles in the very place where the occupation is most disruptive to the lives of Palestinians. This is how the Israeli-Palestinian and later Jewish-Arab



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Solidarity movement was born. It is highly important that Palestinians have a sense of ownership in such joint actions and that Israelis do not dominate and hijack their struggle as if it were their own cause.

The emerging conclusion is that we should pause for a while and rethink our strategy instead of continue producing more of the same. To continue doing what we do bearing no significant results may be harmful in that it actually prolongs the conflict by making it comfortable and easier to bear.

"The more we sweat in peace the less we bleed in war", Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit

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