

Why People-to-People Peacebuilding in Israel/Palestine is more urgent than ever – Fieldbuilding

by Moritz Haegi - 03.10.2021

14-17 minutes

Image: Women Wage Peace

As tensions in Israel/Palestine escalated once more in mid-May, Western media outlets seemed glued to the sensationalist images of rocket barrages onto Israeli population centers and the destruction caused by Israeli air strikes in the densely populated and chronically underdeveloped Gaza Strip. While the devastation and death inflicted by these asymmetric military exchanges is – of course – tragic, merely focusing on the recurring saber-rattling between Hamas and Israel fails to look beyond the most palpable symptoms of the ongoing struggle for genuine equality, self-determination and peace in Israel/Palestine. In fact, what set the current round of escalation apart from rounds of the past, was the widespread [intercommunity violence](#) discharging in mixed cities within Israel itself, from Lod over Haifa and Acre to Jaffa.

This rise in social mobilization and vigilante violence serves as evidence that hawkish narratives and disparate lived realities have intensified to a point where the status quo has become increasingly untenable. Empowered by Kahanist Itamar Ben-

Gvir's *Religious Zionist* party entering the Knesset in March, and ultranationalist *Lehava* ('flame') mobs [hunting down](#) Arabs in Jerusalem in April with considerable impunity, extremists and right-wing settlers took matters into their own hands in the pursuit of their ethnonationalist vision for "Eretz Israel." At the same time, some Palestinian citizens of Israel – a demographic long-plagued by institutional neglect, discrimination and intra-communal violence – joined the riots by setting fires, battling the police and, in some cases, even attacking Jewish Israelis. Although these extremists make up only a small – albeit very loud – minority within their respective communities, they demonstrate that the Israeli doctrine of 'managing' the conflict under the Oslo regime has rendered futile and led to troublesome consequences.

As much as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been labelled a 'lost cause', the latest escalation and the global attention towards it – amplified by social media – prove that it will not simply go away. Neither a short-sighted ceasefire nor the ethnonationalist fever dreams of Israeli right-wingers will make it disappear. To the contrary, if implemented, the latter would constitute an historic human tragedy, periling peace in the Middle East and Israel's standing in the world indefinitely. A sustainable and just resolution of the conflict is contingent upon the vindication of the human rights and right to self-determination of both Israelis and Palestinians. What is more, the small size of Israel/Palestine (smaller than Belgium, Catalunya or Switzerland) as well as the intertwined relation between the two peoples populating it, make rigid separation both impractical and undesirable.

While coexistence, let alone genuine cooperation, seems all but a pipe dream now, there will not be lasting peace in the holy

land without it.

Instead of separation and segregation, coexistence must be the goal. This appears particularly important and urgent considering the hardening of exclusionary and dehumanizing narratives on both sides. Dehumanization refers to a psychological process whereby opponents view each other as less than human and thus not deserving of genuine moral consideration. While coexistence, let alone genuine cooperation, seems all but a pipe dream now, there will not be lasting peace in the holy land without it. Anyone dedicated to genuine conflict resolution in Israel/Palestine must therefore work to offer an alternative vision to the widespread excuse that *“there is no partner for peace.”* Such a vision could run along the lines of Nelson Mandela’s bon mot: *“If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner.”* Transforming the conflict by turning enemies into partners is precisely what grassroots people-to-people (P2P) peacebuilding seeks to achieve.

On May 19th, ten days into the latest Israel-Hamas escalation, hundreds of Jewish and Arab/Palestinian women [formed](#) a peace chain along the walls of Jerusalem’s old city, advocating for peace and an end to the vicious cycle of violence. This peace chain was organized by more than a dozen Israeli and Palestinian grassroots peacebuilding NGOs, most prominently [Women Wage Peace](#), an Israeli women’s organization dedicated to pressuring the Israeli government into achieving a “bilaterally acceptable political agreement.” Among the other co-organizers of the peace chain, one stands out in particular: [The Parents Circle-Families Forum \(PCFF\)](#). This P2P peacebuilding organization of over 600 bereaved families from both sides of the conflict, continues to inspire local and international

audiences, because of its espousal of reconciliation and forgiveness, emblemized by its motto: *“If I, who have lost a beloved one, can walk the path of peace, then surely you can too.”*

Two PCFF members, Israeli Robi Damelin and Palestinian Bassam Aramin, were recently [interviewed](#) at length by Christiane Amanpour on her nightly global affairs show on CNN. Bassam Aramin is also one of the two protagonists of Collum McCann’s bestselling novel [Apeirogon](#), which examines his bond-turned-friendship with Rami Elhanan, an Israeli PCFF member, over the tragic deaths of their respective daughters. Having lost her son to a Palestinian sniper in 2002, Robi Damelin, who moved to Israel from South Africa in 1967, is the subject of the gut-wrenching documentary [One Day after Peace](#), in which she visits South Africa to learn about the truth and reconciliation process after the fall of the Apartheid regime. Every year, the PCFF, together with *Combatants for Peace*, co-hosts a [Joint Memorial Day](#) ceremony on Israeli Memorial Day (‘Yom HaTzikaron’), commemorating the conflict’s victims on both sides. This Joint Memorial Day, hosted on Zoom due to the pandemic, attracted close to 200’000 attendees in 2020 and 2021, and received extensive coverage in Israeli/Palestinian as well as Western media, including the [New York Times](#). Currently, the PCFF is holding weekly online vigils to help *“heal the damage to hearts and minds and find a way back to the path of peace.”*

[Combatants for Peace \(CFP\)](#), founded in 2005, is a bi-national NGO made up of ex-combatants from both sides – the only joint organization of former fighters in an active conflict in the world. CFP is committed to non-violent action aimed at ending the occupation and establishing a Palestinian state based on the

1967 borders, or any other just solution agreed upon in negotiations. This P2P peacebuilding organization is the subject of the 2016 documentary [Disturbing the Peace](#) and was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2017 and 2018. In April of this year, one of CFP's founders, Sulaiman Khatib, co-published a book [\(In this Place Together\)](#) describing his personal journey. At age 14, Khatib attempted to stab an Israeli in his village in the West Bank, for which he spent over 10 years in an Israeli prison where he learned Hebrew and English, while reading the works of non-violence leaders like Gandhi, Mandela and Martin Luther King. Upon his release in 1997, Khatib embraced non-violence and reconciliation activism. Joined by Knesset members from Meretz and the Joint List, Khatib and CFP regularly stage non-violent protests at Israeli checkpoints in the West Bank.

On May 21st, Israeli troops [cut short](#) one such protest at the Tunnel Checkpoint north of Bethlehem when they detained eight activists, four Israelis and four Palestinians, thereby proving that non-violent action, precisely because of its rejection of violence, constitutes a thorn in the flesh of the prevailing security narrative. The protest in question was co-organized by two renowned Israeli peace organizations: [Breaking the Silence](#) and [Standing Together](#) (*Omdim B'Yachad*). *Breaking the Silence* is an Israeli NGO led by former IDF soldiers willing to publicly share their experiences of having served for the IDF in the occupied territories.

These first-hand testimonies appear particularly powerful considering the persistent [notion](#) within Israel that the IDF is “the most moral army in the world.” As such, the Israeli Knesset passed the so-called “[Breaking the Silence Law](#)” in 2018, which prevents groups that “operate in contradiction with the states’

education goals,” most prominently Breaking the Silence itself, from accessing schools. One day after the latest ceasefire between Israel and Hamas was signed, *Breaking the Silence* and *Standing Together* co-organized a [peace rally](#) on Tel Aviv’s Habima Square, calling for a “joint future” for Arabs and Jews in Israel/Palestine, which was attended by several thousand people, including the famous author, David Grossman.

The primary criticism against P2P peacebuilding activities is that, despite their inspirational symbolism, they are merely a drop on the hot stone – an unrealistic utopia amidst a perennial tinderbox. And indeed, grassroots peacebuilding, aimed at incrementally transforming the hearts and minds of Israelis and Palestinians, remains too few and far between the sensationalist headlines of rocket strikes and vigilante violence. Nor has it permeated the political arena, mainly because the hawkish security narratives on both sides have gained influence since the stalling and subsequent failure of the Oslo peace process.

The failure of Oslo itself can also be traced back to a lack of conflict transformation, which allowed the nationalist hawks on both sides to successfully torpedo the peace plan. This indicates that top-down conflict resolution without bottom-up conflict transformation will prove fragile and unsustainable due to a lack of genuine willingness to cooperate, compromise and reconcile. Conflict transformation by means of a widespread change in attitude, and thus narrative, is a prerequisite for even the best conflict resolution model to succeed. P2P peacebuilding is one vital way of working towards achieving that transformation.

Not all people-to-people work is as exciting as the activities presented above. It is, however, equally important. Hundreds of P2P peacebuilding organizations exist in Israel/Palestine. Many of them provide basic services like healthcare, education or

access to water, and bring together Israelis and Palestinians through joint activities, workshops and entrepreneurial programs. Currently, the transformative potential of P2P peacebuilding is greatly stymied by the discursive predominance of dehumanizing narratives. The key to unlocking this potential primarily lies in the scalability of P2P work.

Whether an activity can be scaled, and thus have an impact, or not, often depends on funding. While the Trump administration had cut off much funding for P2P peacebuilding activities, prospects do not look as bleak anymore. Last December, the United States Congress [passed](#) the Nita M. Lowey Middle East Partnership for Peace Act (MEPPA), which will deliver \$250 million over five years to projects that support peacebuilding and Palestinian economic development. MEPPA constitutes the largest investment ever in the region's peacebuilders. Currently, a bipartisan group of more than 65 UK lawmakers is [lobbying](#) the United Kingdom to use the 2021 G7 Summit to work with the United States "in establishing an International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace."

It is easy to succumb to the pitfall of cynically writing off peacebuilding in Israel/Palestine as a futile endeavor – as a drop on the hot stone. But the drops are increasing, and if genuinely embraced and properly scaled, they do have the potential to transcend the cycle of violence, transform the conflict and "cool down the hot stone." For we have so tragically been reminded of the urgent necessity to do so.

Bibliography

Alliance for Middle East Peace. (2021, June 1). More than 65 MPs and Lords call on U.K. to use G7 to create International Fund. <https://www.allmep.org/news/more-than-65-mps-and->

lords-call-on-u-k-to-use-g7-to-create
international-fund/

Barak, J. (2018, April 15). Reality Check: The most moral army in the world. Really? The Jerusalem Post. <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/reality-check-the-most-moral-army-in-the-world-really-54906>

Candlelight Vigil with Bereaved Israelis and Palestinians. (2021, May 21). Parents Circle Friends. <https://parentscirclefriends.org/vigil/>

Combatants for Peace. (2021, May 21). Israeli troops attacked on Friday midday a nonviolent protest at the tunnel checkpoint north of Bethlehem and detained eight activists, [Facebook Post]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/c4peace/posts/3694280664015733>

Halbfinger, D. M. (2020, April 28). Israelis and Palestinians Remember the Slain, Home Alone or Online En Masse. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/27/world/middleeast/israel-palestinian-memorial-day.html>

Hasson, N. (2021, April 22). Dozens wounded in far-right, anti-Arab Jerusalem protest. Haaretz.Com. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-we-re-burning-arabs-today-jewish-supracists-gear-up-for-jerusalem-march-1.9737755>

Kershner, I. (2021, May 14). In Mixed Israel Cities Proud of Good Relations, a Sudden, Explosive Division. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/13/world/asia/israel-lod-arab-jewish.html>

Meisler, G. (n.d.). The Joint Memorial Day Ceremony 2021. Parents Circle Families Forum. Retrieved June 21, 2021, from https://www.theparentscircle.org/en/live_ceremony_2021-4/

Peleg, B. (2021, May 22). Thousands join Tel Aviv rally for “a joint future” after Israel-Gaza fighting, Jewish-Arab violence. Haaretz.Com. https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-thousands-rally-for-a-joint-future-after-gaza-fighting-jewish-arab-violence-1.9833802?utm_source=mailchimp&utm_medium=marketing&utm_campaign=Best-of-Haaretz&utm_content=cb0923c031

Samuels, B. (2021, June 1). Congress gave Biden new tool to advance Mideast peace. Now he could actually use it. Haaretz.Com. <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium-congress-gave-biden-new-tool-to-advance-mideast-peace-now-he-could-actually-use-it-1.9864217>

Tag, N. (2021, May 21). Jerusalem’s Longest Human Peace Chain Hugs the Walls of the City. Scoop Empire. <https://scoopempire.com/jeruselems-longest-human-peace-chain-hugs-the-walls-of-the-cit/>

“The cycle of violence must stop.” (2021, May 14). [Video]. MSN. <https://www.msn.com/en-us/travel/travel-trivia/the-cycle-of-violence-must-stop/vp-BB1gKcn>