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OPINION: There's a quiet revolution underway in Israel-Palestinian peacebuilding

Those facilitating dialogue between enemies launch a new initiative involving 15 organisations working towards Middle East peace

By **MEHRA RIMER AND MEREDITH ROTHBART**

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Jewish settlers hold an Israeli flag after they put up a fence in the West Bank village of Khirbet Ein al-Hilweh, in the Jordan Valley. (AP Photo/Nasser Ishtayah, File)

If you have supported an unsuccessful political party in recent elections, you might be shaking a bit right now. How can the political pendulums in the UK, Israel, the US and beyond swing so intensely from extreme to extreme? And what can we do about it?

We – Mehra (an Iranian-Swiss Muslim) and Meredith (an Israeli-American Jew) – are totally with you. We work in peacebuilding. Together we provide capacity building, funding, networking, and visibility for Israeli and Palestinian NGOs.

In our work, direct enemies engage with each other regularly, acknowledging each others' pain and fears alongside the desire to live a better life. While writing angry social media posts and opinion pieces may be more cathartic, it isn't as productive. Real change starts within our day-to-day interactions. Believe it or not, there is a quiet revolution of Israeli and Palestinian civil society leaders leading this change.

Fifteen of our NGOs came together this week to launch a new initiative, the Build Peace Campaign. This may not seem ground-breaking at first glance, but anyone who has worked with non-profits knows how complicated it can be to align on anything. And we didn't just bring any organisations. Those participating have undergone extensive strategic planning and capacity building to ensure they run professionally, effectively, and transparently.

These NGOs are strategising and scaling together in line with a promised influx of international funding, foremost from the US government, that should lead to the establishment of an international fund modelled after the International Fund for Ireland.

The Troubles saw more conflict-related deaths per capita than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. At the time of IFI's founding, their leaders refused to meet under any circumstance, let alone to discuss a peace that seemed impossible. IFI created the social, economic, and political foundations upon which peace was secured about a decade later.

Interestingly, this is where the Israeli-Palestinian conflict stands now. Our leaders will not engage; the diplomatic community is keeping distance, and we noticed that virtually all efforts for Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding were stifled due to lack of professional skills, organisational infrastructure, and access to funds.

Yet thankfully, much of that is changing. In the last 2 years, leading NGOs are building capacity and scaling their work. They are preparing for an international fund that is in the works, likely to launch in the next two years.

In the meantime, the Build Peace initiative enables anyone who is passionate about this cause to play a meaningful part. This campaign supports those working to improve the day-to-day lives of both Israelis and Palestinians in concrete ways.

Participating organisations include: Lissan, which helps Palestinian women in East Jerusalem access the Israeli job market and higher education, navigate public services and the healthcare system; Roots-Shorashim-Judor, which brings Jews and Arabs together across Judea & Samaria/the West Bank; The Rossing Center for Education and Dialogue, which trains teachers in Jewish and Arab schools across the country to facilitate difficult conversations about the other in society and tackling xenophobia in the classroom; Tech2Peace, which sends hundreds of Israeli and Palestinian through intensive tech and dialogue bootcamps; and others.

Their missions may not sound like "traditional" efforts focused on dialogue. That's because most people don't think of women's empowerment, access to healthcare, language instruction and technology as 'peace' programs. But if we take a step back and think of what a more peaceful reality actually looks like, these are the key ingredients.

The alternative is bleak – sitting angrily on our own sides, hurt and anxious about the future. But there is an answer. Alone, we barely cross the threshold of relevance. This is the time to reach out and connect. To work together to create the change we need so badly. The moment has never been so ripe.

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