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Master's Thesis in Holocaust and Genocide Studies

# INTERGROUP CONTACT BEYOND BORDERS AND HISTORICAL TRAUMA

## *A case study of the Jerusalem Youth Chorus*

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*In memory of my grandmother Azniv, whose whispers carried me back to Jerusalem.*

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# *Acknowledgements*

Writing this thesis has been as much a part of a personal odyssey into my family roots as it has been an academic one. In 1948 amidst the rising tides of war, my Armenian grandparents left their homeland, Jerusalem, behind. Alas, the stories and the memories of this event have been lost. 75 years later, this untold past became the driving force behind this (re)search. It had me wondering: how can the young generation of Israelis and Palestinians find “a will to meaning” (Frankl 1992)? How can that meaning motivate them to become *border-crossers*?

A number of hurdles delayed the empirical collection of answers to these questions, the most significant one being, ironically enough, the global border closure policies that arose in the wake of the recent pandemic. But last year, as the world (and myself) began to recover from this rupture in ties, a series of serendipities brought me to the doorsteps of the Jerusalem Youth Chorus, an Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding program that gave the long-sought existential validation to my research endeavours.

An equally important motive power has been my supervisor, Professor Roland Kostić, without whom this thesis would not have been possible. I owe him a special debt of gratitude and respect for his invaluable guidance, careful listening, and unwavering confidence in my ability to give roots to this research.

All my gratitude goes to the choristers who lent their voices to this project. I want to thank them for their generosity of heart and patience in answering my questions. It gives me some satisfaction to think that this thesis will contribute to make their insights and chiming

voices audible to the people who, like me, have developed a deep fascination for Jerusalem and would like to see more harmony in it.

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As ever, to my family who, from near and far, gave me a sense of direction throughout the many valleys of doubt and unfinished thoughts which, little did I know, could transmute into a finish line.

## *Abbreviations*

| | |
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| ICT | Intergroup Contact Theory |
| JYC | Jerusalem Youth Chorus |
| SIT | Social Identity Theory |
| SS | Societal Security |
| ST | Securitization Theory |

## *Introduction*

“The very relationship with the other is the relationship with the future” (Levinas 1994). These words written in 1948 by Emmanuel Levinas could enlighten all settings of intractable conflict around the world, where relationships across ethnonational boundaries seldom thrive, let alone intersect. Academia situates this rift in the zero-sum rhetoric of political elites, who play a significant role in securitizing intergroup relationships by presenting the rival *other* as an existential threat to the survival of the in-group and to the shared identity it sustains (Waever 1993). Memories of historical trauma are pivotal to this *mors tua vita mea* battle. As important identity markers, they are often manipulated in such a way as to resurrect old fears about group survival and legitimate escalatory actions against the out-group. This, in turn, imposes on the youth a society with negligible levels of contact and trust between the conflicting sides. Breaking the conflict deadlock thus becomes in part a question of how to overcome identity and mnemonic divisions at the level of local communities through positive intergroup contact, conflict resolution scholars have argued. The present paper ambitions to explore this praxis in Israel—a typical case of a protracted dispute overshadowed by unresolved collective traumas, where grassroots-led rapprochement routines have nevertheless persevered in the past decades. However, the ability of these encounters to enable sustainable relationship transformation is controversial. This thesis provides a stepping-stone in the development of this scholarship by presenting the findings of a field study conducted in 2022 with sixteen alumni members of an Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding program, the Jerusalem Youth Chorus.

## Research problem and aims

The central aim of this thesis lies in exploring the effects of intergroup contact on identity boundaries and associated mnemonic markers among members of majority and minority ethnic groups engulfed in the protracted Arab-Israeli conflict. Although the body of literature on reconciliation is rich in its emphasis on the grassroots level, the particular nexus between intergroup contact and desecuritization has so far been an underdeveloped field of research. Additionally, much of the existing scholarship has failed to adopt the long-term, artistic perspective that is needed to study the transformation of relationships in conflict. Yet, I call for a consideration of how reconciliation programs require skill, creativity, and large doses of patience. By extension, I argue that gaining empirical knowledge about the specific features of these programs—the communal fabric members of opposing groups are sewn into—and the lasting impact of these activities in a societal context ripe for violence and threat, is of critical importance.

## Disposition

This thesis is structured around three main segments. The first part develops a review of the existing literature relevant to this study in order to identify the lacunae that it is seeking to bridge. This inquiry is evenly divided between a theoretical and an empirical part. Part I examines the literature that helps to appreciate the nexus between social identity and intractable conflict. Specifically, it engages with the concept of identity securitization and the relevance of collective memory in this process. Following this, it proceeds to examine the relationship between desecuritization and intergroup contact, by exposing the most pertinent findings from the scholarship in this regard. This will set the puzzle of whether intergroup contact is a compelling tool to desecuritize certain aspects of social identity. Part II engages with the empirical part of this review by focusing more narrowly on the Israeli context. It casts light on a body of research on Jewish-Arab intergroup encounters that has empirically addressed the nexus under investigation. This section culminates on the identification of two significant lacunae which become the starting point of my case study. The second part of this paper establishes a framework of analysis, which brings into conversation the insights from three theoretical approaches—Social Identity Theory, Securitization Theory, and Intergroup Contact Theory—and their intersections with collective memory. Integrated together, these theories reiterate the puzzle explicated *supra*, and reaffirm the roots of the research question it seeks to answer. The third and final segment of this study is dedicated to the empirical analysis – major *pièce de resistance* – which serves to empirically implement the theoretical framework established earlier. To give the reader a clear understanding of the socio-political context within which the case study takes place, a historical background of the Arab-Jewish conflict is offered, followed by a succinct description of the Israeli encounter program under investigation. Following this, the findings of fieldwork conducted at the Jerusalem Youth Chorus are presented with the promise of bringing fresh light on the theoretical and empirical puzzles drawn from the earlier two segments of this thesis. A tentative, yet compelling, conclusion is reached on the challenges and transformative opportunities that can be opened by engaging sustainably in intergroup contact.

## *Research Overview*

The aim of this section is to review the relevant theoretical and empirical literature on intergroup contact in order to outline the potential and the limits of this scholarship with reference to desecuritization. The theoretical component of this review begins with a succinct description of the identity securitization process and its reversible nature. It then proceeds to discuss contact theory and provides a review of selected research in this literature that offer compelling insights on the relationship between contact, identity, and collective memory. Thereafter, the empirical review of this research exposes the most relevant findings on intergroup contact in Israel, followed by an overview of the knowns and the unknowns.

### **Identity securitization, a two-way process**

Intractable conflicts can be defined as deep-rooted, generation-long conflicts, with a longstanding history of unfruitful attempts to reconcile the disputing parties. Beyond the physical threats that they pose to the parties' existence, they primarily tell of existential and basic needs – things such as identity and security – viewed as critical to the survival of ethnonational groups, yet largely unsatisfied (Theiler 2003). In such circumstances, political leaders play a major role in shaping ethnonational identities that are rooted in the denial of the out-group's existence and identity (Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde 1998). These "identity entrepreneurs" sometimes go as far as securitizing the out-group by discursively convincing their community that it represents an existential threat to the survival of the in-group's identity and culture

(Abulof 2014: 937). In practice, these discourses stir the public into identifying with a series of beliefs, concepts, or things subjected to securitization – things such as collective memory – which further support the exclusiveness of identities and make group boundaries more robust (Branscombe et al., 1999; Doosje et al., 2002). In line with this, scholar-practitioner Herbert C. Kelman (1999) has argued that intractable conflicts create a "zero-sum dynamic between identities", such that the expression of out-group identity comes to be perceived as threatening to the integrity and existence of the community's identity. Going one step further, Livingstone and Haslam (2008: 3) have proposed that conflict may in itself become a crucial aspect of in-group identity, such that a person's adherence to a particular social group (its content and boundaries) is conditioned to negative relations with a particular out-group.

The point at issue is that, intractable conflicts generate monolithic identities, in the meaning that all the dimensions of a group's identity tend to be viewed as highly correlated. As a result, members of groups in conflict are fully separated along *all* boundaries – be they ethnic, political, religious or mnemonical – and are thereby discouraged from engaging in cross-community relations (Tropp 2015: 163). Yet, as Kelman (2001) contended, conflict transformation requires some level of "disaggregation" of essentialist understandings of group identities and the boundaries that constitute them. A growing number of constructivist IR scholars have, in this regard, suggested something similar. By underscoring the dialectical nature of securitization, they stress that society members, or "the audience", have the analogous agency and power to either endorse or destabilize the initial categorisers' understandings of identity and memory and, in the latter case, stimulate a progressive rapprochement with the *other* (Buzan et al. 1998: 28-31; Balzacq 2005; Stritzel 2007; Huysmans 2006, 2011). This fluid and dynamic conception of identity is built to a large extent on social psychology, which chiefly understands social identity as a "dynamic process" (Haslam 2004), namely a *construct* that is actively shaped by the broader social environment. Notwithstanding its undeniable rigidity and perceived unmalleability in settings of protracted conflict, social psychologists have been arguing that identity is largely constructed out of experience, and these experiences can be ordered in different ways, thereby resulting in different boundaries (Kelman 1998; Tilly 2002, 2005; Strömbom 2010).

Against this backdrop, advocates of intergroup contact have argued that mixed encounter programs may be a powerful enabler for creating new types of interaction and for disrupting intergroup relations based on fear and threat. Supposedly moving past conflict norms, the people involved in these activities are encouraged to engage in perspective-taking and gain insight into the depth of the out-group's fears and grievances alongside their own. As such experiences multiply, and as the learnings generated by them are infused into each group's sociocultural environment, the assumption is that intergroup contact may positively transform collective identity by removing the negation of the out-group's identity as an element of the in-group's identity, and by recognizing the possibility of a cross-group partnership as a new element of their identity (see, most prominently, Reicher 1995; Kelman 1998, Salomon 2004, 2006; Maoz 2011).

## Intergroup contact and the desecuritization of identities

Of all the strategies that have been suggested to overcome the ontological aspects of conflict, intergroup contact has seen the widest application and represents a major pillar of grassroots-level peacebuilding activities (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Celebrated for the potential it holds to enhance the permeability of boundaries between groups in conflict and to mitigate the effects of prejudice, fear, and hatred, the strategy has received sustained attention in the past seven decades (Hewstone and Greenland 2000: 140).

Overall, studies have shown that the amount of interaction between communal groups can explain the difference between more peaceful societies to ones with more violence (e.g., Varshney 2002)[1]. The general idea is that, if a lack of contact reinforces intergroup bias and prejudice, contact between the members of identity groups can serve to overcome it (Pettigrew 1998). As members of identity groups connect, their preconceptions about the *other* can be challenged, commonalities across ethnic lines can arise, and accentuated distinctiveness is reduced (Cuhadar and Dayton 2011: 277).

Notwithstanding that, most researchers today agree with and even emphasize the point that an increase in contact *per se* cannot be considered “a general panacea” for producing a positive change in ethnic attitudes and relations (see Ben-Ari and Amir 1988; Gaertner, Riek, Dovidio et al. 2009: 87; Al-Ramiah and Hewstone 2013: 538). Instead, the scholarship argues that certain conditions need to be met for contact to be positive, and that it is foremost the nature and the quality of contact, as well as the societal context in which it occurs, that will determine the outcome. It follows that more intergroup contact can either induce “greater prejudice and rejection” (i.e., reinforce us-versus-them identity boundaries) or “greater respect and acceptance” (i.e., de-stabilize such boundaries) (Pettigrew 1971: 275).

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[1] Ashutosh Varshney’s long-term study of Indian cities compared more peaceful cities to ones facing more violence and found that in the cities that allowed for more interaction, intercommunal relations were more harmonious.

That increased levels of positive contact across communal boundaries can lead to improved relations between groups in conflict is the core assertion of the ‘Contact Hypothesis’. Following an interactionist perspective, Allport (1954) formally proposed that structured contact between members of opposing groups may re-adjust perceptions between members of rival communities and mitigate prejudice between them (see Pettigrew & Tropp 2011 for a review). Accordingly, the psychologist identified a set of conditions under which the sharing of a social setting by two or more groups decreases prejudice. In Allport’s words, prejudice

> may be reduced by *equal status* contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of *common goals*. The effect is greatly enhanced if this contact is sanctioned by *institutional supports* (i.e., by law, custom, or local atmosphere), and provided it is of a sort that leads to the perception of *common interests* and *common humanity* between members of the two groups (Allport 1954: 281, emphasis added)[2].

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[2] Pettigrew (1998) added to the research by showing how cross-group friendships are one of the most beneficial forms of intergroup contact. To date, cross-group friendship potential is viewed as a compelling fifth condition for successful contact.

The foregoing clarifies that contact must take place within a controlled environment as opposed to contingent, every-day interactions[3]. According to Allport, this optimal setting is conducive to greater intercultural understanding, which constitutes an important step toward dissolving ignorance and, *ipso facto*, curtailing prejudice (Pettigrew 1998)[4].

Following decades of research, there now exists extensive empirical evidence in support of this hypothesis (for a meta-analytic review, see Pettigrew & Tropp 2006). Yet, these conditions may be hard to achieve in a societal context of structural violence and power asymmetry. In particular, the hurdle of achieving equal status between groups in a societal context of severe asymmetry has been highlighted by many (e.g. Malhotra and Lyanage 2005: 912; Hammack 2013: 299).

Since Allport, the research field evolved and scholars have advanced a set of additional mediators that explain why the enumerated pre-conditions achieve their effects. In particular, contemporary research suggests that positive contact can foster more positive intergroup relations by changing how we understand our social identities. A second part of the story thus concerns the impact of contact on the social categorization process (Allport 1954; Brewer 1996; Pettigrew & Tropp 2006), i.e., in forming, augmenting, or reducing identity salience. In accordance with the scope conditions advanced by the Contact Hypothesis, research in social psychology proposes that encountering members of out-groups can, under the right conditions, induce people to espouse more inclusive social identities that include out-group members, and that this should lower prejudice and discrimination against them (Hewstone and Brown 1986; Dovidio et al. 2011; Turner et al. 2008).

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[3] This idea is very similar to that of Professor Ashutosh Varshney, who established a distinction between quotidian and associational forms of engagement, arguing that the latter was more effective in bringing about peace and de-construct ethnic lines on a larger scale (Varshney 2001: 363).

[4] The prejudice-reducing effect of contact has most impressively been verified through convincing evidence accumulated by Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) meta-analysis of 515 studies, the results of which point to a significant negative relationship between contact and prejudice.

On the one hand, encounters between rival groups that are based on the Joints Projects Model (Maoz 2011) view cooperation as an important resource that can help groups escape the logic of identity polarization and reduce intergroup bias (Allport 1954; Dovidio et al. 2016; Paluck & Green 2009). This approach to contact proposes that a shared task which is stirred toward achieving a common goal that is relevant to both groups will bring them closer together and promote a shared super-ordinate identity (Nadler 2004). Psychologically, if people join forces toward a common objective, they are likely to view themselves as sharing a common group membership, or a superordinate identity, with others who pursue the same goal. The perception of a common identity between an in-group and an out-group may in turn work to de-emphasize the identities that divide groups and therefore be an important step to achieving reconciliation between groups with histories of conflict. Accordingly, creating stronger feelings that people are now members of one group has been found to promote perceptions of common fate (Brewer 2000), encourage pro-social attitude across group lines (Dovidio, Gaertner & Loux 2000) and foster intergroup forgiveness (Wohl & Branscombe 2005). Notwithstanding the merits of such joint projects, in recent years, scholars have begun to question the value of focusing on cross-group commonalities on the basis that it may overlook deeply entrenched power asymmetries (see Saguy 2018).

Another widely appraised approach to contact is the Narrative Model (Maoz 2011), which has been found to be a compelling mechanism through which people get an opportunity to move beyond political narratives and political stereotypes which, left unaddressed, can create obstacles to the development of more positive relationships. According to this approach, creating a "more complex image" of the out-group may lead to the recognition and legitimization of the out-group's collective narrative (Adwan & Bar-On 2004; Aiken 2010; Bar-On 2006, 2008, 2009). This mode of encounter is largely appraised for generating intimate ties alongside the acknowledgement of the conflict and of power relations. It is based on the theoretical approach of intergroup reconciliation advanced by Salomon (2004), and to a larger extent with the theory and practice put forward by Israeli psychologist Dan Bar-On (2006, 2008, 2009; Bar-On & Kassem 2004). According to Salomon (2004), intergroup reconciliation programs should mainly focus on changing collective narratives of groups in conflict and their implied delegitimization of the out-group's narrative. In line with this, Bar-On's theoretical approach to encounter and dialogue is based on the belief that reconciliation can only be reached when ethnic groups in protracted conflict deal with unresolved anger and suffering through story-telling, appraised inter alia for its ability to generate a "more nuanced and empathetic understanding of the past" (Aiken 2010: 186).

In the past 70 years, Allport's contact hypothesis has inspired reconciliation intervention programs around the world (Maoz 2018). Intergroup contact interventions (also known as "people-to-people" activities) such as joint schooling, intergroup dialogue, sports and cultural events, are broadly utilized in peacebuilding as strategic initiatives in contexts of intercommunal violence, including between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, Greek and Turkish Cypriots, and Israelis and Palestinians (e.g., Maoz 2000, 2002, 2003; Ron et al. 2010; Abu-Nimer 2004). These reconciliation efforts largely aim to rehumanize the other side by linking groups through a common aspiration to peace and prosperity (Pundak, Ben-Nur and Finkel 2012; Hameiri, Bar-Tal, & Halperin 2014; Nadler & Saguy 2004). Findings from Sri Lanka (Malhotra and Liyanage 2005), Northern Ireland (Hewtstone et al., 2006) and Cyprus (Fischer 1994) indicate a positive relation between intergroup contact and prejudice reduction. In the Balkans, Cehajic, Brown, and Castano (2008) found that although Bosnian Muslims they surveyed were reluctant to forgive Bosnian Serbs for their actions during the war, they were more amenable to do so following intergroup contact. In the same vein, Čehajić & Brown (2010) reported that among Serbian adolescents in Bosnia-Herzegovina, both the quality and the quantity of contact with Bosnian Muslims was associated with less competitive victimhood and an increase in perspective taking. Consistently, a study conducted by Andrighetto, Mari, Volpato & Behluli (2012) has shown that in the segregated society of Kosovo, where immediate contact with the other group is rare, Kosovo Albanian high school students who had more extended contact were less inclined to express competitive victimhood following the enlarged perspective stemming from contact with the out-group (for similar results, see Puhalo, Petrović, & Perišić, 2010, Turjačanin & Majstorović, 2013). In line with this, a large body of evidence from Northern Ireland points to the positive impact of intergroup contact, which was found to produce intercommunal empathy and enhancing the ability of participants to understand the perspective of the out-group (Donno et al. 2021: 414). In particular, increasing levels of intercommunal contact and dialogue between Protestants and Catholics has been beneficial in increasing intergroup forgiveness (Hewstone et al. 2006), reducing support for political violence, inducing “less highly polarized and monolithic” perceptions of group identity (Hewstone, Hughes, and Cairns 2008), and fostering higher identification with a more inclusive “Northern Irish identity” (Muldoon, McNamara, Devine and Trew 2008).

Admittedly, these findings show that people have the ability to discover commonalities in grievances, beyond the boundaries of groups they are associated with. Yet, there are also risks linked to overly inclusive peace programs that fail to recognize power differences and resultant inequalities in experiences between groups. Notwithstanding the merits of these models, a growing number of scholars have argued that these conflict-resolution strategies are much more limited in practice and may be unrealistic in conflict-ridden or identity threatening contexts (e.g., Saguy 2018; Shi et al. 2017; Gaertner et al. 2000). When groups are involved in intense and prolonged conflicts, they are likely to feel threatened by exceedingly inclusive categories that overlook distinctiveness needs (e.g., minority group members who risk being assimilated to a superordinate category dominated by majority-group members). Moreover, participants may experience growing frustration and disappointment in relation to the lack of change that comes after the positive contact experience (Nadler & Saguy 2004). This may in turn fuel hostile intergroup relations, especially in settings where groups differ in size, status, and power (Horsney & Hogg 2000). An optimal intergroup contact environment would therefore be one in which a dual identity can take place, whereby connection (superordinate group identity) and difference (original sub-group identity) coexist together (Gaertner, Riek, Dovidio et al. 2009: 97)[5]. Admittedly, this balance can be hard to strike in contexts of heightened conflict, where group boundaries are particularly salient. In the following, I shall expose how, in Israel, intergroup contact can also become difficult experiences in which social categories are reified.

## Intergroup contact and peacebuilding in Israel

In Israel, the tradition of intergroup contact is a long-standing one and has begun as early as the 1950s (Maoz 2011). The strategy received a fresh impetus with the Oslo Accords, signed in 1993 and 1995, which brought to the fore a plethora of face-to-face projects instigated by local and international organizations, both at the official level and within grassroots communities (Abu-Nimer 1999; Maoz 2004: 566; David 2020: 70). Many of the goals associated with these peacebuilding programs are rooted in a social psychological understanding of identity conflicts as outlined by Allport's (1954) Contact Hypothesis, whereby people in conflict lack knowledge of the other side and need opportunities to properly meet. The assumption is that once contact occurs, the stereotypic homogenization of the other will be gradually removed and new coalitions across ethnic divides will arise.

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[5] For a review on the problems with inclusivity in the context of structural inequalities and unequal power relations, see Dovidio, Gaertner, Ufkes, Saguy, & Pearson, 2016.

In practice, encounter programs in Israel take various shapes and forms, from those with a problem-solving purpose, to those centred on dialogue, to those focusing on cultural and musical joint activities. What holds true to all of them is that they seek to build bridges between antagonistic ethnonational communities living in a setting defined by structural inequality and asymmetric power-relations. Markedly, these reconciliation efforts tend to capitalize on the benefits of a common identity (Maoz 2011). In particular, projects in education (e.g., bringing students from rival groups to study together), arts (e.g., bringing artists together to work on a common project) and dialogue workshops based on the “facing the past agenda”, have largely flourished in the mid-1990s and continue to prosper to this day (Nadler & Saguy 2004). Despite the vastness of these peace movements, the predictions of the contact hypothesis are far from confirmed (Maoz 2011). Rather, the structural dynamics of the conflict can and do penetrate these activities, thereby damaging interactions therein (Abu-Nimer 1999; Maoz 2000).

A central theme of much of the scholarship on intergroup contact in Israel has been its ability to transform beliefs about peace (Biton & Salomon 2006; Lazarus 2011), promote positive intergroup relations among participants (Salomon 2006, 2009) and foster social change by focusing on collective action tendencies (Lazarus 2011; Saguy 2017). Overall, it highlights multiple perspectives regarding whether, how, and under what conditions encounter programs can generate meaningful change. Although identity is at the heart of the conflict between Jews and Palestinians in Israel (Kelman 1999), only a small fringe of the literature has studied the ways in which these programs create conditions for social identity change, and how this change lasts over years and decades. In particular, the literature does not systematically address the traumatic dimension of social identity, namely, how participants understand and perceive the out-group's collective trauma following participation. Yet, I argue that this area of focus is fundamental for the reason that in Israel, collective memory has become "a dominant form of belonging" (Stockwell 2019: 104) and is thus very much intertwined with claims of ethnonational identity. Therefore, an examination of such claims and the link between their formation and participation in intergroup contact is crucial to understand whether encounter programs carried out in a protracted conflict can reasonably be expected to reach their underlying aims.

In the following, I expose the literature addressing the impact of intergroup contact on group boundaries and group membership, the findings of which reveal conflicting viewpoints. Whereas some have found that peace encounters open a space for challenging identity polarization and hegemonic discourses on the past (e.g., Bar-On & Kassem 2004; Ron & Maoz 2013a, b), a growing number of critical scholars have described these activities as a site of identity competition that crystallizes intergroup relations as they exist on the macro level (e.g., Helman 2002; Hammack 2006, 2009; Hammack 2014; David 2019).

### *Identity, memory, and intergroup contact*

In Israel, efforts to challenge identity boundaries and channel interactions towards commonality have been undertaken. Noteworthy are mixed Jewish-Arab schools, which expose and acknowledge both Jewish and Palestinian historical experiences in their formal curriculum, thereby refusing to be in the service of ethnocentric agendas (see Adwan & Bar-On 2004; Zembylas & Bekerman 2008; Bekerman & Zembylas 2009. This field of study, known as "critical pedagogy of history", explores possibilities for re-conceptualizing identity and memory as "non-divisive constructs" within educational settings; they can be seen as an extension of the logic of dialogue groups. In this field, most prominent is the work of Zembylas & Bekerman's (2008, 2009, 2010, 2011), which empirically explores limits and opportunities amongst teachers and students for resisting binary dichotomies and a static concept of identity through the introduction of "dangerous memories" (Metz 1972). Drawing upon years of ethnographic research in an integrated bilingual Arabic-Hebrew school in Israel, their findings point to the great challenges of exposing students to narrative plurality on issues as salient as collective identity and historical trauma in a societal context where hegemonic powers work hard to sustain a conflict-perpetuating *ethos*. Looking closely at the experiences of both students and teachers, the scholars note that moments of hybrid openings that question the validity of essentialist understandings of collective identity *can* and *do* arise in dialogue, while also observing that groups easily fall back into their respective hegemonic identity categories. Their findings present a complex and ambivalent picture of these encounters, which open possibilities for convergence based on empathizing with the out-group's past suffering, whilst echoing state-sponsored ethno-national narratives (Bekerman & Zembylas 2009).

Another line of research concerned with memory has examined, outside the strict perimeter of schools, the effects of intergroup dialogue sessions promoting a “facing the past agenda”. On one side of the spectrum, evidence suggests that encountering the narratives of suffering of out-groups in dialogue augments recognition of them. Noteworthy is Ron and Maoz’s (2013) research program that examines the effects of exposure to the contesting narrative of the out-group (Ron and Maoz 2013; Ron et al. 2010). They explore the extent to which the continuous involvement of Israeli Jewish group facilitators with Arab citizens of Israel can lead to an ideological shift (Ron et al. 2010). Rooted in the Narrative Approach to contact, their study attests that long-term, face-to-face dialogue encounters enabled Jewish participants to forge “a new consciousness and a moral response to the suffering and distress of the Palestinian other”. Although an array of studies have similarly underscored the positive effects of encountering the out-group’s narrative of suffering in dialogue (e.g., Ron, Maoz and Bekerman 2010; more recently, Zigenlaub & Sagy 2020), this research is limited by the fact that the only segment which underwent examination is the majority group (i.e., Jewish Israelis), the experience of which most likely differed substantially from that of the minority (i.e., Palestinian Israelis).

On the other side of the spectrum lies an ever-expanding group of studies that is more critical of the benefits of intergroup contact in situations of structural inequality, on the basis that it reifies social identity. In the main, the argument holds that participants continue to be captive to the particular boundaries of their own community (e.g., Helman 2002; Hammack 2006, 2009a; Hammack & Pilecki 2014;

David 2019, 2020). In this field, significant is the work of Hammack and Pilecki (2014, 2015), which focuses on prospects of narrative reconciliation within North American-based youth encounter programs. Using a multi-method approach (i.e., coexistence facilitation paradigm vs. confrontational), their work empirically analyses the process of social category formation in intergroup dialogue among Israeli and Palestinian youth. Their studies point to the “reproductive role of intergroup dialogue” in settings of high intractability and the inescapable pattern of competitive victimhood that characterizes both parties’ narratives. In particular, they argue that in a context where historical categories are made salient, participants who are made aware of their history will most likely follow the historical positions of their groups, and will less often show critical awareness about the politics of identity in conflict. Precisely, acknowledging the rival’s narrative of suffering *within* the contact setting appears to “threaten the moral status of the in-group and undercuts the struggle that gives national identity meaning” (Pilecki & Hammack 2014: 109; for similar views, see Bilewicz 2007). Secondly, their research underscores the limitations of these programs in producing long-term identity shifts in their participants. Instead, they suggest that upon their return to their home, close proximity with the dominant discourse in society will most likely lead them to conform to a master narrative that gives them a sense of “security and solidarity” (Hammack 2011: 321). In the same vein, Lea David’s (2020) long-term study on Israeli/Palestinian peace encounters promoting a ‘dealing with the past’ agenda has shown that, instead of blurring ethnic and religious identities, dialogic encounters between Israeli Jewish and Palestinian participants crystallize historical narratives, which are evoked as a valuable part of their identity. This, in turn, leads to greater ethnicization of each group and the upholding of essentialist identities. Notwithstanding the identity homogenisation produced, David argues that these encounters also “shape emotional energy that produces *micro-solidarities* on the ground” (David 2020: 165) (emphasis added). Namely, participants typically report positive feelings of collective effervescence and stronger bonds with out-group members during and shortly after these encounters. Yet, she contends that these “warm feelings” of solidarity produced are ephemeral and bound to be “hijacked by the state apparatus”, while the ritualized nature of these groups’ historical past will stay (David 2020: 165).

### *Empirical limitations*

In light of the above, three observations can be made. Firstly, what transpires from this research catalogue is the promotion of a “victim-centred agenda” as a path to peace and reconciliation. To the best of my knowledge, studies that have investigated the effects of intergroup contact on collective identity and historic representations have done so exclusively within the framework of dialogue encounters that seek to overcome the troubled past. Admittedly, the main presumption behind these encounters is that working through the past is necessary for healing and reconciliation (e.g., Rouhana & Bar-Tal 1998). Yet, the strategy consisting in placing the past at the core of peacebuilding processes has its limitations. The results from these case studies suggests that dialogue stirred toward the history of the conflict will, at best, be limited in their ability to transform group boundaries and, at worst, support the *status quo* by solidifying and reproducing identity polarization.

Second, we lack data on the impact of hybrid people-to-people activities which highlight common interests such as music, the immediate aim of which is to foster learning and shared experience alongside addressing the difficult aspects of conflict. This thesis seeks to address this gap by examining identity and memory claims following participation in encounters based both on the *Joint Projects Model* and the *Narrative Model*, i.e., programs that seek to create a sense of common humanity among participants through involvement in a concrete process of working together whilst, in parallel, stirring them into difficult conversations about the conflict through dialogue.

Lastly, a crucial point that has been repeatedly stressed across this research panorama is the uncertainty surrounding the ability of intergroup contact to mitigate identity boundaries outside the socially engineered setting of contact (e.g., Thiessen & Darweish 2018). Yet, these studies have failed to empirically inquire whether contact can potentially enable identity change among participants overtime and go beyond the "micro-solidarity" it creates. To a large extent, the literature studies intergroup dynamics discourses that develop within dialogue workshops. In this thesis, I seek to bridge this gap by focusing on identity claims as they are narrated years following program participation. Identity transformation is a long and fragile process, hence the importance of exploring the participants' perceptions in the aftermath of their involvement.

## *Research design*

### I. Theoretical framework

In my ambition to create a theoretical framework that can improve the reader's understanding of the linkages between (1) collective identity, historical trauma, and the securitization process in intractable conflicts, and (2) collective identity and intergroup contact, I incorporated insights from the fields of Social Psychology and International Relations, mobilizing for this purpose three different literatures that have, in some aspects, evolved in isolation.

The aim of this section is to cast light on the intergroup dynamics at stake in times of intractable conflict and the more specific role of memory in rigidifying borders between identity groups. With this, I begin by drawing on the insights of Social Identity Theory (SIT), to which I incorporate some well-established findings from Securitization Theory (ST). Thereafter, I establish a nexus between SIT, ST, and Intergroup Contact Theory (ICT). Taken together, these theories will help the reader to better capture the nature of identity – conceptualized as a socially constructed phenomenon, neither fixed nor rigid but rather, contextually contingent – and the possibility of reshaping intergroup relationships across ethnic lines in a less conflictual and "boundary-drawing" (Strömbom 2010) way.

#### *Social identity theory*

I rely on the findings of Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner 1979; Tajfel 1981) to provide an understanding of human nature with respect to two opposed psychological needs: assimilation and differentiation (Dovidio, Glick, and Rudman 2005: 57). Accordingly, the following pages serve to clarify the mechanisms through which boundaries of identity and community take shape.

SIT largely conceptualizes identity as a product of relational processes, wherein groups define themselves vis-à-vis other groups. It explains the universal process by which individuals structure their understanding of the social world on the basis of shared group memberships and the impact these affiliations have on cognition and behaviour. This universal process, known as *social categorization*, has more specifically been defined as

> the ordering of social environment in terms of social categories, that is of groupings of persons in a manner which is meaningful to the subject. […] In other words, social categorization is a process of bringing together social objects or events in groups which are equivalent with regard to an individual's actions, intentions, attitudes, and systems of beliefs (Tajfel 1974: 69).

By extension, psychologist Tajfel defines social identity as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel 1974: 69). From this perspective, group memberships are viewed as extensions of our sense of self: just as we internalize the categories of our social environment, we internalize our group categorization (Kostić 2007: 25). As a result, the degree to which a person identifies with a group, will influence their attitude towards "outsiders", as either friends or enemies (Horowitz 1985).

In line with this, SIT theorizes on how social categorization entails both accentuation and homogenization of social categories. Namely, it explains the tendency of humans to exacerbate perceived similarities within the in-group and, conversely, to exaggerate differences with the out-group. All things being equal, it follows that the stronger the social identity, the less room it will leave for recognizing individual differences (Theiler 2003).

Furthermore, SIT clarifies how insider-outsider perceptions differ according to group status: majority- and minority-group members do not negotiate their ethno-national identities in the same manner (for a review, see Dovidio et al. 2009). Whereas the former have the choice to either include or exclude minorities from their in-group, minority-group members, on the other hand, can either align themselves with the dominant majority group or seek a common in-group identity with other minorities (Reimer, Kamble, Schmid and Hewstone 2020: 3).

Here, important is the understanding that the social categorization process and the borders it creates serve psychological functions. Namely, it satisfies "basic cognitive and emotional needs" (Theiler 2003: 266). In this regard, SIT highlights self-inflation through negative stereotyping of others as a primary psychological need. By instilling a strong feeling of group belonging, group identity satisfies people's need for positive differentiation which, in turn, will be predicated on advantageous intergroup evaluations (Tajfel & Turner 1979). Put simply, human beings need a relevant out-group to maximize their quest for positive social status and their sense of self-esteem. By the very nature of belonging to a social group, we endorse a social identity that instils a sense of group loyalty in our behaviour. Thus, when we think of ourselves as sharing the same identity, we tend to be more generous to other members of the in-group (e.g., Tajfel & Turner 1986), feel emotions on its behalf, including the threats directed at it (Stephan & Stephan, 2001). It follows that, once people integrate a group category and acquire a relevant social identity, they generally want to preserve it.

These categories, although at times functional, are implicated in the maintenance of intergroup conflict in at least two ways. The first stems from the identification process itself, which involves the attachment of our sense of self to the group as a whole. In a series of experiments using the "minimal group-paradigm", Tajfel and colleagues found that the identification with a group, however minimal or arbitrary the basis for categorization was, was enough to spark intergroup conflict (Tajfel & Turner 1979). This, in turn, suggests that group categorizations and group differences are *intrinsically* valuable to people (Theiler 2003: 267).

In times of conflict, people are more likely to experience existential anxiety and a concomitant need to identify more strongly with the in-group. In this context, the survival and the legitimacy of their community, seen as a source of security and societal cohesion, are no longer guaranteed. This in turn reinforces the need to defend the in-group's boundaries from intrusion, for preserving one's community becomes essential. Group belonging creates a deep sense of meaning and purpose amongst members and has, in this respect, been found to moderate the effects of political violence, especially in young people (Hammack 2010; Tajfel & Turner 1979).

A key aspect for including in, or excluding from, a given person from one's community is the perception of threat which, in times of conflict, is at its highest both among members of the advantaged and the disadvantaged group, irrespective of group status (Cakal, Hewstone, Guler, and Heath 2016: 734; Tajfel & Turner 1979). According to Bar-Tal (2010: 125), people who identify strongly with the collective will perceive threats to the collective as constituting a direct threat to the self. In this line of thinking, protecting the group ultimately means protecting the *self*. Perceptions of threat are thus what prompts fundamentalist identities that are more salient and intolerant of out-groups to arise (Doosje, Spears, & Ellemers 2002). Another aspect stems from the need for acknowledgement and legitimization of one's group symbols and collective narratives. A group's "worth" is inevitably concomitant to a need of recognition by others. External validation of one's identity is indeed crucial, for it increases self-esteem and reinforces a person's identity. By contrast, subjective perceptions of identity threats to group values and symbols usually provide the base for intergroup antagonism and fear (Bar-Tal 2013). In consequence, the absence of identity recognition is usually concomitant to social identity salience and societal insecurity.

### *Identity boundaries and threatened ethnonational groups*

Securitization Theory (ST) – a neighbouring theory to SIT, developed by the Copenhagen Security School (CSS) – has forged the concept of *societal security* to explain the concerns of an ethnonational group experiencing an "identity threat" as a distinct security threat (Buzan and Waever 1997; Kostić 2007). To put it simply, the Copenhagen School proposes that social identity may be *securitized* in times when a group's societal security is perceived as threatened (Theiler 2003: 251). By "securitization", IR scholars Buzan, Weaver, de Wilde (1998) refer to the process by which a securitizing agent – usually a political actor – discursively identifies an alleged threat to the survival of the community and their shared identity, including a strategy to erase said threat and render society secure again. By persuading the community (i.e., the recipient audience) of the existential threat against it, the securitizing actor elevates the in-group's identity over other identities – it *securitizes* it. Much of ST's rationale is based on the findings in social psychology – and SIT in particular – but without explicit references to these.

Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde (1998: 119) argue that "society is about identity, the self-conception of communities and of individuals identifying with them". According to this perspective, societal security concerns the security of group identity as reflected in common language, cultural and religious practices, and group beliefs (Waever 1993). Simply put, what is at stake is the identity of a society, the meaning of "who we are". In line with this, Barth (1969) views ethnicity as deeply anchored in the perception and the awareness of shared features, as well as perceived intergroup differences. Accordingly, he presents ethnonational groups as collectives whose membership is shaped by a perceived common past, a common culture, a common language, and a common destiny.

In situations of protracted ethnonational conflicts – where state borders and identity borders do not correspond – perceived threats to societal security will often result in the *securitization* of the out-group, i.e., by labelling the other as bearing an existential threat onto the community. Because these conflicts are particularly durable, perceived threats deriving from an ‘enemy’ out-group are likely to become internalized as an integral part of people’s identities, thereby freezing or solidifying their already antagonistic identities. As group boundaries become *securitized*, a tighter, fixed definition of the in-group emerges, thereby opposing more inclusive perceptions of identity. A so-called “societal security dilemma” (Mitzen 2006) occurs when a group’s actions taken to fortify their identity causes a reaction in the out-group, and creates a cycle of reactive measures taken by each side to fortify and preserve their identity, but resulting instead in the insecurity of both (Roe 2004). This dilemma can be assessed in terms of the degree of salience of ethnonational identity and the threats perceived by the members of ethnonational groups. Here, important is the understanding that such threat perceptions to the group’s identity are situated in the community’s *subjective perception*, “regardless of whether this is objectively established or not” (Kostić 2007: 332).

As the foregoing makes clear, the securitization process is driven by the logic of differentiation, for it hardens the boundaries that divide ethnonational communities (Jutila 2015: 939). In an almost self-fulfilling prophecy, when a group is strongly internalized and salient, it becomes more likely to elicit societal security responses, which in turn reinforce its salience, and so on (Theiler 2003). Thus, drawing stable, clearly defined boundaries, satisfy psychological needs for groups involved in conflict – borders are viewed as a source of ontological security and cohesion throughout social and political instability (Kinnvall 2002: 81). In other words, labelling the out-group as a threat is what allows a security-seeking group to present itself as a coherent collective. Placing physical and symbolic distance from the out-group is, thus, the other side of the act of defining intimacy and friendship within the group of affiliation. Furthermore, as identities forged in conflict become deeply internalized, they stand against any change that may threaten their existence. To fend off any challenges to a group's identity, the continuation of conflict may become desirable psychologically, and its resolution a potential source of anxiety (Mitzen 2006; Kinnvall 2002: 81).

Thus, the linkage with SIT becomes clear: in the same way that individuals seek to preserve their internalized group categorizations, they are bound to defend their societal security. Both theories illustrate that, in situations of intractable conflict, we are dealing with well-internalized identities in need of difference to be sustained. Ethnonational communities are in this way defined around an "inside good" versus "outside hostile" binary (Roe 2004). While people are attached to the boundaries that separate them from threatening out-groups, the cultural symbols attached to the group are used as markers to solidify said barrier. This, I explore further in the following section.

### *Identity boundaries and collective memory of trauma*

In this section, I explain how traumatic historic memory may become associated with, or disassociated from, group boundaries and, accordingly, how it may become involved in processes of securitization and desecuritization.

According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), when people identify themselves with a group, they also identify with the characteristics of the community they belong to. In line with this, collective trauma plays a crucial role in the development of identity. Namely, master tragedies that have occurred years, decades, or even a century ago, may feel as though they happened recently, and then form part of the collective identity or the "ethnic consciousness" of a group (Tcholakian, Khapova, van de Loo, and Lehman 2019).

In society, the historical (and traumatic) past is actively reproduced and transmitted to individuals through official historical narratives that provide the formative story of "who *we* are, where *we* have come from and what *we* have been through" as a group (Mälksoo 2015; Anderson 1983) (emphasis added). These narratives – viewed as an important source of ontological security for ethnonational communities – are presented as the collective memory of the nation. Thus, a group's identity is largely connected to what its members remember (Lederach 2005). By "unifying a group through time and space" (Eyerman 2004: 161; Anderson 1983) they become a crucial ingredient for societal cohesion.

In settings of protracted conflict, collective traumas[6] become important "cultural signifiers" (Theiler 2003) or "identity markers" (Volkan 2001), which become "attached" to group boundaries, and therefore become implicated with processes of securitization (Posen 1993: 31). Namely, memory can become opportunistically manipulated by political leaders who selectively choose to evoke (or erase) certain historical events in ways that support the in-group's identity (Rosoux 2019). Thus, a particular vision of the past may be *securitized* while alternative versions – often regarded as existentially endangering for the in-group – may be delegitimized or muted (Mälksoo 2015). In a highly problematic way, the memories that fall into the scope of securitization tend to be over-simplified and unambiguous. They takes the form of idealized tragedies or glories, whereby the protagonists are depicted in a black-and-white fashion, couched as either "good" or "evil"; "victims" or "perpetrators" (Posen 1993: 31) and, thus, become a decidedly important contributor to the enmification process and the rigidification of boundaries.

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[6] Collective trauma can be defined as "an emotional and psychological stress that has affected a large group and that moves across generations" (Tcholakian, Khapova, van de Loo, and Lehman 2019: 2).

By extension, the linkage between security and collective memory is a vital one, for past collective victimization becomes a reference point to determine the intentions of the out-group and interpret potential new threats in the present (Posen 1993: 30). They produce historical narratives that constantly emphasize the insecurity which characterized the collective self in the past, and provide justification and legitimization for intergroup defence and pre-emptive violence against the out-group in the present, as an antidote to future catastrophe (Bar-Tal 2007; Lederach 2005). Given this context, I argue that the success of societal desecuritization cannot be understood without taking into account collective trauma, as memory and group boundaries are "indissolubly linked" (for similar views, see Rosoux 2019; Mälksoo 2015).

### *Identity desecuritization and intergroup contact theory*

As intimated in the previous sections, intractable conflicts make reconciliation an arduous process, for they permeate all aspects of life and become integrated into people’s identity and routines (Kriesberg 2012).

As a reminder, SIT views boundary construction – which separates “us” from “them” – as a *relational process*, shaped through interactions with others (Tajfel & Turner 1979). By extension, ST understands identity as an *intersubjective process*, involving a constant negotiation between the elite and the general population (Buzan et al. 1998: 31). It follows that, as “independent variables” (Theiler 2003), groups can either accept or reject top-down understandings of what “identity” means and, by extension, what its boundaries are. This allows for fluidity such that social identities are not solely defined by political actors. Instead, they can evolve in ways that redefine who is part of the collective “we” and overcome securitization, even when there is no peace at the state level. In light of the above, this thesis draws on intergroup contact theory, which proposes avenues for more inclusive relationships to flourish across ethnic lines.

Theories on intergroup contact began to emerge in the United States in the aftermath of World War II, in the broader context of racial segregation (Brewer and Gartner 2002: 452). Theorists such as Newcomb (1947), Williams (1947), and Allport (1954), developed the idea that negative intergroup stereotypes and mutual prejudice originated in a sense of estrangement and separation which, in proper conditions, could be tempered through repeated personalized contacts (Brewer and Gartner 2002: 452). The approach to contact underpinning this research is more specifically inspired by the Harvard social psychologist Gordon Allport – one of the founding fathers of social psychology – whose work provides unique insights into the psychology of prejudice and conflict. Cognizant that a society organized along ethnic lines with limited opportunities for contact is more exposed to disorders and violence, Allport formulated the ‘Contact Hypothesis’ (1954) in an effort to restore positive relations between segregated groups. His research, originally presented as a device to reduce intergroup tension and hostility between blacks and whites in the United-States of the 1950s, proposes that contact between adversary groups will not unfailingly produce favourable attitude change. Instead, encounters need to occur within a structured setting, where four vital conditions can be introduced: (1) equal status between the in-group and the out-group within the contact situation; (2) an active goal-oriented effort or a joint cause; (3) cooperation in a situation of mutual dependence; and (4) unequivocal institutional support for contact and cooperation by authority figures (Maoz 2011: 117; Pettigrew 1998: 66). In the words of Allport (1954):

> [t]o be maximally effective, contact […] should lead to a sense of equality in social status, should occur in ordinary purposeful pursuits […] and enjoy the sanction of the community in which they occur. While it may help somewhat to place members of different ethnic groups side by side on a job, the gain is greater if these members regard themselves as part of a *team* (italics original, Allport 1954: 489).

At the core of Allport’s argument is the premise that under certain conditions, conflictual (and, by extension, securitized) relationships could change from a bottom-up process. For these encounters to be successful, members of both majority and minority groups should perceive parity of status within the contact situation (Pettigrew 1998, 66). This means, *a contrario*, that a setting in which status disparities are maintained will likely reinforce mutual prejudice (Brewer and Gartner 2002: 452). Second and third, encounters should be oriented toward common goals, which should be an interdependent effort based on cooperation between the in-group and the out-group. Cooperative interactions of this nature may lead to greater acquaintance potential which could, in turn, contribute to transform competitive relationship between parties. Admittedly, kinship is a compelling way of acquiring accurate information about out-group members which, in turn, may invalidate negative preconceptions and augment perceived intergroup similitude. Finally, intergroup contact should take place with the help and support of an authority that formulates social norms of acceptance and tolerance (Pettigrew 1998: 67).

Visible through Allport's statement is the important role played by social categorization as "us" and "them". Not only does social categorization represent a key element in the process of intergroup prejudice, but also, it may be used in the service of reducing identity salience. Indeed, Allport writes that the benefits from intergroup contact will be greater if the participating members have a *community spirit*. This point, in particular, has been the focus of contemporary research in social psychology. One theoretically grounded model worth elaborating on is the Common In-group Identity Model (CIIM) (Gaertner and Dovidio 2000). According to this model, intergroup contact may induce members of adversary groups towards a common in-group, by de-categorizing[7] in-group members and re-categorizing[8] them more inclusively with out-group members, and thus reduce the salient basis of original group-to-group boundaries (Gaertner and Dovidio 2000). Building a common project, they suggest, could be seen as a valuable resource for escaping the logic of identity polarization and reduce intergroup bias. Inducing the feeling that people have become members of *one* group – through Allport's paradigm – may indeed work to de-emphasize the identities that divide groups and, thus, represent an important step to achieving reconciliation. From this perspective, contact may create a shared, superordinate identity between former rivals. In other words, intergroup contact may inspire rivals to redefine their mutual perceptions and loosen the strict boundaries between "us" and "them", provided that it takes place under optimal conditions.

### *The final puzzle*

In light of the above, the present thesis rests on the hopeful hypothesis that, if a lack of contact between disputing parties can intensify intergroup enmity and reaffirm the security threat one group poses to another, so too might positive contact desecuritize identities, and by extension, assist the reconciliation process. At the same time, the very specific social environment of intractable conflict – where groups not only struggle for societal survival but also internalize the 'enemy other' as an integrant part of their identity – severely limits the ability of these interventions to redraw intergroup boundaries towards greater permeability. For, as SIT and ST suggest, desecuritization involves painful concessions to a group's representation of the *self* and, thus, may endanger the existence of 'our' identity and known narratives. As a result, group affirmation and group defence may be anticipated as a result of intergroup contact (Tajfel & Turner 1979).

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[7] To de-categorize implies that people break down social categories, meaning that the in-group-out-group distinction is less prevailing and there is greater awareness of individual group members' distinctiveness. In other words, people are viewed as more or less typical of their category, and some may be categorized into a sub-group of the larger category.

[8] To re-categorize implies that people develop an awareness that out-group members are also members of one's in-group on a different dimension.

## II. Specification of research questions

The aim of this thesis is to investigate the long-term effects of intergroup contact on identity boundaries. To provide theoretical and empirical understanding, it focuses more specifically on the memories of pivotal traumatic events, which produce socio-political meanings that hold both potentials and limits for how one draws boundaries of identity and community.

The primary research question is the following: *Is intergroup contact an optimal strategy to desecuritize identity boundaries in an intractable conflict?* The following sub-questions will guide the direction of my case study:

1. What are the respondents' attitudes toward the encounter program they took part in? Do they attribute meaning and value to reconciliation efforts?
2. How do the respondents identify? Do they perceive that their community is under threat?
3. What are the respondents' attitudes toward history? How do they interpret the Holocaust and the 1948 War?

In order to provide tentative answers to these questions, the empirical focus is on the protracted, Arab-Israeli conflict in Israel. I argue that there are at least three good reasons for concentrating on this particular dispute. First, Israel provides a clear (and often overlooked) case of securitization in which the Jewish majority and the Palestinian minority are locked in a societal security dilemma. Second, the conflict is traversed by two pivotal traumatic events, which play a vital role in perpetuating the cycle of violence and perceived threats between the conflicting parties. Third, Israel is home to some of the most extensive peacebuilding efforts in the world, and thus represents a productive site for understanding the impact of intergroup contact on identity boundaries.

## III. Research Methods

### Case selection

#### *The Divided City of Jerusalem*

The city of Jerusalem stands as a peculiarity, for it is riven into two pieces by a green, invisible line – the Arab East side and the Jewish West side. A different language, a different religion, a different culture, a different memory prevail in each. And when they encounter one another, the estranged neighbours, it is rarely to sing together or to discuss the prospects of reaching a peaceful future.

Home to three world religions – Islam, Judaism, and Christianity – Jerusalem has had a long-standing history of disputed ownership[9] and continues to be the stage of competing national aspirations between Jewish and Palestinian Arab communities. Coveted existentially by the two people, the "city of peace" has been described as a major "red line"[10] of the conflict. For Palestinians, East Jerusalem (*al-Quds*) is to become the capital of the future Palestinian State. For Israelis, the entirety of Jerusalem (*Yerushalayim*) is envisaged as the unique and indissoluble capital of the Jewish State. To a large extent, the issue of Jerusalem lies at the core of the identities of both rival groups involved (Bickertone and Klausner 2002).

In the past few years, the divided city has known major unrest. On the one hand, Palestinians living in East Jerusalem are affected by ongoing state policies that threaten the physical and ontological survival of their community[11]. Tangible measures on the ground include, *inter alia*, "the massive shrinkage of the physical spaces" in which they live, exposing many to house demolitions and threats of eviction (Jamal 2019: 940). On the other hand, recurring terror attacks perpetrated by Palestinians continue to overshadow the reality of Israeli Jews and contribute to destabilize the ontological security of the nation-state[12].

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[9] In the wake of the first Arab-Israeli War of 1948, Jerusalem became cleaved into two distinct ethnic sectors: West Jerusalem (Israeli Jewish) and East Jerusalem (Jordanian). A few decades later, following the Six-Day war of 1967, the Jordanian enclave became annexed by the Jewish State, which came to extend its jurisdiction over both parts of the city (Bickertone and Klausner 2002).

[10] European Parliament, 'Jerusalem, the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Policy Briefing', March 2012, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/briefing_note/join/2012/491443/EXPO-AFET_SP%282012%29491443_EN.pdf (accessed on November 11, 2022).

[11] The Jerusalem Fund, 'Erasure of the Native Identity in Palestine', https://thejerusalemfund.org/2022/11/erasure-of-the-native-identity-in-palestine/, November 16, 2022 (accessed on November 18, 2022).

[12] Deutsch Meir, 'Israeli Public has become accustomed to daily terror attacks – opinion', The Jerusalem Post, October 24, 2022, https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-720388 (accessed on November 11, 2022).

The more recent clashes across the Shu'afat refugee camp in East Jerusalem between Palestinians and Israeli forces have served as a reminder of that unfortunate reality[13].

Here, important is the understanding that Arab-Jewish relations within Jerusalem are intricately connected to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and *vice versa*. Within Israel, the broader conflict steadily reinforces the importance given to the security of the Jewish community, which leads Israel to take "repressive actions" against its Arab Palestinian minority (Olesker 2013: 373). As a result, Palestinian violence erupts both in response to the minority group's frustration with their marginalized and securitized status within the state, and also as an act of solidarity between the Palestinians in Israel and their Palestinian counterparts in the Palestinian Territories. Turning our eyes upon Jerusalem is thus crucial to this conflict.

As I hope to have conveyed, the complexities of contemporary Jerusalem, coloured by the deep fraction of its two rival ethnic communities, represents a prolific research context for exploring potentially existing cases of desecuritization.

### *The Jerusalem Youth Chorus*

Notwithstanding its turbulent topography, Jerusalem is also a place where meaningful encounter programs flourish in an attempt to disrupt the routinization of the conflict. That said, not all encounter programs are born alike. While they are all, in some measure, constrained by the ethnopolitical realities of conflict, some are still more likely than others to meet their goals (Biton and Salomon 2006).

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[13] X., "Israeli Forces use live fire in clashes with Palestinian protesters in East Jerusalem", The Guardian, October 14, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/13/israeli-forces-use-live-fire-in-clashes-with-palestinian-protesters-in-jerusalem (accessed on November 2, 2022).

In this thesis, I focus empirically on the Jerusalem Youth Chorus (JYC), an Israeli-Palestinian program that creates opportunities for interaction among youths living in East and West Jerusalem, in order to challenge the fractured reality of the city. This organisation was selected because it is believed to encompass many of the desired features of a potentially effective encounter program. First, as a youth-centred initiative, it may be more likely than others to meet its objectives of higher tolerance for the other side, reduced stereotypes, weakened prejudices, and such. Under the right conditions, youths may become key agents of positive social change, I argue, because they tend to be more available to new perspectives and ideologies. As Erikson (1958) observed, young people are typically driven by a broader quest for meaning, and are confronted with the choice between conforming to or defying a particular social order; between living in a state of conflict or acting towards a more harmonious society[14]. Thus, the assumption is that, through their engagement in communal activities, youths may hold greater power to redraw the boundaries of identity in ways that could assist the prospects for peaceful relations. Second, what makes this program distinctive is its mixed model of interaction, which combines interpersonal and intergroup engagement. In line with Allport's (1954) Contact Hypothesis, the JYC promotes the development of interpersonal relationships by bringing participants to collaborate through music. The latter is understood as a very social activity which can foster deep ties among participants, away from national or ethnic group identification. In parallel to the music, the program also empowers participants as members of a collective group by holding weekly intergroup dialogue sessions. In line with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner 1979), dialogue provides a space where group identities can be fully expressed and stimulated. It is where collective narratives of identity can grind painfully – yet constructively – against each other.

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[14] The period between twelve and twenty-five years of age is critical for the construction of identity (Conway, Singer, and Tagini 2004).

By encouraging participants to engage in a shared musical space while exploring their distinct group identities in dialogue, there is good reason to assume that the JYC may be more successful in meeting its objectives of prejudice reduction (e.g., Suleiman 2004). Ultimately, I argue that it is the combination of those two elements, standing along a calibrated beam, that makes the JYC a unique site of investigation.

## Data collection

### *Selection of research participants and sampling*

My research sample comprises 16 alumni participants who were enrolled in the JYC high school program in the last decade. It is representative of three social groups, and includes eight Jewish Israeli, four Palestinian, and four Palestinian Israeli research participants, living in East and West Jerusalem. At the time of the interviews, the respondents' ages ranged from 21 to 27. Six interviewees are male, and ten are female.

My sampling strategy consisted in including the alumni who were comfortable and willing to engage with the research process. Most of the informants in this study were selected at a three-day alumni retreat, held at the prominent music school Keshet Eilon in Northern Israel. The participants took part in the retreat on their own accord, in the weeks leading up to Jerusalem Youth Chorus' ten-year anniversary concert. In parallel, I accessed the names of two additional JYC alumni through an alumna who has directly connected to them. The informed consent of each participant has been obtained prior to the commencement of the interviews, either in writing or orally.

### *Structure of the interviews*

Data was collected using qualitative methods, which allowed me to fully appreciate the complexities of the social phenomenon at hand. An emphasis was also placed on storytelling, which can lead to findings that support transformative social change (McAleese & Kilty 2019: 822).

For the purpose of this study, 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted over the course of my fieldwork. Following Flick (2007), I take the view that flexibility and spontaneity can be useful when inquiring on complex social problems. In this respect, the choice of a semi-structured procedure is believed to be appropriate for this study, as it provided structure and a level of consistency across the interviews while also making room for new issues to arise. Certainly, this protocol offered a safe avenue for self-expression and frank disclosure of personal experiences, more so than a standardized type of conversation (Flick 2007). Following this, all research participants were asked the same questions. They were not, however, constrained to a particular format. Moreover, the identity of the respondents has been kept anonymous by changing their names and disguising the details that may reveal their identity.

On the question of how many interviews are needed to reach reliable data saturation, I relied upon observations made by Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006: 74-76), who posit that a small sample of twelve interviews is generally sufficient to provide an understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. In light of this finding, sixteen interviews are believed to be sufficient, *a priori*, to uncover meaningful themes and make useful interpretations. I am however aware of the stratified nature of my sample, which of course presents a limitation. Given that my study investigates the beliefs and perceptions of three distinct groups, a wider sample encompassing a selection of twelve participants per group of interest would have been ideal to secure greater representativity in each group and expose more accurate information. However, I had to balance ideal theory with the non-ideal world and its limitations. In this process, I was still able to reach sixteen participants whose earnest stories will, I trust, allow me to draw some insightful, yet tentative, theoretical conclusions.

I should also say that the present thesis constitutes the first step of a broader inquiry into the social psychological impact of intergroup contact in conflict. Wider efforts into that direction will hopefully ensue upon my graduation, in order to draw broader trends and shed further light on the theoretical stipulations under scrutiny.

### *The interviews*

I conducted most interviews in a private room at the Keshet Eilon music school. Two interviews have been carried out remotely over Zoom with the respondents who were not able to join the retreat. Follow-up interviews have subsequently taken place by phone.

Twelve interviews were conducted in English, while four were in Arabic and required the presence of a translator. In practical terms, each interview was tape-recorded and lasted between thirty minutes and one hour. They were all subsequently transcribed for analysis.

### Data analysis

The final stage of my research was the analysis of the research data collected. Once all the transcripts had been done, I used the help of the MaxQDA software for coding and analysis. I revisited the transcripts multiple times with the aim of uncovering common themes and patterns. A number of categories that were closely related were gradually merged and highlighted as most pertinent. I coded utterances relating to what I was most interested in: perceptions of equality, cooperation, commonality, friendships, in accordance with Allport’s sociocultural conditions (1954); social identity constructions; threat perceptions; and historic accounts with reference to the Holocaust and the Nakba. Accordingly, an approach of deductive coding was adopted. Using narrative analysis (Mishler 1986), this thesis also explored both explicit and implicit meanings and content of the data, and treated the respondents’ answers as stories.

### Methodological issues and limitations of the study

My empirical research faces three major obstacles. First, the qualitative method that I used cannot offer an exact measure of changes in attitudes or perceptions, or the effects of intergroup contact. Although it uncovers the experiences of the respondents with reference to the encounter program, it cannot draw a clear-cut causal association between exposure to the out-group and ideological or attitude change.

Second, the participants in this study are all alumni. The focus on individuals who continue to be active in the organization as alumni created a selection bias[15]. In this sense, the respondents cannot all be seen as fully representative of the “regular” past participants in intergroup encounters of this nature. At the same time, focusing on this particular group enabled mature, considered, and long-term perspectives around their identity and what their involvement with the other side means to them, which go beyond any immediate and excited assessments. It also prevented any unwelcome interruption in the peace program they have engaged in.

Third, in order to maintain transparency, it is crucial that I recognize the challenges inherent to collecting interview data across cultural and national borders. In other words, I cannot ignore the role that I played in my position as an “outsider”, i.e., as European researcher lacking Hebrew and Arabic language skills, in the generation of my data. In particular, holding interviews in English may have posed a limit to free expression for the alumni who were not native English speakers. Although the research participants held some agency over the interview language[16] and had overall a good grasp of the English language, it is undeniable that conducting all the interviews in the local language would have further “opened doors” and enhanced the trusting relationship with the informants of this study.

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[15] Three respondents have become staff members at the JYC, while two have a recent history of working as facilitators.

[16] Four respondents requested the presence of a translator and answered the interview questions in their native language.

## *Empirical analysis*

### I. The Arab-Israeli conflict: A historical overview

In the following pages, I provide an overview of the Arab-Israeli dispute to put flesh on my empirical inquiry. Alas, there is no space to ascertain the full magnitude of this complex reality here, which is why I keep my assessment brief and to the point.

The Arab-Israeli dispute, with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at its core, is by and large an intractable ethno-national conflict which has kept Israel’s ethnonational communities – the Jewish majority and the Palestinian Arab minority (Muslim and Christian) – at perpetual odds for as long as 75 years. The year 1948 is, in this respect, paramount, as it marks Israel’s Declaration of Independence and the ensuing outbreak of the first large-scale war between Israel and its Arab neighbouring states, known as the 1948-9 Arab-Israeli war. To this day, the events of the war oppose two very different sets of interpretations, in terms of the causal factors behind them, their circumstances, and their consequences. Following their military victory in March 1949, the Jews remember the “The War of Liberation” and the return to their ancestral homeland as a symbolic reparation for centuries of exile and persecution culminating in the *Shoah*[17] of European Jewry. The Palestinian Arabs, who were defeated, remember *al-Nakba*[18], as the unrighteous dispossession from their land that sent them into exile and condemned them to refugeedom and oppression. We have, in other words, a narrative of triumph and victory versus a narrative of loss and defeat (Bickerton & Klausner 2002).

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[17] *Shoah* is the Hebrew word for “catastrophe”. This term refers to the genocide of nearly six million European Jews by Nazi Germany during the Second World War II, between 1941 and 1945.

[18] *Al-Nakba* is the Arabic word for “catastrophe”. This term refers to the massive exodus of Palestinians following the creation of the new state of Israel in 1948.

The events of 1948 are “less about historiography than [they are] about collective memory” (Bracka 2017: 353), some have argued, for they became a symbolic prism through which Israelis and Palestinians have since then produced opposing discourses of identity, victimhood, and entitlement, in what is perceived by both sides as an existential struggle[19]. From this perspective, every historical episode since 1948 – from the Six-Day War in 1967 to the 2021 Israel-Hamas conflict – continues to be assessed through a strong sense of persecution and victimhood. For the Jewish community, every war and Palestinian uprising since the birth of Israel (e.g., the second *intifada*[20] (2000-2005), the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War, and the periodical terrorist attacks fired by militants in Gaza deep into Israeli territory[21]) has been perceived as defensive – as constituting a direct threat to the “survivor nation”[22] – and is thus lived as a secondary trauma (Bar-Tal 2007). For the Palestinian community, Israel’s military occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem since 1967[23], coupled with the steady expansion of illegal Jewish settlements in these territories, serve as a perpetual reminder of their community's displacement in 1948.

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[19] Whereas an important part of the Palestinian narrative revolves around the expulsions of the Palestinians by their Israeli aggressor, a core aspect of the Zionist narrative highlights the Jewish combat for livelihood and security, and their victimization at the hands of an Arab population that seeks to annihilate their state (Bickerton & Klausner 2002).

[20] *Intifada* is the Arabic word for “shaking off”. This term specifically refers to the two Palestinian uprisings, respectively from 1987 to 1993, and from 2000 to 2005.

[21] United Nations, ‘On 4 April 2023, militants in Gaza and Lebanon fired dozens of rockets towards Israel’, https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15264.doc.htm.

[22] This epithet was chosen by *The Economist* for the front page cover of its recent magazine titled ‘Survivor Nation. Israel at 75’ (April 29th – May 5th 2023).

[23] In the wake of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, East-Jerusalem fell under Jordanian rule, and later became annexed by Israel in the Six-Day War in 1967. It has remained under Israeli military occupation ever since.

The outcome of the 1948 war was the annihilation of 420 Palestinian communities and the expulsion or flight of 520,000 to 850,000 Palestinians (i.e., over 80% of the Palestinian inhabitants of the land which became the newly found state of Israel). It created, as a result, a permanent "refugee problem" (Morris 2009: 411) – nearly 6 million Palestinian refugees according to UNWRA's most recent numbers – viewed by Israel as an existential security one, as their return would compromise the Jewish majority inside Israel (Golan 2018: 49).

In the wake of the war, some 150,000 Arabs of pre-1948 Palestine remained anchored on their lands, and have been granted nationality or residence by the Jewish State (Pappé 2013). Demographically, they turned from an established majority to a defeated minority, and have been defined by political leaders as a "fifth column" (Jamal 2019: 946) – a disruptive element, threatening to the state's security, which has to be "neutralized". Numerous scholars have in this respect argued that Israel is a state in which "ethnic Jewish superiority over the Arab minority is built into every aspect of life" (Kahanoff 2016; Smooha 2004). As a result, the tensions in Jewish-Arab relations are heavily strained by symptoms of inequality, deprivation and discrimination of the Arab population in Israel. A number of studies have pointed to a growing gap between the two sides, including a rise in mistrust and mutual delegitimization of Jews and Arabs by each other (e.g., Ayalon and Sagi 2008) with 2022 marking "the deadliest year in Israeli-Palestinian conflict"[24]. No clearer is this illustrated than through the recent cycles of violence in Jerusalem, which has become a centrepiece *par excellence* for heightened tensions[25].

According to a recent poll released by the Alliance for Middle East Peace (ALLMEP) in January 2023, "the state of youth attitudes [in Israel] are in an alarming position". The picture that emerges from this survey is that Arab and Jewish youths (or the "Post-Oslo generation", as they have been called by peace activist Nivine Sandouka) betray highly antagonistic attitudes[26]. The report, which concludes by stating that "majorities of both cohorts rejected the other side's claims of historic, national connection to the land […] and by a clear majority, each side believed that violence is the only or best way to achieve concessions from the other side"[27], attests to the urgent need to develop a *modus vivendi* entailing alternative relationships between members of this young, divided generation[28].

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[24] United Nations, 'With 2022 Deadliest Year in Israel-Palestine Conflict, Reversing Violent Trends Must Be International Priority. Middle East Coordinator Tells Security Council', https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15179.doc.htm (accessed on January 21, 2023).

[25] J. Magid, 'UN Security Council to meet on Jerusalem violence in 4th emergency session in months", 5 April 2023, https://www.timesofisrael.com/un-security-council-to-meet-on-jerusalem-violence-in-4th-emergency-session-in-months/ (accessed on April 17, 2023); UN News, 'Israel-Palestine: UN calls for restraint following violence at Al-Aqsa mosque', 5 April 2023, https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/04/1135382 (accessed on April 17, 2023).

[26] John Lyndon, 'How Do Israeli and Palestinian Youth View the Prospects for Peace?', January 31, 2023, https://www.usip.org/blog/2023/01/how-do-israeli-and-palestinian-youth-view-prospects-peace (accessed on March 14, 2023).

[27] *Ibid.*

[28] The definition of 'youth' is a source of contestation in the contemporary world. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) defines 'youth' as "those persons between the ages of 15 and 24" and young people as the age group "10-24 years". However, this age category is flexible and will receive different definitions across contexts. In this thesis, I use the term 'youth' and 'young people' interchangeably to refer to individuals in the range of 13-27.

## II. Setting the scene: The Jerusalem Youth Chorus

In this section, I provide a brief description of the fieldwork site that I investigated.

The Jerusalem Youth Chorus is a bi-communal Israeli-Palestinian encounter program founded in 2012, based in West Jerusalem. The organization implements programs for 13-18 year old Jewish and Arab Palestinian youths from East and West Jerusalem. Over a period of one to four years, they are brought together through singing and dialoguing within a community bound by the values of peace, equality, and social justice. Accordingly, key attention is given to diversity, ethnic balance, and language parity between Hebrew and Arabic. In order to reflect the multi-layered realities of Jerusalem, youths from Jewish, Christian, and Muslim homes with disparate political positions are encouraged to engage in the chorus. They are invited to join upon an audition, a personal interview, and a group interview, which are held with the aim of bringing *ensemble* not only music enthusiasts, but also communicators *en devenir* who are open to dialogue in a mixed setting.

Weekly rehearsals include an opening hour of singing followed by two hours of intergroup dialogue, which culminate into a final hour of singing. This circular *passaggio* from music to dialogue to music again, is the way Micah Hendler intended it. He deliberately designed those meetings in a way that the music holds the space for a deeper and challenging dialogue to take place. To put it differently, through the evocative words of Micah, “the music is this outer circle that is pulling in and the dialogue is this inner chord that is pushing out”[29].

A broad range of music styles characterizes the chorus[30]. Its repertoire is marked by a large variety of musical backgrounds, from the Western canon to a combination of traditional Jewish and Arab music. This is done in the spirit of representing the musical identity of each chorister. Beyond those weekly rehearsals, the chorus performs concerts annually within Israel and goes on international tours. Furthermore, retreats are organised twice a year with the aim of fortifying relationships, making room for creativity, writing new songs, and pursuing dialogue.

In parallel to choral rehearsals, the participants meet for two hours for a dialogue session led by two professional facilitators – one from each ethnonational group. An interpreter takes part in these exchanges to allow members to converse free-flowingly in their native tongue. The practice of structured, intergroup dialogue is meant to equip the participants with tools that enable them to build critical thinking and effective communication skills. By extension, it aims to help the youth surpass the stigma connected to each identity group, by acclimating them with ambiguity, differences in culture, and structural inequalities.

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[29] ‘Transcending divisions and conflict through song, with The Jerusalem Youth Chorus’ Micah Hendler’, Enhance life with music podcast, February 1, 2022 (accessed on June 20, 2022).

[30] During my time at the JYC, I was immersed into an extraordinary blend of sounds and rhythms, ranging from the soulful and melancholic Arabic Mawwal, to Jewish traditional songs, to revamped English-American pop songs. Walking in for the first time, I witnessed the choristers’ improvisation of the song *Home*, with Arabic, Hebrew, English, and even Armenian words interlacing in an organized chaos. In a moment’s time, as I watched the choristers exist solely through music – their throats uncloaked – I distinctly heard barriers dissolve into powdered chalk.

## III. Qualitative analysis[31]

In this section, I present the findings of the qualitative fieldwork undertaken in Israel with the Jerusalem Youth Chorus, and feed them back into the theories that drive my research.

The first chapter really constitutes the backbone of my analysis. It provides the reader with a general understanding of the quality of the contact environment under scrutiny by juxtaposing Allport's sociocultural conditions for favourable contact—viewed as major mediators of prejudice—with the respondents' perspectives and attitudes toward the JYC encounter program and the values of peace and coexistence.

Under the particular light of this environment, the second chapter—*pièce de résistance* of this paper—is devoted to unstitch the respondents' interpretations of the 1948 War and the Holocaust, understood as major signifiers of national identity which play an important role in the escalation of the Arab-Israeli conflict. What do their historical representations tell us about group boundaries? To what extent do they align or depart from sociocultural and politically-informed understandings of identity? The pages that follow will begin to enlighten the reader on these questions, by keeping a dual focus on intergroup dynamics as they have been shaped by structured intergroup contact on the one hand, and the broader societal environment in which they have evolved on the other.

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[31] In his Preface to *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche wrote: "An aphorism, properly stamped and molded, has not been 'deciphered' when it has simply been read. Rather, one has then to begin its interpretation, for which is required an art of interpretation". To the best of my knowledge, I went on to apply this precept throughout the writing of my analysis.

# Chapter 1. The  Jerusalem Youth Chorus through the eyes of its former youth

For far too long, political leaders in Israel have drawn societal and political boundaries between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs in ways that severely distort young people's perceptions of the "abstract Other" (Laclau 2000). Against this backdrop, Allport's Contact Hypothesis (1954) proposes methodological ways forward. Cross-group encounters, the social psychologist argues, may challenge traditional prejudices, provided that they occur within a controlled setting whereby four (plus one) conditions – equal status, common goals, cooperation, institutional support and, lastly but very importantly, cross-group friendships – can be successfully introduced (Brewer and Gaertner 2002: 467). In the following sections, I provide concrete insights into these provisions by tapping the alumni's past experiences with the JYC high school program.

## Led by music, 'one foot in front of the other'

*I know you're scared*
*Well I'm scared too*
*But look at me*
*Right next to you*[32]

In a divided Jerusalem marked by pervasive politics of distance, the task of bringing into conversation young individuals from opposing groups would at first glance seem complex, if not impossible.

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[32] 'One foot' is an enlivening anthem of hope covered by the Jerusalem Youth Chorus. It was originally written by the American composer Melanie DeMore.

Apropos, I begin my analysis by revealing a fascinating and predictable truth: music played a key role in motivating the respondents to become border-crossers, in contrast to the amorphous concept of peace, which took a deeper meaning in time. The following excerpts are just a few illustrations of many referring to this.

Looking back ten years, Dina, a Jewish Israeli alumna, retraced her steps into the chorus:

> I think it was my love for music in the beginning. I remember Micah, the founder, came and started talking about this choir. And my friends wanted to join and, I was like: 'Wow, this is like the TV shows, where everybody joins! Like an acapella group!'. And I really wanted to be part of something like that. I think when he initially came and said this was going to be Israeli and Palestinian together and there's going to be dialogue, I didn't really know what that meant so much. I was really young, I was 13.

Under a similar leitmotif, Palestinian alumnus Tarek shared:

> When I started in the chorus, I didn't really pay attention to the mixed character of the program, with Jews and Arabs together. I was only interested in singing, and that's why I decided to audition. And I think, back then, I wasn't as aware of all the racism that exists in the country either. I just knew that Jews and Arabs exist here, that they don't like each other, and that they don't talk.

Ricocheting between past and present, Limor, a Palestinian Israeli alumna, recalled:

> Initially I joined just because of the music, and because I love singing. I remember, when I started seeing Israeli and Palestinian people together, I was a bit shocked [laughing]. But I decided to continue. To be honest, in the beginning I was a bit scared. I wasn't, like, 'the girl who knew the other side'. I was scared because of what I was seeing on TV. I was always thinking: How can we be together?

More than simply anecdotal, these recollections go to show that music can create the shared meanings needed to mobilize youths from antagonistic communities to engage in a peace program. It furnishes a prime example of a common goal around which young people can meet (Allport 1954: 261; Pettigrew 1998: 66). All things being equal, this data provides *prima facie* evidence that musical peacebuilding may be less sensitive to the selection bias, i.e., the critique that peace activities essentially "preach to the converted" (Adamides 2017: 19), often stressed in contact theory research (Pettigrew 1998: 69).

Additionally, music played a pivotal role in sustaining the alumni's engagement in difficult exchanges and contain their salient features. Overwhelmingly, the data points to the value of mixing methods in youth peacebuilding, implying that the connectivity built through music may be helpful to make relationships secure again after a challenging dialogue.

For example, Nofar, a Jewish Israeli alumna, elegantly described the value of music in supporting contentious exchanges:

> I remember getting out of a really heavy, intense, dialogue session. I remember feeling really upset. I remember feeling it inside, in my stomach. And then going outside, having to sing, for the first few

> minutes I was thinking: ‘I can’t believe that I’ve to sing. I’m so upset!’. But then, as we sing, we look at each other, smile at each other, and you really feel the tension going away. It kind of melts something, it takes away some of that threat, some of that tension.

For many, the initial goal of music evolved to a shared ambition to sow the seeds of reconciliation. Through their musical performances, the alumni hope to inspire changes in terms of recognition and inclusion to the wider communities involved in the conflict.

Palestinian alumnus Waseem, who found himself revisiting the memories of past JYC concerts, shared an illustrative anecdote:

> Some people like what we do, others don’t. Over the years, people have come to me, asking: ‘Why are you showing peace when there is no peace?’. And then, other people come to us on stage, with tears in their eyes, asking: ‘How did you learn to accept each other and sing together despite the conflict, the war, the hate?’. They have bubbles on their skin, we touch them. So, even if there’re people who are against this sort of program and call it normalization, I believe that we have an impact. And that’s one of the main reasons why I want to continue. To always do better, to show the world that what we do has value.

## The chorus, an exercise in collaboration

To be successful, planned encounters should foster a climate of cooperation rather than competition. The type of cooperation presumed to result in improved intergroup relations is cooperation toward achieving a common, superordinate goal that cannot be reached without the contribution of the members of all groups (Sherif 1958). In line with this idea, Gaertner and Dovidio (2000) have suggested that cooperation may transform people's understanding of the memberships from "us" and "them" to a more inclusive "we" and, resultingly, increase positive evaluations of out-group members.

Both my observations in the field and my qualitative findings point to music as an activity that created incentives for cooperation.

A story brought by Faris, a Palestinian Israeli alumnus, powerfully describes the importance of synchronized cooperation from each singer as a prerequisite to successful performance:

> In 2015, during a tour in the US, we had this big concert with different choirs that sang really good. And we were really bad, so our confidence got low when we saw them. We went up to do the sound check, and it was horrible. And then, us, the members, as like, kids, we went outside – Arabs and Israelis, Palestinians, Christians, Muslims – we sat together, and we told each other: 'We need to do this, we trained a lot, we rehearsed a lot, we should do this' […]. And without the staff, just for a moment, we stood together as one group, away from its differences, from its challenges, and all of its problems. Just for one moment, we felt *one*, that we have a mission that we need to do. In the end we joined arms and screamed 'JYC!'. And after that, we performed really well.

Faris talks about the mechanics of how to solve problems jointly, including how to get the chorus back on track when the going gets tough. His story provides the possibility of conceiving, even "just for one moment", how the boundaries that divide the two ethnonational communities can come to be overpowered. Semantically, the inclusive pronoun “we” is illustrative of the momentary re-categorization of all participants into a more inclusive group.

In a parallel manner, intergroup dialogue was described as a collaborative activity through which they learned, overtime, to articulate their feelings and experiences – to themselves and to others – in a respectful and constructive manner, by working to accommodate all members into the conversation (e.g., Bohm 1996).

Anita, a Jewish Israeli alumna, talked about the foundational importance of managing difficult conversations effectively:

> Conflict is always complex. But I think the JYC gave me a lot of tools to communicate with other people. Communication is the most important thing and also the hardest thing […]. But if you open up to someone and they open up to you, and you respect each other, and you look into each other’s eyes and you’re like: ‘That’s a *person*. I want them to feel comfortable sitting next to me, and I want to feel comfortable sitting next to them’. Then you can say a lot of very difficult things.

Cooperative attitudes have persisted until this day, well-beyond the respondents’ original participation in the high school program. A desire to take the reins of the JYC either by joining the staff ranks, becoming facilitators, or shaping the future vision of the chorus, transpired from a large number of accounts.

In the following, Palestinian Israeli alumna Noor speaks about her desire to see the alumni transform into a community of facilitators for the next JYC generations:

> Today, I told one of my friends: ‘Aren’t the alumni supposed to be facilitators for the upcoming generations?’. And they were like: ‘I don’t know yet, is that really happening?’. And I said: ‘Isn’t it? Why not?’. I mean, we were a part of this, and I think it should come from us […]. It will be more effective and meaningful. And also, it’s not just about singing and talking about peace, like all this bullshit all the time. No, there’re some serious stuff going on, and we need to talk about it […]. So, I don’t think an outsider would understand this, to be honest. Because the background also matters. As an alumna, I know what’s deep and what’s not.

In many ways, the JYC was described by the alumni as an important platform for cooperation, not through any mysterious power of music, but through joint efforts to create harmonious sound, ace onstage performances, enter difficult conversations, and develop a common vision for the chorus.

## Fostering an egalitarian environment under a solid institutional umbrella

According to Allport, “contact should lead to a sense of equality in social status” in order to be maximally effective (Allport 1954: 489). Moreover, the gains will be greater if the encounter program is sanctioned by institutional support (i.e., by law, custom, or local atmosphere) (Allport 1954: 281). Authorities in these institutions, he reasoned, are necessary to provide the organisation with a structure (Pettigrew 1998: 67). As Jean Monnet once put it, “nothing is possible without men, but nothing lasts without institutions”.

In Israel, equality is the primary element that is absent from the politics of the region, marked by unequal distribution of power and structural inequality. As a result, scepticism on the achievability of equality and institutional support within encounter programs operating in active conflict settings has been systematically echoed by scholars (e.g., Rouhana 2004; Saguy, Dovidio, & Pratto 2008).

Notwithstanding the difficulties involved, the JYC was, during most of its existence, implemented within the Jerusalem International YMCA, an institution that works "to foster *equality* and friendship among members of all religions […] while serving as an oasis of multiculturalism and a space for coexistence among the residents of Jerusalem and beyond"[33] (emphasis added). In line with the YMCA's core values, the JYC is dedicated to upholding egalitarian norms by making equality, safety, and mutual respect the blueprint for interactions between Israeli and Palestinian youths (see *supra*).

Manifestly, music was found to be the breeding ground for making the participants meet as equals. It was overwhelmingly described as an activity that made them feel as "one body" (Noor), providing "common ground" (Rachely) and "a sense of togetherness" (Waseem).

To underline this point, Leila, an Arab-Palestinian Israeli alumna said, eyes widened:

> We're all singing more languages so accurately, so right, that we'll just forget the fact that we're all coming from different religions, and that they are not the same as you.

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[33] Jerusalem International YMCA, https://www.ymca3arches.com/about-internation-YMCA (accessed on October 31, 2022).

Analogously, Rachely, a Jewish Israeli alumna, expressed with unconcealed zeal:

> I loved the singing parts because I actually felt like I was a part of the group. It made it easier for me to connect with the people.

But music was not the only space conducive to fostering equality between the participants. According to my data, intergroup dialogue, as well as the moments of silence and maturation coursing through these exchanges, were an essential ingredient to meet the need for equality.

According to the Palestinian view, dialogue became a valued vehicle for rendering the Palestinian cause visible. Despite the initial challenges and emotional difficulties of communicating the uncommunicable, the gradual practice of making their experiences knowable to the other side has supported the principle of equality, the data suggests.

Tarek, a Palestinian alumnus, shared some insights that illustrate the foregoing:

> The choir has had a big impact on my life. I mostly see this impact through the dialogue groups that we had. Before, I never had dialogue of this kind with Jewish people. And, you know, people from the other side would get shocked over a lot of things. So I felt like I was relaying a message a lot of the time […]. For Arabs, it's very difficult to participate in these programs because for them, this is considered normalization. But that's not how I see it. I'm trying to share my story with as many people as I can.

Leila said in the same vein:

> The way I see dialogue is that I'm walking up the stairs, and each step there's a new thing. So, if I stay on stair number one, not learning about what's going on, I'll be stuck on this stair my whole life and I won't know how to move on to the second one. But as we're opening a space to complain on some of the things that we dislike and the people who are hearing our complaints are improving it, then *slowly, slowly, slowly,* we'll get up the stairs without even noticing it. And if I want to compare the first year with the tenth year, I'd say that there was a huge difference and that huge improvements happened.

For all that, in the face of prevailing structural inequalities in Israel, the potential for these exchanges to reverberate outside the bounds of the program into the socio-political arena, has been put in doubt by a minority of participants.

For example, Palestinian alumnus Adham shared:

> I enjoyed the dialogues, because the other side would actually listen. But we were just teenagers. And they can't actually change state policy. They can't change the reality we're in. All they can do is listen.

According to the Jewish Israeli view, the dialogue process was respectful and even-handed. The respondents told of how it helped them to adequately express difficult feelings and opinions, and how this ability to narrate effectively was a product of time and mutual listening.

Dafna, a Jewish Israeli alumna, stated it thus:

> In the beginning, the dialogues were really difficult and I didn't like them. Because I'm more of a listener. I never just put my own input right away in seconds. But after a few years, it started becoming easier for me. I grew up a bit, I formed opinions, and I learned to voice them. And people listened respectfully. Sometimes, when we had a more heated topic, it was harder for everybody to be patient. But still, it was done in a respectful way.

Two respondents offered caveats about the limitations of such equality, reporting unequal ideological views from the program's staff due to their group's position of military and political superiority in the conflict.

Here, noteworthy are Rachely's insights:

> At the end of the day, there's also the experience of the Israeli side. And especially in the second year of the choir, I felt that the JYC was more of the Palestinian worldview than Israeli, to be honest. What happens is that you're almost unable to come with your side of the story, because you're part of the people in power, even though you're not.

Rachely exposes how, behind the category of "the people in power", actually lies an existentially threatened community. She thus challenges the dominator-dominated dichotomy by conveying the weakness of the supposed powerful.

Another qualifying consideration revealed in the respondents' narratives is how much intergroup contact enhanced their awareness of the double standards upon which Israel is built, thereby exposing *the hidden*. Markedly, repeated exposure to the out-group powerfully unearthed the threatening experiences of subordination behind the abstract categories of “Palestinian” or “occupied”.

In this regard, Flavia, a Jewish Israeli alumna, told a story which would have certainly been of interest to Gordon Allport:

> I remember one day specifically, we had a concert with the German president’s wife. She was coming to do a thing with us and these boys from our choir walk in late. And Micah said: ‘Why are you late? It was super important to be here on time’. And they were like: ‘We got stopped at a security check point and they kept us there for hours’. And Micah immediately apologized for blaming them for being late, and I think that was a huge learning moment for all of us. It really opened my eyes, because I didn’t know it was there. Because I had never gotten stopped. I didn’t know what it was. I was in a bubble. And the JYC really opened my eyes to what else is out there.

## The special importance of friendship

*In fine*, structured encounters are more likely to be successful if they are repeated overtime and if each experience is not so brief as to preclude the formation of meaningful friendships between members of groups in conflict (Pettigrew 1998: 76). As a reminder, cross-group friendships are significantly predictive of reduced prejudice because they are built on three mediating processes: they invoke further cooperation, common goals, and a sense of equal status. They are thus a powerful place to stand in order to appreciate the other side’s perspective, intentions and identity, including one’s contribution to the other’s pain.

In the present study, a host of mixed friendships reflecting an emphasis on equality and cooperative interdependence have been shared by the Jewish and Palestinian Israeli respondents. These bonds, it was found, are largely contingent upon the recognition of each other as musicians collaborating together.

Dina's recollections are in this regard illuminative:

> When I first joined the choir, I never had non-Jewish friends. I lived in a very tight-knit community. In a way, I just sticked to what I knew. And then, when I came to the choir, during the first rehearsal, I was like: 'Oh, ok, this is different to what I'm used to'. And, me and Aya, we were in the tenor section together – she's a Christian Palestinian – and we became so close. We had a lot of things in common, we're both kind of shy and we were like: 'Oh god, we're going to have to perform in front of people!'. And we kind of held each other together. I think for a long time she was my closest friend in the chorus and even now we came on the retreat, we hang out, and have not been together for a long time. It feels good to go back to what we were.

By contrast, the Palestinian respondents lacking Israeli citizenship were more reserved on the topic of intergroup friendship, and reported altogether weaker levels of intergroup trust.

By way of illustration, Tarek shared:

> In general, a deep friendship with someone from the opposite side is something that I don't have. I don't have that big trust that I can give to them.

Rather, they showed "openness" and "acceptance" vis-à-vis the out-group.

Waseem's story offers a telling illustration of that. In the following, he talks about his initial fear of meeting with Israelis – previously perceived in a homogenous fashion as occupiers – and the positive influence of intergroup contact in deconstructing threatening stereotypes and prejudice:

> Before joining the JYC, I didn't really meet any Jews or Christians, because they've a different religion and obviously different thoughts and worldviews than mine. But after I joined the choir, I had the opportunity to meet them, and now I can accept any Christian, or Jew, or Israeli. What made me not accept them initially is thinking of the Israeli people as occupiers and thinking about the occupation in general. That's what created fear in me, to meet these people. So, being in the choir changed a lot for me.

Years following participation in the JYC, these bonds have proven both vulnerable and resilient to the real complex world, where conflict punctually seeps into the picture.

Flavia stated it thus:

> Once I became an alumni, I started becoming a lot closer to Tarek and Faris. So, I text them, they're my friends, but then also it's hard when there're times of conflict. I see them post these things on Instagram that I don't necessarily agree with. So, that's always hard. Once there is conflict, it's like: 'Oh, are we still friends? Can we still be friends?'. But then, when we come back together, we end up just chit chatting and talking about life. So it's not always what's really going on outside that affects us. We might have completely different views on

> Israel and the world, but that doesn't stop us from being genuine friends from the choir.

Significant in this respect is that the relationships built inside the JYC have rippled out and impacted external interactions. Indeed, the majority of the respondents pointed to an individual to group type of generalization, that is changes that generalize from the specific out-group members with whom participants were in contact with in the JYC to the broader out-group (Pettigrew 1998: 70).

For example, Limor explained how she gradually came to redefine her perception of the out-group beyond her involvement in the chorus:

> Before, I didn't know that Israelis had feelings and that they were also suffering from the conflict. That's what I was hearing from my grandma. She would always say that they just want to kill us. And I was shocked to find out that they're human beings, just like us […]. After four years of dialogue, I felt that I could actually live with them. And today, I've Israeli friends. I've many. But even though I'm talking comfortably with them now and want peace, it's not easy. For example, I've an Israeli friend at work, and I notice that when we've a bad situation in the country, things between us start to change. We stop talking, and then eventually, later on, we talk again.

In a similar vein, Palestinian alumnus Osaid revealed:

> Before, I was always thinking : 'This person is Jewish, I won't talk to them'. So when I came to the choir, I started interacting with people whom I would never talk to before and learned to communicate with

> them. It also taught me how to deal with different people outside – people who are not the same as me – and how to show kindness to them.

Described by the alumni as a "second home" (Leila), a "warm community" (Noor), or even a "shelter" (Rachely) they "hope to grow up with" (Osaid), the JYC ostensibly created a "felicitous context for meeting" (Barth 1969: 34). Important here is the contrast of perceptions – the replacing of either ignorance or mistrust vis-à-vis the out-group with an enhanced understanding of the *other* as being with feelings, pains, and valid experiences. This finding strongly illustrates that boundary placement (i.e., categories such as "friend" and "enemy") is contingent upon an ongoing relational process (Buckley-Zistel 2008). So much is this the case that the mixed ties built within and outside the JYC are punctually affected by the broader geopolitical reality of Jerusalem that feeds on differentiation.

To the point, Faris said:

> Our goal as a group is not to become the best singers. We're just trying to exist and be together. Lately, I'm reminding myself of that. That we're more interesting than any other professional choir. Because it's impossible for us to exist at all, and still, we're existing, as Palestinians and Israelis together.

This existential reflection beautifully sums up the tension between the different boundary drawing practices inside Israel – those of the civil society against those of the nation-state. With this, the question turns to whether, taking account of all the socio-political forces at play, micro-scale coexistence can make the painful legacies of the past touch.

## Chapter 2. The Holocaust and the Nakba: Bridges or barriers?

The previous chapter has constituted the first step in my empirical inquiry for appreciating the quality of the contact setting the alumni were involved in as young adolescents. It has presented preliminary evidence that positive exposure to the other side can successfully reduce levels of prejudice and ignorance about the out-group. This leads to questions concerning whether these encounters can give rise to new forms of engagement with the past. Do the respondents with a long-term history of engaging in intergroup contact show an aptitude to transcend the longstanding societal “mnemonic battles” (Zerubavel 2003) that invariably involve a victimizer and a victim? What events do they (choose to) remember or to forget? Building on these questions, the present chapter scrutinizes and empirically examines the respondents’ interpretations of the Holocaust and the Nakba, focusing on how their claims implicitly or explicitly reference program participation and dominant societal discourses.

Before I begin to cast light on these memories, two remarks are in order. First, I should signal clearly that my paper does not equate the tragedies of the Holocaust and the Nakba in size or scale, and also does not seek to compare levels of pain and victimization. Beyond question, these events are incommensurable, except in one aspect: both nations continue living in their shade. Second, in assessing prevailing representations of memory in each group, I do not suggest to be exhaustive of all interpretations. Certainly, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to do justice to the wide spectrum of feelings and representations brought on by the legacies of trauma between and within the group members. Rather, this chapter aims to share tentative findings, in order to better discern how youths with a history of engaging in a long-term process of breaking intergroup boundaries interpret the traumatic past, and to distinguish some valuable trends or patterns made evident in this modest, yet weighty, sample of interviews.

## Addressing contentious history in intergroup dialogue

> When you're in dialogue, there's going to be translation, and you go to that reality where you remember that this person who was singing in your language so perfectly is different from you. It's like, you're going to a room full of clouds, and food—maybe with marshmallows—and having fun. But then you've to take another door that's really harsh, and maybe there's lava and rocks, and you need to jump each steps to go to the marshmallow room again. This is how I see it, the difference between the dialogue and the singing.

This poetic description given by Leila illustrates the pair of opposites between music and dialogue; unity and division; personal and political which, like an old song repeating itself in an endless loop, bestows a complex pattern upon the lives of the alumni.

According to the JYC, solid relationships require some level of engagement with historically and socially embedded concepts that put intergroup boundaries under pressure. The program thus includes a dialogue space within which the choristers are invited to "work through" their differences as members of politically antagonistic groups. History, as a major site of contestation and resistance, is one of the points of contention that the JYC commonly addresses in dialogue. Because of its sensitive nature, this "memory work" (Ricoeur 2000: 496) is only introduced toward the end of the curriculum. As Micah Hendler contended, the choristers should have had many opportunities for affective engagement and trust-building "before jumping head first" into historical traumas[34]. In this context, joint visits to commemoration sites such as Yad Vashem and demolished Palestinian villages have been organised, although it is unclear whether all the research participants took part in these activities at the time of their involvement[35].

## Voices of memory

### *§1. 'We didn't learn about it'*

A red thread weaving itself through all the narratives is how little the alumni knew about the historical legacy of the out-group before joining the JYC. This void illustrates how deeply institutionalised remembrance is, and the influence of political socialization – community events, commemorations, and the education system – in transmitting exclusively "accepted" understandings of the past. Depending on their place of residence, in East or West Jerusalem, and the schools they attended, Arab, Jewish, state-secular, or state-religious in character, very different textbooks were placed into the then adolescents' hands.

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[34] 'Transcending divisions and conflict through song, with The Jerusalem Youth Chorus' Micah Hendler', Enhance life with music podcast, February 1, 2022 (accessed on June 20, 2022).

[35] These gaps can be explained by the different times of their participation in the chorus and the evolutionary nature of the educational program, which undergoes changes on a yearly basis.

Dafna's and Noor's responses are in this regard illustrative:

> We learned about the 1948 war but never called it 'the Nakba'. So I wasn't even aware of this word existing until I went to the choir and talked about it when I was 16 or 17 for the first time.

> I first heard about the Holocaust in high school, but not in detail. Like, we talked about it in the framework of our lessons on World War Two, and that was it. We didn't really speak about it in detail. It was this short paragraph.

Years later, the alumni agreed to revisit their experiences and thoughts in relation to the traumatic past. To better appreciate group-specific responses, their claims are divided into three sections. Cross-group commonalities are highlighted in the final discussion of this paper.

## *§2. The Holocaust and the Nakba: Jewish Israeli alumni perceptions*

Reflecting upon the historical knowledge gained through intergroup dialogue, most research participants explained that talking about an "active past" that is relived as a daily experience by people who have become "friends" (Anita) and "partners in song" (Dafna) was "almost never easy" (Uri). To this day, engaging on the issues at stake continues to impose many moments of uncertainty.

### *The Holocaust, still an open wound*

To begin, I discuss the Holocaust as a major theme that runs through prevailing understandings of identity. According to my data, the majority of the respondents appropriated stories of historical persecution and victimization, with the Holocaust constituting a central component of their national consciousness.

Looking back on the legacy of her ancestors, Flavia declared in a solemn tone:

> The fact that the Jewish people are here today, it was not a given. It's not a given. We've been through so many horrible things, so many genocides. Everyone tries to kill us all the time. So the fact that I'm here, as a Jewish woman, as an Israeli, is unthinkable. To my great grandparents, this is an unthinkable thing.

The question of identity, and the difficulty answering it, led Anita to disclose:

> I didn't really identify as Jewish for many years. Because I felt that it had to be religious. But in the past few years, I don't feel that it's really my religion as much as it's my identity. Because, you know, my grandma was in the Holocaust and, a lot of my family suffered from antisemitism and being persecuted around the world. So, in some way, it's part of my identity because my family fled to live here. They had nowhere else to go at some point.

These statements illustrate how collective trauma does not merely touch the lives of those affected by tragedy directly. Rather, these events conjure up painful memories that live on in the present day and affect how people self-identify (Misztal 2003: 143; Volkan 2001). More than merely belonging to a group, people *internalize* the group, which becomes an actual part of their sense of self (Theiler 2003: 260).

By extension, chronic cycles of violence, which in Israel are part of the "background noise" (Perec 1974: 209), hinder the respondents' ability to lay past traumas to rest, the data suggests. In particular, the grammar of insecurity casts an imprint on the threshold of early adulthood, as they become weaved into a compulsory military service.

This reality has been most saliently echoed by Rachely:

> You know, all Israelis have PTSD from the wars. Even just last night, there was a shooting near the Shuafat refugee camp in East Jerusalem by a check point. And a soldier was killed, an 18-year old woman. And one guard man, and a number of soldiers are in a critical condition. So it's always in the back of our minds. And this is just one case of a terror attack among a string of attacks in the past few months. And, for us Israelis, this leads us to grow up with the mentality of: 'I could literally get killed right now'.

Furthermore, their insights highlight the prevalence of the Holocaust as an event that has a publicly recognized meaning in Israel[36].

For example, Dafna explained the role of the educational system in "fixing" the Holocaust into the collective consciousness of Israel's youth:

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[36] The Denial of Holocaust (Prohibition) law 5746, or "Holocaust Denial Law", passed by the Knesset on 8 July 1986, is a prominent example of Israel's efforts to regulate and preserve Jewish historical memory.

> Since kindergarten and throughout our teenage years, we've been growing up learning a lot about the Holocaust. In a way, it's so ingrained in us that we've always known how to respect it and how to talk about it appropriately. It was a big part of history lessons in high school, we had lots of tests about this subject throughout, like, every year.

In that regard, the out-group's representations of this event sat very much in contrast to the "trauma culture" (Kaplan 2005) they grew up with, their accounts suggest. Most, if not all, respondents described an initial lack of historical and emotional understanding of this tragedy from their Palestinian counterparts in the chorus.

Looking back on her experience with dialogue, Dina slowly articulated:

> I think that for other people who haven't experienced it, they didn't have the same sensitivity towards it. So for me, it was really the first time that I sat and thought: 'Waw, I've never heard anybody speak about the Holocaust like this'. And it was really hard to hear. And I think there were a lot of times when, over the years, we've gone back to it and talked about it. And there has been a lot of apologies and a lot of emotions […]. Similar things also happened when we initially started talking about things to do with Palestinian issues. The default is to kind of be like: 'No, that's not what happened'. Instantly, you're thinking: 'I don't want to support something that's happening to you in that way'. So you have this kind of cognitive dissonance where you're like: 'No, there has to be a reason why they have experienced this that hasn't gotten anything to do with my identity'. And it's really hard. And it was a shock for me to realize that as much as I didn't

> know about the Nakba until I joined the choir, that the gaps were there for both of us.

This excerpt highlights three essential points. First, it presents collective trauma as a phenomenon involving inclusion and exclusion, between those who can identify with its symbolic meaning versus those who (initially) cannot. Second, it fortifies the notion that intergroup dialogue requires long and repeated sequences of exchanges and cannot bring mutual understanding on a one-off basis. Repeated exposure to the out-group gradually stimulated mutual understanding and empathy through which apologies have been exchanged. Lastly, it captures the need for cognitive consistency in the face of the in-group's wrongdoings. The Palestinian perspective on 1948, Dina argues, painfully contradicts core beliefs about the in-group (as "good", "victim", or "innocent") and self-identity. In that regard, the second part of her response is interesting, for it draws a line between the Holocaust and the Nakba.

Right after, Dina added:

> I also really don't like the comparison between the Holocaust and the Nakba. Each thing is separate and I don't want to take away from either thing by saying: 'Oh, look at the similarities here and, look at the similarities there'. I think it's unfair to do that. Obviously, you've to learn from history. But because they're so sensitive – and I'm speaking more from the Holocaust aspect because it's more personal to me – I find it hard to draw the comparisons. I think they're just different.

### *Between persecutor and persecuted*

The following claims shed light on the uncertain and anxiety-ridden place that *al-Nakba* continues to hold for most research participants in the context of the Holocaust memory and the ongoing conflict. In varying degrees, they reflect a complex negotiation between the respondents' allegiance to Israel – largely perceived as the State that sheltered (and continues to protect) Jewish lives in the wake of the Holocaust and enduring antisemitism – and the difficult knowledge of the crimes their nation-state rests upon. The tension, found in most narratives, is indeed one between the need to safeguard the legitimacy of their identity community (Tajfel & Turner 1979) and the need to acknowledge the suffering and injustice inflicted on Palestinians.

On the topic of the 1948 War, Uri thought for a moment and said:

> There was a war and, you know, Israel was formed. But in spite of all the complications that come with it, we still have a right to be here […]. The way the war happened isn't necessarily fair, with all the dispersing of the territories and people got kicked out of their homes, especially Arabs […]. But I'm very proud to call Israel my home because without this State, the Jews would keep being, in a more extreme way, ridiculed, and chased, and murdered. And that doesn't justify any of the other killing that happened by us to the other side or any other side. But I also believe that we deserve to have a country and a place to call the Jewish State to protect us from outside threats.

Uri takes the measure of the role played by his people in the "unfair" Palestinian expulsions of 1948. Having acknowledged that, he goes on to describe the in-group as existentially threatened, in need of a secure homeland where it can thrive, free from any further threat of persecution.

Turning my question into her head, Anita stared into the distance. After a long pause, she looked back at me and said:

> I'm not sure I feel comfortable answering that, just because [pausing]. I think, from a younger age, I've celebrated *Yom Ha'atzmaut* knowing I don't really feel connected to it but also I really do. Because I know, at the end, it was a war, still happening for some people. But at the same time, I'm supposed to celebrate it because I live here. And, some might say that I wouldn't have my family and I wouldn't have my life if it wasn't for this country. So I don't know if I can say anything specifically because, just thinking about it was just so many feelings on both sides. But all I can say is, just a lot of pain, a lot of anger, a lot of things that people tried to hide for many years… A lot of destroying villages, and raping women, and doing unspeakable things, and trying to hide it in this beautiful holiday.

Anita turns a critical eye on Israel's mnemonic policies of erasure and recognizes the sense of loss and grief brought on by the war on both sides. At the same time, she expresses the need to retain loyalty to her community and to the country that provided refuge to her ancestors in the wake of the Holocaust.

Additionally, the tendency to take a stance of "not knowing enough" has been a common theme.

With reservations, Flavia expressed:

> Honestly, I don’t really remember talking about these events very much. I really remember hanging with my friends. I know we touched on it multiple times. But my understanding of these events didn’t really change, I just learned more about them. Honestly, I’m not really sure about the Nakba. I don’t really remember talking about it and I feel bad that I don’t know. I feel like I should know more.

Admittedly, discomfort and pain are enduringly sewn into the past. The reluctance of Ariel, a Jewish Israeli alumna, to engage with the topic of the 1948 war, is a testament to that:

> I don’t like to dive into these subjects… It’s very emotional for me and it’s hard to get into these things.

According to SIT, revisiting episodes of collective atrocities is a demanding process for members of the perpetrator group. Doing so involves imagery that displays a negative conception of the self, which may pose a threat to collective identity (Strömbom 2010; Hirschberger 2018). Flavia’s and Ariel’s accounts seem a clear illustration of that.

### ***‘It’s like having twice as much pain’***

Two alumni adopted an “inclusive victim consciousness” (Vollhardt 2015) which, by definition, transcends the exclusive national syntax that “triumphs” in Israeli society. Nurturing a virtue of mutual legitimacy, they accommodated the Nakba and the roots of Palestinian suffering in their search for a desirable middle between the excesses of suffering and war.

Standing on a “mountaintop”, Dafna recognized the absence of an absolute truth with reference to the past and nurtured the hope of a peaceful coexistence beyond the zero-sum “game” of politics:

> I personally don’t mind the word “Nakba”. It’s an existing term and this is how many of my Palestinian friends would call it. But it’s also weird, because for me, it’s a holiday in the Jewish calendar. You get a day free from work or studies, it’s very colourful and happy. And then you’ve friends for whom it’s a memorial day. So, my philosophy for now is sticking to the middle and looking from this mountaintop. Because both sides are in the right and in the wrong many times. And if you go to the extreme of either side, it’s wrong. I mean, you can’t just say: ‘Yes, we’re occupiers and we shouldn’t exist here and let it become Palestine again’. And the other side can’t just say: ‘No, Israel is only for Jews, we should get everybody else out of here’. I mean, can we not just exist together? Physically, we’re here together, whether we like it or not. It’s this huge political game that will never solve itself.

In parallel, Nofar shared her view about how the Holocaust and the Nakba intersect and how discussing them in dialogue was a challenge:

> My family aren’t Holocaust survivors. Which doesn’t mean that I don’t respect. What I mean to say is that it’s not in my blood, you know, it’s not a family trauma. I think it touched a lot of people because their grandparents or great grandparents were caught in these atrocities. And [in dialogue] some people were comparing what happened then to what Israel is doing now… and for some people it

> was really difficult and painful to hear. But I think wrong things were said on both sides, that should not be said no matter what you think. And I also think there're similarities: in the really early stages of Nazi Germany, they weren't putting anyone in death camps. Now, I look at it from a different perspective. I think more about the things that I learned. Because before that, I didn't know what the Nakba was. I didn't know about the experience of Palestinians. I didn't know what Israel does. And it taught me so much. It's not like I read about it in a book. Because Israeli people, they read a book, that's like, right-wing, and they're like: 'Yes, I know everything about Palestinians!'. But I heard it from people telling me about their daily lives.

Dafna and Nofar frame collective trauma as an inclusive experience that the in-group shares with the out-group. Their narratives suggest a fluid boundary in terms of the legitimacy given to the two legacies of trauma. In that regard, it is significant to note that the respondents appropriated the tragedy of the Holocaust and its pain less strongly, explaining that "it's not a family trauma". This finding underlines an important point: mnemonic boundaries are directly contingent upon people's backgrounds, in the meaning that family narratives are an important channel through which trauma attains meaning. Put differently, *the politics of mnemonic security*, as Maria Mälksoo (2015) called them, would be meaningless if they did not resonate with a specific repertoire of stories that make up a person's autobiography (see Rosoux 2019).

Nofar proceeded to comment on the more recent waves of violence:

> Last time we had a war, in the summer of 2021, I remember feeling awful because they were bombing my side and I had to go to my

> parents' house because it was safer there. And I felt the pain of my people and the pain of the people in Gaza. It's like having twice as much pain. Seeing both sides is a blessing, but it's also painful […]. It's really, *really* complicated.

## Preliminary discussion

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, celebrated as a "chosen glory" by Jewish Israelis in the wake of the Holocaust, is mourned as a "chosen trauma" by Palestinians (Volkan 2001). Considering these two historic representations side by side is therefore a challenge, some would argue a contradiction in terms. According to SIT and the psychological need for a positive self-view (Tajfel & Turner 1979), adversarial interpretations of the past that convey in-group wrongdoings are expected to threaten group-based esteem and, thus, to be rejected. According to this line of reasoning, the Palestinian historical narrative, which provides a reading of history that turns Israeli Jews from righteous victims into perpetrators, may collide with the positive identity groups innately strive for. As demonstrated above, the statements under scrutiny bring nuance to these predictions, and reveal instead complex perspectives where the personal and the political are entwined in ambivalence, away from rigid societal discourses rooted in the delegitimization of the out-group's narrative.

On the one hand, the full-fledged aliveness of the Holocaust memory, as it was revealed in five narratives, is suggestive of the "weight of the past" (Rosoux 2019: 212) and the enduring impact of "the politics of memory" (Mälksoo 2015: 228) on identity. Admittedly, beliefs about a threatened self continue to taint the collective existential experiences of this young generation of Israelis, irrespective of their position of *de jure* military, political, and economic dominance (Bar-Tal 2013; Abulof 2009). Bar two notable exceptions, the Holocaust was understood by the respondents primarily as a “Jewish issue”, namely as a valued group marker. In discussions about the 1948 war, it became, in a number of cases, activated as a boundary towards the other side, to safeguard the political legitimacy of the Jewish State and the Jewish right to self-determination (Olesker 2013; Bar-Tal, Chernyak-Hai, Schori, & Gundar 2009). Here, I suggest that the background variable may have an important influence on boundary-drawing practices, for it was found that the respondents who were most critical to their side and receptive to the Palestinian narrative came from a family that did not bear the scars of the *Shoah*.

Beyond the persistence of the Jewish collective trauma and clear group insecurities triggered by the conflict, the findings suggest that long-term intergroup contact has stimulated a complexified view of history among the majority of the respondents. It is significant to note that most research participants recognized the suffering and the victimization of the Palestinian out-group while expressing, in some instances, a degree of culpability in relation to the 1948 war. At the very least, their narratives provide evidence that exposure to the out-group elicited critical reflection upon societal discourses, in ways that weaken the dichotomy between “good us” versus “threatening them”; “victim” versus “perpetrator”. Here, one could tentatively speak of a “choice of the past” (Rosoux 2019: 196), broadened through constructive encounters with the other side.

### *§3. The Nakba and the Holocaust: Palestinian alumni perceptions*

In this section, I study the voices of the Palestinian respondents who, like the vast majority of Palestinians living in Jerusalem, permanently reside in the city without the Israeli citizenship. From observations during my fieldwork, I gather that they live in highly difficult political and socio-economic conditions. Namely, they occupy an ontological and existential category of precariousness characterized by increased uncertainty – not to mention chronic struggle – that is normative to the experience of a subordinated group living in an "ethnic democracy" (Smooha 1996) without the security of citizenship[37]. Instead, they hold a blue ID that grants them the residence status which, under current Israeli law, can be revoked if they leave the city and country for a prolonged period of time[38]. Thus, in addition to seeing their identity and historical heritage weakened by the Israeli apparatus, members of this group face a "persistent threat of being displaced" from their homeland in Jerusalem (Sandouka 2021).

#### ***'The victims of the victims'***

The following narratives suggest high levels of in-group cohesion, which can be clearly discerned from the ways in which the Palestinian respondents "act out" dominant stories of trauma. As titled above, they provide the insight that they are “the victims of the victims, the refugees of the refugees” [39].

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[37] On 19 July 2018, the Israeli Knesset enacted the Jewish Nation-State Basic Law, which constitutionally defines the State of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people (article 1), https://www.adalah.org/en/content/view/9569 (accessed on November 1, 2022).

[38] Human Rights Watch, 'Israel: Jerusalem Palestinians Stripped of Status', August 8, 2017 (accessed on December 17, 2022).

Speaking in a resolute tone, Waseem said:

> To me, as someone who lives under occupation – and I feel it – I don’t really care about the Holocaust. I care for the Nakba and the refugees who left their house and still can’t get back. I feel that they’re a part of me. And a lot of people died here, during the Nakba. So I’ll definitely stand with my people, with the refugees who are thrown here and there and who cannot go back to their country.

In a further act of clarification, he explained:

> I feel sorry about what happened to the Jews because of my humanity. But when it comes to comparing both events, I’m going to side with my people, the Palestinians. Especially because, today, look at what’s happening: they’re taking our houses and our lands, and it’s getting worse every year. Because in the end, their goal is to steal all our lands.

Waseem’s narrative reveals a binary between “*my* people” and “*they* who are stealing Palestinian lands”. Feelings of empathy toward the out-group’s trauma are expressed, yet they are overlapped by an ethnonational narrative that breeds pain, victimhood, and injustice.

Analogously, and with the same affirmativeness, Tarek said:

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[39] Edward Said, “The One-State Solution”, *New York Times Magazine*, January 10, 1999.

> When the subject of the Holocaust was raised in dialogue, it was usually raised along with the Nakba. And for me, you can't really compare these two events. Typically, when we're talking about the Holocaust, we can't laugh, we can't do anything, we have to cry. And yes, I empathize, you're people, and I empathize with animals getting killed, and you're people who got killed. I empathize. But what about the Nakba? It's really interesting that when the Nakba is brought up, it's not compared to Independence Day. For me, it doesn't sit right how we're always bringing these two subjects together, raising them and treating them in the same way. The Nakba, it's things that they're doing to us. What happened with the Holocaust has nothing to do with me. And still, I empathize. The Holocaust happened, but not here, and it's not happening right now.

Tarek contends that the Palestinian catastrophe is different and should be discussed separately from that of the out-group. He highlights the asymmetry in the responsibility of the Israelis for the Nakba and the absence of responsibility of the Palestinians for the Holocaust, thereby drawing a line between the "Palestinian-as-Victim" in-group category and the "Jewish Israeli-as-Aggressor" out-group category[40].

He went further to assert that:

> When the Israelis talk about the Holocaust, it's presented to me in a way that sort of says: 'My pain is more than yours'. Out of all the massacres in the world, it's as though only *their story* is important.

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[40] These categories have been introduced by Hammack and Pilecki (2014) in their recent study entitled "Victims Versus Righteous Victims: The Rhetorical Construction of Social Categories in Historical dialogue Among Israeli and Palestinian Youth", Political Psychology, 35(6).

> I'm sorry, I can empathize with them as people, but I've to focus on my own story and make people hear my perspective.

This excerpt illustrates a phenomenon referred to in the literature as "social competition" (Tajfel & Turner 1979) and, by extension, "competitive victimhood" (Noor, Shnabel, Halabi, & Nadler 2012). The Jewish Holocaust memory, which enjoys a hegemonic status in Israel's socio-political arena, overshadows the Palestinian Nakba – its memory and ongoing consequences – Tarek claims[41].

Reflecting on his long-term exposure to the out-group's narrative, he ultimately declared:

> Politically, things were very clear to me from the start. Every year, I would talk to new people and I didn't change my vision. The only new perspective that I gained is cultural.

According to Hammack (2006), identity salience may "moderate the effects of trauma and political violence" among the Palestinian youth. Waseem's and Tarek's historical narratives exemplify this coping strategy.

### ***'It's painful'***

By contrast, something resembling history avoidance was detected in the other half of my sample.

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[41] In Lea David's evocative words, the Palestinians are facing a "Holocaust wall" that serves to actively erase or justify the Palestinian Nakba (David 2020: 68).

When the subjects of the Holocaust and the 1948 War were raised, Osaid succinctly responded:

> Honestly, I don’t like to talk about history because it’s so sensitive. And I don’t have the experience to talk about the Holocaust.

With similar reservation, Adham declared:

> It’s a painful thing [pausing]. And we need to give appropriate time to our thoughts on both sides.

After surveying the respondents’ faces, which were locked in apparent unease, I decided to close this subject. Their responses, so resolute, did not leave much room for probing. At the very least, they make me entitled to assume that there is threat and anxiety – perhaps also emotional difficulty – in addressing history and recalling traumatic loss.

### Preliminary discussion

Given the small sample size for this group, the following comments should be read with a grain of salt. However, the relative homogeneity found in the narratives still allows me to make some important, yet tentative, observations.

The data for this group supports predictions derived from SIT, which posits that identity salience may increase or remain unchanged following interethnic contact for groups in conflict (Tajfel & Turner 1979). On the subject of the Holocaust, half of the sampled alumni displayed in-group favouritism, (e.g., “I’ve to focus on my own story”;

“I’m going to side with my people”), and mobilized 1948 as a boundary towards the out-group. The other half refrained from engaging with history, claiming that it was a sensitive issue. The narratives also contain expressions of empathy, which were uttered *verbatim* with reference to the Holocaust. At the same time, engaging with the out-group’s trauma predominantly brought out – either explicitly or implicitly through their muteness – injury and wounding in relation to the escalating nature of their Nakba, stretching ever farther and deeper into Palestinian landscapes. Markedly, the respondents occupy a position of subordination that makes them “cling” more tightly to their identity (and the Nakba as an important national marker) to mitigate communal insecurities, especially in a societal context where no “alternative identity” is accessible to them (Barth 1969: 134). To compensate for their victimization and to restore a sense of agency in the face of prevailing inequality, preserving ideological solidarity with the community is crucial, the data suggests. By extension, earlier findings for this group have shown that intergroup contact became a meaningful vehicle for breaking the institutional silence surrounding their community’s history and ongoing struggles (for similar results, see Halabi & Sonneschein 2004; Suleiman 2004). Thus, it would seem that committing to coexistence with members of the oppressing group who, according to the data relayed *supra*, are perceived more as valued music partners than friends, is an act of resilience.

## *§4. The Nakba and the Holocaust: Palestinian Israeli alumni perceptions*

Caught in the "cross-fire" (Simon, Aufderheide, and Kampmeier 2002: 318) are the voices of the Palestinian citizens of Israel, who bear an identity riddled with contradictions. Simultaneously minority citizens of Israel and national members of the Palestinian community defined in antagonistic terms by the Jewish majority, Palestinian Israelis[42] occupy a very unique position in the conflict (Al-Haj 2000). As a group, they classically represent an indigenous and stigmatized minority within a state where "they can only assume limited power and social roles as a consequence of their social identity" (Hammack 2010: 369).

No amount of theory can describe this "liminal" (Turner 1967) identity better than the voices of the alumni themselves. In the following pages, I begin by situating how they experience and negotiate their identities, before plunging deeper into the traumatic memories that constitute and divide their community.

### ***'Do I belong here, or there?'***

Members of this group hold a complex identity wherein they do not completely relate to the nation-state they live in – defined in ethnic terms as the State of the Jewish people – yet they also do not entirely relate to their ethnic and cultural kin living outside the borders of Israel (e.g., Kachuyevski and Olesker 2014: 306). This gives rise to an uncertain identity boundary perception, described most evocatively in the words of Faris:

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[42] The term "Palestinian-Israeli" is consistently used in the literature to refer to this group (e.g., Hammack 2010). However, members of this community use more than one label to identify themselves, such as "Arab-Israeli", "Israeli-Arab", "Palestinian", "Arab", or "Israeli-Palestinian".

> Living in Jerusalem is a big identity issue for everyone here. You can't feel fully connected to your Palestinian identity, because you live under Israeli authority. Most of our formal papers are written in Hebrew, and we work and trade with Israelis in our daily lives. So, occupation isn't only about occupying the land. It also occupies your identity. And yeah, it's a complicated subject. Perhaps you've heard of the word *tamsahin*? In Arabic, *tamsah* means 'crocodile'. It's an expression we use to say that, to live here, we need to toughen our skin. And at some point, we stop feeling anything.

Key here is the theme of double marginality (Suleiman & Beit-Hallahmi 1997), i.e., the perception that their identity is reprehensible in both communities as a result of their "hyphenated status" (Hammack 2010: 375).

Leila stated it thus:

> If I start identifying with Palestinians, my Israeli friends won't like it. And if I identify myself as an Israeli because I'm holding the Israeli passport, my Palestinian friends will say that I'm a traitor and they won't like it. And I'll find myself in a place where I don't know where I belong: do I belong here, or there?

Another statement, equally potent and too colourful not to be quoted, was made by Limor:

> A lot of times, people ask me if I’m Jewish because of my name. Then they get confused because I don’t speak with a Hebrew accent. And when I say that I’m an Arab, they get shocked. They tell me: ‘What? How come you have Limor as a name?’. Or: ‘But you don’t look Arab!’. So I tell them: “How are Arabs supposed to look like?’. It’s funny, to have a Jewish name as a Palestinian. It’s like… a salad [laughing].

To recontextualize, these identity “salads” are inextricably linked to Israel’s identity-based policies of exclusion started immediately after 1948 (Jamal 2019). As evidenced by the above excerpts, the process of “Palestinian de-nationalization” which, at its core, seeks to alienate Palestinian citizens from their national identity and associated group markers, leaves Palestinian citizens with a social identity that imposes unusual levels of internal dissonance on them (Olesker 2013: 372). In the face of such insecurity, growing a “crocodile skin” may thus appear as the only available strategy to pursue.

Against this backdrop, intergroup contact has been described by all the respondents as an experience that possesses the possibility for resilience. Noor put it as follows:

> I don’t like the situation here, it’s really difficult. And I love that the JYC gives me the space to really express my identity. To feel like someone is listening to what I’m saying. Because you don’t get to do that often, you don’t. Out there, people will always judge you […]. And I feel like, if we keep talking, things will get clearer, and the fear within us will decrease.

### *‘Khalas, we need to move on’*[43]

Bar one, all the accounts suggest that the past is best left behind. This view was most commonly relayed by the respondents who highlighted a strong desire to integrate themselves into Israeli society from a position of equality.

Reflecting on the intractability of 1948, Limor said quietly:

> It’s hard to talk about it. Even if I’m free now and I can express my feelings, sometimes I feel that I can’t understand anything that has happened, and why it happened. And I’ve many questions. And always, I prefer to not think about it. And there’re a lot of times where I don’t want to learn about it and teach about it. Like, *khalas*, I’m living my own life now and it’s not going to help me to think who killed the other and who started the war with the other side. Now, I’m living a good life, and I’m working, and I’m doing my Master’s at the Hebrew University. And I’m living with them [the Israelis]. Like, *khalas,* I think we need to move on because both sides did bad things to each other.

After I articulated the words *al-Nakba,* Noor paused. Then, with a slight hesitation, she explained:

> I feel like I just want to achieve what I want, you know. Have less headache. To have principles is very important, but at the same time, I want to disconnect from this. Because I don’t want to feel that my origins have something to do with who I am and influence my opportunities in the future. Like, in terms of inequality. So, I don’t

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[43] For novices to Palestinian culture, in Arabic “khalas” is the equivalent of “enough”.

> want to be this nationalistic. Do you understand? Like, ok, I like to speak about politics, but I avoid politics. And I try to be very careful when speaking about politics. You want to make sure that you're comfortable. And it's about freedom of speech, right? […] So, it's not that I don't acknowledge the Palestinian suffering. It's just that, at some point, you have to move on, you know?

Leila, who narrated the injury and loss brought on by the perpetuation of the Nakba, resisted to linger on the injustice it inflicted. Looking back on early life traumas, she said:

> It happened to me that the government came and said: 'Ok, now we're going to take this side of your house and build a nice sidewalk for the people to walk'. But my neighbourhood is empty, there is no people to walk, so why are you doing this? I didn't like it. It was really hard for me. It was a place where I used to run around when I was 4. It was my childhood place, and it wasn't really nice to see them ruin it for a sidewalk for people who don't even walk there. But at some point, I learned that sometimes, fighting a battle that I know I'll lose is not good for me. I don't like *fighting, fighting, fighting*. Because I'll lose my game.

At a later point, she interjected:

> It's hurtful that, yes, they're taking our land. But still, if there's a solution where we can share the land, why not.

Implicated through these statements is a desire to be free of rather than trapped by past (and present) pain. From this emerges a "cooperative pattern”, which transcends the ubiquitous victim-perpetrator rhetoric. Crucially, how the Nakba is perceived and processed holds political significance, their stories suggest. Namely, power determines what can or should be said about these events, and one therefore needs to learn to “manage” one’s thoughts and emotions accordingly to “survive”. As a reminder, collective memory is a big security issue in Israel (Mälksoo 2015: 222). Suffice it to look at the state’s legal memory, which enshrines denial of the Palestinian past[44], to understand that historical positions are “a crucial battleground” in the country (Mälksoo 2015: 227). Giving oneself a blank room – free of trauma – may in this light become a useful strategy to protect or enhance one’s position in Israel and build the future.

This finding dovetails nicely with SIT, which introduces the term “individual upward mobility” (Tajfel & Turner 1979) to define the coping strategy used by members of disadvantaged groups to improve their current standing by leaning toward the “strongest” group membership  (Ellemers and Barreto 2002: 336).

### *‘Both sides suffered’*

All the narratives reflected a certain amount of recognition of the out-group’s trauma, albeit in varying degrees. The respondents who identified themselves without reference to the Palestinian component (i.e., as either “Arabs” or “Israeli Arabs”), it was found, demonstrated higher sensitivity, leading to a “narrative of shared suffering” (Noor, Vollhardt, Mari, & Nadler 2017: 124).

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[44] By way of illustration, the so-called “Nakba Law” (2011) explicitly criminalizes the public commemoration of the Nakba in Israel (https://www.adalah.org/uploads/oldfiles/Public/files/Discriminatory-Laws-Database/English/33-Budget-Foundations-Law-Amendment40-Nakba-Law.pdf).

For example, Noor adopted a neutral, “pro human rights”, stance:

> In my opinion, both people should really know about both narratives, both struggles. Palestinians or, like, Arabs, should learn about antisemitism and about the Holocaust. I think it’s important if we want to reach a peaceful life and coexistence. And also the other way around : Jews should know about Palestinian struggles and the Nakba. I think it should be mutual […]. Because I’m pro human rights. And after I heard about the Holocaust, I thought, both sides suffer.

Similarly, Leila described the Holocaust as a painful event that shattered the lives of people across religious and ethnonational differences:

> In the Holocaust, there were Israelis, and Jews, and they lost their souls. Also Christians, also Arabs, and a lot of innocent people lost their souls. And it’s something really hurtful. Just the idea of innocent kids, innocent families dying for not doing anything, just because they were born like that. Why are you judging them for being born that way? I was born Arab, why do you blame me for being me? It’s something really messed up, and something that really kills me, and makes me feel really sad about how it happened and how it ended.

On the other hand, the alumni who reported a stronger allegiance to the Palestinian community articulated more equivocal responses.

For example, Limor, who identified herself as “a Palestinian living in Israel”, built an empathetic and ambivalent response to the out-group’s trauma:

> If you’re interested in my opinion, I think it’s very hard. In the past, I always thought: How can they treat Palestinians this way after all the suffering that they went through? But now, I can understand them better. *Ya’ani*[45], I don’t feel happy that the Holocaust happened to them. No, I’m so sad. But also, it’s complicated.

A few moments later, as I tried to probe deeper, she shared an anecdote that conveys insecurity and a lack of freedom to narrate history:

> I can tell you a story that happened at my university on Holocaust remembrance day. We’ve a big board on which we can write everything. And some students wrote the names of the victims who died during the Holocaust. That day, two Palestinian girls who didn’t understand Hebrew took a pencil and wrote *Ramadan kareem* on the board, which means ‘Happy Ramadan’. Do you know what the university did? They punished them and took them out. They were in their fourth year and weren’t allowed to continue their program anymore, just because of *two words*. And I don’t know, when I heard about this story, I felt that I’m not secure. So even if we want to be together, I also know that I can’t say whatever I want.

Faris, who reported “feeling more Palestinian” since his involvement in the JYC, pondered the difficulties of lending legitimacy to the historical narrative of a group that actively injures “his people”. A look of hesitation passed across his face, before he said:

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[45] “Ya’ani” is a highly versatile Arabic interjection. Depending on the context, it can mean “like”, “you know”, or “for example”.

> For me, the Holocaust is like every other genocide that happened in the world. It was between the Jews and the Germans and, for me… [pausing, hesitating] …they did the same thing to my people. I know that everyone hates the Jews around the world and that the Nazis killed over six million of them. And that they murdered them in a really ugly way. And that’s why, for me, them abusing my people and taking their rights away tells me that they didn’t actually learn from the past.

## Preliminary discussion

Circling back to my introductory claims, the above sheds light on the dynamic nature of identity which, in the present case, involves an ongoing process of negotiation between two poles, two memories.

The narratives under analysis illustrate the respondents’ perceived incapacity to “consummate” their culture and associated markers “moderately successfully” (Barth 1969: 132) in Jerusalem. Accordingly, their perceptions of the Nakba are tainted by the themes of insecurity and subordination (e.g., compromised freedom of speech; insecurity surrounding property rights). In speaking *mezza voce* of what cannot be spoken of freely in Israeli society, they seem caught between the urge to remember and the compulsion to forget; two competing impulses which are locked in a securitized identity. Given this context, SIT explains that, to cope with their subordinated status, members of an ethnic minority are prone to “reaffirm” their identity by drawing closer to any group that is deemed capable of reducing uncertainty and defusing the negative consequences of their group membership (Tajfel & Turner 1986). Nowhere is it more apparent than within this community that "positive distinctiveness can take a variety of forms" (Turner and Reynolds 2002: 140), at the intersection between their Palestinian ethnic identity and Israeli civic identity.

These identity construction strategies have been shown to have some implications for how the respondents interpret the Holocaust. On the one hand, the respondents who identified primarily as Israeli Arabs or Arabs were found to lean more toward a "narrative of multiculturalism" (Jutila 2006), in which the Holocaust was recognized as a human tragedy. On the other hand, the respondents who emphasized a stronger sense of belonging and loyalty to the Palestinian community displayed higher levels of dissonance with respect to the Holocaust. Namely, it triggered either competition for historical victimhood (e.g., the belief that the Jews perpetrated similar atrocities against the Palestinian people) or deep feelings of anxiety (e.g., the perception that departing from Israel's historical narrative would come at the heavy cost of being expelled from one's university). Notwithstanding the above, what holds true for all members of this group is that intergroup contact has made them more aware of the troubled history of their Jewish peers, and generated narratives of sympathy (rather than indifference). This may be reflective of the beneficial impact of intergroup contact, which has opened a space for the alumni to explore their collective identity in ways that do not imply the rejection of either side of the hyphen.

# Chapter 3. Discussion

In this chapter, I highlight the key findings ensuing from my empirical analysis and feed them back into the theories that underpin my research.

To reiterate, my conceptual framework is driven by a tension between two theories. On the one hand, SIT (Tajfel & Turner 1979) and the related concept of societal security (Buzan 1983; Weaver et al. 1993) postulate that people have a basic psychological need to maintain "us"/"them" categorizations as a source of positive self-evaluation, security, and survival (Theiler 2003: 268). According to this perspective, exposure to the other side is expected to increase the salience of group boundaries based on the metacontrast principle and the universal quest for positive self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner 1979). On the other hand, the contact hypothesis (Allport 1954; Pettigrew 1998) proposes that optimal contact can be a compelling strategy to de-rigidify group boundaries because of gains in mutual understanding and reduced threat perceptions (Gaertner & Dovidio 2000). The paragraphs that follow illustrate how the empirical material collected during my fieldwork in Israel in fact supports predictions from both approaches.

First, the qualitative findings lend strong credence to the Allportian argument (1954), for clear associations between intergroup contact, prejudice and/or ignorance reduction have been found across ethnic majority and ethnic minority groups. In particular, joint and sustained efforts to create musically became conducive to seeing "the human being across the table" (Rosenberg 2005) instead of the group stereotype. As a "containing figure" (Winnicott 1971), music fostered the amount of trust that was needed to make the choristers come back as friends after challenging dialogue sessions. By extension, the perception that time was an important ingredient to establish intergroup trust and effective communication across the gulf of differences in perspectives, experiences, and feelings, has been a common theme across the three communities. “Slowly, slowly”, as they put it, dialogue became an important vehicle to challenge the language of the status quo, previously made invisible by the original state of isolation of the parties. *In fine,* the respondents’ involvement in the program as alumni provides the clearest evidence that, instead of strengthening the “I”, intergroup contact has given the local youth an opportunity to experience and imagine an alternative and enduring “We” (Gaertner and Dovidio 2000). By turning the “abstract Other” (Laclau 2000) into either a friend or a legitimate partner with whom difficult conversations can be had – both *in* and *ex situ* – there are strong reasons to believe that the JYC has worked to sustainably lower perceptions of threat and improve the youth’s relationship to difference, no longer viewed as exclusively threatening.

Notwithstanding the above, the findings of historic perceptions demonstrate that the youth’s openness to engage in mixed encounters does not imply *de facto* that they have become immune to top-down securitization moves. For, underneath the surface of music, the broader power dynamics and spiralling cycles of violence routinely simmer tensions and probe the wounds of collective trauma. As demonstrated in the second part of my analysis, the memories of the Holocaust and the Nakba are felt intensely in the present and continue to perpetuate societal beliefs around victimization and the justness of one’s community’s goals. As much as being separate, they were often addressed together, if only to emphasize that they are “different”, that one is ongoing whilst the other is "in the past", or else, that they share unfortunate similarities. Thus, it would seem that collective trauma remains a significant group marker for this young generation of artists, which continues to perceive itself as facing existential threats.

In accordance with SIT's and ST's predictions, the findings have shown that ethnonational belonging and threat perceptions influence the ways in which people construct memory. Accordingly, my analysis highlighted a trend, common to all sides, in which the respondents who identified more strongly with their community articulated historic interpretations that were more protective of their identity (Tajfel & Turner 1986). In this regard, claims reflecting higher levels of identity salience and group defence were primarily the purview of the Palestinian alumni without the Israeli citizenship, who brought "the language of trauma as a function of power" (Hutchison 2016: 59) into focus. The fact that they possess very little security in their identity and rights as a minority ethnic subgroup could be seen as a reason why they are less amenable to revise the victim-perpetrator interlock and maintain higher levels of identification with the Palestinian community, seen as a remedy for their insecurities. The hybrid voices of Palestinian Israelis, on the other hand, epitomized identity conflict as a condition that pervades the roots of their being. Overall, they displayed lower levels of attachment to their ethnic group's signifiers (i.e., *al-Nakba*), and often used empathetic language when engaging with the Holocaust, instead of the political language of confrontation. These findings are remarkable given that Palestinian Israelis are in a much weaker position when it comes to "affording" to be egalitarian, as the findings of previous research in the region have shown (e.g., Ross 2014; Hammack & Pilecki 2014; Kahanoff 2018). The respondents' partial disjuncture from the Nakba and increased receptiveness to the out-group's narrative may speak to the need of this young generation to rebuild itself by producing new forward-looking meanings from trauma. I also suggest that the gender variable may be significant, for the Palestinian respondents in favor of moving past contentious history were exclusively women. Further to such observations, identity conflict was also found in the accounts of most Jewish Israeli respondents. Their historic narratives exposed how intergroup contact destabilized the hegemonic discourses they grew up with, and the expansive and unsettling effects of contact on identity. The majority of Jewish respondents, it was found, recognized in part the wrongdoings perpetrated by their in-group during the 1948 War. Their membership to the majority-group – which allows them to fully cultivate their identity in Israel – may be a potent explanation for why they are more amenable to embrace ambivalent positions towards the history of the conflict. At the same time, the reluctance of some to address the meanings ascribed to these events accounts for the inherent difficulty and threat involved in destabilizing intergroup boundaries.

Ultimately, the findings from both chapters should be taken very seriously. Together, they highlight the scope and the limits of people-to-people encounters as a reconciliation process in societal contexts awash with trauma and insecurity. Accordingly, the answer to whether intergroup contact is an optimal strategy to desecuritize boundaries from the bottom-up is neither straightforward nor absolute. Depending on what is expected from these bicommunal programs, a different conclusion will ensue. If the success of desecuritization is measured according to the youth's ability to reach common ground on history, the answer would have to be negative. As the findings have revealed, attaining a shared understanding of the past is an unrealistic (and perhaps even counterproductive) goal in the circumstances of conflict, for we are dealing with open, festering wounds on both sides (for similar views, see Rosoux 2019; Adamides 2020). However, if we are prepared to view desecuritization as an ongoing process involving a mutual agreement to sit, reflect, and even disagree on issues as sensitive as history, my verdict would have to be more hopeful. For, the collected data provided strong evidence that, beyond the persistence of trauma in generating group insecurities and affirming a particular notion of collective identity, empathic connection and cooperation across borders are achievable, and most wanted, by the youth. This finding alone entitles me to argue that intergroup contact can, under optimal conditions, lay sustainable foundations for reconceptualizing us-them relationships, from that of invisible enemies to legitimate adversaries and friends. However, this case study raises important questions regarding the role of collective memory in the reconciliation process and the question of timing. In situations of intractable conflict, (when) is time at its ripest to engage with "memory work" (Ricoeur 2000: 496)? To what extent can the competing memories left by extreme experiences be bridged at the grassroots level, when reconciliation work is unparalleled in political structures? These questions, still largely unanswered, require cautious consideration, more than this thesis can presently afford.

## *Conclusion and future research*

The contribution and overall aim of this thesis has been to provide empirical knowledge on the nexus between intergroup contact and identity desecuritization in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict. This inquiry can be situated in an increasingly important debate in the empirical scholarship concerning the ability of people-to-people encounters to fulfil the promise of reconciling intergroup relationships in settings of high intractability. While the "micro-solidarity" produced by these encounters has been well researched, their long-term impact is uncertain, with a number of scholars arguing that they may further strengthen the boundaries of ethnonational communities involved in conflict. To advance the debate, I presented the results of a qualitative study conducted with sixteen Jewish Israeli and Arab-Palestinian choristers who sustainably engaged in a hybrid, bi-communal encounter program – the Jerusalem Youth Chorus – in their early youth.

This case study brought us face-to-face with the fact that intergroup contact is not a one-and-done exercise, but rather a long-term process that requires a balancing exercise between joint acts of creativity and courageous conversations. It provided preliminary evidence in favour of music and dialogue which, together, provide a promising "common framework" (Barenboim 2013: 49) to reduce the salience of group-to-group boundaries by dissolving simplified beliefs about the opponent and its painful heritage. Echoing Allport, one of the research conclusions is therefore that the methodological roots of encounter programs and their duration matter deeply to forge cooperative and inclusive relationships that show resilience in the face of conflict. Another research conclusion is that positive intergroup contact is not a panacea in geo-politically charged environments. Admittedly, eliminating fear, threat, and anxiety in relation to the *other* is an unrealistic goal in active conflicts characterized by deep-rooted asymmetric power relationships. We have seen this clearly in the Arab-Israeli case and associated collective memories: the Palestinian youth still needs equality and dignity; the Israeli youth still needs security. Mitigating this triad by learning how to manage it with the other side, on the other hand, proves to be a small yet significant way to gradually move away from the confines of intractability and securitization.

Ultimately, there is no doubt that the narratives informing this paper will have to be read as a prelude to further research involving a larger sample and a deeper plunge into history. Moreover, since this thesis has focused empirically on one specific encounter program, it would be worthwhile to conduct further case studies within the proposed conceptual framework in other conflict settings where old grievances endure, such as in neighbouring Cyprus. Finally, future research attention should be devoted to studying the length of the involvement that would be minimally required for intergroup contact to desecuritize intergroup boundaries in settings of intractable conflict. Embracing this longitudinal approach is crucial to reach the level of discernment that is needed to appreciate the complex interlude between War and Peace.

# *Appendix*

## THE JERUSALEM YOUTH CHORUS : QUALITATIVE QUESTIONNAIRE (July 2022)[46]

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself?
    - How old are you? Where in Jerusalem did you grow up?
    - What is your voice part at the JYC? For how many years did you sing in the JYC high school program?
2. What motivated you to join the program?
3. Why did you choose to come on this retreat?
    - What has kept you involved as an alumni until today?
4. How would you characterize the JYC's impact on your life?
    - Are there ways that you live or lead differently because of the JYC?
5. What is your nationality and how do you identify yourself?
6. Could you tell me about a cross-group friendship that you formed in the JYC?
    - What is it like? What values are at its heart?
    - Are you able to withstand conflict, and if so, how?
    - Did you spend time with JYC friends outside of the chorus? If so, with people from both sides of the city?
7. Over the years, do you feel as though your participation in the JYC has influenced the amount and the quality of cross-group interactions that you have had outside JYC? If yes, how so?
8. How did you experience the dialogue space at JYC?

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[46] This questionnaire has been established in collaboration with Micah Hendler, founder of the Jerusalem Youth Chorus.

    - What did you take away from these sessions?
    - Did you feel that your voice was heard?
    - Was there mutual respect between members of the chorus?
9. While in dialogue, how did you discuss the history of the conflict?
10. What is your understanding of the Holocaust?
11. What is your understanding of the 1948 War?
12. Can you recall a difficult conversation or moment that you were later able to work through or transcend with music?
13. What would you say is the value of music in peace-building and social change? How do you see yourself in that?
14. Have different conflicts arisen in the chorus? How did you work through them?
15. What were your community's reactions like to your being part of the chorus?
    - Were there times when you needed to stand up for the JYC in that community in the face of negative pressure?
    - Were you able to do that, and if so, what did that look like?
16. How would you describe the impact that the JYC as a chorus has on its audiences?
    - Can you share stories of interactions with audience members or viewers or commenters on social media that were moving to you?
17. What are you hoping the next 10 years of the JYC will look like?

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*Legislation*

- Denial of Holocaust (Prohibition) law 5746, or “Holocaust Denial Law”, passed by the Knesset on 8 July 1986.
- Budget Foundations Law (Amendment no. 40) 5571-2011, or “Nakba Law”, passed by the Knesset on March 22, 2011. (https://www.adalah.org/uploads/oldfiles/Public/files/Discriminatory-Laws-Database/English/33-Budget-Foundations-Law-Amendment40-Nakba-Law.pdf).
- Jewish Nation-State Basic Law, article 1. (https://www.adalah.org/en/content/view/9569).