
The Atkin Paper Series

Collaborating for Peace?
Assessing the Work of
Palestinian-Israeli Joint
Organisations since the
Oslo Accords

Oday Abukaresh

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Summary

Despite the theoretical importance of nongovernmental joint work in conflicts including the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, practically its effect on enhancing reconciliation and bottom-up peacemaking in this conflict area is still basic. Instead of being an active factor in developing social relations aiming to activate and revitalise the peace process between the Palestinians and Israelis, most of the Palestinian-Israeli joint efforts are working in parallel and their roles are stuck in preparing the people for any prospective peace deal.

Most Palestinian-Israeli joint organisations and projects seek to create good social relations between the two. However, this is done without any attempt to mobilise and use this relationship to confront the disruptions that the peace process has suffered and the political regimes in both Palestine and Israel.

The Palestinian-Israeli joint projects and activities have emulated contact hypothesis from other conflicts without any serious examination of whether these contact hypotheses could be applied to the situation in the Middle East and the nature of this conflict.

Collaborating for Peace? Assessing the Work of Palestinian-Israeli Joint Organisations since the Oslo Accords

By Oday Abukaresh

Introduction

Despite decades of conflict and violence, there have always been civil society organisations in Palestine and Israel that have crossed the cultural, national, religious and ethnic divides. They are organisations in which Palestinian and Israelis work and socialise together, carry out joint projects, and get to know each other.

Joint organisations are frequently seen as a vehicle for building peace from the bottom up by promoting practical coexistence – that is, living in harmony with one another. Consequently, the peace process of the 1990s saw an expansion of activities in this area.

Despite their promise and the resources that have gone into building these organisations, there is little evidence that they have had any practical impact. After all, the alienation and distrust between the two sides is as pronounced as ever, and the prospects for peace are fading, if not remote.

This paper seeks to analyse the impact of joint Palestinian-Israeli organisations since the Oslo Accords. Of particular interest are the effects of these organisations and their activities on peacemaking, conflict resolution and human reconciliation, as well as the role played by donors.

A related aspect also investigated in this paper is the significance of Track II diplomacy: the informal, alternative diplomatic channels, typically activated and maintained by academics, politicians and businesspeople with access to policymakers. How can Track II diplomacy be tied to the work of joint organisations as a tool for enhancing the prospects of conflict resolution and peacemaking?

The paper argues that the positive impact of joint Palestinian-Israeli organisations has been modest. They tend to not reach out to the groups most at risk from extremism, but often preach to the converted. Language is an important

barrier in facilitating access to vulnerable groups. Also, there have been few links with established Track II diplomacy efforts, which have been fragmented and not as effective as they could be. Based on this analysis, the paper closes with a list of practical recommendations for how the work of joint Palestinian-Israeli organisations can be improved in future.

The paper is structured as follows. It provides a typology of joint organisations after the Oslo accords, detailing their structures and memberships as well as participants' motivations for enrolling. Following this, their aims and strategies are analysed, and donor engagement is critically investigated. The paper then looks at the so-called 'contact hypotheses' which underlie the joint organisations' work, and examines whether they are seen to apply in the context of the conflict. The main part of the paper closes with a case study of a joint organisation, Combatants for Peace. It begins, however, by setting out a very brief history of joint organisations prior to the Oslo Accords.

A Very Brief History of Joint Organisations

The Palestinians and the Jews lived together within the historical borders of Palestine, before the existence of the state of Israel, and their relations were marked by a good atmosphere; the relationship was dominated by a kind of cooperation and deference in the daily life of the two peoples, particularly in social and economic matters.

This relationship depended on national, regional and international variables, and levels of cooperation expanded to include other vital aspects such as the formulation of social, cultural and political bodies; especially among the Palestinian-Jewish labourers. This cooperation did not last very long: it collapsed dramatically with the first waves of Zionist immigration, the expansion of the purchasing of land, the building of new settlements and the increasing employment of Jewish labour. Clashes occurred during the 1920s and 1930s between the Palestinians and the Jews as a result of the organisational development of the Zionist movement, which was sponsored by the British mandate as part of their plan to implement Balfour's promise to create a national state for the Jews in Palestine.

The first clashes between the Palestinians and the Jews began three days after the content of Balfour's promise of 1917 was declared. The Palestinians launched the first popular revolution against the British desire to implement Balfour's promise; this was the first record of blood between the Palestinians and the Jews in Palestine. It was at this time that there was an unprecedented increase in the number of Jewish immigrants to Palestine, which was aimed at changing the demographic composition of Palestine to create a new reality on the ground. The tension in the Palestinian-Jewish relationship escalated right up until the so-called Alburag popular revolution in 1929, and it exploded again in the 1936 revolution which was at the time the biggest general strike in the Palestinian arena.

These events were mostly random and lacked organised direction. Relations between the Palestinians and the Jews continued, which indicates that there were no methodical calls for boycott from either side.¹ Nevertheless the ill-feeling and resentment toward the newcomers was obvious, because they were seen to cause high unemployment among the Palestinian people and more Palestinian land was seized.

Palestinian-Jewish civil cooperation. Social, cultural and economic organisations were established before these clashes among the Palestinians and the Jews, especially in the urban areas in the later years of the nineteenth century. The Jerusalem literature society and the 'Lovers of Zion' were groups of religious Jews who used to live in harmony with the Palestinian majority in Jaffa, Hebron, Tiberius and Jerusalem. Other joint Palestinian and Jewish organisations included railway and post trade unions, a general worker club, the sea workers trade union and the bakery workers trade union. Palestinian and Jewish interaction included daily neighbourhood interaction, interaction among workers, trade unions and the different mandate companies and bodies. This relationship was subject to political changes but did not

1 <http://www.palestine-info.info/arabic/qadhya/madkhal.htm>

stop even after the so-called Nakba – the word used by Palestinians to describe the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948.

Coexistence and peaceful solutions. The calls for coexistence and a bilingual state became louder as wars became inevitable. Indeed, many peace activists and journalists called for a bilingual and bicultural state, such as Uri Avneri in 1947. Even with the emergence of the Palestinian resistance movement after the Nakba and its operations against the establishment of the Israeli state in Palestine, there were conciliatory tendencies. The period before 1967 witnessed rapprochement between the Palestinians and the Israelis, and there were initiatives that called for coexistence between the two peoples of the land of Palestine and for mutual recognition of their right to existence.²

After the Six Day War the calls for coexistence became louder as they spread to academics, politicians and decision-makers. The historian Ya'kov Talmor and the philosopher Yeshi Aha Leibowitz spoke after the Six Day War about the evil of ruling another nation, and another group of professors called for the issues of peace and security to be connected. Aryeh Eliva from the Labour Party wrote that after the success of the Zionists in seeking self-determination, how could the Israelis deny this right to others? In this period there was a statement from the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the minuscule Israeli socialist movement, calling for the establishment of a 'federal over national country' where the Palestinians and Israelis could equally enjoy comprehensive civil and cultural rights.³

The PLO's new resistance methodology. A vital and dramatic switch occurred in 1974 when the Palestinian National Council – the legislative body of the PLO – accepted the establishment of the Palestinian state in any land that could be liberated from the Israelis, as stated in the ten-point programme where negotiation with the Israelis as an alternative tool of resistance was legitimised. After this some PLO leaders, such as Sa'aed Hamami, Wael Ze'eter, Isam Sartawee and Na'em Khader, began to meet with their Israeli counterparts in different European countries.⁴

Track II diplomacy efforts. The 1970s and 1980s saw little effective Track II diplomacy and cooperation between Palestinian and Israeli counterparts. Both sides developed political initiatives aimed, at the beginning of the 1980s, at enhancing the living standards of the Palestinians in the occupied territories, where a group of Palestinian academics from Birzeit University met with a group from the Weizmann Institute despite the assassination of the four PLO leaders by an extremist Palestinian party. Palestinians and Israelis continued to meet their counterparts during the first intifada and Track II diplomats continued their efforts to present a creative initiative to end the occupation and respect both sides' right to self-determination.⁵

During the early 1990s, formal negotiations between the Palestinians and Israelis failed to achieve any progress towards a peace deal because of public opinion and

2 Walid Salem and Edy Kaufman, *Bridging the divide: Palestinian and Israeli peace building*, p. 14-17; Interview with Dr. Mordakhi Kedar, 3 March XXX]

3 Walid Salem and Edy Kaufman, *Bridging the Divide*, p.23.

4 <http://www.plord.org/resolutions/agreementsfeb/13.htm>

5 Walid Salem and Edy Kaufman, *Bridging the Divide*, p.26-29.

the pressure of extremists on both sides. Track II diplomacy played a major role in saving negotiations when two Israeli academics, Ron Pundak and Yair Hirschfeld, met two high-ranking PLO officials, Ahmad Qora'a and Hassan Asfor, and agreed to open a new track in Oslo. This concluded with the Declaration of Principles between the PLO and the Israeli government, which was then known as the Oslo accords. It is worth mentioning here that these accords were disliked by segments of both communities; however, hostility to this development was much greater in the Israeli community, where it resulted in the assassination of the Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzchak Rabin.⁶

6 President Mahmoud Abbas, *Alhyat el Jadeda*, 3 June 2008.

Joint organisations after the Oslo accords

This paper will examine the work of joint organisations regardless of whether their activities are carried out by joint structural organisations or in a partnership between Palestinian and Israeli unilateral organisations.

After the second Gulf War and the Americanization of economic and political systems, the Middle East witnessed a fundamental leap in many vital sectors that affected the cultural and informatics infrastructure. After the Oslo accords both Palestine and Israel were significantly affected by this new world political system and the half-century conflict began to take serious steps towards a solution and reconciliation, in addition to action to solve neighbourhood conflicts related to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The region saw a tremendous expansion of the peace and conflict resolution 'industry'.

Joint organisations: types and legal structure

Nongovernmental organisations in the area of joint activities are best classified according to whether their membership is open or not. The membership of **think tank organisations** is not open. Participants in these organisations, such as research and policy institutes, health organisations, etc., are typically employees. Examples include the Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information (IPCRI)⁷ and the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR). The membership of **grassroots organisations** is open and includes, for example, youth unions, womens unions, farmers and trade unions, the Bat Shalom organisation, The Palestinian Center for Rapprochement Between People (PCR), and Friends of the Earth Middle East (FoEME).

Legally, according to the Palestinian NGO law of 2000, Palestinian NGOs are accountable to:

- The relevant ministry as well as the Ministry of Interior Affairs. For example, sports associations are accountable to the Ministry of Sport and the Ministry of Interior Affairs; health and nutrition NGOs are accountable to the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Interior Affairs.
- The General Assembly, where each organisation should present its accredited financial report by the end of each year.
- The Palestinian public. Each NGO should publish its accredited financial and administrative report in order for it to be accessible for Palestinian public review.

Palestinian-Israeli joint organisations cannot be registered under Palestinian law as local Palestinian NGOs because the law does not permit board members who are not Palestinians. As a result, joint organisations tend to register as 'two separate organisations that do joint projects such as Bat Shalom and the Jerusalem Center for

7 Walid Slaem, *Mapping of mainstream Israeli and Palestinian organizations*, p. 85-86.

Women, which emerged from what was called "Jerusalem Link". So what applies to the local organisation applies to them in terms of membership and accountability'.⁸

Motivation for enrolling in joint organisations

Many joint organisations have similar goals and furthermore their members have similar motivations to join this kind of organisation. These motivations include, for example:

- A political belief in the viability of bottom-up peacemaking and its influence on decision-makers.
- The desire to know each other closely and discover the other's mentality.⁹
- Convincing the other side of the justness of their own views.
- Financial self-interest in this new industry.
- A desire to network through this involvement in joint organisations, as a platform of public relations.¹⁰
- Gaining professional skills in the peacemaking industry.
- A belief in the importance of Oslo as an introduction to a final and comprehensive peace deal.
- Some Palestinians want to explain their suffering at the hands of Israeli soldiers and ask the Israeli partners to denounce the soldiers.
- Some Israelis are motivated by a sense of guilt over their country's involvement in the occupation.

The most problematic situation is when members come steeped in their own points of view and wanting to enforce a personal agenda and convince others of their beliefs.¹¹

There is a very wide range of motivations and we will look at some of the reasons for this divergence in greater detail below, because it is important to understand how these organisations deal with varied motivations and expectations, and the absence of a clear definition for the conflict at the same time.

8 Interview with Wafa Abdelrahman, Filastiniyat general manager, 3 May 2009.

9 Interview with Dr.Mohammad Dajani, Al Quds University, 18 March 2009.

10 Interview with Elik Elhanan, Combatants for Peace founder, New York, 19 April 2009.

11 Dr Mordakhi Kedar, department of Arabic studies in BAR-ILAN University.

Common goals, visions and strategies

Each organisation has its own goals and vision but most have a common strategy: to enhance the possibility of conflict resolution by building teams of peace activists.

However, there is no clear and coordinated vision to lobby for any specific solution due to the multiplicity of debates over the most desirable or applicable solution. This has been true especially in the last seven years, since the second Al Aqsa Intifada and the failure of conflict resolution efforts by peace organisations. Their visions in this regard range from a two-state solution, to a federal bicultural state, to a bilingual, bicultural state solution. Notwithstanding such differences about the long-term political vision, common goals for the joint organisations could be summed up as follows:

- Create a friendly atmosphere between Palestinian and Israeli members so they know each other well.
- Break the stereotypical images of each side toward the other.
- Reacting constructively to violent action.
- Dealing with pressing calamities and dilemmas for members caused by the cycle of violence.¹²

To fulfil these goals, joint organisations target Palestinian-Israeli women, youth and children through a series of multidisciplinary projects such as sport projects, intellectual projects, joint professional training schemes and recreational trips.¹³

By evaluating many of these programs conducted by joint organisations it has been found that most of the programs are similar and repeated in many ways. Moreover we find organisations that are getting funded for a specific project while the same project is being run by another organisation. This has been described by Dr. Mohammad Dajani and Gershon Baskin in *Bridging the Divide* as a 'salad without a chef'.

Indeed the chef in this salad is the donor, and the third party is the 'supporter, diplomat, peace investors...etc'. If these activities are to be conducted effectively, their responsibility should be to organise and conduct a comprehensive donation strategy that would enable them to use the results of each project to enhance reconciliation possibilities among the two nations. Ideally, this comprehensive strategy would maintain a bottom-up approach to reconciliation projects in order to maximise the effect of taxpayer money invested in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

¹² Interview with Bassam Aramin , Combatants for Peace founder and AFDD chairman, 2 May 2009.

¹³ Interview with Dr Ron Pundak, Peres Centre general director and Track II diplomat

Investment in peace making

After the success of the Track II initiative and the progress of the Oslo accords, donors invested huge amounts of money covering many sectors: 'peace sector, human rights, media, capacity building, security, infrastructure, education, health and nutrition, economy, etc.'. This was done by preparing public opinion for any future peace deal through enhancing the levels of public life, improving the creation of friendly and peaceful relations, and focusing on structural developments of the future Palestinian state. This effort accompanied the diplomatic efforts within the international community to bring the Palestinian and Israeli visions closer through formal and informal political negotiations.¹⁴

Donors also tried to create alternatives for the conflicting parties through changing living conditions and interconnecting the peace efforts with a new pattern of life, especially in the Palestinian community, where they tried from the beginning to create economic, cultural, educational and value system alternatives. Consequently they targeted these efforts at ordinary Palestinians using a series of theoretical and practical programs.¹⁵ However, these efforts faced intransigence from conflicting parties on both sides which damaged the results of the donor program and prevented the new way of life model taking place. Donor efforts were accompanied by the efforts of extremists; during 1995 and 1996, at the height of the reconciliation effort, the area witnessed high rates of violence.

Challenges for donors

Until now the donors have played a very weak role in the control and organisation of all the actors in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, as shown by Dr Liealy Faidy. She indicated that the donors' role was restricted by giving money to any project that fit their formal criteria and agenda while knowing that many of these projects started and ended without any value added to the peacemaking efforts. Furthermore some evaluations highlighted the results of joint projects that were unsupportive of the peace process.¹⁶

On the other hand, Mr. Elik Elhanan, founder of the Combatants for Peace organisation, highlighted the shortages of the donor credit system in reaching different kinds of organisations, especially the grassroots ones, even while knowing that these organisations are better equipped to reach different people and more able to demonstrate some conflict resolution among them. Yet, these organisations are unable sometimes to translate their goals into specific projects. Donors require formal criteria to donate to organisations, which strongly prohibits a lot of grassroots organisations from receiving donations.¹⁷

¹⁴ Interview with Michael Docherty, international aid cooperation officer, Brussels, 13 April 2009; Sabastien Lorion, program manager, European Commission, 13 April 2009.

¹⁵ Interview with Gwenda Jeffreys-Jones, Desk Officer, Middle East peace process , Brussels 14 April 2009.

¹⁶ Interview with Dr Liealy Faidy, MIFTAH secretary general , 12 March 2009.

¹⁷ Interview with Elik Elhanan ,Combatants for Peace founder, 19 April 2009.

Donors are further complicating the Palestinian-Israeli conflict by funding organisations that do not believe in the two-state solution. Mr. Bassam Aramin describes this policy as wasting more money with no expected benefit. He added that donors support many organizations that do not believe in the feasibility of negotiations on Jerusalem as the capital for two states. Donors do not mobilise the results of their own funded projects and do not follow up the results of each project; they are just funding any project with no specific aim.¹⁸ The donors thus developed a 'peace trade' which created hostility and mistrust with respect to all conflict-resolution-based organisations. The sector was flooded by donations and yet the community has not seen any critical developments; this caused a negative outlook on behalf of the community toward these organisations.

The remaining question is: what should donors do to maintain bottom-up peace making?

- **First**, donors should link projects and their results and translate them into initiatives to pressure politicians and policymakers for more progress in the peace process.
- **Second**, they should intensify donations to grassroots organisations and enhance their abilities to maximise the benefits from them.
- **Third**, donors should maintain links between all of the peace making actors, including Track II diplomats, grassroots organisations and international actors.
- **Fourth**, they should develop grant mechanisms to support nonviolent grassroots movements and reactivate their efforts in peace-making.
- **Fifth**, they should develop the credit system to facilitate the creation of small project initiatives.

Target groups of joint organisations

This section examines the target groups of joint organisations: the most common demographics among their participants and the categories lacking within joint activities. The most frequent commonalities among most of the participants are language and personal convictions; thus most of the target group would come from the same ideological classes even if they are from different geographical backgrounds, professions or ages (otherwise the activities would not be applicable). For example, participation on the Palestinian side would be restricted to those who have good English language skills and believe in the importance of peace and conflict resolution. Many people from both sides will be excluded from joint activities since they do not speak English or believe in the activities' feasibility. These categories are the most vulnerable to the extremists. The categories most likely to be radicalised

18 Interview with Bassam Aramin, Combatants for Peace founder and AFDD chairman, 2 May 2009.

are: less educated people (especially women and children); people in less fortunate and marginalised areas, including those that depend on agriculture or livestock; older men and women; and religious people.

One notable feature is the lack of participation of Palestinian women in the joint activities, which reflects two reasons: a lack of trust in the joint activities; and the inability of peace activists to reach the marginalised categories in the community.

Track II diplomacy and the joint organisations

In any conflict, Track II diplomacy is a very important negotiation channel between the conflicting parties, but in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict it was the most important channel because the Israeli government and the PLO did not recognise each other. In addition, Palestinian-Israeli formal negotiations did not progress until the Track II diplomatic intervention with the Oslo accords. Nowadays Track II diplomacy is not of such importance because of the right-wing government in Israel and the inability of this track to have any success in reconciliation efforts.¹⁹

The joint organisations could play a godparent role in explaining Track II diplomatic initiatives, creating supportive public opinion and putting pressure on policymakers on both sides – thus creating a complementary lobbying system among the diverse actors of conflict resolution which could promote reconciliation and peace making by connecting the results of Track II diplomacy and advocacy by grassroots organisations.²⁰ However, what is happening on the ground is far different from the theory; there is no relationship among the different peace organisations, even among those who have taken donations from the same donor. This shows the importance of efforts to connect all the actors in the field of conflict resolution and peace making and to reach the whole population, especially those in closed and strict religious groups, in order to integrate them into joint activities and develop their attitude toward a peaceful and nonviolent solution.

19 Interview with Yossi Beilin, former justice minister and Track II diplomat, 7 April 2008.

20 Interview with Elik Elhanan, Combatants for Peace founder, 19 April 2009.

Testing the Contact Hypotheses

It is important to differentiate between the varied types of joint organisations and their activities in order to understand different contact hypotheses as well as their effects on human reconciliation.

Joint organisations aim to enhance peace, conflict resolution and common ground between the Palestinians and the Israelis by building social relationships between them, so as to integrate them into a joint neutral atmosphere and let the conflicting parties agree on a specific understanding of the conflict. Theoretically this is a very similar approach to the black-white integration project during the civil rights era in the USA. Most of the people interviewed, however, denied the comparison between the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the black-white clashes of the mid-twentieth century.

To test the different contact hypotheses and their effects on human reconciliation, this paper will review and compare the contact hypotheses used in the black-white integration projects and the ones used in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Combating stereotypes. Black-white integration projects aimed to break stereotypical images between the conflicting parties and to give people personal judging mechanisms.²¹ Most of the Palestinian-Israeli think-tank organisations seek to create normal social relations between the participants and to facilitate the acceptance of peace initiatives among the two peoples.²² The grassroots organisations seek to mobilise mutual understanding among the members and promote peace by confronting any violence and other actions taking place in the conflict area, through direct action on the ground.²³

Combating fear and creating convergence. The essential condition supporting the fear between black and white people was the segregation between the two races and the imagined stereotypes this facilitated. According to Stephan and Stephan (1964), attending classes together reduced the prejudice between them.

Palestinian and Israeli organisations believe that stereotypes and a lack of social relations are among the basic reasons for the conflict. Dr Ron Pundak shares the example of an Israeli girl studying in a Hebrew university and meeting for the first time a Palestinian in a neutral and normal environment, and the friendship that developed. He offers as another example the British-German relationship after World War II, where the fighting that had happened between the two nations was put aside and they are now both major players in Europe.²⁴

Grassroots organisations and activities seek to reactivate public opinion by calling for the end of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as a path to a normal relationship between Palestinians and Israelis, based on geographical proximity, economic interconnectedness, and social-cultural interaction during peaceful periods.

21 Kristine C. Macomber, *The Effects of Black-White Contact and Interracial Friendships on Whites' Racial Attitudes*, p. 14-18.

22 Interview with Gwenda Jeffreys-Jones, Desk Officer, Middle East peace process, Brussels, 14 April 2009.

23 Interview with Elik Elhanan, Combatants for Peace founder, 19 April 2009.

24 Interview with Dr RONOAN PUNDAK, Peres Centre general director and Track II diplomat.

Social aims and mobilization. Some studies conducted in the 1960s and 1970s indicated the positive attitudes of white people who had social contact with black people.

In gathering Palestinians and Israelis from different professions – such as teachers, doctors, nurses, computer experts, media experts, economists, etc. – in joint projects the think-tank organisations try to build a bridge of trust between the two people and create a culture for peace building within a new generation.²⁵ Grassroots organisations and activities aim to put pressure on policymakers in order to direct the political discourse toward what the two peoples agreed on: the two-state solution. This includes nonviolent confrontation conducted on the ground; for instance, many Palestinian and Israeli grassroots organisations and peace activists confront weekly the apartheid wall and risk their lives to send a message to their governments.

A review and comparison of the contact hypotheses and the mechanisms of the joint organisations shows that the different types of peace organisations are working in parallel directions. Even though they refute the comparison with the black-white conflict in the USA, they use mostly the same contact hypotheses, especially in the think-tank organisations.

Yet, the contact hypotheses did not affect public opinion in the last elections. The people voted for extreme right-wing parties. To understand why people did not respond positively to the joint activities, we need to understand seriously the categories of people excluded from them. There is no doubt that participants in joint activities benefit from them, but they do so separately – there is no way to integrate the two parties in the same activity due to the lack of a shared language. When a shared language is available the 'black and white' of each side is not present; the target group from both sides already believes in the importance of peaceful solutions. These activities are easy targets, involving the mainstream; the difficult targets are not involved in the peace activities. This explains how we returned to the cycle of violence in 2000 after ten years of a peace industry.

25 www.peres-center.org/AboutCenter.html. Interview with Dr RONoan Pundak, Peres Centre general director and Track II diplomat.

Case study: Combatants for Peace

Combatants for Peace (<http://www.combatantsforpeace.org/>) is a combination of two Israeli-Palestinian grassroots organisations founded by individuals who were involved in the violence cycle: one as a soldier in the Israeli army and one as a Palestinian militant. The relationship between the two was one of killing and oppression, in jails, checkpoints and confrontation platforms where communication tools were the weapons and the best contact person was the best killer.²⁶

Along with the growth of the right wing in Israel and the continued violence during seven years of the Al Aqsa intifada, a new phenomenon appeared in Israeli society: a refusal to serve in the army. The refuseniks needed to organise this phenomenon and so formed an NGO to encourage this refusal among the Israeli troops for any reason, without having any political programs. Meanwhile this group refused to have any contact with their Palestinian counterparts for national and social reasons. Some of the refuseniks called for a political program for this group and searched for Palestinian counterparts to have a refusal movement on both sides. Combatants for Peace began formally with seven Israelis and four Palestinians. They met in Bethlehem in a doubtful and fearful atmosphere where each side distrusted the other.²⁷

Common values

Unlike other joint groups, the Combatants for Peace members agreed to discuss common issues to enhance trust among them. Each member tried to convince the others of his support for joint work to end the occupation and to enhance the applicability of peaceful nonviolent solutions in the conflict area. Their main common values were:

- Belief in the two-state solution and the Palestinian right to live independently beside Israel.
- Resisting the occupation in a nonviolent way and considering the occupation as a main source of violence.
- Using the existing Palestinian-Israel relationship to confront occupation procedures.
- Refusal to take part in army services in any occupied territories (Palestine, Lebanon and the Golan heights); moreover some of the Israeli members refused to serve inside Israel in the last war between Israel and Hezbollah in order to reduce the number of troops in the war.²⁸

²⁶ Interview with Bassam Aramin, Combatants for Peace founder and AFDD chairman, 2 May 2009.

²⁷ Interview with Elik Elhanan, Combatants for Peace founder, 19 April 2009.

²⁸ Interview with Bassam Aramin, Combatants for Peace founder and AFDD chairman, 2 May 2009.

- Stopping the progress of settlement projects, which could affect the applicability of the two-state solution or the future Palestinian state with east Jerusalem as its capital.

Goals

- Promote reconciliation and nonviolence in both communities by sharing both narratives.
- Pressure politicians on both sides toward constructive dialogue.
- Raise public awareness of the suffering on both sides.
- Create awareness in the international community about the importance of constructive nonviolence movements in Palestine and Israel.
- Create international support for more pressure on the politicians.²⁹

Tools and methods

Combatants for Peace depends on two main tools to implement its goals and to influence its target group.

Teaching the personal stories of the members as educational material for the target group. These highlight the suffering of the members during their involvement in the conflict and provide a mutual informational exchange between the target group and the lecturer. The lectures are conducted in many platforms, such as schools, universities and homes, and are conducted in both Hebrew and Arabic. The aim of the lectures is to attract more members, encourage refusal among the future troops of Israel, and educate the target group about the dangers of their involvement in the army or of violent actions in their personal life .

Direct Action: members of Combatants for Peace organise solidarity actions, public meetings and memorial activities, and confront occupation procedures and settlement projects. For example, members organise solidarity actions with marginalised people living beside the Israeli settlements in order to enhance their durability in their lands, to confront settler actions against them, and to open streets that are closed to Palestinians living in those areas.³⁰

Target group

Essentially Combatants for Peace are targeting those involved in violent actions: soldiers, future soldiers, settlers, liberation combatants. It accepts the membership of regular soldiers for a specific period but if the army commanders ask the member to resume service and they do not refuse, they terminate his/her membership.

²⁹ Interview with Elik Elhanan, Combatants for Peace founder, 19 April, 2009

³⁰ <http://www.combatantsforpeace.org/aboutus.asp?Ing=eng>

According to Bassam Aramin, ‘to be combatants for peace you have to sacrifice and we will not accept to be like other peace traders who are just singing “od yavo shalom aleno” in Hebrew, “the peace will come to us one day”, and considering they will bring the peace by singing’.

Organizational structure and management

Combatants for Peace combines two Palestinian and Israeli nongovernmental bodies. The founders from each side chair a central steering committee with two coordinators (one from each side) and the position of coordinator is rotated among fourteen members every six to nine months. The organisation has twinned Palestinian and Israeli groups working under the decentralized steering committee. They exchange information, problems and successes periodically in a collective meeting. The twinned district groups are: Ramallah-Jerusalem, Tulkarem-Tel Aviv, and Hebron-Beersheva.

Donations

Mostly Combatants for Peace depends on its members’ contributions in addition to support from small personal donations. However, it has taken small donations from donors like the Heinrich Boll Foundation.³¹

Successes

Combatants for Peace have doubled their number of members, and have succeeded in targeting the most extreme categories on both sides and converting fighters into negotiators who carry clear and peaceful beliefs instead of carrying guns. At the same time Combatants for Peace succeeds in drawing religious people from the Palestinian side and religious settlers from the Israeli side, which indicates their abilities and credibility among the two societies.

Main obstacles

- Freedom of movement: Since all of the Palestinian combatants for peace are ex-prisoners, they all have problems with Israeli security and intelligence. Thus one of the main problems is getting permission to enter Israel; and visa versa for the Israeli ex-soldiers when Israeli law prohibits them from entering Palestinian areas.
- Donations: The organisation depends mainly on member contributions and funding is still at a very basic level. This causes other problems such as difficulties in obtaining a permanent headquarters, landline phones, equipment and facilities.
- Non-adoption of a specific curriculum for their education activities means that personal stories and other educational tools are not documented.

31 Interview with Bassam Aramin, Combatants for Peace founder and AFDD chairman, 2 May 2009.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the analysis of joint organisations’ orientation, donor investments and agendas, as well as their effects on human reconciliation and Track II diplomacy, the paper has come to the following conclusions:

- Despite the importance of Palestinian-Israeli organisations their effect on human reconciliation and conflict resolution has been modest. Most of the benefits from their activities have gone to the mainstream even though the essential focus should be on groups vulnerable to extremism.
- Most Israelis and Palestinians have benefited from the joint projects and activities. However, their respective activities are largely uncoordinated and since a comprehensive strategy does not exist among the joint organisations the results of their activities are not cumulative.
- The relations that emerge between Palestinians and Israelis through the joint projects are temporarily relationships that end at the completion of the project or the activity.
- Language is a major obstacle in the projects implemented by joint organisations at the public level, especially for children, women and less-educated people.
- Donor focus on investing in employee-based ‘think-tank’ Palestinian-Israeli organisations has led to a decline of voluntary work, causing a lack of activity by grassroots organisations with negative effects on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In fact, this creates negative attitudes toward peace organisations among the two societies.
- The absence of any connection between the grassroots organisations and the Track II diplomats meant less support for their initiatives. In addition, the lack of connections between different types of joint organisations fragmented their efforts, wasted money and led to the repetition of similar projects.

Based on this analysis, the following recommendations are made:

- Reform the target group of the joint projects, activities and organisations and improve the target categories to include religious people and women from less fortunate and marginalised areas.

- Intensify the involvement of grassroots, small and youth organisations by allocating a percentage of the donations for those organisations as well as improving the thematic donations under the direct supervision of the donors. Thus, the movements which are unable to translate their goals into specific projects can get more donations and the donors will have direct access to the spending in these projects.
- Develop partnership relations among members and participants of the joint organisations (instead of developing friendship relations); use these relationships to shift political narratives toward reconciliation rather than conflict.
- Reduce formal requests and conditions in the calls for proposals to guarantee that these donations will not go only to the fluent English speakers, and preserve the theme as a first donation condition.
- Put pressure on the Palestinian and Israeli governments to allow joint organisations to operate as one legal entity, which would facilitate more transparency and accountability.
- Interconnect and coordinate different projects to increase results and the effects on human reconciliation and conflict resolution; reduce project repetition; and interrelate joint organisations' efforts with Track II diplomatic efforts.
- As part of the donation process, personal profiles have to be analysed for increased transparency.
- Encourage coalition and network building among the joint organisations and facilitate the involvement of these networks.

About ICSR

ICSR is a unique partnership of King's College London, the University of Pennsylvania, the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya (Israel), and the Regional Centre for Conflict Prevention Amman (Jordan). Its aim is to counter the growth of radicalisation and political violence by bringing together knowledge and leadership. For more information, see [**www.icsr.info**](http://www.icsr.info)

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