

Culture, Dialogue and Perception Change  
In the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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This paper seeks to address two basic questions concerning: (1) the role that culture, and particularly religious culture can play in improving Israeli-Palestinian interactions; and (2) the impact of dialogue and contact in general on mutual Israeli-Palestinian perceptions in the post-Oslo agreement era. In the effort to address these two issues we will offer an interdisciplinary theoretical framework: integrating classical international relations theory, intercultural approaches to group interactions on the international level and relevant social psychological theory concerning group contact; with empirical qualitative and quantitative results concerning interactions between Israeli and Palestinian students in two case studies: one a joint dialogue and cooperation project which has been underway since 1994 involving Bar-Ilan students and Palestinian students from the Bethlehem-Hebron area; and another more recent dialogue activity in Gaza involving both an Israeli and Palestinian voluntary organization.

### Theoretical Background

The place and importance of culture in the framework of contemporary international relations is a complex one. Hans J. Morgenthau in his seminal realist theory of international relations attached little importance to the cultural discourse between nations, emphasizing instead the clash of power and interest and the need to attain stability through the attainment of viable balances of power and the exercise of responsible diplomacy (Morgenthau, 1969).

However more recent researchers, most prominently Raymond Cohen, have emphasized the importance of the cultural variable in either helping to advance or retard understandings between nations (Cohen, 1990). And even a careful reading of Samuel Huntington's recent works on intercultural conflict suggest that international stability can be advanced by nations discovering and developing greater intercultural understanding and appreciation with each other (Huntington, 1996, p.320). Recent research in political psychology has also pointed to the importance of culture and psychological perceptions in politics (Pye, 1997).

This research effort, however is concentrating on evaluating the impact of inter-group and inter-personal interaction on mutual perception change between Israelis and Palestinians. The eminent social scientist Karl Deutsch pioneered the investigation of the foundations of community building between nations in the form of amalgamated or pluralistic security communities and pointed to the importance of interpersonal ties and the intensity of social communication in the creation and maintenance of such communities (Deutsch, 1957, pp.52-4).

Thus the work of peace building can be very much affected by perception change and the quality of interpersonal interactions. Social Psychologist Yehua Amir, pioneered the investigation of various aspects of intergroup contact emphasizing the importance of various conditions for effective intergroup encounters including: "equal status contacts"; "intimate" as opposed to merely "casual encounters"; "cooperative" as opposed to "competitive" relationships; and "institutional" supports for such efforts. (Amir, 1969). Furthermore and of great importance to this discussion, are the insights of various social

psychologists concerning the contribution which the discovery of commonalities in another group can have on improved mutual perceptions (Byrne, 1969; Newcomb, 1961; Rokeach, 1960).

### Background of Case Studies

In 1994, Mollov a political scientist, was able to co- initiate with a group of Palestinian students from the Hebron area, a series of dialogues between those students and Israeli students from Bar-Ilan University. These meetings and activities lasting for about four years, focused on commonalities between Islam and Judaism and eventually led to a variety of spin-off cooperative efforts leading to increased cooperation and interactions between Israeli and Palestinian students. Participants reported on a warm atmosphere in those face to face meetings and attributed that achievement to the discovery of commonalities in the other's religious culture (Mollov and Barhoum, 1998).

Specifically it should be noted that approximately 90 students on each side had at some point been directly involved in the process; and the activity led to the participation and now graduation of a Palestinian student from the Beit Ommar village, in proximity to northern Hebron, in Bar-Ilan University's International Program in Business Administration. Similarly it facilitated the participation, of another Palestinian student in the Peace Studies Program at Notre Dame University.

Family visitations and strong friendships developed during the process between the principle organizers, and they have responded to each other during illness and joy and have expressed condemnation and condolences to each other in the wake of violent events on either side.

As the Bar-Ilan--"Hebron" dialogue began as an ad hoc effort under difficult circumstances, no hard quantitative data was collected to measure perception changes among the participants, although a more thorough description of the process and interactions has appeared elsewhere (Mollov, 1999).

### Quantitative Data Concerning Israeli-Palestinian Perception Changes

Chaim Lavie, a social psychologist originally undertook a graduate research project under the direction of Yehuda Amir, in the 1970's focusing on perception change among Jewish/Israeli workers towards Arab/Palestinian employees. This occurred in the context of Israel's initiation of the "open bridges" policy which was meant to facilitate face to face contact between Israelis and Palestinians in the wake of the Six-Day War, following the geo-political changes, as well as meeting joint economic needs (Steinberg, unpublished).

It was hoped, particularly by then defense minister Dayan that direct contact between the two populations might contribute to ameliorating tensions, by reducing negative stereotypes and promoting co-existence. Lavie examined attitudes among Jewish workers in two factories employing Arab workers, against attitudes in two "control" firms in

which there were no Arabs employed. Lavie's questionnaire based data essentially confirmed Amir's hypotheses that positive changes in perceptions among the Jewish workers could come about only under circumstances in which Jewish workers came into contact with Arab workers of an equal status (Lavie, 1975 )

In the post-Oslo agreement era there have been a large variety of efforts to promote Israeli-Palestinian "people-to-people" efforts directed to the goal of creating a stronger infrastructure of peace by changing mutual perceptions and promoting constructive interactions among the two publics. The dialogue effort co-initiated by Mollov is one such effort, but again the question needs to be addressed if contact does indeed bring about quantifiable perception change, and if so under what circumstances.

In particular based on Mollov's field experiences pointing to the possibility that inter-religious dialogue between Israelis and Palestinian can facilitate constructive relationship building, we the two researchers, have sought to collect and evaluate hard data concerning the impact of student/academic dialogue in the post-Oslo period, with a particular interest in the religious dimension of such contacts.

Lavie adjusted his earlier questionnaires to assess both Israeli and Palestinian student attitudes concerning the opposite group. For the purposes of control data, 99 Bar-Ilan University students (Group A as designated in the Appendix) filled out questionnaires focusing on their willingness to have contact with Palestinian student along with their impression of the characteristics of the other side. The results were instructive. Negative or even highly negative predispositions towards Palestinians were held most strongly by Israeli Jewish religious students (see Table 1 in the Appendix).

The identical questionnaires were adapted and translated into Arabic. Responses were collected from 89 Palestinian students (designated as Group B) affiliated with the Universities of Beir Zeit, Bethlehem, and Hebron. In this Palestinian control group a parallel picture emerged of the most strongly negative attitudes towards Israelis being held by religious Palestinians (see Table 2 in Appendix).

Interestingly however, data collected from the Palestinian students (in the control group) also revealed that, students who had had some type of prior contact with Israelis, even presumably in a work or non-equal status setting displayed more favorable attitudes towards Israelis than those who did not (as Table 3 indicates). Thus we have some indication that even "non-optimal" (i.e. non-equal status) contact in the Palestinian-Israeli case, can contribute to improving perceptions, highlighting further the importance of human contact as a means of reducing tensions.

#### An Israeli-Palestinian Dialogue in Gaza

An on-going Israeli-Palestinian dialogue, jointly sponsored by the Israel Interfaith Association and the Palestinian Movement for Peace and Equality based in Khan Yunis, and assisted by the Norwegian People-to-People Organization, offered the venue to assess the impact of dialogue and particularly religiously based dialogue in a recent

Friday-Saturday (Sabbath) seminar, in Gaza, involving both Israeli/Jewish and Palestinian Muslim/Arab students and academics. In it, Jewish and Moslem prayer rituals were discussed, and services of both religions were conducted, and the religious dietary requirements of the Jewish guests were respected.

The gathering which was held in late February 1999, in a comfortable facility in the heart of Khan Yunis was briefly addressed by Yassir Arafat himself, and the vehicles transporting the Israeli participants from the Erez checkpoint to the locale were escorted throughout by PNA police cars, thus indicating the importance which the Palestinian Authority accorded the event.

Approximately 80 participants from each side attended the meeting and were asked to fill out questionnaires before and after the activity.

Again results were instructive, although some definite differences were discerned between the Israeli and Palestinian respondents (Group C).

Data compiled from a total of 33 responses from the Israeli/Jewish participants indicated a strongly favorable predisposition for contact with Palestinians with the initial favorable responses changing little following the conclusion of the meeting. Furthermore little difference in attitude was displayed between the religious and non-religious Jews in attendance. Thus in contrast to the Israeli control group, those Jews willing to participate in dialogue (with some of the participants having previously participated in such encounters) held much more favorable predispositions than those without impending dialogue in the control Group, with religious commitment not being a factor (see Table 4).

However the picture emerging from a total of 44 Palestinian responses (29 before and 15 after) was more complex. While those Palestinians planning to participate in such a meeting held generally more favorable attitudes than those in the control group, their attitudes were somewhat more negative than their Israeli counterparts— (compare Table 5 with Table 4). Furthermore it was also noted that women by and large held more negative attitudes than men among the Palestinians (see Table 6).

But perhaps the most important result of the dialogue was the fact that Palestinian attitudes shifted appreciably to a more favorable perception, following the encounter, with the strongest jump taking place among the religious Palestinian Muslims—indeed those who would intuitively be considered the most difficult to influence (see Table 7).

### The Potential Importance of the Inter-Religious Dialogue

These quantitative findings, although admittedly limited in scope, offer corroborating evidence to the anecdotal impressions offered by Mollov and Barhoum in their earlier dialogue which focused on religion as a basis for dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians. Indeed the question should certainly be posed as to why and how focus on an inter-religious dialogue has the potential to move opposing sides towards

reconciliation when religion is assumed to act as an escalatory influence in many of the explosive international/inter-ethnic disputes occurring throughout the world?

We believe that some of the most prominent and widely accepted conclusions in the field of social psychology relevant to inter-group relations can, on the basis of our experiences, offer insights in to why and how such dialogue has the potentiality to act as a positive factor in Israeli-Palestinian relations. As noted earlier, theoretical literature in the field suggests that individuals will change their negative attitudes towards another group when they discover that others hold attitudes or beliefs similar to their own (Byrne, 1969; Newcomb, 1961; Rokeach, 1960). Both in the Bar-Ilan-Hebron dialogue and the Gaza encounter, the organizers focused formal discussions on the similarities of structure and practice between Islam and Judaism. Indeed as noted elsewhere, the participants on both sides have been surprised to learn of the great similarity in rituals and even terminologies in both religions (Mollov and Barhoum, 1998).

The requirements which Yehuda Amir identified as being necessary for successful inter-group encounters also seemed to find expression in the two dialogue experiences. Amir particularly emphasized the importance of equal status contacts as being extremely important for such encounters (Amir, 1969), and from our experience, a religious focus can offer greater possibilities for equal status contacts than those of another source. For in Israeli-Palestinian dialogues with a more secular/political focus the complaint is frequently voiced by Palestinian participants that they cannot meet their Israeli counterparts as equals as they lack an equal status political framework such as a state of their own. However in a dialogue with an inter-religious dimension and framework, Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs could meet as equals, with each side appearing as representatives of their respective religious traditions and heritages, rather than as members of political entities which may or may not be equal.

Amir also emphasized the importance of “intimate” as opposed to formal or merely casual contact and cooperative vs. competitive relations. In the two dialogues, an emphasis was placed on providing ample opportunities for informal interactions over refreshments or during meals so that informal bonds could be developed. Furthermore the sense of sharing some larger commitment to religious ideals and practices also seemed to have the effect of bringing the sides together and helping to create an environment favorable to constructive relationship building.

Indeed Raymond Cohen, in his work, Theatre of Power, cited the particular importance of religious symbolism with its potential for link building between Israel and Egypt recalling the late Anwar Sadat’s proposal for the building of a mosque, synagogue, and church on Mount Sinai (Jabal Musa) as a means of “bridging the psychological gap between separate nations involved in a quest for reconciliation and friendship.” (Cohen, 1987, p.56).

The Problem of Institutional support

Amir's fourth element for successful intergroup encounters—the need for institutional support was also demonstrated both positively and negatively in various ways in the two dialogues.

The Bar-Ilan—Hebron dialogue was severely hindered by the opposition of the Palestinian Authority to allocation of third party international funds for the project, which clearly prevented it from reaching its potential. The organizers are still hopeful however that the project, which has requested funding for some new approaches to dialogue and cooperation will yet receive support and be renewed.

The dialogue involving the Israel Interfaith Association and the Palestinian Movement for Peace and Equality has benefited from third party support which necessarily involved the agreement of the Palestinian Authority which has been clearly a factor in enabling it to bring together the number of people that it has. Although just recently, the potential success of a follow-up Friday-Saturday seminar held in Ashkelon was hindered by the refusal of Palestinian officials to grant last minute crossing clearance to Israel, by a fairly large number of Palestinian participants, despite their having had prior permission. On the other side of the coin, anyone involved in dialogue planning also is familiar by the difficulties sometimes encountered in securing entrance permits for Palestinian participants to enter Israel from the Israeli authorities.

Experiences from other parts of the world, and appearing in the professional literature further corroborate the importance of institutional support for activities such as these. Two Irish researchers, writing in the *Journal of Peace Research*, have reported on the effectiveness of Community Relations programs in Northern Ireland. Citing and expanding upon Amir's research, they asserted that institutional support for these types of people to people efforts is a highly necessary factor for their success [Knox & Hughes, 1996].

#### The Interreligious Dialogue from the International Relations Perspective

Academic involvement in, and evaluation of people to people dialogues of the type referred to here, have frequently been the province of practitioners and experts in the field of psychology. Given the fact that this work is being presented by both a political scientist and social psychologist it is appropriate that such experiences be in some way addressed from the standpoint of international relations theory.

At the outset, it might seem that classical international relations thought would see little substantive value for the type of dialogues described here. From a theoretical standpoint, Morgenthau referred to earlier, actually expressed deep skepticism concerning the efficacy of what he termed the "UNESCO approach" to solving international disputes. He maintained that conflicts among nations do not occur because peoples are unaware of another's culture, even a similar one, or are unaware of a different actor's policy objectives [Morgenthau, 1967, pp.501-504].

However the case against believing that furthering cultural and religious understanding can contribute to conflict resolution in the Israeli-Palestinian case is perhaps not so closed and shut, even according to Morgenthau's own understanding of the dynamics of international relations. Morgenthau asserted the importance of a creating a viable balance of power between states and encouraged the practice of responsible diplomacy as the best basis for promoting international stability.

In the course of the dialogues it has begun to become clear to the two sides of the depth of the commitment which both peoples have to being on the same land which is based in large part by what they experience, know, and cherish from their religious heritages. Thus in a sense, an "ideological balance of power" emerged out of the clash of viewpoints with the possibility of a balancing of religious and culturally based convictions.

Faced with a situation in which both sides recognize that both sides are here, and neither expect to leave, rational and responsible human beings ought to seek the creation of a viable structure of peace and stability. While perhaps neither Islamic or Judaic justice can be realized in each one's fullest and most abstract sense, if the other side was not present, we can however, based on our experience seek the creation of new relationships that would benefit each other to a greater extent than could be achieved if the other party was not present.

### Conclusion

This paper has focused on the importance of dialogue in general and inter-religious dialogue in particular in the Israeli-Palestinian context.

Karl Deutsch who has so vitally explored the conditions necessary for the creation of "security regimes" following periods of political conflict among nations, pointed to the impact of a stalemate, followed later by active peace building between peoples. As has been suggested here, the inter-religious dialogue in the Israeli-Palestinian contact has the potential for strengthening the "constructive" stalemate as an initial basis for transforming the conflict, as "people-to-people" efforts are carried out between the two populations, aimed at generating the active relationship building so necessary for community building.

And in this context, referring again to an example from Northern Ireland; Knox and Hughes, cited earlier, (the former being a political scientist, the latter a social anthropologist) reported on the favorable impact of intercultural activities and dialogue, connected to religion, upon Protestant and Catholic participants [Knox and Hughes, 1996, pp.93-94].

Finally the case for the inter-religious dialogue is further reinforced by other insights from the literature. Samuel Huntington concluded his well known analysis concerning the clash of civilizations with the suggestion that the West will have "to develop a more profound understanding of the basic religious and philosophical assumptions underlying

other civilizations... [this process] will require an effort to identify elements of commonality between Western and other civilizations.” [Huntington, 1993, p. 49].

We therefore hope that the observations and evidence presented in this paper can further strengthen efforts to explore both in practice and theory the use of religious culture as a basis for dialogue and perception change to occur between Israelis and Palestinians with possible relevance to other international ethnic conflicts.

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