Relationship Transformation between Israeli Settlers and West Bank Palestinians: The Case of "Roots"

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Against the background of on-going research on the impact of Israeli-Palestinian inter-religious dialogue for conflict resolution efforts; the authors here present a preliminary assessment of the impact and dynamics of a relatively new Israeli-Palestinian initiative known as "Roots". It is unique in that it has provided a framework for cooperation and relationship transformation to occur between Israeli settlers and neighboring West Bank Palestinians. This paper will present an initial evaluation, concerning the background, strategic approach, impact, and challenges facing this organization in the context of relevant conflict resolution theories.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This paper will present a preliminary evaluation of a cutting-edge effort at dialogue and conflict resolution in a highly fraught area of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict namely between Israeli settler and West Bank Palestinians. This preliminary research effort will explore and serve as the beginning of a larger research evaluation concerning the particular methodology, impact, achievements and challenges facing the organization and the constituencies it is meant to serve.

As a point of departure this paper will be a continuation of earlier work on the analysis and evaluation of Israeli-Palestinian inter-religious dialogue efforts primarily as purported through the work of the Israeli Interfaith Encounter Association (Mollov, 2011; Mollov and Lavie, 2006, 2015; Mollov, et. al., 2007). In this work, a further stage of field research concerning efforts at peace building on the inter-religious level (although not limited to it) will be undertaken, through an analysis and evaluation of a relatively new Israeli-Palestinian initiative known as "Roots" or Shorashim in Hebrew and Judur in Arabic.

While the Interfaith Encounter Association (IEA) has undertaken impressive work over a period of years in which religion has served as a bridge of understanding between Israelis, Palestinians and Jews and Arabs within the State of Israel; Roots established in 2014 focuses mainly on interactions between Israeli Jewish settlers and local Palestinians in the Gush Etzion area located due south of Bethlehem on the way to Hebron. In parallel to key inter-religious interactions "Roots" can be considered as a key example of "sustained dialogue" on the grass roots level as advanced by Harold Saunders (1999). It is also relevant to refer to the work of Daniel J. Elazar who was a pioneer in the area of federalism which emphasized social partnership between entities which are required to live together even if they differ on fundamental definitions (Elazar, 1987). Applying that approach, he published an insightful book entitled

Two Peoples One Land (Elazar, 1991). Furthermore, a recent interpreter of Elazar's work suggested that organizations such as "Roots" and the IEA have been seeking to develop forms of social partnership between Israelis and Palestinians which reflect a federalist spirit (Elazar, 2017).

As further background it is important to emphasize that the Jewish population of settlers in the West Bank/Judea and Samaria are heavily comprised of religious Zionists who along with local Palestinians tend to see the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as rooted heavily in their respective narratives with their foundations in the respective religious traditions of both Judaism and Islam.

> Indeed, as has been suggested elsewhere (Mollov and Lavie 2015) there is no avoiding the Arab-Israeli conflict becoming a "religious conflict" as it already is such insofar as religion impacts significantly on the ways of life of both Arab and Jew in the Middle East even for many who may not follow strict religiously-observant behavior in their personal lives (Mollov and Lavie, 2001). Furthermore it has been contended that the Arab-Israeli conflict is an identity based conflict heavily rooted in conflicting narratives which are ultimately based upon religious culture insofar as both Israelis and Palestinians contest over the same land (Garfinkle 1991; Mollov and Lavie, 2001; Mollov, et.al , 2007; Reitner, 2010; Tessler, 2009).

Those identities are part of larger movements—that of modern Zionism and that of the Arab national awakening (Garfinkle 1991; Reitner, 2010; Tessler, 2009). Indeed, both movements arose out of protest to existing conditions in the 19th century and sought to renew the respective civilizations of both peoples based on the collective memory and inspiration of an earlier "heroic era." In the Jewish case the earlier heroic era was that of the Bible and Jewish civilization in the Land of Israel; in the Arab case that of the Arab-Islamic empire which existed at its height between the 7th to 10th centuries.

Given this situation in which conflicting narratives have been and remain at the core of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, what means rooted in culture and religion can serve to help bridge this gap and promote a process of conflict management and peace building? Limited work in this area has already been undertaken.

The potential for religion to serve as a moderating element in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been described in a limited number of research studies that have already been carried out concerning the impact of Israeli-Palestinian inter-religious dialogue (Abu-Nimer 2001, Bekerman, 2002; Mollov and Lavie, 2001, 2006). They point to the potential that a religiously based strategy holds for conflict management efforts. These efforts can foster a deeper and more effective discourse between the parties than a purely secular discourse can advance (Mollov, 2006a; Mollov and Lavie, 2001; Mollov and Schwartz, 2010). Based on field anecdotal evidence and empirical data, this approach can serve as a multi-pronged strategy for inter-group dialogue and conflict management.

Important to note is that a central criterion for assessing the impact of activities such as these are the degree of relationship building and perception change fostered among participants as a result of such activities as cited in a United States Institute of Peace Report (USIP,2004).

Common to most of these various dialogue activities is that on the initial level, participants find commonalities based on the similarities between Islamic and Judaic practices; such as practices related to prayer, charity, dietary laws, and laws of mourning, and also central personalities in the Hebrew Bible and the Koran such as Joseph and Moses. These commonalities moderate perceptions as participants in the two opposing groups find elements in common. Field activities have previously been reported on in which religion has served as a focus of constructive dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians. Similarities in the practice and the structure of Judaism and Islam have formed the basis of these dialogues taking place in the period between 1994 and 2000 (Furman, 2011; Mollov and Lavie, 2001; Mollov, et.al., 2002; Mollov and Lavie, 2006) with such activities continuing to take place despite significant difficulties on the ground (Furman, 2011; Tange, 2010). Discovering commonalities between the two groups based on common or similar elements, reflect the conditions for positive inter-group relations (Allport, 1954; Amir, 1969; Rokeach, 1960) and has served to facilitate a process of sustained

dialogue (Saunders, 1999). Given that the Israeli-Palestinian/Arab-Israeli conflict is a deep seated ethno-national conflict rooted in conflicting narratives, the inter-religious dimension helps guide both sides to a deeper discourse and understanding of the connection and identity which both sides have to the same land, and which forms a primary basis of the conflict (Fox and Sandler, 2006; Garfinkle, 1991; Tessler, 2009). This recognition can lead both sides to the understanding that a "constructive stalemate "exists (Zartman, 2007), which fosters an understanding that barring a willingness for perpetual violence, that both sides must reconcile themselves to acknowledging the existence of the "other" and the need to share the same land.

The Case of "Roots"

The particular case of "Roots" is highly significant as not only is this organization a further example of inter-religious dialogue and interactions between Israelis and Palestinians as a means to foster dialogue and conflict resolution but brings together Israeli settlers and local Palestinians in the area between Bethlehem and Hebron in a structured fashion. Indeed, the venue of the "Roots" Center located in close proximity to Gush Etzion (a burgeoning area of Jewish settlement with deep historical roots in both ancient Jewish history and Zionist pioneering in the 20th century) was made available by an extended family from the neighboring Palestinian village of Beit Ummar.

The activities undertaken by Roots extend from: an on-going core leadership group of Israeli settlers and Palestinian activists from the immediate area; an Israeli and Palestinian women's study group in Jewish and Muslim sources respectively; and a two-year-old very active Israeli-Palestinian youth group (ages 15-18) for Jewish youth from communities throughout Gush Etzion and Palestinian youth from Bet Ummar and Bethlehem. The Roots Center also organizes monthly lectures, joint religious activities, a music therapy group and photo workshops for the people of the area.

It is also significant that the Roots Center hosts annually hundreds of Israeli youth participating in pre-Army study programs as a means of enlarging their perspectives and the possibility of peace building between Israeli and Palestinians, prior to entering the Army and potentially encountering complex situations requiring cultural sensitivity to carry out their missions in a manner that would not exacerbate Israeli-Palestinian tensions.

The formation of the Roots/Shorashim/Judur group is in itself an example of relationship transformation between Jewish settlers and Palestinians. The key Palestinian leadership from the village of Bet Ummar all had backgrounds as militant/political activists in the first intifada of 1987. Having experienced though pain and loss they were able to summon the empathy to consider the pain of Israelis who also had experienced loss, in the Israeli –Palestinian Bereaved Parents Circle. From this step came the realization that Palestinian violence has brought neither side benefit and if they wished to influence Israeli public opinion to support Palestinian aspirations and the possibility of a joint productive future they needed to engage in meetings with not only secular left oriented Israelis, who form the bulk of Israeli peace activists, but Israelis who are more traditionally oriented who in fact were their neighbors in Gush Etzion.

The Jewish Israeli core leaders and initiators underwent parallel transformations. From the point of departure of living in Judea and Samaria, the heartland of Biblical history, as a means of realizing the Jewish ideals of building the Land of Israel they came to realize that they could not ignore their own Palestinian neighbors. In fact, a number of Rabbis came to focus on Jewish sources that could support the idea of Jewish-Arab partnership on the Land as opposed to an exclusivist interpretation and mindset towards their Arab neighbors.

Extremely impressive is the fact that the Palestinian leaders have been able to articulate an understanding of the Jewish Biblical narrative and Jewish connection to Judea and Samaria and the Land of Israel in general This is a very important step towards peace building as Israelis often lament the fact that even during the time of peace efforts with Arab parties and countries that the Jewish connection to the Land of Israel is either ignored or entirely denied.

Research Methodology and Preliminary Assessment

In our research plan to assess the work and impact of the "Roots" organization three methodological approaches will be used: Qualitative observation of the content and dynamics of the groups which meet on an on-going basis; in-depth interviews of key participants; and questionnaire based quantitative data measuring perceptions of participants before and after meetings based on similar methodological tools undertaken in the past (Mollov and Lavie, 2001).

Observations to date of both the core leadership group comprising approximately 20 Israelis and Palestinians; and the core youth group comprising approximately 50 Israeli and Palestinians youth have been instructive. In the core leadership group the tendency of the Israeli participants has been to emphasize the goal of creating good neighborly relations and peace building living so close yet so far from a psychological and environmental perspective; the Palestinians on the other hand while endorsing this goal emphasize that their date to date reality which includes negotiating the difficulties of a military occupation must also be addressed as part of dialogue and peace building. As part of on-going relationship building the Israeli settlers have become more aware of these day to day difficulties and try to utilize their contacts and good offices with Israeli military and civil authorities to help alleviate particular cases of hardship encountered by their Palestinian neighbors. While some of the Palestinians wish to move "Roots" in the direction of undertaking concentrated political action designed to immediately affect macro political policies, the general consensus of both sides has been to eschew this approach as being both unrealistic and divisive.

Although much of the discourse of the core group has not expressly focused on inter-religious elements this dynamic has clearly been in the background given the strong identity-based nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A very recent example however of a very powerful inter-religious encounter occurred towards the end of the recent Muslim Ramadan festival and observances. A Moslem "Iftar" fast breaking meal was organized by the group in which Israeli grass roots religious and political leaders were invited to partake in this festive fast breaking. In fact, the Mayor of the large Regional Council of Efrat, considered to be the "capitol" of Gush Etzion, also attended this gathering. Impressive was the fact that the Moslem participants conducted their prayer services ending the daily Ramadan fast facing Mecca, while the Jewish participants conducted their evening prayer services standing adjacent to the Moslem group, and faced Jerusalem. It was a strong moment of inter-religious solidarity. An animated discussion in an excellent atmosphere ensued at the Kosher dinner, in fact at which the Palestinians expressed their empathy at the prospect of a nearby Jewish settlement needing to evacuate due to a legal matter. Furthermore, apparently some of the Beit Ommar village's water supply was funneled through that settlement, nearby indicating a degree of interdependence between settlements in Gush Etzion and the neighboring Palestinian villages.

Observation of the "Roots" Youth Group was also conducted, during which inter-religious elements and commonalties became the focus of some of the discussions such as in time proximity to the Jewish festival of Purim and the observances of Ramadan. In fact, in proximity to Purim the Israeli and Palestinian youth cooperated in preparing "care packages" of food to needy families, both Israeli and Palestinian in the adjacent areas, which is a Purim custom of extending this type of support to others. The youth group also conducted general hikes and tours of various areas in the Land of Israel/Palestine. The group's discussions also veered into current and even controversial developments as the Palestinian youth tried to make the Israeli youth aware of the hardships that they faced in comparison to their lives as Israelis. The Palestinians though found it difficult to understand that the Israelis also had their fears related to security and potential threat. In general, though it seemed that the youth were less equipped to conduct discussions of a political nature and it's not certain if enough balanced adult guidance was available to guide these discussions into useful areas.

In addition to qualitative observation, questionnaires testing for perception change will be distributed to both the core leadership and youth groups and then analyzed for perception changes. It should be noted though that some questionnaire-based data has already been collected from the youth group which will also be reported upon in a later stage of research.

As mentioned earlier, another important aspect of the "Roots" activities are the meetings held at their Center with large numbers of Israeli students in pre-Army preparatory programs. In the following phase of research, samples of such pre-army students will be surveyed for their attitudes on questionnaires before and after their exposure in their visit to the "Roots" Center and discussions with the Palestinian and Israeli speakers representing the organization. Assessing the impact of such exposure will help determine the degree in which "Roots" is able to affect larger numbers of Israelis with a new view of Palestinians and the possibilities of peace building, to better guide them during their military service, and their subsequent lives as Israeli citizens.

DISCUSSION AND SIGNIFICANCE

In this research we attempt to explore the larger significance of "Roots" along with the Interfaith Encounter Association to more deeply explore its impact and efficacy that can open up new vistas of thought and approach for peace building between Israelis and Palestinians. The very fact that Israeli settlers (considered by many to be the main "obstacle to peace") can engage civilly and constructively with Palestinians is in itself an accomplishment, as a tension reduction measure in the areas considered most explosive to the both sides. In effect if religious Zionist settlers can find commonalties with local Palestinians there might be hope for the two populations as a whole to positively engage as well. Indeed, some have maintained that the Oslo process failed, significantly due to the fact that the grass roots and particularly the most religiously committed members of both societies were either marginalized or completely excluded from the process.

In terms of a larger vision resources found in federalist type thinking which emphasizes the promotion of constructive interactions between different populations in conflict towards a sense of social partnership and mutual responsibility should be inculcated among Israelis and Palestinians (Elazar, 1987, 1991), even if the partners don't necessarily agree on common definitions. Indeed, the vision of "Roots" is an example of such thinking on the micro level. For whatever more formal arrangements are advanced by Israeli and Arab leaders (including the Palestinians) relationship transformation is an indispensable element of peace building (Saunders, 1999).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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