

In Practice

Contributions of an Unofficial Conflict Resolution Effort to the Israeli-Palestinian Breakthrough

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Since the widely publicized signing of the accord between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in September of 1993, there has been general recognition of the role that unofficial efforts have played — directly or indirectly — in making this agreement possible.

The Oslo, Norway talks themselves, from which this accord emerged, cannot be characterized as an instance of “unofficial” or “track two” diplomacy. Rather, the Oslo talks were a form of back-channel negotiations, which contained a mixture of official and unofficial — track one and track two — elements. The Oslo negotiations demonstrated dramatically, however, that private, nonofficial individuals and settings can play a significant role in advancing a negotiating process that had reached an impasse at the official level. The heightened awareness of the potential contributions of unofficial inputs served to remind observers of the contacts and interactions between Israelis and Palestinians that had been organized over the years by a variety of unofficial third parties and that helped lay the groundwork for the recent developments.

In this context, many observers of the Middle East peace process, as well as some news reports in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East, have referred to the activities in which my colleagues and I have been engaged over the years. For more than two decades, we have worked to bring together politically active and influential Israelis and Palestinians for private, direct communication. This work has involved the intensive application to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict of the concepts and methods of interactive problem-solving — an unofficial third-party approach to conflict resolution derived from the work of John

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Burton' and based on social-psychological principles.' Beginning in the early 1970s, we have organized a series of problem-solving workshops for Israelis and Palestinians,' culminating in a continuing workshop that met over a three-year period between 1990 and 1993.⁴

These activities must be seen, of course, within the context of the variety of Israeli-Palestinian meetings and projects that have been organized in recent years — particularly since the onset of the *intifada* — under different auspices and with different purposes, types of participants, formats, and agendas. Different projects have made different contributions to the recent developments. Some helped by opening particular channels of communication; others explored the feasibility of certain security or economic arrangements. The cumulative effect of this range of activities has helped to create a political atmosphere conducive to productive negotiations.

It is impossible to disentangle the effects of our own efforts from this array of unofficial activities. However, there are several distinct features of our approach to which its particular contribution can be traced. Our program represents a substantial, systematic effort — spanning more than two decades — to bring together politically influential Israelis and Palestinians; it is one of the earliest and most consistent enterprises of this type and has reached deeply into the political elites of both communities. We have been very clear throughout about the political purpose of the communication we facilitate, which is to feed the new insights and ideas developed in the course of our workshops into the political process. Our work has been based on close knowledge of the two communities and familiarity with their political landscapes; we visit the region frequently, stay in touch with events and people, and have paid special attention to building and maintaining our networks.

Essential to our operation is the identification and recruitment of participants who can both engage in the kind of communication process that our workshops call for and feed what they learn into the political process in their own communities. Thus, we select individuals who are politically involved and influential; are actively interested in finding a negotiated solution; and, at the same time, are part of the mainstream of their communities, are close to the center of the political spectrum, and have credibility and access.

The workshops themselves are carefully designed and conducted so as to facilitate the process of sharing perspectives and joint thinking that we are trying to foster, the setting and the ground rules (with their emphasis on privacy and confidentiality), the agenda, the procedures, and the third party's interventions are all geared to making this kind of communication possible. Finally, our emphasis has been not on communication as an end in itself, but on transmitting what is learned in the workshop setting to the political leadership, the political elites, and the general public in the two communities, thus helping to create a political atmosphere conducive to negotiations. In sum, our work has represented a sustained, systematic use

of an unofficial third-party microprocess as a vehicle for influencing the political debate and official policy at the macro-level.

Contributions to the Peace Process

There are three ways in which, I believe, this work has contributed to the recent breakthrough in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: through the development of *cadres* prepared to carry out productive negotiations; the sharing of information and the formulation of new ideas that provided important *substantive inputs* into the negotiations; and the fostering of a *political atmosphere* that made the parties open to a new relationship.

Development of cadres. Over the years, dozens of Israelis and dozens of Palestinians — all politically involved, some of them "pre-influentials" who have since moved into positions of leadership and influence, others already political influentials by virtue of their current and former positions — participated in one or more of the workshops or similar opportunities for direct Israeli-Palestinian communication that we arranged.

Many of these individuals have played direct or indirect roles in the discussions and negotiations that led up to the September, 1993 accord. Most of the participants in our continuing workshop played central roles, as negotiators or advisers, in the official peace talks that started in November, 1991. Many "alumni" of our other workshops, meetings, and symposia have also been engaged in this process in a variety of roles. Similarly, some of the participants in our projects were involved in the various secret explorations (including the Oslo channel) that took place in recent years, and continue to be involved in the ongoing negotiations on implementing the interim agreement. Some of our alumni can now be found in the Israeli cabinet, Knesset, and foreign ministry, and in leading positions in various official Palestinian agencies.

In short, we *know* that participants in our activities have been well represented in the various phases of negotiation and implementation of agreements. We can only *surmise* that their earlier participation in our workshops and other activities may have helped to prepare them for these roles — in some sense to train them or even "credential" them for enacting these roles — and may have contributed to the productivity of the process.

Several factors account for the contribution of our program to the development of cadres for negotiation. First, given their sheer numbers, the people involved in the three dozen or so workshops and similar activities that we conducted over the years constitute a significant proportion of the political elites of the two communities. Second, our criteria and procedures for selection of participants and composition of workshop groups yielded precisely the kinds of individuals (in terms of their personal characteristics and the political groupings they represented) who were natural candidates for negotiations once there was political readiness for that step. Third, the workshops increased participants' knowledge about the other side and sensitivity to its concerns, and enhanced their experience and skills in communi-

cating with the other side, as well as their commitment to such communication. As a consequence, workshop participation helped to strengthen their qualifications and effectiveness for the negotiating role.

Substantive inputs. Workshops produced new knowledge, understanding, and ideas, which gradually found their way into the political thinking and the political debate in the two communities. Thus, Palestinians and Israelis had the opportunity to enter into each other's perspective. Each learned about the other's concerns, priorities, sensitivities, and constraints. About the nature of public opinion and the political divisions on the other side; about changes that have taken place and possibilities for further change; and about the elements on the other side that might be amenable to accommodation, and the forms that such accommodation could take. Through the process of joint thinking that workshops encourage, participants explored new formulations of issues that would make them amenable to solution, ideas for solutions that would be responsive to the concerns of both parties, shared visions of a desirable future, and steps of mutual reassurance (in the form of acknowledgments, symbolic gestures, and confidence-building measures) that would create an atmosphere conducive to negotiations.

These new understandings and ideas were then fed into the political process in each community by way of workshop participants' political discussions and political work — through their public communications in speeches, articles, and media appearances, and through their private communications to political leaders and political colleagues. Ideas that emerged from workshop discussions were also fed into the political debate through the work of third-party members, such as my own publications and lectures (see below) on ways of overcoming the barriers to a negotiated solution. In sum, the information exchanged and the ideas developed in the course of workshop interactions injected into the two political cultures some of the substantive elements on which productive negotiations could be built: shared assumptions, mutual sensitivities, and new conceptions of the process and outcome of negotiations.

Political atmosphere. Our workshops, along with various other Israeli-Palestinian meetings and projects, helped create a political atmosphere that became increasingly favorable to negotiations. A new relationship between significant segments of the two communities evolved over the years. This relationship accelerated after the onset of the *intifada* and it maintained itself despite many setbacks — particularly during the Gulf crisis and war of 1990-91. The workshops and related activities contributed to a political atmosphere conducive to negotiations and to the gradual evolution of a new relationship between the parties by encouraging — through the interactive problem-solving process — the development of more differentiated images of the enemy; a deescalatory language and a new political discourse attentive to the concerns and constraints of the other party; a working trust based on

the conviction that both parties are genuinely interested in a peaceful solution; and a sense of possibility regarding the ultimate achievement of a mutually satisfactory outcome.

Assumptions about the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

In discussing the different types of contributions of our program to the recent peace process, I referred to the substantive ideas for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and for moving toward the negotiating table that have emerged from our workshops and related activities. These ideas were gradually infused into the political debate and political thinking in the two communities, and thus helped to develop the conceptual framework on which the recent accords were built. The Israeli and Palestinian participants, of course, played the most important role in injecting the insights and ideas emerging from the workshops into the political process. Third-party members, however, also contributed through the policy analyses conveyed in our written and oral presentations.

I have presented and published, starting in 1977, a series of papers that conveyed my particular analysis of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and especially its Palestinian-Israeli component.² My disproportionate reference to my own policy-analysis publications in no way implies that mine were the only — or the most important — analyses that contributed to the framework for the recent Israeli-Palestinian breakthrough. I make no such claim. Indeed, I have drawn heavily on the work of other analysts over the years.³ My purpose here, however, is not to review the relevant literature, but to document the contributions of our particular program. I refer to my writings in that context. They developed the framework for conflict resolution at the macro-level that underlay our work at the micro-level; they drew on the workshops as a main source of their ideas; and they influenced, in turn, the structure and content of subsequent workshops. The focus of these papers has been on how to create the conditions for negotiations by overcoming the political and psychological obstacles that have stood in the way. According to my analysis, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been viewed by the parties as a zero-sum conflict around national identity and existence. In light of this analysis, the key requirements for movement toward resolution have been mutual reassurance and mutual recognition.

My analyses have been based primarily on what I learned from the interactions between Israelis and Palestinians in the context of our workshops. These observations, of course, are combined with other sources of information (including regular visits to the region and conversations with officials, academics, journalists, and others on all sides) and filtered through my particular conceptual approach. It is important to note here that the relationship of my analyses to the workshops operates in both directions. The analysis derives heavily from insights and ideas that emerge out of the workshop interactions, but in turn it influences the way in which we organize and conduct workshops. The timing, focus, agenda, structure, and composition of a given workshop or series of workshops are guided by our analysis

of the nature of the conflict, of the current political situation within and between the two communities, and of the requirements for movement at the particular time.

Several core assumptions or propositions about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its potential resolution have emerged from interactions in the workshops and have, in turn, informed the organization of workshops. These assumptions seem to be confirmed by the recent developments in the peace process. I have discussed these propositions in my articles and lectures over the years. Although they are now widely accepted and may even appear self-evident, they were often quite controversial when first enunciated. Let me review several of these propositions, which have been central to our practice and our analysis:

(1) The Palestinian problem is the central issue of the Arab-Israeli conflict. It is not the only issue; the conflicts between Israel and the Arab states have their own dynamics and present significant problems relating to regional security, development, and democratization. Resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will not automatically solve the other issues and eliminate all conflict in the Middle East. But, as the Israeli government now acknowledges, solution of the Palestinian problem is a precondition for change in Israel's relationship with its neighboring states.

(2) Mutual recognition of Israelis and Palestinians — mutual acceptance of each other's national existence and national rights — is an essential prerequisite for movement in negotiations and an essential ingredient of a final agreement. Acknowledging the other's nationhood, with all that this implies, helps to provide the mutual reassurance that is necessary if the parties are to engage in a negotiation process that is inevitably risky and whose outcome is uncertain. Moreover, mutual recognition must form the basis of any final agreement if it is to be durable by virtue of meeting the needs of both parties and engendering their commitment. Key elements in the effectiveness of mutual recognition are simultaneity and reciprocity in the declarations and actions of the two parties.

(3) Israeli recognition of Palestinian nationhood and of the PLO as the embodiment of the Palestinian nation is of vital concern to Palestinians. Such recognition implies acceptance of the unity of the Palestinian people inside and outside of Palestine, acknowledgment of the Palestinians' right to choose their own leadership, and legitimacy of their claim to national self-determination and an independent state.

(4) Palestinian recognition of Israel is of vital concern to Israelis. It implies legitimacy of Israel's presence in the Middle East and provides the key to ending its isolation in the region. Acceptance by its Arab neighbors and integration in the region are important to Israelis' sense of security, economic well-being, and quality of life. Indeed, it is Israel's isolation in the region and the denial of its legitimacy that have been the driving forces behind Israel's genuine security concerns.

(5) Since 1967, there have been gradual, significant changes in the political thinking and perceived interests of the Arab states and the Palestinian movement, opening the way to a negotiated solution of the conflict. The PLO mainstream, under the pragmatic leadership of Yasser Arafat, has been ready for some time to negotiate with Israel on the basis of a two-state formula, involving the establishment of a Palestinian state (perhaps in confederation with Jordan) alongside of Israel.

(6) Despite the increasing strength of right-wing parties in Israel, Israeli public opinion remains fluid. Since the *intifada*, there has been increasing public readiness for negotiation with the PLO and establishment of a Palestinian state — provided the PLO meets certain conditions. Given such conditions, along with a leadership that is ready to negotiate, as well as a favorable regional and international climate, a majority of Israelis can be mobilized in support of negotiations with the Palestinians. The leadership is most likely to come from the Labor Party, with support from the peace movement and the dovish political parties.

(7) A breakthrough in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process is most likely to emerge from a direct, bilateral process between the two central parties (rather than a process that involves U.S. pressure on Israel and Jordanian and other Arab pressure on the Palestinians). Final agreements, of course, require a multilateral process, since they must include the Arab states and will depend on inducements and guarantees from the United States and other powers. Given the existential nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, however, only the parties themselves can provide each other with the reassurance and recognition that make a breakthrough possible.

(8) An Israeli-Palestinian agreement cannot be based on a formula of total separation between Israel and the new Palestinian state. A viable and lasting solution requires the development of a new relationship between the former enemies, which will allow them to coexist on the basis of open borders and cooperation in different spheres (such as economic relations, trade, tourism, development and utilization of resources, and protection of the environment), while avoiding Israeli domination and control.

Looking to the Future

It is gratifying and encouraging that these assumptions or propositions, which have both emerged from our work and guided it over the years, have become the basic principles on which the September 1993 breakthrough rests. They continue to serve as the basis for the implementation of the interim agreement and the negotiation of the final agreement, which is scheduled to begin within the coming two years.

Our own work also continues, in the form of a joint working group on Israeli-Palestinian relations. The initial emphasis of this group is on systematic exploration of the difficult political issues — such as Jerusalem, settlements, refugees, borders, and the precise nature of Palestinian

self-determination — that have been postponed to the final-status negotiations. The group will explore these issues in the context of a broader discussion of the future relationship between the two societies and politics that is envisaged as the long-term outcome of the final agreement. We hope that our new efforts will contribute directly and concretely to this new phase of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiation process.

NOTES

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1. See, for example, Hurton 1969, 1979, and 1981.
2. See Kelman 1972 for the earliest and Kelman 1992a for the most recent presentation of this approach. See also Kelman 1990 and 1994.
3. See Cohen, Kelman, Miller, and Smith 1977; Kelman 1979, 1986, and 1992a; and Kelman and Cohen 1976.
4. See Routhana and Kelman 1994. The continuing workshop was initiated and organized in partnership with Nadim Routhana of Boston College, and we co-chaired the program throughout its three-year duration. We were joined on the panel of third-party facilitators by Harold Saunders of the Kettering Foundation and C.R. Mitchell of the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University. We are very grateful to them, as well as to the members of the third-party staff, which included Cynthia Charney, Rose Kelman, Susan Korper, Kate Routhana, and William Weisberg.
5. The published papers include Kelman 1978, 1982, 1982-83, 1983a, 1983b, 1983c, 1985, 1987, 1988, and 1992b.
6. See, for example, the writings of Eban 1980, Harkabi 1988, Heradstveit 1979, Khalidi 1978 and 1981, and Saunders 1991 [1985] — among many others.
7. This project, like the continuing workshop, is co-chaired by Nadim Routhana and myself. We are joined on the third-party facilitation team by Eileen Babbitt, who also administers the project. The third-party staff includes Kate Routhana as researcher/editor and Rose Kelman as coordinator/scribe. We are grateful to the Nathan Cummings Foundation and the CRB Foundation for their financial support of this work.

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