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The Copernicus Journal of Political Studies nr 1 (3), 127-138

2013

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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PEACE MOVEMENTS IN THE PALESTINIAN-ISRAELI CONFLICT

ABSTRACT

The peace movements, both Palestinians and Israelis, have been little discussed academically, however, its importance in the development of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is crucial. This article intends to expose the dynamics that the Israeli and Palestinian peace organizations have had over the years.

Key words

Israel, Palestine, NGO's, conflict resolution, peace

The great figures of the previous generations warned us that the guaranteeing of international peace was a *sine qua non*. Furthermore, the technical progress achieved in our times has made this a crucial issue for civilized humanity, and each and every one of us, without exception, has a moral duty to play an active role in solving the problem of how to achieve peace.

Albert Einstein

The sun rises over Israel and Palestine, and, at the Israeli-army control points that connect Israel with – and sometimes disconnect it from – the Left Bank, the women of *Machsom Watch*, a non-governmental organization that has been monitoring the behaviour of Israeli soldiers and policemen since 2001 in response to the press reports about human-rights abuses committed on the Palestinians who enter and leave Israel every day, are monitoring the behaviour of the Israeli police and soldiers.

At 9:00 a.m., Jeff Halper, the Director of the Israeli Committee against the Demolition of Houses, will arrive at his office in Jerusalem. The aforesaid Israeli NGO, founded in 1996, is an organization that uses non-violent means

to prevent the Israeli armed forces from demolishing Palestinian homes, as well as rebuilding Palestinian houses that have already been demolished, sometimes with the support of Rabbis for Human Rights, a group founded in 1988 during the Palestinian *intifada*, which, from its headquarters in Jerusalem, strives to give voice to the Jewish religious tradition regarding human rights. As its Executive Director, Rabbi Ascherman, says: “The aim of we rabbis who are members of our organization, and variously belong to orthodox, conservative or reform Judaism, is to take part in non-violent action, show solidarity with the victims of abuse, and carry on an inter-faith dialogue, in addition to keeping alive, in the *yeshivas* (Jewish religious schools), the Jewish tradition of defending victims and rebuilding demolished houses.”

Sami Awad will soon arrive – albeit 10 minutes late, having lingered over a cup of coffee with his friends as always – at the offices of the Holy Land Foundation in Bethlehem, where he works hand-in-hand with Jeff Halper. Since 1998, the aforementioned Palestinian organization has worked to promote non-violent resistance and put an end to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, while at the same time advocating a democratic Palestine and condemning Palestinian terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians.

The Foundation attempts to improve the lives of Palestinian children and youths via programs such as Peace and Reconciliation (which operates in association with the Israeli NGO, Journey and Encounter, and Palestinian News Network, whose aims are to teach Palestinian youths to respect others, to eschew hatred and to assume individual responsibility in the search for peaceful coexistence with Israel.

At four p.m. on the same day, in Hayasmin de Ramat Efal street in Israel, some Palestinian and Israeli families from Families Forum, an association that includes hundreds of Israeli and Palestinian families that have lost close relatives in the conflict, gather together. The aim of the Forum, officially founded in 1998, is to end the Israeli occupation and establishment of settlements in the West Bank, stop the terrorism that kills innocent people like their own relatives and achieve a lasting political settlement, for which purpose, via messages published on the Internet and conferences in schools and universities, it strives to have an impact on public opinion and convince politicians to seek reconciliation and understanding.

Though my favourite byword, during my university years, was “let’s be realistic and seek the impossible”, I have learned that this is a selfish, simplistic and irresponsible slogan, since it places us in the very advantageous position of asking the impossible from others while comfortably ensconced in our favourite

armchair, seated in a university classroom or study cubicle, taking part in some conference, or marching in a demonstration; indeed, there are those who, more cynical, repeat it while lying in bed watching a movie.

This is why these lines set out to be a reflection on – and homage to – those Palestinians and Israelis who, in uncommon – and very sad – circumstances, have every reason to hate each other, choose to go out into the streets each day, not to ask the impossible, but to do it.

Since I feel that the words of Julio Cortazar aptly describe what has happened to the words, *peace/shalom/salaam* – words of consolation and hope; what a pity that they have a certain air of being overused, oft-repeated, worn out by constant repetition – I would like to use a definition formulated by Julien Brenda, who eschews sentimentalism and goes to the heart of the concept of peace: “If it ever comes, peace will be based not on fear of war, but on love of peace. It will not consist in refraining from doing something, but in a new mental attitude.”

Though the word “politics” suffers from the same problem, here I will cite what Manuel Azaña once said: “If politics is the art of governing countries, let us all engage in it, and the more the better, because it is only thus that we will be able to govern ourselves and avoid being badly governed by others.”

Since the State of Israel was founded, civil society has played a very active, decisive role in its formation, as witnessed by the many Israeli citizens who are members of social movements, non-governmental organizations, cultural and recreational associations, and political parties.

Relations between the Israelis and the Palestinians have changed across the years, and one might say that most of the Palestinian population lived under Arab leadership (above all Jordanian and Egyptian) from 1948 to 1967, thus rarely coming into direct contact with Israeli civilians.

Such interaction between the two societies intensified after the 1967 war, especially along the so-called Green Line, when Israel occupied most of the West Bank and all of Gaza.

Alongside this increase in contact between the Palestinians and the Israelis, the occupation of the Sinai desert, the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan Heights, stemming from the military victory in the 1967 war, polarized the Jewish population into two factions that can be seen today in Israeli society:

- The Eretz Israel Hashlema (Greater Israel) movement, which resulted from the coming together of nationalist Jewish religious groups and secular organizations that advocated the annexation of the conquered territory – i.e. the right-wing and religious sectors of Israeli society.

- The Movement for Peace and Security, which is mainly secular and saw the 1967 war as an opportunity to settle Arab-Israeli differences, being made up of groups that identify with the left wing.

As the academics Walid Salem and Edy Kaufman have mentioned, between these two factions there is the silent majority, which is politically indecisive and, in the right circumstances, will support any leadership, which explains the abrupt changes that occur from one election to the next.

Academics such as Yakov Talmor and the religious philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz spoke out against the occupation just after the 1967 war. Leibowitz was deemed to be “the conscience of Israel” during the 1970s and 1980s, and his positions regarding the conquering of territory, the role of the Jewish religion in the State of Israel, and the position occupied –and role played- by Israel in the world, provoked both admiration and repudiation in Israel society. In his most widely recognized works, which include *Judaism, the Jewish People and the State of Israel* and *Israel and Judaism*, he very polemically asserted that “no people has any right over any land. Land is an objective entity, while “right” and “people” are constructs of the human mind... a land belongs to a given people only in the mind of that people”.¹

Such statements garnered Leibowitz the hatred and contempt of the Zionist religious groups. In an article entitled *Right, Justice and Reality*, published in the Haaretz newspaper, he wrote: “There is only one way out of the predicament stemming from the complicated past between the Palestinians and the Israelis, though neither side considers the said solution to be fair or fully agrees with it; that way out consists in splitting the land between the two peoples.”²

Groups such as the Siach (Dialogue) aligned themselves with well-known peace advocates such as Shulamit Alón, Uri Avneri, Ran Cohen and Matti Peled, to form Yaad, the left-wing Zionist party that opposed the colonization and annexation of territory.

While social activism has existed in Israel since the early days and has permeated Israeli society, it would appear that civilian pacifist activism did not become part and parcel of Israeli political life until the late 1970s, when the governing establishment became more sensitive to – and favourable towards –

¹ Y. Leibowitz, *La crisis como esencia de la experiencia religiosa* [Crisis as the Essence of Religious Experience], Mexico 2000, p. 142.

² *Ibidem*, p. 1432.

extra-parliamentary political activism than it had been in the preceding years, when the founding and survival of the State of Israel were absolute priorities.

After the 1973 war, also known as the Yom Kippur war, a wave of protests by Israeli soldiers about government actions and policies during the armed conflict began, giving rise to an intense debate among Israelis about whether those governing them were competent and helping a lot to legitimize political action outside the Knesset – i.e. the Israeli Parliament.

In March of 1978, in response to the decision of the then Prime Minister, Menahem Begin, to defend – and even support – the creation of a host of new settlements inside the occupied territories, around 350 Israeli-army reservists sent a letter to him, accusing the government of encouraging the building of settlements in order to create “Greater Israel”, and of not seeking peace with the Arab world.

This letter marked the creation of the Shalom Ajshav (Peace Now) movement, which, in September of the same year, organized the biggest political demonstration in Israel’s history in Tel Aviv.

On September 25, 1982, as a result of the murders of Palestinians in the Sabra and Chatila refugee camps committed by the forces of the Lebanese Christian Phalange with the blessing of the Israeli army, 400,000 Israelis took to the streets of Tel Aviv in a demonstration convened by Shalom Ajshav, once again showing the government that a large portion of Israeli society opposed the measures taken during the occupation of southern Lebanon.

The active role played by women in the Israeli pacifist groups and organizations merits special mention. In the words of Salid Salem and Edy Kaufman: “The gender factor should be acknowledged, since a majority of the members of the peace groups in Israel are women, who have not only set up groups such as Four Mothers Lebanon and Parents Against Silence, but also participate in human-rights organizations such as Machsom Watch, and in political coalitions such as the one between the Israeli Bat Shalom group and the Palestinian Jerusalem Center for Women.”³

The history of the Palestinian peace movement is very different, since there is no record of any non-violent demonstrations by Palestinian civilians seeking that their national and human rights be respected until the start of the first Intifada in 1987, and it should be stressed that, during its short history, the

³ *Bridging the Divide: Peacebuilding in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, E. Kaufman, W. Salem, J. Verhoeven (eds.), London 2006, p. 27.

Palestinian peace movement has been mainly influenced by two parties – the European Union and, paradoxically, Israel.

The 1987 Intifada exposed not only the Israeli government and its policies in the occupied territories and towards the Arab population, but also the corrupt, non-functional leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Academic studies of the Palestinian NGOs all concur that the two Intifadas and the 1993 Oslo Accords laid the foundations for the development of these movements within Palestinian society, with the number of such organizations increasing in the mid 1990s.

While there are records of the existence of Palestinian civil organizations in the 1930s and 1940s, most researchers, and academics such as Juliette Verhoeven, Manuel Hassassian, and Walid Salem and Edy Kaufman in their book *Bridging the Divide* agree that the 1987 Intifada might be seen as the event that gave rise to civil organizations in Palestine (with differences between Gaza and the West Bank) and also to the Palestinian peace movements.

In broad terms, these were the beginnings of the peace movements in both Israel and Palestine, the history of which is marked by a series of successes, but also by dark, difficult periods when citizens' participation has diminished due to violence, economic instability and radical extremist political leaders.

The activities of the peace movements in Israel and Palestine can be divided into three categories, depending on the population at which they are aimed: the Israeli peace movement which is active inside Israel; the Palestinian peace movement that targets Palestinian civilians; and the overall Palestinian peace movement – i.e. those joint Israeli-Palestinian actions that are aimed at promoting peace, good will and understanding between the ordinary Palestinians and Israelis.

Since the very beginning of the 1987 Intifada, informal contacts began to be established and joint activities were undertaken between Palestinian and Israeli associations, with the 1990s being the most fruitful decade, in terms not only of the number of organizations founded, but also of the intensity of the contacts between the said organizations and the amount of pressure that they managed to exert on the political establishment.

At times, the ability of those non-governmental organizations that seek and promote peace to apply upward pressure increases – i.e. they manage to influence the politicians who make the big decisions; at the same time, they also apply downward pressure on public opinion, giving rise to organized mass demonstrations that also influence the politicians and affect parliamentary

decisions, not to mention their horizontal effect – i.e. the influence of Israeli organizations and vice versa.

The main areas in which these groups have managed to achieve success are bicultural and interfaith education, legal counselling, academic research in general, human rights and democracy, economic development via cooperatives, and alternative proposals to settle territorial conflicts.

Some examples of the successes achieved by the Field of Peace are: the upward pressure that the latter organization succeeded in applying both in Israel and in other countries, leading to the Israeli government's decision to withdraw from southern Lebanon in the year 2000; the aforementioned 1987 Intifada; the pressure brought to bear on both Arafat and the Nineteenth National Palestinian Congress by the Palestinian peace organizations, leading the former to approve the two-state solution and the proposal to recognize Israel; the 1993 Oslo Accords, which reaped unprecedented popular support, though they later fell through; and even Ariel Sharon's plan for the splitting off of the Gaza Strip in 2005, all of which can, to some extent, be attributed to the said civilian organizations.

You say that working with children is exhausting. You're right, because you have to get on the same level as them, stoop, bend down, crouch, make yourself small.

You're wrong on that score: that's not what tires you out, but rather having to rise to the level of their feelings, stretch, make yourself longer, stand on tiptoe in order not to hurt them.

Janusz Korczak 1942

Also one should not neglect to mention other initiatives of the so-called "Field of Peace", such as the Neve Shalom-Wahat al Salam (In English: "Oasis of Peace") school community founded in 1970 on the road between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

By 2006, around 50 families had settled in the aforesaid community, which is self-governing and not affiliated to any political party. In the words of one of its founders, "Neve Shalom is not something inside a bubble, removed from reality. This community confronts the conflict between Palestine and Israel, which is reflected inside it."

With very little initial support from the Israeli Ministry of Education, the community in question opened a school that mainly covers the pre-school and primary levels, as well as the lower senior-high-school grades, and currently has between 250 and 300 children enrolled, both Palestinian and Jewish.

The said school, which is bilingual and bi-national, takes in children from both the Neve Shalom community and also the environs of the village where it is located, who presently make up 90% of all the pupils, as well as day-pupils from the more distant communities of Nachshon, Harel and Gezer.

Its alternative curriculum is based on several basic tenets, the most outstanding of which are:

- Jews and Palestinians participate equally in both management and teaching.
- The establishment of a natural framework that allows Jewish and Palestinian children to come together every day in a safe environment.
- Teaching in both Hebrew and Arabic for all pupils.
- Strengthening of the children's individual identity, via teaching about their own culture and traditions, along with the inculcation of respect for the other culture based on teaching about its values and traditions.

It should be stressed that, both in the classroom and during recesses and extracurricular activities, the issue of identity is constantly brought up at Neve Shalom, where the classes are given in Hebrew and Arabic, the children learn about each other's traditions, and both the Jewish and the Moslem children celebrate each other's feast days together.

Outstanding among the programs that the school offers is the one called "Home Hospitality", which consists in pupils visiting their classmates' homes in other villages. In this way, the children develop strong inter-community links, with stress being placed on mutual understanding of the different family environments that exist side by side in the same area. To quote one of the members of Neve Shalom: "Since the school operates based on a democratic, egalitarian model, the children learn that it's possible for Arabs and Jews to work together."

This ongoing cultural exchange leads the children of Neve Shalom to develop alternative viewpoints and hence to understand, accept and respect each other.

In recent years, other schools have been set up based on the Neve Shalom model. While these schools adhere to the state curriculum, they make their own educational and administrative decisions, as exemplified by their opting to use Israeli books that include texts aimed at Arabs (one should not forget that both Hebrew and Arabic are Israel's official languages).

At present, the primary school is state-recognized, but operates independently, and there are plans to extend the Neve Shalom model to communities in other parts of Israel, as well as to set up cooperative projects with Palestinian schools,

though it must be acknowledged that the said educational model has still not been put into practice within the Palestinian educational system.

Outstanding in the Neve Shalom model is the approach proposed by the Israeli teacher, Dan Bar-On, and his Palestinian colleague, Sami Adwan, who both published a text book for Israeli and Palestinian secondary schools that presents two versions of history, since, in the words of Bar-On, “A common history was not possible. Given the existence of two states, one must accept two narratives. We have to learn to live with each other.”⁴

Bar-On’s and Adwan’s book was published in Catalan and Spanish by the Intermón publishing company and caused a great deal of controversy among Israeli educators, since various teachers, including the Israeli Minister of Education himself, have consistently refused to implement the book’s methodology, which involves the analysis of three historic events – the 1917 Balfour Declaration, the 1948 War, and the First Intifada in 1987 – based on “an asymmetrical narrative”, since, in the words of Adwan, “It is not a matter of denying one own version in order to accept that of the other. One must accept the other’s version without denying one’s own.”⁵

The very title of the book, *Histories of the Other. Israel and Palestine, One Conflict, Two Viewpoints*, reveals its aims. In it, the authors enter what they describe as a “minefield” full of dangers, though they assert that, if one accepts that history is interpretation – the formation of perceptions and interpretations that make it possible to bring about a change that has been awaited for years – then “in the XXI century, there are no excuses for continuing to deny the other.”⁶

In this regard, one must acknowledge that violence and terrorism have damaged the legitimacy and credibility of the arguments about reconciliation and dignity that these groups put forward.

The lack of effective dialogue among institutional leaders, which, in recent years, has led to unilateral policies, should not polarize those people who are committed to building peace, but it cannot be denied that, in such a violent political climate, initiatives for peaceful coexistence do not receive much support from the bulk of the civilian populations of either Israel or Palestine.

Non-violent strategies are needed in both the Palestinian and the Israeli societies. In this respect, the joint development by the various peace movements

⁴ “El Periódico”, February 15, 2006.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ Ibidem.

of an interdependent economic and social program could lead to contact at the most immediate level – that of everyday life. Indeed, improved living conditions enable the peace movements themselves to grow.

Also, it must be admitted that the participation of both Palestinian and Israeli intellectuals in the aforesaid civilian demonstrations and organizations has decreased over the last few years, due to the polarization that one sees at all levels of both societies.

The terror that the people of Palestine and Israel have been subjected to has had an enormous impact on civilian participation in the peace process, and, indeed, the extremist forces and the violent factions in both communities have indirectly cooperated in continuing the violence, the hate and the demonization of the other.

Therefore, it is necessary to create minimum levels of stability, economic development and security, so that most Israelis and Palestinians will not only support efforts to bring about peace, but also believe that such efforts can succeed, and it is here that the international community – if such a thing really exists – could be of help.

However, I am bound to remark that the difficult situation that has prevailed for so many years in Gaza, the West Bank and Israel has revealed the profound ignorance about the conflict that prevails in the media, politicians, academics and most specialists.

The war in Gaza and Israel has led to the polarization and radicalization of the supporters of both Israel and Palestine, leaving very little leeway for those of us who like to define ourselves as both pro-Palestinian and pro-Israeli, with the result that dialogue between those holding different positions has become equally impossible not only in the universities and the media, but also in daily life. And without serious dialogue and analysis, no sincere agreement can be reached.

In my opinion, this situation is due to various factors, among which I would like to highlight: the simplistic and superficial sensationalist communications media, which prefer quick sound bites over rigorous analysis; the lack of an academic community with social clout that explains and analyzes the causes of the conflict; the scant objectivity and professionalism of most opinion columns and specialists speaking on the radio or appearing on television; a civil society that is keen to support either Israel or Palestine, but from a distance, without running any risks, and without the curiosity and humility that stem from an awareness that the aforesaid superficial and tendentious communications media

have misled people into erroneously believing that they are well informed about the topic in question.

Thus, based on superficial news reports or sensationalist photos or scenes shown on TV, everywhere there emerge specialists who demand that their voices be heard and respected by the rest of us. However, in reality nobody listens to, or reads, the words of those who think differently, nobody doubts his own opinions and convictions, clashing discourses are created, and everybody, from his own entrenched position, condemns those with views that differ from his own.

And these people who are incapable of listening to, or reading, a different opinion are the same ones who demand peace in Palestine and Israel. What cynics!

In the words of Amos Oz, we become fanatical adherents of the cause that we defend, and unfortunately fanaticism is very contagious.

It is essential and urgent that we create spaces for analysis, study, research and discussion in those universities that have enough impact on society to generate the minimum amount of factual knowledge required in order for people to take the most objective position – and reach the most informed opinion – that is possible about this, or any other, conflict in which people are dying.

Continuous proximity with these real, encouraging expressions of solidarity between Israelis and Palestinians will enable people to become more productively involved and, in the words of Hannah Arendt, to eschew lazy ways of thinking that shun complexity and depth, splitting the world into good and bad, black and white – mental routines that are blind to the complexity and depth of social problems and turn us into implacable judges of distant conflicts that are alien to us. As Ray Loriga has written, “Nobody wants to pay the price of struggle, and so, day after day, words such as ‘repudiation’, ‘condemnation’ or ‘solidarity’ gain ground over effective action”.

And it is precisely effective action that the NGOs we have mentioned propose, encourage and take action that will enable us to develop the mental attitude that constitutes the true peace that Julián Brenda speaks about and the self-governing environment that Azaña seeks.

These civilian demonstrations and organizations may be the key to a future which, while not perfect, is the best one possible in the Middle East. However, like all good things, this will take time, patience, respect for those who refuse to accept their cruel fate, humility, and a lot of hard work.

I can think of no better way to end this paper than by transcribing the following extract from the book, *The Same Sea*, by Amos Oz:

And you?

Shattered, desperate, one hears from a distance the cries, in Yiddish, of a woman whose stomach has been slashed open before her very eyes.

And one hears, moaning in Arabic, yet another woman whose house or child... Her voice is piercing, terrifying.

And you sharpen a pencil or glue together the ripped cover of a book.

At the very least, shudder!

Note:

Some of the quotations are taken from interviews carried out in Israel and Palestine by the author of this article in the period 2007–2008. The author wishes to thank all who so kindly and warmly gave their time and shared their thoughts and feelings.