

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

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Introduction

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 settlers 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 and challenges facing the organization known as "Roots" and the constituencies it is meant to serve.

Point of departure is a continuation of earlier work on the analysis and evaluation of Israeli-Palestinian inter-religious dialogue efforts primarily as purported by the work of the Israeli Interfaith Encounter Association (Mollov, 2011; Mollov and Lavie, 2006, 2015; Mollov, et. al., 2007), with the similarities between Judaism and Islam serving as positive points of contact. In this work, a further stage of field research concerning efforts at peace building on the interreligious 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**

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).

"Roots" also example of **social partnership** between Israelis and Palestinians which **reflect a federalist spirit** (Elazar, 2017).

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 respective narratives rooted in the respective religious traditions of both Judaism and Islam and contest over the same land (Garfinkle 1991; Mollov and Lavie, 2001; Mollov, et.al, 2007; Reitner, 2010; Tessler, 2009).

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 Gush Etzion area between Bethlehem and Hebron in a structured fashion.

Main Activities Undertaken by “Roots”

- An on-going core leadership group of Israeli settlers and Palestinian activists from the immediate area
- Israeli and Palestinian women’s study group in Jewish and Muslim sources respectively
- 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 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 Israelis and Palestinians prior to entering the Army
- Palestinian Leadership of “Roots” drawn from Palestinian militant activists from first intifada of 1987. Realization of need to engage more traditional oriented Israelis for the purposes of peace building and achieving Palestinian national goals.
- Israeli Jewish Leaders committed to living in heartland of Biblical history and building the land, while achieving realization that needs and aspirations of Palestinian neighbors could not be ignored and must be part of their consciousness.
- 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

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
- Interviews of key participants
- 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).]

Dynamics Observed:

- 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 they emphasize that their day-to-day 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.
- **Inter-religious dynamic in Moslem “Iftar” fast breaking meal** in which Israeli grass roots religious and political leaders were invited to partake in this festival fast breaking. 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.**

Observation of the **“Roots” Youth Group** was also conducted, during which inter-religious elements and commonalities became the focus of some of the discussions such as in time proximity to the Jewish festival of Purim and the observances of Ramadan. Group involved in community service to help needy families (both Palestinian and Israeli). Also political discussions but these have been less successful.

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**. 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.

Significance

The larger significance of “Roots” and other organizations such as the Interfaith Encounter Association and this research **lies in the very fact that Israeli settlers and religious Zionists can engage civilly and constructively with local Palestinians**, which is in itself an accomplishment.

If religious Zionist settlers can find commonalities with local Palestinians, there might be hope for the two populations as a whole to engage positively as well.

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)**.

“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).

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