

Transforming Relationships between Israeli Settlers and West Bank Palestinians: Assessing the Case of “Roots”

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INTRODUCTION

This paper will present an advanced 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**, based on the foundation of an earlier assessment (Mollov and Lavie, 2018). Provided here is a more detailed **quantitative and qualitative empirical data** to assess the impact of a relatively new Israeli-Palestinian initiative known as “Roots” or Shorashim in Hebrew and Judur in Arabic.

Indeed the venue of the “Roots” Center is 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), and which is accessible to local Palestinians from the area between Bethlehem and Hebron.

It is important to note 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

The activities of this Center, established several years ago, will be framed here with reference to three approaches relevant to Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding: **(1) Inter-religious Dialogue as the basis for conflict management and perception change** (Abu-Nimer, 2001; Amir,1969; Bekerman 2002; Mollov and Lavie, 2001, 2006); **(2) “Sustained Dialogue”** aimed at groups engaged in inter-group conflict and seeking relationship transformation (Saunders, 1999); and **(3) a federalist approach** to conflict management/resolution between Israelis and Palestinians with emphasis on “social partnership” particularly as both groups represent “two peoples on one land” (Elazar, 1991; Elazar, 2017).

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. They concluded that Palestinian violence has brought neither side benefit and that they were required to reach out to larger segments of Israeli society, particularly their own neighbors from Gush Etzion who are representative of the national religious public.

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, which in the past has been either ignored or entirely denied.

The activities undertaken by “Roots”, which are currently being assessed, focus on: (1) an on-going core leadership group of Israeli settlers and Palestinian activists from the immediate area; (2) a three 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; and (3) lectures and meetings with hundreds of Israeli youth participating in pre-Army study programs, to expose them to the more human side of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

ROOTS CORE LEADERSHIP GROUP

Comprised of key Israeli and Palestinian activists. Consensus of Group is that Roots meant to foster **“relationship transformation” based on sustained dialogue and intervention with Israeli authorities** to provide practical solutions which Palestinians encounter due to day difficulties that can develop as a result of Israeli military occupation. Relationships have also been transformed partly as a result of powerful inter-religious activities such as joint “Iftar” involving parallel Muslim and Jewish prayer.

Quantitative data has been produced from special questionnaires focusing the degree to which each side is able to be empathic to the fears of the others; the degree to which both sides understand the particular tie of the other to the Land of Israel/Palestine; the degree to which both sides believe in the possibilities of peace.

MAIN RESULTS:

Based on a 12 item survey the **Israelis generally were able to express more empathy to the fears and tie of the Palestinians to the Land of Palestine**, than vice versa; however the **Palestinians expressed a greater degree of trust in the Israelis and opti-**

mism in the possibilities of peace actually developing between Israel and Palestine than vice versa. Interesting as well is the fact that the Palestinians believed that the Israelis were less able to understand their tie to the land, than what the Israelis actually reported about themselves.

(Note: Full data is available upon request)

However despite the discrepancy of views expressed in this survey it is very important to cite the important work **that Roots leadership has done in attempting to alleviate hardships faced by Palestinians** on the ground and strengthening liaison functions with Israeli military authorities which has also reduced violence such as rock throwing by Palestinian youth.

YOUTH GROUP

The approximately four year old youth group has provided an opportunity for Israeli youth from the settlements and Palestinian youth from neighboring villages and cities to form relationships and encounter the other through the mediums of life style, understanding mutual fears, inter-religious bonding and also political discussion. In addition social action for needy families has been undertaken by the group and for the first time a Roots “alumni” Shabbat/Friday Jewish/Muslim weekend was held to maintain the youth network and foster the possibilities that the youth could be “agents for change”.

Although **quantitative data** has been collected based on questionnaires used previously by the researchers (Mollov and Lavie, 2001) designed to measure perception change, based on “before and after surveys”, conclusive results are not yet available.

PRE-ARMY PREPARATORY PROGRAMS

A significant aspect of the program of Roots are their meetings with Israeli youth who are participating in pre-Army preparatory programs. The encounter primarily with Palestinian leaders of Roots is meant to **provide a “humanizing experience” for the youth who will soon be beginning their I.D.F. service** often in elite units and in military service in the territories. According to anecdotal reporting the participation of one of the Palestinian representatives who has been meeting with the groups has been particularly effective. His thoughtful message to the students has emphasized the **importance of their coming service to provide protection against terrorism** than can threaten both Israel and the Palestinians

however at the same time he has stressed the need to treat the Palestinian population with dignity and respect which can impact on how Palestinians view Israel and Israelis.

Two Army Preparatory Programs participating in these encounters were surveyed for “before” and “after” responses. Group A is a secular oriented Program based in Jerusalem and Group B a Program based in Tel Aviv and affiliated with the Jewish Reform Movement.

In both cases **quantitative data** has further corroborated the positive effect of the meetings.

(Scale—1= most positive 5=most negative).

GROUP A

		No. of Respondents	Score
Contact Willingness	Before Encounters	31	2.4161
	After Encounters	18	2.1139
Perception of Characteristics	Before Encounters	29	3.3760
	After Encounters	18	2.9738

GROUP B

		No. of Respondents	Score
Contact Willingness	Before Encounter	15	2.2500
	After Encounter	14	1.8250
Perception of Characteristics	Before Encounter	15	3.3556
	After Encounter	10	1.9556

DISCUSSION

The activities of Roots have reflected three approaches to conflict resolution:-the inter-religious buttressed by the contact hypothesis; relationship transformation through sustained dialogue; and “social partnership” despite differing positions reflecting a “federalist approach “ to peace building.

While there is evidence that Roots has not necessarily convinced the participants that overall peace between Israelis and Palestinians is readily achievable, however on a local level in a particularly explosive context, Roots appears to be an effective agent to promote more civil and constructive interactions between Israelis and Palestinians.

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