People-to-People Peace Making:

The Role of Citizen Diplomacy in the Israeli- Palestinian Conflict

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When efforts to bring peace, stability and long lasting change take place in situations of social conflict, participation by the people is essential. "The lack of public involvement in the struggle to build a new social order makes any peace-making process unstable, fragile and vulnerable" (Handelman, 2012, p. 163). In conflict resolution, promoting a culture of peace is the only way to truly overcome mental barriers such as fear, mistrust and prejudice. Thus, in addition to official channels, citizen diplomacy, known also as people-to-people initiatives or Track-II diplomacy, is necessary in building the foundation of a new social order rooted in peace and coexistence. Periods of conflict between Palestinians and Israelis have always been marked by "two trends: one that called for war and violence between the two sides, and one that called for peace and reconciliation" (Kaufman, Salem & Verhoeven, 2006, p. 31). Throughout this paper, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the context used to examine the importance and necessity of citizen diplomacy as a vehicle of peace and reconciliation. An analysis of specific cases of citizen diplomacy in the Israeli-Palestinian context following the 1990's, illustrates the great merits of this type of communication channel, as well as the challenges and opportunities it entails. A common theme running through these case studies, despite the challenges, is the power of citizen diplomacy to bridge the cultural, political, historical and religious gaps between Israelis and Palestinians, and its potent ability to facilitate change.

According to Cull (2009), public diplomacy is an "international actor's attempt to mange the international environment through engagement with a foreign public" (p. 12).

However, a few key shifts have been made in the definition of public diplomacy throughout the years, which came to be known as the New Public Diplomacy. First, elements of nontraditional actors and NGOs were added to the process of public diplomacy; second, the mechanisms being used by different actors to communicate with publics have been influenced by new technologies especially the internet; third, international and domestic news spheres were blurred by these technological changes; fourth, old concepts of propaganda were replaced by new concepts of national branding and network communication; fifth, the new terminology of public diplomacy emphasizes the notions of 'soft power' and 'branding; and lastly, and most importantly, the new public diplomacy speaks of a departure from the actor-to people Cold War-era communication and the arrival of a new emphasis on people-to-people communication for mutual enrichment. Thus, "the prime task of the new public diplomacy is characterized as relationship building" (Cull, 2009, p. 13).

Moreover, the new public diplomacy is rooted in strategic people-to-people communication in an effort to establish sustainable relationships, with various scholars even arguing that nothing works better than this approach when two entities work to develop mutual respect for their respective differences (Brown, 2002). Different perspectives exist about the actors in charge of public diplomacy processes, whether it is governments, NGOs, corporations or individuals. Yet, "inherent in all perspectives is that effective public diplomacy is rooted in strategic people to people communication in the effort to establish a sustainable relationship" (Payne, 2009, p. 579). The new public diplomacy shift to people-to-people communication became known in the past few years

as citizen diplomacy or Track-II diplomacy, terms which will be used interchangeably throughout this paper.

The concept of Track-II diplomacy emerged from the notion of new public diplomacy and has many folds and interpretations. Yet, most scholars agree that it refers to types of diplomatic efforts which are conducted below the official governmental level. According to Handelman (2012), "Track-II diplomacy is an unconventional method of diplomacy involving unofficial dialogue between mid-level elites" and citizens from both sides (p. 164). Meaning, the participants of citizen diplomacy cannot have an official position in the government. Moreover, the goal of Track-II diplomacy is "to clarify outstanding disputes and to explore the options for resolving them in settings or circumstances that are less sensitive than those associated with official negotiations" (Agha, Feldman, Khalidi & Schiff, 2003, p. 1). The non-officials involved usually include "scholars, senior journalists, former government officials, and former military officers" (Agha et al.,2003, p. 1), but can also simply include people communicating with people in productive ways that ensure and further develop understanding and mutual respect (Payne, 2009) . Thus, Track-II diplomacy is targeted specifically at fostering informal interaction among participants regarding the issues dividing them, and finding ways of resolving the conflict between them. Track-II diplomacy provides participants with settings and conditions that are essential to achieve an effective dialogue, and are rooted in engagement and relationship building targeted at cultivating trust and mutual understanding between peoples (Kelley, 2009, p. 73). Furthermore, all Track-II diplomacy initiatives are related to reducing tensions or facilitating the resolution of a conflict, but differ in their nature, context, and leaders. Despite the challenge in

establishing criteria for judging the success or failure of Track-II diplomacy, its

significance and great potential in promoting peaceful resolutions can be illustrated

within the context of the Israeli- Palestinian conflict.

Track-II diplomacy is characterized by both what it is not and what it is. Track-II

diplomacy is not secret diplomacy, which involves covert interactions between

government officials. Track-II diplomacy usually takes place in informal settings in a

manner which does no involve government officials (at least not from its inception).

Moreover, Track-II diplomacy does not require the parallel conduct of official and formal

negotiations by the government (Track-I diplomacy), and can be held independently and

separately from any official negotiations. Additionally, Track-II diplomacy can be "hard"

or "soft": While "hard" Track-II diplomacy is aimed at negotiating an agreement between

the parties involved, "soft" Track-II diplomacy is aimed at "dialogue, familiarization,

exchange of information, assessments, and security concerns" (Agha et al., 2003, p.4).

Thus, Track-II diplomacy aims at creating a positive relationship between both sides

involved for which the fundamental requisite is the establishment of trust between the

involved parties – knowing the true intentions of each other, carefully defining what

words and concepts mean to the parties, discussing differences, and ultimately accepting

and respecting the other view point (Livonen, Sonnenwald, Parma & Poole-Kober, 1998).

Lastly, Track-II diplomacy is relatively free of media coverage, and except for rare cases,

is not made public (Agha et al., 2003). Track-II initiatives are often ignored or given

minor coverage by the official press which often dominates the media landscape (Payne,

2009). As a result, alternative media channels that are less controlled by the government

and the dominant discourse (ie- blogs, SMS, social networks, etc.) fulfill the void and are

being used as means of communication (Payne, 2009). Consequently, Track-II diplomacy

has a compelling advantage in tending to be more credible for its targeted audience.

Political elite diplomacy, or Track-I diplomacy, is the dominant peacemaking

experience in the Middle East; however, "to leave the peace-making process solely in the

hands of political leaders, with the expectation that they will reach innovative agreements

and prepare the public on both sides to accept them is not wise" (Handelman, 2012, p.

163). Thus, in order to build a solid foundation of a new social order, civil society must

be involved in the process. The case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict emphasizes the

great necessity for civil society involvement.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the most entrenched conflicts in the

Middle East and perhaps even in the world. Efforts to foster Track-II diplomacy date

back to the 1967 war between Israel, Egypt, Syria and Jordan, which set a formal

framework for a peaceful settlement "with the adoption of United Nations Security

Council Resolution 242 based on the formula of 'land for peace' and secured and

recognized borders for all the states in the area" (Agha et al. 2003, p. 9). However, no

progress was achieved and the outbreak of the 1973 war gave renewed urgency for the

search for peace. During the 1970s, a number of Palestinian- Israeli channels were

developed, and an Israeli peace movement was developed as well as Palestinian peace

initiatives that were led by the Palestinian Liberation Organization. The 1982 Lebanon

War and its aftermath transformed the attitudes of the Israeli public towards Palestinians

by illustrating that perpetuating dispute would only lead to more bloodshed (Agha et al,

2003).

The 1990's and the Oslo Peace agreement marked a new era in Israeli-Palestinian Track-II diplomacy and therefore is examined as the first case study in this work. Track-II efforts in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict differ in their conceptualizations of the nature of the conflict, and in their beliefs regarding the ways to achieve transformation as well as in their views about how such initiatives can be transmitted from the micro to the macro-level (Cuhadar &Dayton, 2012). Moreover, reaching peaceful resolution requires innovation, creativity and painful compromises of all sides (Handelma, 2012, p. 163), and the case studies examined throughout this paper illustrate creativity, compromises and innovation of brave individuals and groups who have refused to surrender in their struggle for peace.

Case Studies

Following the 1990's, various Track-II diplomacy attempts have taken place in Israel. In order to examine the merits, challenges and relevance of Track-II diplomacy in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, an analysis of four frameworks will be used to analyze six specific case studies. Track-II diplomacy efforts are manifested through different structures, initiatives, and programs seeking to bring people together in order to "give a human face to the 'Other' and, hopefully, generate sufficient momentum and pressure from below to bring about the long-overdue political will to move forward toward a peace agreement" (Shemesh, 2012, p. 1).

The concept of Track-II diplomacy solutions may be done through different frameworks of which four main ones will be examined in this paper. First, Track-II talks which are "discussions held by non-officials of conflicting parties in attempt to clarify outstanding disputes and to explore the options for resolving them" in unofficial settings

(Agha et al., 2003, p. 1). This framework will be used to examine the Oslo Accords. Second, educational encounter based approaches, which include "working with students in the classroom, working with youth in informal education arenas, working with teachers, and the writing of educational curricula and historical narratives" (Gawerc, 2012, p. 19). This framework will be used to examine Project Sulha and the School for Peace. Third, the framework of research centers which includes institutions in which Israeli and Palestinian scholars collaborate to facilitate conflict resolution and peace building efforts through the realm of academia (Chaitin, 2011, p. 77). This framework will be used to examine the PRIME initiative and the Israel-Palestine Center for Research and Information. Lastly, the framework of civil organizations which include social movements "rooted in civil society and make use of social capital accumulated in civil society" (Marteu, 2009, p. 1). This framework will be used to examine the Mevaseret Tzion & Beit Surik campaign. The case studies which will be examined emerged during the years following the first Intifada, and are all joint ventures of both Israelis and Palestinians seeking peace.

Track-II Talks

The Oslo Accords. Following the first Intifada, 1987-1989, new challenges emerged in Israel, Gaza and the West Bank territories. The Intifada led to a rapid deterioration of social and economical conditions in Palestinian territories, and it became clear that a change needed to take place. Moreover, with the rise of the Islamic movement HAMAS, the PLO had to create a better network of health, educational, and social facilities in order to maintain the position of leadership. Thus, gaining effective control over Palestinian territories became imperative to the Palestinian Liberation Organization,

a political movement which was in a position of leadership at the time (Agha et al., 2003, p. 31). Moreover, the end of the Cold War and the Gulf War reinforced changes within both Israel and the PLO, and emphasized the importance of peaceful reconciliation.

Abu Ala' (Ahmad Qurei), who was the head the Palestinian Liberation Organization Economics Department, was the first to suggest the opening of an informal Palestinian-Israeli channel to the Norwegian side during a visit to Oslo in 1992 (Agha et al. 2003). Additionally, in mid 1992, Feisal Husseini, who was active in the Palestinian delegation to the Washington talks and searched for a way to renew the peace negotiations, requested a secret Palestinian-Israeli conduit. Eventually, it was the Palestinian leadership in Tunis that finally succeeded in turning the Oslo channel into a reality (Agha et al., 2003, p.1).

In December 1992, the project was launched during a meeting in London between Yair Hirchfeld, a faculty member of Haifa University, and Abu Ala. In September 1993, these talks produced one of the most dramatic achievements of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process; the Israeli-PLO declaration of Principles (DOP). The Oslo Accords were signed between the state of Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in September 1993 with the goal of bringing the Israeli Palestinian conflict to an end by means of territorial concessions and facilitating the creation of the Palestinian Authority (The Israeli Knesset, 2008). The accords presented a milestone in Israeli- Palestinian relations; Arafat, as the leader of the PLO, relayed a message to the Israeli prime minister Rabin saying his organization was willing to acknowledge Israel's right to exist and adhere to some of the UN resolutions while relinquishing all forms of terror, and in exchange Israel agreed to recognize the PLO as the Palestinian people's official

representative for any peace talks (The Israeli Knesset, 2008). The Accords were divided

into two sections (Oslo A and Oslo B) and marked the beginning of a long process

towards a would be secured Israel and Palestinian statehood.

The Oslo Accord has significant meaning in the Israeli-Palestinian context. The

accords marked a complete break from past Israeli and Palestinian approaches, since both

sides made progress through real compromise. The processes not only changed the

relations between Israel and the PLO, but also improved relations between Israel and

other Arab states as well as with the international community. Between 1993 and 1999,

more than 35 nations established or restored diplomatic relations with Israel (Agha et al.,

2003). Moreover, the Israeli-Palestinian DOP played an important role in encouraging the

peace agreement of Israel with Jordan.

Two important factors in the successful transition of the Oslo Accords from

Track-II talks to Track-I agreements were access to high ranked government officials and

deniability. From the Israeli side, Yair Hirchfeld who worked on the talks with his

student Ron Pundik, were both successful academics who were also close associates of

Yossi Beilin, who was serving at the time as deputy Foreign Minister. The fact that

Hirchfeled and Pundik were independent scholars provided the Israeli government with

complete deniability by allowing the Government to credibly claim they were not a part

of it in a case of a failure (Agha et al., 2003, p.37). Throughout the 1980s, Hirchfeld

operated as a liaison between Beilin and the Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs Peres on

the one hand, and key Palestinian leaders on the other. Hirchfeld was also the one who

arranged secret meetings between the leaders on both side when the process was still

covert. Thus, Hirchfeled and Pudnik's access was based on a "three-step approach: first,

from them to Beilin, then from Beilin to Peres, and finally from Peres to Rabin" (Agha et al., 2003, p. 37). Eventually, once the process gained popularity in the higher ranks of government and a formal bilateral agreement became a possibility, Hirchfeld and Pudnik willingly stepped aside and assumed a minor role. In mid May 1993, the Israeli team expended to include Uri Savir, director General of the Foreign Ministry, and Joel Singer, a former military lawyer (Agha et al., 2003).

From the Palestinian side, Abu Ala, Hassan Asfour and Maher al-Kurd were the main representatives of the PLO in the initiative, but similar to the Israeli case, their roles in the margins of the movements provided the PLO the deniability it needed in case of failure (Agha et al., 2003). After the initial stages of the talks rendered success, the negotiations moved to a higher level between official government representatives, led by Beilin on the Israeli side and Abu Mazin, Araft's political advisor, on the other. From that point, the process departed from being Track-II talks and became an official Track-I diplomacy. However, the role of Track-II diplomacy in creating this reality is extremely significant and crucial. The signing of the Oslo Peace Accords gave scope to a multitude of Track-II initiatives which sought to encourage ordinary Israelis and Palestinians to better understand one another and thereby to initiate processes of mutual reconciliation (Atieh, Ben-Nun, El Shahed, Taha & Tulliu, 2004, p. 2). Until this day, the Oslo Process strongly exemplifies the importance of Track-II diplomacy and the power it embodies.

Educational Encounter Based Approaches

Sulha Peace Project. The Sulha ("forgiveness" in Arabic) Peace Project was founded in the early days of the Second Intifada, in 2000. The project was founded by Gabrial Mayer Halevy, a Jewish Argentinian-born Israeli who was devastated by the

eruption of violence caused by the Second Intifada, and Elias Jabour, a veteran Palestinian-Israeli peace activist and author (Gawerc, 2012). The two shared their thoughts regarding the unfortunate reality they witnessed, and decided to partner in creating a new initiative with the aim of "rebuilding trust, restoring dignity, and moving beyond the political agenda" (Gawerc, 2012, p. 30). According to the official Sulha Peace Project website "*twelve years ago, at the height of the El Aksa intifada, when Israel and Palestine were locked into terror of the other side, the Sulha Peace Project was born. As coffee shops exploded and soldiers fired into crowds of youths, we brought Israelis and Palestinians together in a human encounter and, through wholehearted listening, we explored and strengthened the bonds that link us with each other. We've been doing it ever since*" (2013). The purpose of the organization is focused on breaking down social, political and cultural barriers in the journey towards peace and justice: "*In contrast to the current atmosphere of distrust, cynicism and despair, we stand for the possibility of cooperation, shared responsibility, and hope. While our societies demonize those on the other side, we humanize them. Through our common efforts, we create interaction between our peoples while others alienate. While we avoid polarizing political declarations, we know that any political future must address the human needs of both sides, and we stand on the front lines of the struggle to return decency and compassion to our shared land*" (Project Sulha Official page, 2013).

      The Sulha project provides participants the opportunity to take part in Sulha Day gatherings which are composed of listening circles, shared meals, music, and performances. The project is targeted at both Israeli and Palestinians, and has brought a unique approach to peace building; one which is more spiritual and filled with music and

dance (Gawerc, 2012). Since 2005, the organization has a board of directors, made up of both Israelis and Palestinians, and in 2008 years later they started to engage in partnerships with other organizations as well. The project illustrates a significant spiritual dimension in Track-II diplomacy by emphasizing the importance of trust and shared dialogue. The project illustrates the important role of such an initiative in involving the public in the political processes by allowing them to be a part of it.

School for Peace. The School for Peace (SFP) is one of the longest active players in the realm of educational encounter based approaches. It was established in 1979, by a small group of people living at Neve Shalom/ Wahat al Salam, a cooperative village of Jewish and Palestinian Israelis located in the Center of Israel (Gawerc, 2012). Nava Sonenshine, a Jewish Israeli, and Abd El Salam, a Palestinian Israeli, are the leaders of this project, which is targeted at emphasizing the complexity of the conflict as well as working towards inter-cultural understanding. Following the 1993 Oslo Accords, the project began including Palestinians from Gaza and the West Bank in addition to those who live in Israel. Moreover, throughout the years, their targeted audience has expanded to all ages.

Today, the School for Peace in Neve Shalom/ Wahat al Salam operates a few educational programs in addition to their involvement in writing proposals, designing projects and promoting their own world-renowned methodology of education (Gawerc, 2012). According to their official website, Neve Shalom/ Wahat al Salam "*operates a guesthouse, a spiritual center, a humanitarian aid project, and an early childhood preschool, kindergarten and elementary school. The community's educational facilities offer a pioneering educational framework that is bi-national and bilingual. About 250*

children from the village and nearby communities study in its educational facilities.''
(2013). Moreover, their school offers encounter workshops, and training programs which range from bi-national to uni-national programs (School for Peace official Web., 2013).

School for Peace is an important example of educational encounter-based Track-II diplomacy, since it illustrates the importance of an enriched perspective, critical thinking, and mutual comprehension of both side's suffering. The school provides participants with a unique learning experience in a safe space which calls for a reassessment of the existing reality and the importance of change. Their work tries to resist people's natural rejection of change, by teaching people that their life can be different and peaceful if they are willing to work for it.

Research Centers

PRIME. The Peace Research Institute in the Middle East (PRIME) is an NGO that was established by Israeli and Palestinian academics in 1998 with the help of the Peace Research Institute in Frankfurt. Its purpose is to pursue mutual co-existence and peace building through joint research and outreach activities (PRIME official web., 2013). The objectives of PRIME are to reduce inequalities in Israeli-Palestinian society, promote human rights and academic freedom, strive for scholarly excellence and joint research, influence public agenda, offer ideas to overcome the obstacles for peace, develop concepts addressing long-term regional issues, train researchers and teachers who are committed to coexistence and cooperation, and to help strengthen both Israeli and Palestinian civil societies (Chaitin, 2011).

PRIME's studies have resulted in conferences, articles and books, while their longest running research project is the Shared History project, in which teachers from

Palestine and Israel prepare a history book that present the two historical narratives, for use in high-school in both societies (Chaitin, 2011, p. 80). The work of PRIME illustrates the important role of scholarly work in advancing the journey towards peace. Acknowledging the legitimacy of each other's narratives, histories, and views, is at the core of building a common ground between Israelis and Palestinians. Thus the academic aspect is a significantly important building block in the process of constructing mutual understanding between Israelis and Palestinians.

Israel-Palestine Center for Research and Information (IPCRI). The IPCRI was founded in 1988, during the first Intifada, with the idea that the solution to the Israeli- Palestinian Conflict is the two-state solution. Thus, IPCRI brings together Israelis and Palestinians who co-develop concrete steps towards the two-state vision, which are being brought to decision makers on both sides (Chaitin, 2011). The NGO works in conjunction with civil society organizations on both sides and offers partnerships between intellectuals, academics, professionals, and politicians (IPCRI Official Web. 2013; Chaitin, 2011).

IPCRI is divided into three departments: Strategic analysis, environment and peace education. "By implementing long term, sustainable strategies on joint issues such as the environment, public outreach and ongoing political, social and economic developments, IPCRI is constantly moving towards its central goal; a lasting peace between Palestinians and Israelis on the basis of two states for two people" (IPCRI Official Web., 2013). Throughout the years, the research center has focused on different issues including water pollution, standards in agriculture, public health, management of natural resources, labor trends, and textbooks for both Israeli and Palestinian schools. The

organizations also publishes books and articles with research results and policy recommendations, and holds regional and international conferences on a regular basis (Chaitin, 2011, p. 79). IPCRI illustrates the importance of creating shared-knowledge, rooted in the assumption that Israelis and Palestinians share the same region and should work together to improve living conditions, and solve environmental issues. Moreover, the IPCRI concentration on producing practical solutions and policy changes to pave the way to the two state solution illustrates the importance of Track-II diplomacy in contributing to the practical discourse about a sustainable solution.

Civil Organizations

The Beit Surik and Mevaseret Zion Campaign. In June 2002, during the Second Intifada, Israel started to construct a separation barrier, officially aimed at preventing Palestinian terrorists from penetrating into Israeli territory. Previous Palestinian attacks caused the death and injury of many innocent civilians, and raised a sense of indignation toward the incompetence of the Israeli government and security forces which resulted in massive pressure by the Israeli public to stop suicide bombing attacks by Palestinians during that time. The construction of the barrier, however, raised some objections, based on the argument that the "barrier was not built on the Green Line (the 1949 Armistice agreement established between Israel and Jordan) and that it both expropriated extensive Palestinian agricultural lands and de facto annexed many of Israel's settlements that had been built in the occupied territories" (Ben Eliezer & Feinstein, 2013, p. 170). The separation barrier was extremely controversial, and gave birth to different shared Israeli-Palestinian campaigns against it.

The Beit Surik and Mevasseret Zion (BSMZ) campaign is one of the most

important campaigns which took place during that time. While many other campaigns against the separation wall were radical in nature, the BSMZ campaign was pragmatic, nonviolent, and resulted in significant long term implications. The joint campaign was led by the Jewish Israelis from the town of Mevaseret Zion, and their Palestinian neighbors from the village of Beit Surik. Interestingly, the campaign was started by a group of citizens from Mevaseret Zion in their early twenties. Moreover, unlike other campaigns against the separation wall, the participants of this campaign made a tactical decision to exclude their ideological opposition to the barrier from the framework in order to recruit as many people as possible, and focused on opposing the planned path of the barrier between the two localities not on its ideological meaning (Feinstein, 2009). Thus, the mission of the activists in Mevaseret Zion was based on the idea of "helping neighbors".

The framework of the campaign was based on two themes: first, the path of the barrier between the localities caused an avoidable harm to the Palestinian residents; and second, such harm had the potential to develop a security threat to the Israeli citizens of Mevaseret Zion, as well as add to the frustration and anger in Beit Surik (Feinstein, 2009, p. 116). Thus, the campaign was in accordance with the Israeli need for security and was rooted in a deep understanding of Israeli and Palestinians shared reality. Moreover, the activists who were a part of the campaign emphasized the need to obey the law and channeled their activity along a legal path, while consulting with Israeli security experts in constructing their proposal for a new alternative path. As a result, in 2004, for the first time since the start of the fence construction in 2002, the activist successfully convinced the Israeli Court of Justice to rule against the state and change the path of the fence (Feinstein, 2009). "The Israeli Court ruled that certain sections of the barrier in the area

of Beit Surik, altogether more than thirty kilometers long, were illegal since they did not meet the principle of proportionality" (Gross, 2006). The petitioners celebrated their victory which had long term significant effects: a year later, based on the Beit Surik verdict, the Israeli High Court of Justice ruled once again in favor of Palestinians and Israeli petitioners about the route of the barrier on the grounds that it was contrary to international law, and two years later in 2007, the Israeli High Court of Justice ruled once again in favor of Palestinian petitioners against its path (Feinstein, 2009). According to Gordon (2010), "joint struggles of Israelis and Palestinians remain one of the few sources of inspiration and hope" in the reality of the conflict and have a great ability to mount significant change (p. 430). Thus, the BSMZ campaign illustrates the importance of compromise, cooperation and pragmatism in Track-II diplomacy, and the long way peaceful protest and practical approach towards a solution can go.

An examination of six different case studies illustrates the importance of civil society's involvement in creating a successful, long term, sustainable solutions for social and political challenges, while highlighting the challenges it often encounters. Hence, it is very difficult to measure the success of these types of initiatives for a few reasons. Track-II diplomacy has not always resulted in concrete agreements or policy changes. Scholars, politicians, and donors focus primarily on the impact of Track-II diplomacy outcome "especially by looking at whether ideas have been incorporated into the negotiated agreement or not" (Cuhadar, 2009, p. 657). However, such narrow focus misses the other important contributions of Track-II to the process, such as the contribution of Track-II to the improvement of human capital, open discourse, and tolerance. Moreover,

Track-II diplomacy often stays covert, and acts under the surface in order to maximize its potential to bring about real change while reassuring the participants deniability, as seen in the case of the Oslo Peace Process. Thus, the success of Track-II diplomacy cannot necessarily be measured in practical terms, since these activities slowly bleed into civil society and are rooted in deep social transformations which are generated through a slow process rooted in years of dialogue.

In addition, very often Track-II diplomacy is lacking a comprehensive strategy. As seen through the education encounter-based approaches and the research centers, sometimes a shared vision exist but specific strategic methods to execute it are absent since it is not in the nature of these type of organization's goals. Dialogue, shared-understanding and mutual respect cannot be achieved by a simple strategic plan, but are rooted in long-term processes of deep perceptual change.

Another important challenge in the case of Track-II diplomacy in the Israeli-Palestinian context is the environment. These track-II talks, educational encounter-based initiatives, research centers and campaigns operate in an environment with a history of more than one hundred years of hostility, conflict, and animosity. These initiatives always face the political challenges inflicted by the conflict: governmental elections, rise of new political parties, terrorist attacks, human rights abuse, and constant tension. For example, the failure of the Oslo Accords was a result of many variables such as Prime Minister Rabin's assassination, the rise of Hamas, security challenges, media coverage and more. However, the long-term failure of the Oslo Accords does not undermine the important role of Track-II diplomacy in bringing peace closer than ever. Thus, the destiny of these initiatives and the scope of their influence are determined by the social, political

and economical unrest which provide the backdrop to their work and illuminate their crucial role in advancing society. Mobilizing mass support is extremely difficult when people are experiencing daily loss and constant struggle. Moreover, encouraging healthy mutual dialogue is extremely challenging when people are focused on their own private and personal pain, while constantly resenting the other side. Conflict automatically produces an "us" verses "them" reality, and when this reality is rooted in years of war, it is even harder to eradicate and replace this viewpoint with love and respect.

Another important challenge of Track-II initiatives is based on funding issues and institutional capacity. Since the legitimacy of Track-II diplomacy is often challenged by both the public and state officials, funding is very hard to maintain. Moreover, these initiatives are usually donation-based programs which constantly need to promote themselves and their cause in order to remain sustainable. Like any other organization, these initiatives face their own organizational challenges regarding management structures, personnel, capabilities and resources. Moreover, the consequences of the funding challenge for the joint Israeli Palestinian partnerships is even more acute since these initiatives usually must balance funding from both sides to maintain legitimacy and symmetry. Thus, even the funding is influenced by political considerations as well as external policies which serve to maintain and reinforce an equal distribution of power. These challenges can sometimes move the focus of the partnership from its original cause, to a constant struggle of getting resources that guarantee the organization's survival.

Internal challenges are also very critical to the organization's survival. Especially in the Israeli-Palestinian joint Track-II diplomacy initiatives, there is a constant need to

maintain the cause despite the tumultuous and hostile environment in which they operate

in, dependency on external resources, logistics, lack of legitimacy, language and cultural

barriers, sustainability, and emotional changes involved in exposure to the harsh reality of

conflict. "The standard organizational need to maintain legitimacy with the authorities

and civil society is inevitably complicated by the fact that these organizations cross a

very basic conflict line and especially in the case of the joint initiatives, need to find a

way to create and maintain legitimacy on both sides of this line" (Gawerc, 2012, p.92).

Maintaining ongoing communication, relationships, personal connections, decision-

making power, equality, and collective organizational identity is often very challenging

in a bipolar reality. Maintaining the commitment of both Israelis and Palestinian

participants in Track-II diplomacy requires a great amount of constant work. It also

requires from the initiative to avoid stagnation and remain adaptable and sensitive to the

changes surrounding it. However, the survival of all of these joint initiatives despite all of

the constant challenges they are facing illuminates how vital their existence is for both

Israeli and Palestinian societies. When the environment is changing, people lose hope and

their legitimacy is being questioned, these Track-II diplomacy initiatives function as a

lighthouse, reminding everyone of the bigger picture and providing hope for peace to one

day arrive.

     As illustrated, Track-II diplomacy is faced with various challenges from

measuring its success, to organizational, internal, and environmental obstacles, as well as

legitimacy, funding and strategy issues. Despite all of that, Track-II diplomacy's role in

facilitating real change is undeniable and irreplaceable since "every peace agreement that

lacks the genuine support of the public on each side is bound to run foul of continued

resistance and thus, sooner or later, to come undone" (Atieh et al., 2004, p.1). Furthermore, the direct engagement of the Israeli and Palestinian people in efforts to reach a peace settlement, beyond laying the basis for its popular acceptance, could also contribute to its attainment. Thus, an examination of the case studies does not only provide important insights about the challenges Track-II diplomacy is faced with, but also reiterates how critical Track-II diplomacy is in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and as a whole.

Track-II diplomacy is indispensable since mutual reconciliation of Israelis and Palestinians is crucial to a peaceful settlement of the conflict, and such reconciliation can only be achieved through the people themselves. The case studies examined throughout this paper illustrate how Track-II talks, educational encounter based approaches, research centers and civil organizations are extremely significant in facilitating a reciprocal process in which Israel and Palestinians embrace shared principles of coexistence and peace based on joint recognition of their national rights. Since peace requires a profound mental shift on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides, the deliberate, concrete, efforts of groups and individuals working together to reshape society is necessary. Thus Track-II diplomacy is crucial especially in times of distress and political unrest since "peaceful societal beliefs hardly flourish of their own account in times of war, and even less so when war is so protected and complete that it engages society as a whole on a daily basis for decades on end" (Atieh et al., 2004, p.1).

Moving Forward: Virtual Citizen Diplomacy and Conclusions

With the rise of technological advancements, globalization processes and especially the internet, the role of citizen diplomacy becomes vitally more important than

it ever has been. The fact that people across the world are increasingly connected to each other through social media platforms has changed the Middle East and the world at large (Attias, 2012), while highlighting the power of networks to facilitate social change. "The nation states of the world have moved from the bi-polar system of the Cold War to a global system integrating markets, nation states, and technologies to a degree never witnessed before" (Feigenbaum, 2002, p. 7). As a result, new global networks are being created, which are based on technologies, markets, interests and ideas. These networks carry an enormous potential for the future practice of citizen diplomacy by providing new platforms for them to take place within. According to Shemesh (2012) "the dimension of virtual peace building is certainly an opportunity… Facebook and other social media platforms bring people together and enable virtual contact between Israelis and Palestinians" (p.4). Thus, if implemented correctly, citizen diplomacy can be powerful and effective in transforming the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, now more than ever.

The case studies examined throughout this paper, as well as the new reality presented by the age of information technology and the emergence of virtual networks, reinforce the important role of Track-II diplomacy. Despite the constant challenges it presented with, Track-II diplomacy is essential in achieving a long lasting resolution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "Ordinary Israelis and Palestinians have a crucial role to play in the settlement of their struggle…however achieved and irrespective of its final outcome, the peaceful resolution of the Israeli Palestinian conflict must necessarily involve the mutual reconciliation of the two people" (Atieh et al., 2004, p. 1).

Each case study examined throughout this paper, teaches important lessons about the role of Track-II diplomacy. The Track-II talks of the Oslo Peace Process demonstrate

how practical solutions by academics and intellectuals are extremely important in establishing effective formal process since they provide deniability. Moreover, the Oslo case emphasizes how important and attainable access to government officials is when true passion and cleverly creative solutions are in store. The educational encounter based approaches provide more important lessons; The Sulha project emphasizes the importance of addressing the spiritual dimension which is so imperative in constructing a long term peace rooted in deep acceptance of one another. By working towards co-recognition and contrasting dehumanization the project addresses the founding blocks without which progress can't take place. The School for Peace initiative adds another layer of depth to the social process which must be in place before peace can be reached, by emphasizing the importance of critical thinking in bettering society while creating an educational platform for discussing change.

In addition to the Track-II talks and the educational based encounters, the research centers are another vital component in the holistic approach characterizing Track-II diplomacy by emphasizing the influential role of scholarly work in addition to grassroots initiatives. While PRIME is focused on teaching narratives of both societies, IPCRI focuses on producing policy suggestions for a sustainable solution by academics, professionals and intellectuals while working on improving the living conditions of both sides. Lastly, the civil organization campaign by Mevaseret Zion and Beit Surik, reinforces perhaps one of the most important components of Track-II diplomacy: the power of pragmatism over radicalism. By peacefully protesting together, united by one goal, while focusing on practicality, these Palestinians and Israelis have been able to make history together and begin to improve their worlds, illustrating how powerful a

peaceful, pragmatic approach can be, and how far cooperation and joint-effort towards a shared goal could go. All of these case studies illustrate the holistic importance of Track-II diplomacy and the unimaginable achievements it has the power to produce.

The Israeli Palestinian conflict is widely considered to be one of the most difficult and challenging conflicts of our time. This conflict is a long-standing, highly violent, social reality in the region, which constantly perpetuate belligerent societal beliefs (Atieh et al., 2004) that incessantly fuel it. As a result, a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is dire. In a reality in which people on two sides of the conflict are so deeply grounded in war, acceptance and inception of a peaceful resolution is problematic yet crucial. Moreover, such formal resolution requires a deep process of mutual reconciliation between the communities involved, whereby peace-supporting perceptions are being instilled. Thus, the joint Track-II initiatives of Israelis and Palestinians are extremely necessary for the implementation of programs that challenge the hostile views each side hold with regard to the other, advancement of reciprocal communication, creation of mutual respect, acceptance of historical narratives, and the facilitation of a long term peaceful resolution. In today's world, where technologies emerge, governments are altered and realities transformed, people are the strongest source of influence. Israeli and Palestinian peace builders hold the key for a better future, and are living proof that citizen diplomacy is the engine of hope; and in conflict ridden societies desperate for the rise of a new dawn, hope and faith are more powerful than war.

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