

Problems in Palestinian-Israeli Dialogue: A European Perspective

■ *By: Alexandra Senfft **

“Sensible people easily find a compromise when they are aware of the most important needs of the other side”, said Palestinian philosopher Sari Nusseibeh. If this is true, we are left with the conclusion that politicians in the Middle East might be far from being sensible. Worse perhaps, the majorities who voted these politicians into power apparently lack a sense of reality and seem to have no visions for their future.

Rarely have prospects for peace between Palestinians and Israelis seemed as dim as they do today. Concerns that no Palestinian state will materialize appear totally justified, as do expectations for another outbreak of violence with a yet unknown force and devastating effects, possibly also for the rest of the world. And there are strong reasons to fear that Israelis are gradually destroying their own state by allowing and supporting right-wingers and religiously motivated fanatics to decide their fate. On 22 June 2010, Boaz Okon, legal affairs editor of *Yediot Achronot* – an Israeli newspaper not usually known to be left-wing in its orientation – tried to alert his readers by listing a number of undemocratic events occurring in Israel: “Just like in a children’s connect-the-dots colouring book, where connecting random dots creates a picture, so in Israel, if you connect a number of horrifying, multiplying incidents, you begin to see a monster. These dots are growing evidence of the lack of the spirit of freedom and the emergence of apartheid and fascism.”

Instead of looking for compromises in order to ensure a common future in peace and security, most Palestinians and Israelis are blinded by deep mistrust for each other. Their opinions and deeds are ridden by fear, prejudices and

* German author specializing in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. She has Lately published “*Fremder Feind, so nah*” (Strange enemy, so close. Encounters with Palestinians and Israelis) a book, portraying Palestinians and Israelis in dialogue.

images of the enemy. Jerusalem Post author Larry Derfner wrote on January 13th 2010 : “Being Israeli today is about being against. Against Palestinians. Against people who criticize the way we treat Palestinians. Against Muslims in general. That’s it. That’s what it means to be Israeli, ever since the Intifada started a decade ago and we concluded that no Arab could be trusted. Except for its hi-tech image, this is all Israel stands for anymore – being against this one, against that one and against anyone who isn’t against them, too. To be Israeli today is to organize your thinking around the enemy.”

On the Palestinian side, the majority nowadays views contacts with Israelis as a “normalisation” of the occupation, and those Palestinians who continue to cooperate with Israelis in seeking peace are often exposed to immense pressures from their environment. The negative perception of the “other” is so deeply ingrained in the two societies that this “culture of conflict” (Daniel Bar-Tal) by now dominates every sphere of public life. It is common knowledge that conflict is ongoing between Palestinians and Israelis over land and resources, over personal security and self-determination. It is, however, less known that contradicting perceptions and narratives are among the main obstacles to making peace in the Middle East.

Intractable conflicts are characterized by the opponents’ inability to open up to the perspective and the narrative of the other group. A fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of dialogue is that it ought to gradually, incrementally convince the other side of the truth of one’s own perspective which, once it is accepted, will then dictate the practical outcome. Seriously, attentively listening to the other side is generally associated with forfeiting one’s identity and with it one’s moral claim to being in the right. An Israeli for example might feel that truly listening to the personal story of a Palestinian might force her or him to admit that the Jews of the pre-state Yishuv committed an injustice in 1948 in driving the Palestinians out of their homes and off of their land which could, in turn, raise questions as to Israel’s right to exist. Palestinians listening to the fate of the Jews during the Second World War often feel insecure about how “good” their own story of suffering is in face of such a catastrophe – and about whether, if found “not good enough”, it may abolish their right to self-determination? In many failed dialogues, Palestinians have felt silenced and powerless when hearing about the annihilation of the Jews, to which some reacted defensively, accusing Israelis of behaving like Nazis. This in turn has hurt the Israelis, who felt that their narrative and their feelings

were being ignored. This dynamic usually ends in a predictable, abrupt break-off of the meeting.

Senior Researcher Aziz Abu Sarah explains: “I must admit that growing up I did not know much about the Holocaust. As Palestinians, we simply did not learn about it. There was a stigma attached to it, an understanding that Israel would use the Holocaust to lobby for sympathy, then turn and use the sympathy as a terrible weapon against the Palestinian people. So when I was asked about the Holocaust, I always felt that defensive urge to say “It was not my fault! I suffered for it too.” Deep down, I think I felt that by acknowledging their pain, I would betray or marginalize my own suffering. Also, some part of me feared that if I sympathized with “the enemy,” my right to struggle for justice might be taken away. Now I know this is nonsense: you are stronger when you let humanity overcome enmity.” Abu Sarah understood that he had to learn about the tragedy of the Holocaust in order to successfully communicate with his Jewish friends. One would expect his friends, by the same token, to acknowledge the Palestinian fate in order to empathize with him and enter a true dialogue.

Dialoguing with the enemy does not mean relinquishing one’s positions: “Acknowledgement is not the same as legitimization”, says Palestinian professor Sami Adwan. Since any rapprochement is generally perceived as a threat to one’s own story and identity, it feels easier to deny the other, rather than engage in dialogue, to neglect his interests, de-legitimize his positions and fight him to the brink of war. “The vivid, fearful image of a threatening Arab ‘other’ served, and still serves, in Israel as the antithesis against which identity is defined, creating an illusion of cohesive ethnicity, of coherent nationality and statehood, while suppressing the reality of multiple, fragmented, competing cultures within still non-existent territorial borders. No less than defending - or emanating from - a pre-existing ethnicity or even a given nationality, then, ongoing conflict steadily delineates, feeds and informs both”, says Israeli peace activist Reli Mazali.

A dialogue could be considered already successful when both sides acknowledge that there isn’t one single shared narrative but two differing ones, both with a right to exist. After the Second Intifada, Sami Adwan and the late psychologist Dan Bar-On, together with a group of Palestinian and Israeli teachers and two historians, developed a new school textbook. This

presents both narratives side by side. “We think that true peace means that you recognize how the other is different from you, not how the other is the same as you are”, said Bar-On. “To create a bridging narrative means to create a same-ness. We don’t want to create an illusion of same-ness; we don’t think that will happen, not in the near future, at least. So first of all you have to recognize that the other thinks differently from yourself.”

Middle East analyst Tony Klug from London reported on an extraordinary meeting between Palestinians and Israelis in Berlin during the month of May, 2010. Among the Israelis were representatives of the right-wing parties Likud, Avigdor Lieberman’s Yisrael Beitanu party and the right-centrist Kadima. As Klug had anticipated, the atmosphere of the meeting deteriorated by the day. But “on the fourth day, there was a sudden dramatic change. The Israelis had been pressing for the full plenary session to divide into smaller clusters, while the Palestinians – fearing a trap – preferred to stick with one large group. Two of the Israelis, separately, drew me aside and asked if I would explain to the Palestinians that for the first time in their lives they felt the pain of the Palestinians, realized it was not a tactic but genuine and wanted to find a way to say sorry and explore how Palestinian human and national rights could be realized without jeopardizing Israel’s own national existence. On the final day, two of the most outspoken participants, one from each side, jointly presented to the plenary session an outline peace treaty, with some novel arrangements, which they each were prepared, with some trepidation, to commit to. However unlikely the terms, it was a remarkable conclusion to a rollercoaster event, which ended with hugs all around.” Although Klug qualifies his statements by adding, that “it’s possible the impact did not even survive the voyages back home”, he also feels that such an encounter could be replicated in some way in the future.

This experience is comparable to what Dan Bar-On concluded about his work on the two historical narratives with Palestinian and Israeli teachers: “The success was that they could listen to each other and not de-legitimize either their own or the other point of view. It’s very difficult to contain in yourself both stories. You can’t expect that to all happen in one meeting.”

Many dialogues fail because of the huge asymmetry between the two parties, which is exacerbated during the encounter and leaves the participants with even more consolidated stereotypes of the other. The right timing, the

right place to meet and the language chosen for communication are of major importance in order to create a favourable atmosphere for a dialogue that builds on equality from the outset while retaining a clear view of a common goal of ending the occupation and making peace. As participants become willing, over time, to listen to each others' stories rather than preach, trust can begin to develop, thereby preparing the ground for an eventual compromise.

Awareness of different uses of terminology is also of vital importance since it may help to avoid inadvertent insults that may end in a collapse of the meeting. While Israelis for example speak of the "war of independence" in 1948, the very same event for the Palestinians is the "Nakba", the catastrophe of their dispossession and dispersal as a people, making them refugees. For the Palestinians, those who resist the occupation are regarded as freedom fighters; for most Israelis they are terrorists. Palestinians speak of Palestine while many Israelis, particularly those with right-wing views, speak of Eretz Israel when talking about the same land.

Gross generalizations, devaluations and a dehumanizing language are part of the conflict. Unlike Germans and Jews who have, over time, developed a common narrative about the past, clearly defining the perpetrator and the victim, Israelis and Palestinians continue to wage a battle over who suffers more and who is the victim. As if it were a forgone conclusion that the victim is always right, each side claims that the other was the perpetrator. The majority of Israelis tend to see themselves as victims of Palestinian terror and feel that their right to exist is permanently in jeopardy. By clinging to this image of themselves, they deny their role as oppressors and occupiers and evade responsibility for their actions. Palestinians are occupied and humiliated on a daily basis; but this does not grant them the eternal status of victims; they too can be or become victimizers – of Jewish Israelis or at times of their own people. The fact is that there are victims and victimizers on both sides.

In order to understand the deeper layers of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, it is indeed necessary to look beyond history and politics into the field of psychology – only then is it possible to begin grasping its complexity. French-Lebanese scholar Gilbert Achcar subtitled his lately published book "The Arabs and the Holocaust" with "The Arab-Israeli war of narratives", referring to "the two defining traumas of the conflict: the Holocaust and the Nakba". As philosopher Brian Klug mentioned in his address at the book launch on July

1st 2010, in London: “It is hard to imagine anything more macabre than this desperate, relentless contest of catastrophes.” And yet this is the reality on the ground, traumas passed down through the generations, creating a subtle atmosphere of horror and fear – and at the same time a unifying identity even for those who experienced neither the Shoah nor the Nakba.

In reference to the villages from which Palestinians were evicted or fled in 1948, which were taken over by Jewish families, Bar-On stressed how important it is, “to recognize that such a location has a past and a present, that such a process is inter-generational and that you can’t live in the present without knowing what happened there in the past ... and you can’t live only in the past, you also have to recognize what happened in such a place since then.”

The psychologist who did pioneering work in building bridges between the children of Nazi perpetrators and the children of Nazi victims, advised not to compete over who suffered more – because there is no objective way of measuring suffering. Instead, he proposed that each party try and understand the enduring, present impact of unresolved experiences of the past. Former PLO diplomat Afif Safieh put it into this perspective: “If I were a Jew or a Gypsy, the Holocaust would be the most horrible event in history. If I were a Black African it would be Slavery and Apartheid. If I were a Native American, it would be the discovery of the new world by European explorers and settlers that resulted in near total extermination. If I were an Armenian it would be the Ottoman-Turkish massacres. And if I happen to be a Palestinian, it would be the Nakba – Catastrophe. No one people have a monopoly on human suffering. It is not advisable to try to establish a hierarchy of suffering. Humanity should consider all the above as morally repugnant and politically unacceptable.”

Unfortunately, it is not only those directly involved in the conflict that cannot find a common ground and be sensible in finding solutions. The same is true for ordinary observers and active participants outside the conflict, in the international community. When it comes to Palestine and Israel, the majority prefer to be either for the Palestinians, or for the Israelis, rarely for both. This introduces other perspectives and narratives to the conflict that add fuel to the fire and indirectly also become factors in the dynamics of hostility. “We all have our prejudices. Our individual prejudices are just a tiny part of the burden of understanding. But unless we are aware of them, we are more

likely to be part of the problem than of the solution”, is one of Palestinian lecturer Saida Nusseibeh’s conclusions regarding conflict resolution.

For Germans, the power of the past is still prevalent and often not worked through on an individual level. Thus unexamined emotions tend to influence attitudes towards Palestinians and Israelis and towards Jews in particular. A given individual’s feelings of guilt about the crimes of his or her ancestors can, in many cases, lead to a need to deny ambivalence and support just one of the opponents in the (futile) hope of finding a relief from the past. Avoiding the complexity and difficulty of containing several narratives simultaneously can also shape views of Islam or of Judaism, which tend to become distorted and full of clichés. Such outlooks in fact constitute emotional reactions grounded in past experiences which are only loosely related to any knowledge, experience or analysis of reality. They accordingly do injustice to those afflicted by the conflict on the ground.

Not knowing the other leads to all kinds of prejudices and racist views, to anti-Semitism and anti-Islamic sentiments. What happens in the Middle East is therefore mirrored abroad. Opposing the occupation of Palestine is not synonymous with being against Israelis or Israel. The solution is to fight for the right to self-determination of the Palestinians and at the same time for the right of Israelis to live in peace and security. It therefore seems mandatory to support both peoples and to aim at promoting those who have incessantly sought for peace. There are countless veterans and young people in the Palestinian and Israeli peace movement who need the attention and active political support of the international community. Politicians could learn a great deal from the dialogue approaches of activists on the grassroots-level. This way they could truly serve their people rather than playing dangerous and destructive power games. It is only when the politicians in government begin cooperating with the grassroots-level, creating a coordinated approach, that a lasting solution can be implemented in the Middle East.

To conclude, people and politicians should critically analyze their personal perspectives before discussing the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and before taking political action. Bar-On used to stress that a monologue - an awareness of our own narrative and identity - is a prerequisite to a dialogue. It is, also, important to acknowledge each one of the different narratives. Palestinian writer Samir el-Youssef says that those who support only one of the conflicting parties are in fact opting for war. Therefore, serious dialogue is not only paramount and necessary between Palestinians and Israelis; It should also happen within the European Union and among its political partners abroad, as well as within ourselves.