

The Palestinian-Israeli Dialogue

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I do not claim that in this essay I will be able to answer all the questions on all sides of the issue, because it is a very complicated issue. Not surprisingly, then, it provokes many different opinions. There are those who favor political dialogue and those who oppose it, and even different levels of support and opposition in each camp. For example, amongst those who strongly favor dialogue, some consider an attempt to influence the other side and change its political stand a form of political struggle, while others consider it simply a reality that we have to deal with—one we may or may not benefit from. At the opposing level, there are those who consider their opposition a difference in opinion. They say they are against dialogue, and don't think it will benefit the cause, but also that they understand the motivation of those participating in the dialogue, as the dialogue might be of a benefit. Still others in this camp say that the dialogue will not be of any benefit—that it could in fact be of harm—and should be stopped. They use inner pressures to persuade those participating to stop it. A third stance within the opposition camp says that dialogue is a form of normalization and therefore must be stopped immediately; those participating in it are accused of harming the Palestinian position.

The above approximately sums the reactions to Palestinian-Israeli dialogue. I don't think that any position has a majority, but this is difficult to know given the many who are silent—not expressing opinions, or not knowing anything about the subject, the history of dialogue and its progress, or its significance. Dialogue is often considered an interest of intellectuals, politicians, and a self-selected few.

On the other hand, the importance, benefits or harmful consequences of dialogue were never discussed openly within the Palestinian community. Even inside debates about dialogue did not constitute real discussions, because there were no measures that both sides could refer to, as a law or national agreement or other... I did not write this essay to defend one opinion on the other, despite the fact that the dialogue inside the Palestinian community should have been on a democratic level and in a special medium language that the Palestinian people could understand.

If we take a look at the history of peace movements in the world in general, we notice that all movements worked in two areas: the political and military struggle in all its forms, and the social/media struggle, including alliances that might influence the other side. The second area—social/media—invoked the inner moral forces that can divide an oppressor—through morally exposing all that an occupation is doing, and proving its wrongness in human values. This is how it happened in Algeria, Vietnam, and South Africa. We have all heard about these peoples' campaigns, how they exposed all that the militaries were doing to the world, and how the people of the occupying countries shook at the roots of society and ultimately divided in two.

Another case which is just as important in the current stage of our political and struggling work: it is getting to know the enemy. Without knowing the enemy—his/her thoughts, plans, opinions, divisions, and fulcrum of unity—we can never fight him, prepare to face him, negotiate with him, or eventually live with him. I would like here to point to an important part of this knowing, which is that many of our politicians and organizations conceive of the Israeli community as one, without differentiating between its different groups, its contradictions, or the disparate pieces of the Israeli political system. This assumption is not only in error, it makes our expectations and planning inaccurate. If we want our expectations, and therefore our actions, to be accurate and effective, we must know the Israeli community in all of its social, economical, and political complexities. These groups are filled with differences from the far left to the far right (shofeeny), from the east (Mezrakim) to the west (Ashkinazis), the Russians and other new immigrants, those who benefit from the continuance of the occupation of the West bank and Gaza and those who suffer from it,

those who benefit from the continuance of the destructive military conflict, and those who suffer from it. We must know how to deal with and benefit from these differences and contradictions, especially since these groups factor into most Israeli analyses considering the Palestinians, directly or indirectly. We need to use these contradictions to our benefit, to influence those groups that are against war and want to live in peace with us, supporting their positions inside the Israeli community. If we do not do this, we continue putting all the Israeli people into one category, thereby uniting them with Sharon and his policy and closing all forms of dialogue and future coexistence.

To evince a change on the Palestinian side, many declarations have been issued lately, with political and intellectual voices calling for a reassessment of violence as the best means of resistance to occupation. This in itself is considered progress for Palestinian policy, commencing an inner dialogue between Palestinian parties to revise, assess, and re-plan for the next stage of resistance. The fact that this took place amidst a complicated international context—in the shadow of complexities in the middle east, the American attack on Iraq, the inability of the Arab world to take a moral stand on Iraq, and the participation of some Arabian countries in a direct or indirect way to this attack— is worthy of note. The Arab world has never conveyed its true position on Palestine, nor what is being said in closed meetings. Arab voices have spoken only behind closed doors, with no exceptions. We need to break this pattern. We Palestinians need to be clear with our people and others—our declarations must be made openly so that all experts, intellectuals, academics, and politicians can participate, adjust, and revise what it is we want.

The issue of dialogue with the Israeli side is one of the issues that is worth discussing and reforming to serve Palestinian interests.

But how we go about it is also important. I hope that we can hold an honest, open, moral dialogue, one that will invite all silent intellectuals to benefit society with their opinions, and thus create a policy from the bottom up and not just the top-down. I believe that this grassroots dialogue, done right, can have an influence on the political progress taking place inside the Palestinian community itself. But to be done right, we must listen to and invite not only the opinions of organizational representatives, but also unattached individuals. Why? Because we are just like any other society—not all of us are members of political organizations, and even those that are have difficulties being heard, or being represented in a democratic way given difficulties of expression during the occupation. (Palestinian democracy is a subject that calls for another essay, because we should never draw our path without listening to all sectors of the Palestinian people, and benefiting from their buried expertise, which has not had the opportunity to express itself since occupation immoral). I think I can say that the two issues are linked together, Palestinian democracy and freedom of expression on the one hand (in all its forms—including management of political and economical issues), and external relations on the other (with all Arabic, national, and Israeli parties—the need to negotiate in rationality and responsibility).

As we continue in dialogue, herein is our goal: to maintain unity on the inside while allowing our differences to show transparently to the outside. Unity does not mean the disappearing of differences, coerced support, and shyness or making others shy; unity means respect for differences, including a respect for real opposition. If we talk about freedom of expression, we must talk about freedom of expression inside organizations and political groups, and between these organizations and political groups. This is the only way that we can reach the best. This is the way dialogue can change both our struggle and the status quo.

Yours in peace & reconciliation,

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