

Civilian Cooperation between Israel and Arab States: How Does it Work?

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A. Introduction

Civilian cooperation between Israel and Arab states takes place on various levels and in different fields despite the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict that often prevents and always challenges the establishment of full, normal relations between the citizens of Israel and the region. This paper is intended to serve anyone seeking to promote Israel-Arab normalization, peace and cooperation, by spotlighting the wide array of existing civilian relations and trying to learn from experience for the sake of expanding future cooperation. Learning from experience is important both in order to efficiently and effectively advance regional cooperation toward peace, and also to advance existing cooperation, especially given its potential for offering better conditions for a political-diplomatic process.

The potential for regional cooperation does not rely only on formal diplomatic, security and economic agreements between states, but also on ties between civilians. That is especially true for the desire to advance normalization as reflected in relations on the civil society level and the public legitimization of relations in a wide variety of fields. This paper analyzes civilian cooperation practices between Israelis and residents of states in the Middle East and North Africa, in the environment, sports, tourism, science, religion and heritage, culture and humanitarian aid.

B. Civilian-Level Regional Cooperation

1. The Environment

Environmental issues are not defined in national or diplomatic terms and do not recognize political borders. They are linked to the geographic world and its human activity. The environment has become one of the key issues on the global agenda, and confronting the challenges it poses requires regional and global cooperation. Civil society organizations devoted to environmental concerns therefore seek to forge cooperation as the basis for their work.

Examples of environmental cooperation

The Arava Institute is a prominent example of regional environmental cooperation. The institute is devoted to academic studies of a range of environmental concerns and challenges, with an emphasis on cooperation, especially with Palestinians and Jordanians. The institute offers several academic programs and operates four research centers jointly with scientists and organizations in the Palestinian Authority and Jordan. It also hosts an

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international environmental conference as part of the informal cross-border dialogue.¹ The Arava Institute relies largely on donations, mostly by family foundations,² a fact that hampers its work especially during periods of global economic crises. Political considerations also hamper its activity; studies in Israel are frowned on in Jordan for the most part while the PA also places obstacles in the way of students seeking to study in Israel.³

Another key example is the activity of EcoPeace Middle East, an organization which brings together Jordanian, Palestinian and Israeli environmental activists with a view to achieving sustainable development and fostering conditions for long-term peace in the region. The organization's structure reflects equality and sharing. The Board of Directors consists of four Palestinians, four Israelis and four Jordanians, who adopt decisions by consensus. The organization has offices in Amman, Bethlehem and Tel Aviv, with an identical team holding parallel roles in each office, funded by a shared budget. The organization's main community project combines water and good neighborhood, bringing together residents of communities and local government office holders to advance cross-border solutions to confront water resource challenges. On the decision-making level, the organization works to advance and change policy based on studies and briefings highlighting the mutual benefit of confronting water challenges.⁴ In order to boost its influence, the organization mobilizes the support of leading international organizations and figures, whose presence has been successful in fostering dialogue between local decision makers.⁵

Additional illustrative examples of environmental cooperation include a biological pest control project using barn owls⁶ and the establishment of the Transnational Red Sea center based in Bern, Switzerland for the study of Red Sea coral reefs.⁷

Key insights into environmental cooperation

From the examples reviewed for this study, two of which were presented above, one can derive several key insights. First, cooperation takes place mostly in the geographic periphery. Second, cooperation takes place in areas adjacent to border fences. The shared environmental challenge, which is not delineated by a political boundary, provides a focal point for cooperation among those it affects. Nonetheless, Israel's environmental cooperation take place mostly with the Palestinians and Jordanians, and almost never with Egypt despite their peace agreement and shared fence, nor with Lebanon or Syria with which Israel does not have peace agreements. Third, environmental cooperation is based mostly on research and knowledge. Fourth, the presence of a key figure committed to a project who makes it his/her life's work is successful in motivating and leading their organizations to long-term success. Finally, these examples point to the importance of an international framework – as a funding, hosting, sponsoring or partnering element in order to increase the prospects of successful regional environmental cooperation.

¹ Arava Institute, [Annual Cross-Border Environmental Cooperation Conference](#), 13-14 September, 2017.

² Arava Institute, [Sponsors](#), 2015.

³ Yanir Yanaga, ["Once a Vision of Peace, Israel's Environmental Institute in Danger of Closing,"](#) *Haaretz*, October 30, 2012.

⁴ Additional information is available on the EcoPeace Middle East [web site](#).

⁵ Interview with Gideon Bromberg, EcoPeace Israel Director, May 5, 2020.

⁶ ["Following the Barn-Owl Project Developed by the Ministry of Agriculture: 60% Decrease in Pesticide Use in Open Spaces,"](#) *Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development*, November 23, 2017; Abigail Klein Leichman, ["Pope welcomes Israeli, Jordanian, Palestinian bird experts,"](#) *Israel 21c*, June 6, 2019.

⁷ ["Transnational Red Sea project that could help save Earth's coral reefs,"](#) *Global Geneva*, 2 April 2019; ["Israel, Arab States Team Up to Protect Red Sea Corals,"](#) *The Tower*, 6 June 2019; Melanie Lidman, ["Israel to ally with Arab neighbors around Red Sea in bid to save world's corals,"](#) *The Times of Israel*, 7 June 2019.

2. Sports

Sports cooperation is conducted largely between member states of international sports associations and individual athletes who compete on their behalf. Although sports are perceived as a civilian or a-political field, it provides much room for advancing political and diplomatic goals. Along with the prestige involved, the hosting of international sports events can also catalyze and accelerate tourism and economic development, which is why states invest great efforts in hosting international sports tournaments and events. States also play an important role in the budgetary aspect and help fund athletes and nurture national teams. The athletes themselves display their national symbols and national anthems are played at medal awards ceremonies.

Sports cooperation examples

Not every state in the Middle East is willing to host Israeli athletes, and those that do usually foster a moderate image and openness to the world, as do the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Morocco. This image is of particular importance to countries dependent on tourism. Morocco opted to accept the conditions set by international sports associations and allow Israeli athletes to compete with the symbol of their state displayed on their uniforms. In return, Morocco gets to host international tournaments and sports events and enjoys the resulting advantages in terms of prestige, sports tourism revenue and a bolstering of its image as a host state.⁸ The participation of Israel athletes in tournaments in Morocco was made possible only after international sports federations forced it to choose between its desire to be a host country open to all and its commitment to the Arab position that opposes open ties with Israel. Qatar is also a host country that has hosted quite a number of Israeli athletes within the framework of international meets despite domestic and foreign criticism of its decisions. Israel, for its part, is willing to host athletes from the Middle East but opposition usually stems from negative Arab and Muslim public opinion or from the states themselves.

Key insights into sports cooperation

Civilian cooperation in sports is linked to organizational structure, to the willingness of states to host and be hosted, and to the roles of international sports associations. Those that linked the right to host international sports events to a country's willingness to abide by the threshold conditions, including permission for each state to compete with its national symbols, were successful in advancing sports as a space that is open to all. Over time, the "routinizing effect"⁹ also came into play, and a growing number of Israeli athletes competed in sports events hosted by states of the Middle East, mostly in the Gulf region and northern Africa. Along with the routinizing effect, there was also the "role model effect"¹⁰ and what initially occurred in the UAE subsequently influenced northern Africa, while developments in the field of judo influenced other sports, too. It is important to note that the more dominant or successful Israel is in a specific sport, the harder it is to ignore the Israeli demand for fitting representation in accordance with association bylaws.

⁸ Einat Levi, "[Israel-Morocco Cooperation in 2019: Warming from the Bottom Up](#)," *Mitvim - The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies*, April 2020.

⁹ Einat Levi, "[Beyond Judo: The Routinizing Effect in Israel-Morocco Relations](#)," *Mitvim - The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies*, April 2018.

¹⁰ Moran Zaga, "[Israel and the United Arab Emirates: Pending Opportunities](#)," *Mitvim - The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies*, December 2018.

3. Tourism

The tourism industry touches on aspects of diplomacy, economy and business. It also relates to the essence of human connections, social ties and culture. Tourists move around and act as economic and cultural agents of change, exchanging information, ideas and new concepts. Outgoing tourism with which this section deals depends on mutual agreement on the part of relevant states as expressed in the signing of agreements regulating the movement of incoming and outgoing tourists and travel modes.

Tourism cooperation examples

The three most popular Middle Eastern destinations for Israelis in 2018 were Egypt (405,399), Jordan (95,854) and Morocco (35,955). The number of tourists from Middle Eastern states who visited Israel in 2018 was markedly lower: Jordan (18,126), Egypt (6,281), Morocco (2,989), Tunisia (1,442) and Iraq (241).¹¹

Given the formal agreements and the relative proximity to Israel, travel to Egypt in Jordan is easy and relatively inexpensive. However, while Israeli tourists can easily obtain visas to Jordan and Egypt, tourists from those countries come up against many bureaucratic difficulties and confront opposition to normalization in their countries.¹² Due to the easily accessible border crossings between Israel and Jordan, tourists can enjoy a variety of different destinations in a relatively small area – the Israeli-Jewish tourist mostly travels to Petra and the deserts of southern Jordan,¹³ whereas the Israeli-Palestinian mostly prefers leisure travel and family visits to Aqaba and Amman. Along with the Israeli-Jordanian cooperation, the two also compete – with Aqaba offering tourists far cheaper tour packages and hotel deals than Eilat next door. Jordan also serves as a transit point for Israelis flying to the Far East and for Israel's Palestinian citizens to fulfill the duty of the Hajj or Umrah pilgrimages in Saudi Arabia. In addition, hundreds of Israeli Christians transit through Jordan annually en route to organized tours in Lebanon.¹⁴ Jordan also serves as a transit point for tourists from the Far East seeking to visit the sites holy to Islam in Jerusalem, without having to recognize Israel or cross through the country.¹⁵

Tourism ties with northern Africa are completely different as reflected in ties with Morocco and Tunisia. Morocco allows Israeli tourist visits under a specific regulation that provides a special entry visa. Whereas Israelis visited Morocco in the past mostly in organized groups, these days they visit independently, too. Tourist ties between Israel and the Gulf States are mostly business and economic in nature, and their volume is small. More Israelis are expected to visit the Emirates in the wake of the September 2020 agreement establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries and to attend international events there, such as the Dubai Expo, which was supposed to take place in October 2020 but has been

¹¹ Data retrieved from [eLibrary of the World Trade Organization](#).

¹² See: [Applying for a tourist group visa](#), *Population and Immigration Authority*. Special criteria apply to states designated "Countries under Consideration": Jordan, Egypt, Malaysia, Indonesia, Tunisia, Morocco, South Sudan, Mali, Mauritania.

¹³ "[Jordan toughens border controls, irking Israelis on Passover vacation](#)," *Times of Israel*, April 19, 2019.

¹⁴ Jacky Khoury, "[Hundreds of Israelis Are Flocking to Lebanon as Tourists - via Jordan, With a Palestinian ID](#)," *Haaretz*, November 4, 2017; Jason Lemon, "[Hundreds of Israeli citizens visit Lebanon as tourists each year](#)," *Step Feed*, November 3, 2017.

¹⁵ The Voyage Opera [Facebook page](#) offers visits to Amman combined with Jerusalem, as does the agency's website. See also Kuwait's announcement about allowing citizens to visit Israel and the Palestinian Authority on a package deal; Itamar Eichner, "[Israel sees sharp rise in tourists from Arab states](#)," *Ynetnews*, November 11, 2014.

delayed. The number of Gulf States residents expressing an interest in travel to Israel also appears to be growing. As of now, such travel is carried out within the framework of official Israeli Foreign Ministry delegations.¹⁶

Key insights into tourism cooperation

Tourism ties between Israel and the region and their limited extent attest to untapped potential. This stems from political and security circumstances, lack of infrastructure and high costs, an expensive and convoluted bureaucracy, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the activity of the Israel boycott movement, and more. The volume of tourism with Egypt and Jordan, states with which Israel has peace agreements, is the most developed, facilitated by geographic proximity and the existence of an institutional infrastructure and clear procedures. The importance of religious and heritage sites in Israel often overcomes political obstacles and provides Christian and Muslim believers with creative solutions, such as passage through Jordan and stays in East Jerusalem. Diaspora ties are among the main drivers of Israeli tourism to Arab states, and are especially prominent in Israeli tourism to Morocco and Tunisia.

4. Science, Research and Medicine

The reliance on knowledge and the search for truth, the improvement of human life, and adoption of morals and principles that dictate a universal approach toward man and society untouched by considerations of nationality or religion are the shared values of science, research and medicine. Advancement of science, research and medicine is enabled within the framework of a global institutional system, through mutual learning and cooperation that ignore political restrictions. Nonetheless, these fields rely to a large extent on national institutions, regulations and funding.

Examples of cooperation in science, research and medicine

One of the most impressive examples of regional research cooperation is the Synchrotron-Light for Experimental Science and Applications in the Middle East (SESAME) launched in Jordan in 2017. The initiative encourages cooperation and invites scientists from all universities and research institutions to carry out experiments.¹⁷ As of 2020, members of the initiative include Cyprus, Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, the Palestinian Authority, Turkey and Israel. The development, activity and financial management of the initiative is entrusted to members who run it independently. Israeli researchers take advantage of the opportunity to participate in experiments, regional study sessions and even serve as lecturers in SESAME's educational activity.¹⁸ Although the fields of research, science and medicine are independent in nature, it is rare to find projects without any government involvement. What is more, states can clearly take advantage of activity in these fields for diplomatic needs. A prominent example is the field of medicine and surgery performed in Israel on Arab rulers, under a shroud of secrecy, reflecting a network of diplomatic considerations.¹⁹ The

¹⁶ Dr. Moran Zaga, "[Israel-UAE Cooperation in 2019: Warming Relations, Also in Civilian Affairs](#)," *Mitvim - The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies*, March 2020.

¹⁷ "[Congratulations are in Order](#)," *The Hebrew University of Jerusalem*, January 31, 2019; See SESAME website: <https://www.sesame.org.jo/>.

¹⁸ See: [Open SESAME Environmental Science Thematic School at SESAME](#), 23-27 June 2019.

¹⁹ Elie Podeh, *From Mistress to Known Partner: Israel's Secret Relations with States and Minorities in the Middle East* (Forthcoming, in Hebrew).

participation of Israeli researchers and doctors in international events in the region is a different example of cooperation.²⁰

Key insights into science, research, medicine cooperation

The review of regional cooperation has found that shared and similar problems provide fertile ground for research cooperation. However, a shared problem is not a sufficient precondition. For example, even joint Israeli-Egyptian treatment and research of epidemics was precluded prior to the signing of their peace agreement.²¹ Research is often conducted under the auspices of a third party. One of the tools successfully employed in the past is the establishment of a joint steering committee by the relevant research authorities in each state that allows joint work unrelated to shifting, sensitive political climates.²² Beyond the relevance of the study subject, the importance of third party involvement and support and existence of a positive peace process, the more the research centers on applicable knowledge with beneficial potential for the economy and the population, the greater the willingness of the sides to cooperate. While the auspices of key political figures in Arab states provide researchers with long-term backing, the involvement of Israeli politicians is best kept to a minimum.

5. Culture

Culture is not necessarily circumscribed by national borders, existing as it does in imagined, symbolic, spiritual and more flexible spaces. Language is a key component, especially in textual works. The linguistic distance between Israel and its environment emphasizes the importance of translation. Compared to the physical boundaries that limit ties, virtual space allows different Israeli sectors and groups in Israel and the Middle East to conduct vibrant inter-cultural discourse.

Examples of cultural cooperation

In cinema,²³ civilian ties between Israel and the Middle East come into play mostly in the screening of Middle Eastern films in Israel and participation of Israeli and Middle Eastern actors in international productions. In the field of music, Israel and Morocco have become focal points of the Andalusian genre. The flowering of Andalusian music in Israel over the past decade, as reflected in the performances of Andalusian ensembles or performance of Andalusian music by other ensembles is creating a shared cultural language with artists and musicians in Morocco and its diaspora.²⁴ Israeli artists perform throughout the Middle East if they are dual nationals of another country²⁵ or if they manage to overcome obstacles and reach Middle Eastern audiences in roundabout ways.²⁶ Cooperation takes place in the fields

²⁰ ["Medicine Crosses Borders: Rambam Doctor Travels to Qatar,"](#) Australian Friends of Rambam, November 25, 2019.

²¹ Arnon Shimshoni, ["Regional Cooperation in Veterinary Medicine,"](#) Israeli Academy of Science, 2000, pp. 7-8 (in Hebrew).

²² Shimshoni, *Ibid.*

²³ News Desk, ["Moroccan filmmakers react to the screening of their movies at the Haifa film festival,"](#) *Yabiladi*, September 17, 2018.

²⁴ ["Israeli Andalusian Orchestra Performs Second Concert in Secret in Morocco,"](#) *JNS*, 19 December 2019; [Advertisement](#) for a performance by Moroccan women musicians at the Mediterranean festival in Israel; [Advertisement](#) for performance by Rahela and the Halijis at Mediterranean festival.

²⁵ ["The Israeli singer who conquered Dubai,"](#) *N12*, March 24, 2010 (in Hebrew).

²⁶ Avi Pitchon, ["Israeli Metal, Arab Fans: Orphaned Land Creates an Alternative Middle East,"](#) *Haaretz*, April 26, 2018.

of translation, literature, poetry and journalism, dependent on translation, the writers' agreement, the line dictated by the regime on such issues in terms of public opinion and on the level of sensitivity to "cultural normalization" between Israel and the Middle East. In recent years, the growing use of social media makes it easier to conduct direct contacts between writers and translators in Israel and the region.²⁷ One project based on a special model of literary cooperation is an initiative called "Maktoob" – a collaboration established in 2015 between the Van Leer Institute and the national lottery for the translation of works from Arab literature and culture and making them available to Israeli readers.²⁸

Key insights into cultural cooperation

The influence of the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts is discernible in the ability to consume culture and more so in the ability to create, translate and make works accessible. The physical boundaries are impassable for the most part and do not enable participation in joint cultural events, such as festivals, shows, exhibitions, etc. Despite Israel's peace agreements with Jordan and Egypt, the level of concern in these countries about "cultural normalization" with Israel appears higher compared with other states in the region. In general, the easier it is to consume the culture of "the other", than to create it in cooperation, although cultural consumption and its creation are both linked to knowledge of Hebrew and/or Arabic. The importance of language differs, depending on the field. There are almost no Hebrew speakers who are not Israelis, whereas the percentage of Israelis able to consume Arabic-language culture barely reaches 2 percent. It is also worth pointing to the virtual space and growing use of social media that allow new contacts between creators, exposure to the culture of the other, and a platform for shared cultural creation, and even offers initial solutions to the language gap. The importance of mediating populations, such as Arab and Palestinian residents of Israel, Hebrew and Arabic speakers, who are writers and artists themselves or who import Middle Eastern culture for the Hebrew speaking audiences in Israel; and Jews from Arab and Muslim countries who immigrated to Israel and continue to nurture their Arabic cultural identity.

6. Religion and Heritage

Religion and heritage are part of our cultural world, relating to the personal lives of each individual, to groups in society, as well as to relations between states. The importance of religion and heritage also comes into play in international projects that nurture local heritage in a bid to preserve it vis-à-vis the globalization threatening to marginalize and bury it. The key areas of such cooperation are the preservation of heritage sites and Jewish renewal in the Middle East; advancement of multiculturalism and religious tolerance; recognition of the Holocaust; and the preservation of Islamic holy sites in Israel.²⁹

Examples of religion and heritage cooperation

We are witnessing an awakening in the preservation of Jewish heritage in the Middle East through refurbishment, rehabilitation and restoration of heritage sites. Much of this activity in recent years has taken place in Egypt and Morocco given the existence of ancient Jewish heritage in both countries and contemporary tourism ties that allow Israelis to visit them. In

²⁷ Interview with Idan Barir, poetry and literature translator and research fellow at the Forum for Regional Thinking, March 30, 2020.

²⁸ [Maktoob - The Arabic-Hebrew Translators' Forum](#), Van Leer Jerusalem Institute.

²⁹ Nadav Shragai, "[Protecting the Status of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem](#)," Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 2016.

Morocco, the King and the Jewish community work together on such projects, along with Moroccan communities in Israel and other diasporas. One example of a civil society initiative was the refurbishment and restoration of the Slat Lkahal Synagogue in Essaouira, which reopened in October 2016. The project was led by Haim Bitton, a Moroccan ex-pat whose family used to pray at the synagogue. In order to oversee the project, Bitton moved back to the town, formed a non-profit organization and raised funding. Often, as was the case with the synagogue, what begins as a private initiative is subsequently adopted by local authorities and recognized as a local heritage asset. Compared to Morocco and Egypt, activity in the fields of religion and heritage in the Gulf States is undertaken mostly by the regime and its institutions. Such measures do not reflect civilian activity, but they are of great importance for their renewal of Jewish heritage presence in the public arena.

Religious and heritage activity is also at play in the virtual space. Groups and communities are active on social media, linking Jews and Muslims through their shared cultural roots and identity. Examples include The Moroccan Jewish Story in 360, a virtual Jewish initiative for the documentation and preservation of Moroccan Jewish heritage.³⁰ An additional example of virtual space activity in the eastern part of the region is the “Preservation of the Iraqi Language” community, which numbers some 70,000 Israelis and Jews of Iraqi origin living in Iraq and its diasporas.³¹

The willingness to recognize and conduct a Middle Eastern discourse on the Holocaust has grown greatly in the past decade, including recent declarations on the subject by state officials in the region.³² In January 2020, an interfaith delegation that included representatives of the American Jewish community and the World Muslim League³³ visited Auschwitz. UNESCO has also sponsored the “Aladdin Project” initiative that provides translations of Holocaust-related books and films to the official languages of the UN, especially Arabic.

Key insights into religious and heritage cooperation

The nature and extent of cooperation in religious and heritage activity stem from the importance of the Jewish community in local heritage, its size and extent of its activity throughout history. In Morocco, Egypt and Iraq we are witnessing deep and extensive civilian activity, whereas in other places such as the Gulf States the activity is of an official nature and more limited. Official involvement is of great help to the success of cooperation because the fields of religion and heritage are usually under full state authority. Often, initiatives stem from private individuals and civil society. Cooperation takes place in two complementary and parallel realms – the physical and virtual. The recognition of Judaism also allows states to promote a moderate, multi-cultural image that helps draw business investment and mobilize Western support. The Jewish connection also constitutes a channel to the Jewish lobbies in the US and Canada. However, legislation in Israel and in states in the region preventing ties between them constitutes a key obstacle. An additional obstacle is the activity of the boycott movements that oppose normalization with Israel. Nonetheless, since Judaism is now perceived as part of the heritage of Arab and Muslim states, the boycott movements do not attack such cooperation.

³⁰ [Web site](#) of The Moroccan Jewish Story in 360, founded in March 2016 by Einat Levi that includes virtual documentation communities on Facebook and virtual tours of Jewish heritage sites in Morocco.

³¹ [Private Facebook group for the preservation of the Iraqi language.](#)

³² For the list of Tweets by the UAE's foreign minister, see Abdullah bin Zayed, [Twitter](#), January 25, 2020.

³³ Vanessa Gera, [“25 Muslim faith leaders make ‘groundbreaking’ visit to Auschwitz,”](#) *Times of Israel*, January 23, 2020.

7. Humanitarian Aid

Within the framework of global human rights discourse, humanitarian aid and investment in international development have become indicators of progressive states. However, not only states engage in foreign aid, civil society organizations do, too. Non-profits that promote humanitarian aid raise funds from donors and states for activity in crisis regions and for the promotion of their values and goals. Business also contributes to such humanitarian efforts when it serves to promote its image of social responsibility. Various organizations often serve as contractors of the state in providing humanitarian aid, thereby mobilizing support, funding and an ongoing or specific organizational framework.

Examples of humanitarian aid cooperation

Surprisingly, most Israeli international aid organizations do not conduct ongoing activity in the Middle East and direct their resources and attention to Africa, South America and the Far East. Nonetheless, there are Israelis and civil society organizations from Israel that have provided humanitarian aid in the Middle East. For example, "Save a Child's Heart" focuses on heart surgery and medical training and was active in Jordan, too, until 2009. About one half of its beneficiaries are Palestinian children and children from neighboring states. Children from Egypt and Jordan, with which Israel has peace agreements, do not travel to Israel for treatment, nor do children from Lebanon.³⁴ The main effort undertaken by Israel for Syrian refugees was conducted through a "Good Neighborhood" administration set up by the military, which was active from 2013 to 2018.³⁵ The Kibbutz Movement, which hooked up with Israel Flying Aid has collected food packages for Syrian refugees. The General Federation of Working and Studying Youth, the Upper Galilee Regional Council³⁶ and the Golan Regional Council also mobilized to collect equipment for Syrian refugees.³⁷ Yet another project for Syrian and other refugee was the School of Peace on the Greek island of Lesbos established by veterans of the Shomer Hatzair youth movement and Ajyal, its sister movement in Israel's Arab society.³⁸

Key insights into humanitarian aid

The Israeli public arena provides fertile ground for humanitarian mobilization in times of crises in neighboring nations. The public differentiates between the regimes and the people themselves and is willing to invest resources to help them in their times of need. On the other hand, a long-term project requires organization, funds and allies around the world. Factors that facilitate aid are a basis of formal relations, cooperation among a number of aid organizations, the existence of a contact person or organization in the destination country and a clear address for the delivery of aid, and support by international organizations that provides access to and legitimacy for the work of Israeli organizations in the region. Aid for Iraqis, Iranians, Afghans and others is provided by Israelis in Jordan, Greece and Israel. Nonetheless, as is the case with other fields, the peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan do not enhance civilian cooperation, and sometimes even appear to hamper it.

³⁴ Interview with Tamar Shapira, deputy director of Save a Child's Heart, February 16, 2020.

³⁵ Anna Ahronheim, "[IDF Ends 'Good Neighbor' aid program for Syrian civilians](#)," *Jerusalem Post*, September 13, 2018; Daniel Salami and Yoav Zitun, "[IDF sends humanitarian aid to Syria in overnight operation](#)," *Ynetnews*, June 29, 2018

³⁶ "[Trying to Help](#)," *Davar Rishon*, December 23, 2016 (in Hebrew).

³⁷ "[Golan Residents for Syrian Refugees](#)," *Kibbutz Movement*, Facebook, July 10, 2018.

³⁸ Judy Maltz, "[Young Jews and Arabs from Israel Join Forces to Help Syrian Refugees](#)," *Haaretz*, February 7, 2017.

B. Discussion and Insights

The examples presented above, while not reflecting the entire array of civilian cooperation, make it clear that such cooperation between Israelis and others in the region is possible in a variety of fields and forms and with varied partners. This section presents the general insights emerging from this cross-sector overview. The insights can be divided into two levels of analysis – insights focusing on structural factors, and those linked to strategies and tactics of cooperation.

1. Structural Factors

The first insight is linked to the impact of an organization's structure and especially to its partners, factors that to a large extent influence the possibility for cooperation and its nature. Joint civil society organizations could be more exposed and vulnerable to criticism by the boycott movements. Joint activity under the auspices of an international association or federation contributes to the "routinizing factor". Formal agreements provide opportunities to move around and operate across national and political borders. In the absence of formal ties between states, Israelis and residents of Arab states must find temporary or roundabout arrangements for cooperation. Nonetheless, the existence of formal ties does not attest in any way to public sentiment and perceptions of cooperation with the other side. Perhaps it is due to the formal agreements that Egyptians and Jordanians feel compelled to prove to themselves and others that they have remained loyal to the Arab and Palestinian narrative, and they express this through civil opposition.

In certain areas, geographic proximity provides opportunities and even requires civilian cooperation. That goes for environmental protection, tourism and even humanitarian aid. Little wonder, then, that many cooperation initiatives between Israelis and residents of neighboring states take place in peripheral regions, along borders, far from the public eye and in the "back yard" that provides greater freedom of movement and is less exposed to criticism or opposition.

Along with the geographic aspects, the different nature of each field creates significant differences in cooperation. Clearly, the more universal an issue is and the less it is colored by national hues – the easier the cooperation. The popularity of the fields is also significant, for example news of sports activity generate public discourse whereas scientific activity does not generate the same kind of emotional response. The perception of necessity of cooperation also has an impact. For example, while scientific, environmental or economic cooperation can be explained as based on a shared existential interest, the fields of culture, sports and leisure could be perceived as luxuries and therefore be more vulnerable to criticism. The nature of the different fields of cooperation also impacts the level of cooperation. Whereas sports allow a limited level of cooperation as reflected in the sides' participation in the same events, in humanitarian aid we see cooperation based on the sharing of knowledge or goods, and in tourism, science and the environment one can identify cooperation based on ongoing collaboration and cooperation.

The promise of funding is one of the main challenges to civil society activity given that most organizations are non-profits whose revenues are not assured and they must therefore ensure other funding sources for their operations, relying mostly on donations and public and private foundations. Government funding, despite its importance, could hamper regional cooperation. The existence of a government framework, on the other hand, is almost vital. Without such a supportive framework, bureaucratic help or at least tacit approval,

cooperation is often not possible. We must recall that the passage of civilians across political borders depends on official approval.

An additional factor in cooperation is the affinity of culture and identity. Such affinity links different groups in civil society through tourism, culture, religious, heritage ties and more. Such ties underscore the complexity of cultural affinity and identity and the fact that national borders do not define them.

2. Strategies and Tactics for Advancing Cooperation

The Palestinian issue is the greatest challenge facing regional cooperation organizations. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict often constitutes a reason for cooperation between peace organizations, but is always a challenge, too. The most effective way to deal with the challenge is through cooperation with the Palestinians, including Palestinian citizens of Israel. Cooperation with the Palestinians, not in a patronizing manner but in equal partnership does not allow Israel to ignore and bypass the Palestinian issue and often allows cooperation with Israelis for the sake of citizens of Arab states.

Given the challenges posed by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the activity of the boycott movements, involvement of a third party from outside the region is very helpful and sometimes essential for cooperation. The involvement could be in funding, sponsorship of events, providing neutral space for meetings and even providing political auspices and legitimization.

Similarly, one of the tools for overcoming political tensions and restrictions on cooperation is a distancing from national discourse and national definitions. That is reflected in doing away with national symbols or muting them, and choosing a-national or universal projects and issues to the extent possible. As part of this trend, many organizations tend to rely on research as a shared universal language, which forms an agreed upon fact-based foundation unaffected by the national narrative of either side.

An additional component that crops up in the examples and promises ongoing and significant work is the existence of a figure deeply committed to an issue or cause. The importance and centrality of social entrepreneurs emerges clearly from the examples. Those social leaders constitute a safe anchor for civil society activity that is typified by a high turnover of activists, occasional activists and organizational and economic difficulties.

Great importance is attributed to the physical movement of Israelis visiting the region and of residents of regional states visiting Israel. Such movement spawns a "routinizing effect" and turns such ties into a matter of routine. Thanks to media and social platform coverage of such movement in Israel and the region, the public in the Middle East no longer gets as exercised as it did in the past when such cooperation was revealed.

One of the central arenas that currently facilitate the advancement of cross-border civilian ties is the virtual space. This internet-based space allows free, cheap and effective communication independent of formal agreements between states or political recognition of any kind. The global coronavirus crisis has increased the importance of this space and spawned broader activity there.

C. Summary

Regional cooperation between states and organizations is carried out first and foremost by people. Formal agreements, despite their great and sometimes vital importance, are not sufficient for forging normal ties between nations. That requires relations on a civil society level, which generate broad legitimacy and provide human infrastructure for joint activities and achievement of shared goals.

This paper presents a broad array of cooperation that takes place despite the many difficulties and challenges presented by the continued Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Experience as presented in the examples provides an opportunity to learn and develop many insights regarding the ways to implement regional cooperation against the backdrop of existing conditions and challenges. These insights could help anyone seeking to advance regional peace once conditions ripen. Rather than being dictated from above by political echelons, such peace could grow from the bottom-up through daily and continuous work of civilians. A vibrant and active civil society that maintains ties and cooperation across political borders is a significant contribution to the foundation of a stable and significant peace.